

## Right Side of Hell

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# Right Side of Hell

by [NeoMare](#)

## Summary

Albus Dumbledore was sure he made the right choice when he sacrificed an innocent child. Too late he understood how terrible that mistake was. Harry Potter was not what he wanted him to be, he was not what the magical world expected him to be. He was not a replica of James. Instead, he inherited more of Lily.

Far too much to be convenient.

## Notes

Hello! So, this is the first time that I post here and am a bit confused about how it works, especially the tags. If I forgot to add something important, please tell me.

Now, this story was born last year when I read a Tumblr prompt that wouldn't leave me alone so I had to write it. It basically described what would happen if Harry was raised the same way Voldemort and he happens to develop/possess Tom's good looks, intelligence, and magical talent. It may not be new, but I liked the way on which hpnubrunfanalaternateu wrote it.

Hope you enjoy it!

# Terrible Mistakes

**1<sup>st</sup> of November, 1981**

Albus Dumbledore was a wise man who understood the acute pain of betrayal and the harrowing weight of regret, but above all, he understood the abominable price of peace. With this mindset, he planned the demise of Voldemort, sacrificing families with a heavy heart. With this mindset, he ordered Hagrid to pick up an innocent toddler from a destroyed cottage in Godric's Hollow in order to place him under his callous relatives' care, knowing the child would be ignored in the best of the cases. However, even when he intellectually understood this was necessary, the knowledge was unable to grant him respite from the pain that constricted his chest.

It was necessary to betray the Potter family in the name of peace. It was necessary to sacrifice their beloved offspring in order to end the lethal Dark Lord. It was necessary to leave one of the most powerful children that ever existed out of their world in order to avoid the possibility of turning him into another monster. It was necessary for the child to be raised humble, or at least he wanted to believe it was.

He never understood how terrible this mistake was or how much it would cost him in the future.

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**24<sup>th</sup> of June 1991, Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts**

Albus Dumbledore was exhausted, sleep eluded him for yet another night. Soon, Harry Potter would arrive at Hogwarts and he was debating on which would be the best way of introducing the child to the magical world. After many long hours, he gave up, knowing the most appropriate way would be delivering the letter in person, especially if you considered Petunia's volatile character and hostile disposition. With a sigh, he decided to write the missive instead of allowing the magical quill to do its job, that way he gave himself time to calm his nerves and appease his guilt.

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**25<sup>th</sup> of June 1991, Number 4 Privet Drive, Surrey**

A strange sound resonated in a park near Privet Drive. An old man dressed in an eccentric suit sauntered around the neighbourhood as if he had all the time in the world, wearing a genial smile that made him look even stranger in the eyes of the observers.

It took Dumbledore more time than expected to find the house numbered four, considering how similar the houses were to one another, he felt quite proud of himself. He paid no mind to the stares his presence caused, ignoring the animosity that emanated from the many curious neighbours that went out of their way to observe him. He knocked at the door, smile still in place, trying with great effort to ignore the dread that oppressed his chest to the point

every breath caused him sharp pain. A tall, somewhat horse-faced woman opened the door with a polite smile that vanished once she saw him, replaced by a horrified expression.

"It has been a long time, Petunia," Albus greeted the pale woman.

"Get out of here!" she hissed, trying to close the door in his face but being stopped by a hand.

"We need to talk. I was hoping we could chat inside, to avoid curious eyes..." he commented, making the woman pale further and allow him entrance. While following the reluctant woman, he examined the house, especially the pictures, noticing with a heavy heart a black-haired boy was in none.

"What do you want?" Petunia hissed, looking at him with apprehension.

"I'm here to give Harry his Hogwarts letter and, if possible, have a nice chat with him," he answered, trying to convince himself that the horror, fear and undiluted hatred in the woman's expression were tricks of the light.

"We don't have the freak," she whispered, her chest heaving as fear gave room to hysteria. "Why should we raise that abomination?! We dropped him in the streets years ago! He was a monster!" the woman yelled and started sobbing, ignoring the horrified man in front of her.

"Look at me," Albus Dumbledore ordered, dropping his grandfather persona.

Petunia looked at him with weariness and he invaded her mind. Bile rose in his throat at the sight of the treatment a young child had received, the pain in his chest intensifying to a worrying degree. He saw a young child being ignored, being treated as a stranger. He felt the vile woman's satisfaction when Vernon locked the child in the cupboard after a sound punishment for doing *freaky stuff*. Then, he felt her horror when her own child began screaming in his room. He saw how utterly horrified Petunia was when she ran to her child's room and found the exact same marks that Vernon gave *the freak* on his body. He felt her hatred increasing and saw how they had decided to get rid of the innocent child. Albus retreated from the woman's putrid mind feeling disgusted.

The guilt he was trying to suppress overtook him, filling him with shame. Taking a deep breath, he did his best to control his emotions.

"You disgust me Petunia, but don't worry. I will make sure you and your husband pay for all your crimes," he promised the crying woman, apparating out of the house directly to his office.

Dumbledore picked up a silver artefact that lay on his desk and activated it. While he waited for the coordinates, he asked a house-elf to bring Severus Snape as soon as possible. That done, he buried his face in his hands and allowed himself to wallow in agony before composing himself. Albus tended to be benevolent to the extreme, but he once was cruel. With a hard expression, he channelled the man he was in his youth, ready to punish the beasts that harmed Harry Potter, ignoring he was the one who left the child with said beasts. He walked towards his pensieve and deposited his memories with Petunia, while he waited for his most trusted ally to arrive.

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## 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1991, St. Thomas Orphanage

Albus' heart stopped beating for a few moments and his skin acquired a chalky tone when he noticed the place he apparated to. An orphanage. A plain and antique, yet well-maintained building that looked welcoming enough. If only he could convince his frozen mind to agree with him and stop reminiscing the dreary building that still brought nightmares from time to time...

Taking a deep breath, he looked at the man that landed beside him. Tired would be a mild word for his companion, bleary was a more appropriate adjective. Though, he guessed he looked no better, considering he slept for a few hours at most during the past few days. Handing the evidence to the muggle Aurors was simple, casting a few spells on them to make sure he got the wanted results barely needed a thought... Involving Severus to create the muggle evidence was the hardest part of his plan. Even though he trusted the man with his life, he was no fool. Albus knew Severus was still bitter and held many grudges against the innocent Potter. Yet, he hoped his blind friend could see the light. At the moment, Severus was in denial. However, he still hoped that those memories would open his eyes once he was able to process the situation. With weary steps, he walked toward the entrance, passing by the stylish and somewhat bizarre front lawn.

“Good morning, we were hoping to speak with the Matron.” Albus greeted the woman behind the desk with a cordial smile.

“Is there any reason in particular?” the woman inquired with a bored expression, not even sparing them a glance.

“Indeed. We are representing a prestigious school and were hoping to offer a scholarship to a child that managed to catch our attention.”

“I will call the Matron. You can sit over there,” the woman said in her monotonous tone, leaving without a second look. Albus sighed, dropping onto the closest couch, allowing his fatigue to show for a brief moment. After a couple of minutes, the woman arrived along with an older woman who walked towards them.

“Good morning, my name is Anna Frigg, the Matron of this orphanage. I was told you were looking for me,” the woman introduced herself, taking a seat on the opposite couch.

“Indeed, Miss Frigg. I’m Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts, and my companion is Severus Snape, a teacher at the school. We are here to offer a scholarship to one of your charges,” Albus introduced himself but was cut by a soft laugh coming from the woman. To say he was bewildered at her odd reaction was an understatement.

“I apologize, but I know exactly who you are referring to. As a matter of fact, this is the time of the year when different institutions come over in order to offer our young Harry Potter a place. That's who you want in your school, right?” she asked with a knowing smile, taking the men's lack of response and surprised expressions as confirmation. “You see, young Harry is truly an angel. He is so studious and intelligent; he is the jewel of this orphanage,” the

woman confided with a bright smile, unknowingly giving Albus a semblance of peace and a sliver of hope.

He was terrified at the outcome of having the last Potter raised the same way as Tom. It seems old age was making him paranoid.

"I'm glad to hear that. Would we be able to talk with him?"

"Of course. I will bring Harry here. You are lucky you caught him on his free weekend."

"I was hoping for a private place... We could go with you to his room," Albus suggested, wincing on the inside when she scowled at them, knowing any progress he made towards the woman's trust was lost.

"Of course you can't! His quarters are private - it would be irresponsible of me to allow strangers in. Sandra! Take these gentlemen to the room next to my office," the Matron barked at a middle-aged woman who was walking by and left with a huff.

"Excuse me, ma'am, I was hoping you could tell me about Harry Potter," Albus asked the woman approaching them. However, the trepidation he felt before came crashing back when he saw the woman pale and look around in panic. "No matter what you tell us, we will take Mister Potter," Albus assured the woman, but failed to reassure himself.

"I know you will," the woman whispered, "but that doesn't mean you'll believe me." Her eyes were fixated on the floor.

"We will hear what you have to tell us."

Albus tried to appease the woman with a gentle smile, placing a hand on Severus' shoulder in order to prevent any biting comment he might make. Yet, the woman still looked reluctant to speak so he was forced to employ a method he personally disapproved of but was necessary for this situation. With a wave of his wand, the woman's face relaxed and her eyes acquired a glossy look.

"Follow me then," she whispered - anxiety and fear emanating from her body in waves despite of the spell. "The child was brought here when he was six. I was in charge of talking to his previous minders at the last orphanage and school to find out about the boy. The school's headmaster told me he was easily the brightest child he ever met. All his teachers noticed he wasn't treated well in the orphanage so they requested his transfer. At the time, I was impressed by how well liked the child was in his school, so I ignored all the signs and the advice his previous caretakers gave me. I believed they were being ridiculous, trying to blame a child for all the problems the place had... I'll never forget the terror in the Matron's eyes when she told me the child was evil," the woman narrated with quick breaths.

The woman's eyes focused again and she immediately covered her mouth. Dumbledore tried not to frown, it shouldn't be possible for a muggle to break his spell so easily.

"Do you have any idea how long he was in the previous orphanage?" Albus asked the frightened woman, trying to ignore his emotions.

“If I'm not wrong, he arrived there when he was four,” was the clipped answer.

Noticing her reluctance to continue talking, Albus decided to encourage the woman. “The information you gave us is very enlightening. Perhaps you have any other details on what happened while Mister Potter was there. I promise to keep it for myself.”

The woman's eyes shifted towards the door. With a sigh, Albus decided to reapply the spell, pointedly ignoring Severus judging eyes.

“Everyone avoided him, which is the first thing I noticed. From the children to the adults, everyone shared the same fear of him. I didn't understand why until I experienced it myself. The Matron told me how the older children bullied him when he arrived. 'They're jealous and it's natural,' she said. She told me how the older children picked on him, but they stopped when one of them broke his leg - shattered might be a better word. He was unable to walk without a limp ever again. She implied that young Harry did it, but why should I believe her? He was barely four and the others were well over ten. How blind I was...” She muttered the last words with haunted eyes, stopping her tale in order to open a plain door that led to a small room with a long table and chairs.

Taking a seat, she continued, looking even paler than before. “He's an adorable child, you know? I was unable to believe that bitter crone when she told me of the horrors of the orphanage. She said the children were terrified of the boy but no one knew why. It was only natural for me to dismiss her. She had no evidence, why should I believe her?” she asked herself, there was a hysteric edge to her voice that disturbed Albus more than he would ever admit.

“She told me how he bewitched people, how he possessed minds, how evil he was...” the woman muttered, looking at nothing in particular with a sombre expression, “I didn't believe it, so I never said a word. Once I realized what he was, it was too late to warn them. They were already ensnared by him.

“It began once he arrived. He shared a room with other boys. They were jealous of the attention he received, naturally. He skipped a couple of years, you see. That was the trigger. He stayed in school until dinner each day. Many of his teachers volunteered to give him extracurricular lessons and the librarian drove him here. His roommates tore his clothes and books. At that time, he did nothing and the Matron was furious. She punished the other children for trying to harm her jewel, but that was barely the beginning. He was given his own room, but his old roommates began having accidents. Eric fell down the stairs, Steve tripped and hit his head, and Aaron slipped and broke his wrist... One by one, each suffered accidents and, one by one they stopped harassing him,” she continued in a barely audible voice.

“So you are saying that he is a bully,” Severus sneered, breaking the trance the woman was in and earning a glare from the old man beside him.

“No, he never bothered anyone. By any means he's the perfect child: brilliant, polite, soft-spoken, excelling in everything he does...” she muttered, her breathing becoming fast once more. “Many schools came to recruit him after a couple of months and this caused jealousy in the older boys. They began bullying him, but suddenly it stopped. I have no idea why, but

they never approached him again. He's attending Eton, you know? He is indeed a brilliant child," she whispered to herself.

He pretended his stomach was not trying to revolt.

"Anything you can tell us about his friends?" Albus asked, trying to keep the image of a young Tom Riddle off his mind.

"Friends," she huffed, looking amused. "No, he has no friends. He has a loyal follower though," the woman commented, allowing a hysteric chuckle to leave her chest. "She arrived here four years ago. She's only one year younger than he is. For some reason he took her under his wing. All the children know you don't mess with Harry Potter. Therefore, you don't mess with anyone related to him. She looks like a little angel, with curly blonde hair and all the paraphernalia. She adores him and, dare I say, he seems to care about her. He takes his weekends away from his boarding school just to see her, though I have no idea how he managed that... Once they tried to bully the girl when he was at school. The next week no one would get close. I still wonder what he did," she chuckled with tremulous hands, eyes lost in the past.

"May I know the name of this young lady?" Albus asked, barely able to subdue his curiosity.

"Even her name sounds innocent-"

The woman was interrupted by the door opening. She looked at the newcomers and lost all her colour, she excused herself and left after she directed a pleading look towards the professors.

The Matron was smiling at the child behind her without hiding her disdain towards the men. She whispered something to him and left without acknowledging their presence, leaving the door wide open. The men's eyes widened at the sight of the child. They were expecting a replica of James Potter with Lily's eyes, not the person in front of them.

His hair was carbon black with an almost undetectable red hue to it and, unlike his father's untameable mess, his was perfectly combed with a few strands left out for aesthetic purposes. His Black and Evans genes predominated over the ones of the Potters. His hair framed his refined visage, on which his mother's beautiful features dominated.

Lily Evans was once considered the most beautiful woman in Hogwarts. James Potter was not far behind, being quite handsome himself - one of the reasons Severus resented him. It shouldn't be a surprise for their offspring to inherit their looks, and yet it was. Especially because he looked like a younger male version of Lily. However, the features that took away Albus' breath and made goosebumps appear on his skin were the boy's eyes.

They were green, but unlike his mother's warm emerald eyes, his were non-expressive, eerily similar to a porcelain doll. Yet, they blazed with hidden power that turned the cold emerald into a disturbing shade of green. One far too familiar for Albus Dumbledore to be comfortable.



“Good morning. I was told that you want to speak with me,” the boy introduced himself with a gentle smile that eased the fears the woman ignited.

“Good morning, Harry. I'm Headmaster Albus Dumbledore and my companion is Professor Severus Snape.”

“Pleasure to meet you. I was told you come from a school,” the last Potter replied in an even tone.

“Indeed. Professor Snape and I came here to invite you to a school for special children,” Albus explained with an amused smile when Harry tilted his head.

“What kind of school?” he asked with obvious curiosity, yet his speech patterns didn't relax. “I already attend one of the most prestigious schools in the country, where they understand my needs and comply where possible,” the child explained, not noticing Severus scowling at him.

“I understand that, Harry, but I think you will like my offer. I'm the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” Albus was ready to explain their world to the child sitting in front of him but was deterred by his deadpan expression. With a weary sigh, he began explaining the existence of magic. “I know it is hard to believe-”

“I know I'm able to do special things. I always could so it is not hard to believe magic exists. It is merely another characteristic that differentiates me from others. The question is, why I would want to learn how to make magic when I already can?” Harry asked with no expression.

“That is certainly a surprise,” Albus stated before Severus talked and drove the child away. He licked his lips trying to decide where to start explaining. He needed to know what the child was able to do, but at the same time, weariness kept him from asking. “You see, Harry, a trained wizard is able to perform the most astounding feats, from controlling the weather to transporting themselves over great distances in a matter of seconds.”

“And how will this be useful to me? I already decided my profession, what can you offer me that I don't have already?”

Yes, this was definitely not going the way he wanted.

“There are many professions in the magical world that I believe are more interesting,” Albus answered without addressing his questions. He already felt the boy raising his defences.

"What would I learn in your school?"

“Many things, my boy. Let's see... Your subjects will be transfiguration, charms, and potions among others. Later on, you will be able to choose different electives,” he explained without really answering. And that was apparently the last straw, Harry's expression morphed into a polite one, there was no longer curiosity on his eyes.

"I understand that, sir, but you have yet to tell me why I should attend your school. I'm graduating in a few years and have many doors open. There is no reason for me to leave all my work behind," the child stated with a calmness that unsettled Albus.

What child didn't want to go to Hogwarts? Apparently, Harry Potter. Of course, it had to be Lily's son.

"You see, Harry, both of your parents attended Hogwarts." For a brief moment, Albus considered hiding the boy's heritage but discarded the idea, knowing a simple question would get him all the information and destroy any semblance of trust he was able to build. Deciding to use the connection to his parents to lure the child into the school, he continued. "Your paternal family, the Potters, attended the school for generations."

Although he decided to tell him a little about his parents, Albus refused to tell him about the House of Potter and his title as the scion of said family. Harry was too young and there was always the possibility of turning him into an arrogant bigot. That was without even mentioning his fame.

"I see... While I admit being curious about the school and my parents, I must inform you I have no means of paying." Albus almost sagged in relief. "You knew them? My parents."

"Ah, you don't need to worry about your tuition, your parents paid in advance the moment you were born and left enough money for you to buy the necessary materials. And I indeed knew them. Lily was really smart and James was quite clever. The stories I could tell you..." Albus trailed off, deeming Harry too young to understand.

"Is that so? Would you mind telling me how did they die? I only remember Aunt Petunia saying they were drunks who died in a car crash."

The old man needed a second to control his desire to strangle that woman. It was definitely a mistake to leave Harry Potter with the Dursley's.

"That was certainly a lie," Albus blurted, unsure whether or not to tell the child. With a defeated sigh, he spoke. "Your parents were murdered by an evil wizard. I regret to be the one to tell you that you are the only survivor of the killing curse, the same that killed your parents. The fact that you survived is the reason you are famous in our world," Albus told the child, withholding as much information as possible, knowing it was not the right moment to reveal the delicate details.

"That is not what I was expecting. I must ask why my parents were murdered." Harry asked and Albus pretended not to notice Severus' ashen visage.

"There was a war going on. Your parents opposed the evil wizard and fought for the light. That's the reason he murdered them. The details are complex, something a child your age shouldn't worry about."

Albus finished talking, knowing it was the wrong thing to say, yet there was no other option. Young Harry would be unable to understand the price of peace. Earning his trust would be

harder than expected, especially considering the frail rapport that was established already broke.

"I understand," murmured the child with a tone that conveyed his disappointment. "Would you be so kind as to tell me how to access the money my parents left me? Mmm, also what I need from school and where to buy it."

"Of course! Here is the letter with the equipment list, the train ticket, and all the necessary information," Albus answered in a cheery tone, ignoring the tense atmosphere. "Professor Snape will accompany you to buy all the things you need."

"I will have to decline," Harry stated, taking the letter but not even glancing at it. "I have to arrange my affairs and have no idea when I will be able to go. Besides, I'm used to doing things by myself, so I would feel uncomfortable with the unwanted company." His tone left no room for discussion and the only thing Albus could do was sigh, resigned at the idea of leaving the boy by his own means. This meeting only earned him Harry's disfavour and he wouldn't push the boy any further.

He could try to press Harry until he agreed, but that was far too risky. Harry Potter was not enchanted with the idea of a magical world or even with knowing more about his parents. The boy could easily refuse to attend school and, as powerful he was, he was unable to force someone to attend Hogwarts. Besides, if the magical world caught a whiff of how their saviour was raised he was doomed. The boy was definitely Lily's son and Albus learnt the hard way of what an Evans was really capable when spited.

"If you insist," he answered. Doing his best to contain a sigh, he took out a bronze key and told the boy all the instructions on how to arrive at Diagon Alley.

"If that is all, I must take my leave. Have a good day," Harry said without inflexion and left, not even glancing back.

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Both men left the building feeling exhausted for different reasons. Severus felt his heart pumping and his hands trembling in a way they had not done for over a decade. Any flicker of doubt he had about the woman's tale disappeared at seeing those eyes and, for the first time, Severus wished this Potter was just like the previous one. He was unable to forget the woman's fear, he was unable to forget those dead eyes, but above all, he was unable to forget the strange aura of the child that inherited far too much of his dear Lily.

Albus Dumbledore was worried about Harry knowing too much. Knowledge in the boy's hands was dangerous. He made many mistakes with Tom, he knew one of the reasons he became Lord Voldemort was because of all the information he obtained while he was young. *Not this time*, he vowed to himself. He would make sure Harry didn't fall into the same dark path.

Albus conveniently forgot he was the one who pushed Tom Riddle into that path, meddling in his life and making decisions for him. A mistake he was making once again...

# Of Goblins Manners and Idiots

## Chapter Notes

So here I am again!

I already have a few chapters written so I will be posting one chapter a day until Sunday. From there on, I will post once a week (every Sunday). Also, I am changing the money system to a more reasonable one.

Hope you like the schedule and please enjoy the chapter! ^.^

Harry Potter left the room without looking back. He greeted the minders politely on the way to his room, not allowing his excitement to show.

Different. Yes, Harry was always aware how different he was, but he never imagined such a fantastic reason as magic. In a way, he supposed it made sense. What he was able to do went against everything he learnt about how the world worked, so magic was a logical answer, as ridiculous as that sounded. However, he had his doubts about the people that contacted him and their school.

Didn't they know what brochures were? Or how suspicious it was for an old man to contact an orphan child to offer a place in his school? Did they even know what credentials were? It was definitely fishy. And yet, Harry knew it was real. He could feel those two men's power sizzling under their skin. Something he only felt with Elizabeth and, occasionally, with some stranger in the street. He would investigate this Diagon Alley and see the magical world himself before taking a decision.

Harry pushed open the door of his room and saw little Elizabeth reading a book, not even noticing him. He took a second to observe the girl he considered a little sister.

The day he met her was still fresh on his mind. A tearing girl being almost dragged into the orphanage's canteen by that annoying minder that loathed and feared Harry in equal parts. He was about to dismiss the girl as inconsequential when he felt it, that same power he possessed coursing through her. It was only natural for him to take care of someone like him. The world was against them and they had to protect each other. Since that day, he did his best to teach her how their strange talent worked. In spite of his lessons, Elizabeth was still soft, far too kind and forgiving for his tastes, but that was just her nature. Sometimes he wondered if the girl tried to be soft for his sake, in order to remind him both were children with much to experience and learn.

"I see you couldn't wait," Harry said in a soft tone that still managed to startle the girl.

"I hate you," Elizabeth muttered, patting her chest in an effort to calm herself. "Who were they?"

"Two weirdos with questionable intentions and shady information," he answered cheerily, amused at her confused frown. "I was offered to go to a magical school. Apparently, there are more people like us."

"Then what's the problem?" she whispered, perhaps picking on his apprehension.

"The supposed headmaster said he knew my parents and even told me how they died, but he didn't really tell me anything. He knew my parents paid for this school in advance but didn't tell me how he knew so, he didn't even tell me why I should attend this school, he just assumed I would. It's fishy. He mentioned this place named Diagon Alley, so I'll take a glimpse of the magical world."

"You are going alone." Not a question, but a statement.

"You know that my... magic," he hesitated a bit in using this foreign concept for his power, "responds to me. I will be back after lunch."

Elizabeth didn't say a word, she simply glared at him. Any other day he would tease her, but today there was no time to spare. Harry simply stuffed his messenger bag with his wallet, the key and the letter the shady man gave him, and a book to keep boredom at bay.

"I will see you in a couple of hours," Harry told her while petting her head, and left without waiting for a response.

He walked out of the orphanage, telling the Matron he wanted to go to the library. Being the perfect example of behaviour certainly had its perks. With a small smirk, he reviewed his plans of the day and walked to the station. First stop was the bank, getting all the information about what his parents left him was crucial. Maybe he should get a lawyer, but then again, what adult listened to children?

Then, Harry needed information about how the magical world worked, which meant the library. Afterwards, and not so vital, he wanted a wand, curious about how it would work with his magic. Only after that he would consider attending this school. Sighing, he got in the train and took out his book.

As Harry walked along Charing Cross Road, looking for the Leaky Cauldron, he spotted a dilapidated pub with that name. He raised an eyebrow at his first glimpse of the magical world. Children were supposed to enter a pub. Was that even legal?

With wary steps, Harry walked in. The inside looked even worse than the outside, if possible. Noticing the very bald, kind of creepy, and undoubtedly ancient barman, Harry took the wise decision to walk away and pretend nothing happened. Then again, why did he ever consider following the instructions of an old man wearing a vivid red suit and sparkly shoes was a good idea?

Unfortunately, the barman noticed him. "Heya, lad! What can I do for ya?"

Was it rude to run away now? Perhaps. Harry composed a pained smile, regretting how his curiosity overwhelmed his common sense.

“Good morning sir, I’m looking for Tom. Do you know where I might find him?”

“That's me, lad. Looking for the entrance of Diagon Alley, I guess. Follow me!” the man exclaimed and walked away.

It was definitely a bad idea to follow old men, but he trusted his magic and his lung capacity. With a sigh, Harry followed the man to the back of the pub. Taking his wand, the man tapped the bricks in a sequence which Harry was careful to memorize. Once he was done, the wall moved to reveal a chaotic marketplace that disenchanted Harry from the magical world.

“Good luck, lad!” Tom exclaimed and left before he could answer, much to Harry's relief.

After taking a deep breath, Harry followed Dumbledore's instructions in order to arrive at the bank. He observed the Victorian fashion magicals seemed to fancy wearing under colourful robes. While he was not a fashion connoisseur, Harry was sure he would rather not wear it. Once he caught a glimpse of the exquisitely carved marble building, he let out a breath of pure relief. At least the bank looked decent.

He almost raised an eyebrow when he caught a glimpse of the bank’s guards. They were short, had strange features, and wore splendid armour. But who was he to judge? Besides, they were better dressed than any of the strangers Harry saw so far. With a polite greeting, he entered the bank. Finding a free counter, he approached the worker and noticed the plaque that read Teller, but had no name, so decided to play it safe.

“Good morning, Mister,” Harry greeted the teller, whose head snapped towards him. “I was wondering where and how I can obtain information about my parents' accounts.”

“... Good morning. We only need the name and key. Some accounts have personal managers but others are managed by the clerks. May I have your name?” For some reason, Harry had the impression he somehow insulted the man.

“Harry James Potter. May I know your name?” The teller gaped at him. Yep, Harry now knew he managed to insult the man. He only hoped he didn't start an accidental war or got banned from the bank. Damn, he should have visited the library first!

“You can call me Sharpclaw,” the man said in a single breath, looking at Harry as if he was a particularly bizarre purist.

“Likewise, Mister Sharpclaw,” Harry saluted warmly, almost feeling like an adult. Hypocritical and sycophantic.

“If you wait for a few minutes, I will talk with the Potter account manager,” the teller said blandly, muttering something under his breath and rubbing his eyes furiously.

Harry sighed and decided to look around. The tellers were using quills, how strange. But then again, people wore headache inducing cloaks and overly pointy hats. Compared to that, using

an old fashion quill was nothing. Though Harry did wonder what magical people had against aesthetically pleasing fashion.

"Mister Potter, Manager Ragnok is waiting for you. If you would follow me."

"Of course, Teller Sharpclaw. Would you mind me asking a few questions?" Harry decided to ask.

He already offended this man, what did he had to lose?

"...I will do my best to answer."

"Thank you. I'm wondering to what species to do you belong?"

The teller choked, looked at him with wide, unblinking eyes, and proceeded to let out a growl-like chuckle. Harry composed a pained smile, hoping not to get banned today.

"I'm a goblin. My people have sovereignty over Gringotts, just like other creatures have control over their territories," Sharpclaw said and looked at Harry, frowning afterwards. "Similar to how muggles own their houses."

"Fascinating," and it truly was, perhaps this place was not as terrible. Though he had to ask something vital, "what are muggles and creatures?"

Sharpclaw groaned and muttered something under his breath. This time, however, Harry had the impression the man - or goblin - was not annoyed at him. At least he hoped that was the case.

"Muggles are non-magical people and creatures are sentient beings capable of magic, such as house-elves, centaurs, merpeople, goblins like myself, among others."

"I understand. Thank you for your time, Teller Sharpclaw."

"It was an honour, Mister Potter," he said as a farewell. Knocking and opening an ornate door before taking his leave.

Harry watched the goblin leave with an inscrutable expression. The definition Sharpclaw gave him of creatures sounded the same way the colonizers described slaves. Not the magic part, the part of totally dehumanizing those people in an effort to justify their cruelty. He definitely needed more information about this world, but wondered if it was truly worth the effort.

"Mister Potter, it is a pleasure to meet you at last. Take a seat," the goblin behind the desk said. Harry examined the office on his way, noting it was tastefully decorated. The pointy sword hanged on the wall and the conveniently placed weapons went surprisingly well with the plush carpet.

"Good morning, sir."

“Call me Ragnok, Mister Potter. Now, though I don't doubt your identity, the bank requires verification for all the major accounts,” he commented, placing a thick, tawny piece of paper and an intricate golden needle before Harry. “The process is simple, you only need to drop three drops of blood onto the parchment.”

Once again, he wondered if this was a wise decision. Before he could over think, Harry took the needle and, without hesitation, punctured his index finger. The parchment absorbed his blood and words began to appear in black ink. James Charlus Potter and Lily Jane Evans could be read above his name. A diminutive smile managed to escape at the proof of him definitely belonging to a family, even if it was gone. he paid no mind to the slight sting of magic healing the wound.

“These are the folders containing information about your personal vault and the Potter family accounts. If you excuse my audacity, I must say your mother was a brilliant woman. She made plans for every possible scenario in order to assure your wellbeing. Thanks to her and your grandfather, the Potter vault has never been fuller,” the goblin commented with a curious version of a smile. Harry took the folders and fought with himself to control his expression. He could easily spend thousands every month for the rest of his life and his grandchildren would be able to enjoy the family fortune. Unless magical money was thoroughly devalued, of course. This would bring other hindrances and Harry would rather live in a stable muggle society than in an impecunious magical one.

“There is much more money than I expected. Would you please explain what galleons, sickles, and knuts are? And their value in pounds?”

“Of course. There are 50 knuts to a sickle, 20 sickles to a galleon, and galleons are worth fifteen pounds, give or take a few pence. The ledger in your hands contains the figures of your Family Vault, which you will not have access to it until either you become a legal adult. Your trust vault, on the other hand, is under your full control,” he commented, signalling a considerably thinner folder.

"Why do I have so much money?" Harry asked, frowning at the paper.

“It's a Potter tradition to deposit ten thousand from the main vault each birthday until the heir is seventeen. If I'm not wrong, another deposit will be made in less than two months. The Potters believed in hard work; they gave all the tools to their offspring and let them decide what to do. Many of your ancestors thrived and multiplied their money. Others lived a comfortable life doing what they enjoyed while some were unable to make intelligent decisions and lived in poverty. It was created as a way of safekeeping the family fortune,” the manager explained.

Well, Harry already liked his ancestors' way of thinking.

“If you don't mind answering, is there any possibility of you telling me about my family?”

“Ah, it would be a pleasure. I knew Lady Lily Evans from the day she walked into the magical world. She was a brilliant woman with a keen eye for business. You see, she entrusted us with a copy of all the documents she owned and allowed almost free reign over the account, with certain conditions, of course.” Harry did his best not to gape at the tall pile



of papers that appeared on the desk. "It contains a copy of the deeds to every single property the Potter's own, along with an inventory of her and her husband's personal belongings in their last residence. There is also a copy of their will and a few portkeys she left under our care," the goblin commented, handing Harry a large rectangular box that he eyed with curiosity. "This contains the portkeys - each will take you to a different property and the activation code is written above each of them."

"I don't think it would be wise of me to take them now. Would you keep it until I ask for it?" Harry asked, deciding it would be wiser to consult with the pillow first.

"You remind me of her, Mister Potter. She was unfailingly polite and had a mind so sharp that, when she graduated, she received many offers despite her blood," Ragnok commented, apparently approving of Harry's decision.

"Despite her blood..." Harry repeated with apprehension.

"Purebloods despise any other being that is not, according to them, pure. In this case, however, they have some decent arguments. Muggleborns tend to be ignorant about the magical traditions, clinging to their roots. However, unlike any other muggleborn, your mother researched this world. She was a constant customer at the bookstore in Knockturn Alley, if my memory serves me right.

"I believe you will be able to find her books and any other personal belongings in a vault she opened a year before her demise in case of them leaving in an emergency or dying. She opened this vault so we could retrieve any personal belongings, by force if necessary and without repercussions. As I mentioned before, your mother was brilliant," Ragnok reminisced.

"Could you tell me why they were attacked?"

"I have no idea, Mister Potter. The day she opened the vault was the last time she came to the bank. Your parents went into hiding soon after. I can take you to the vault in order for you to examine it. Now that I remember, we were unable to retrieve a few things from the house; the objects in red are the ones. We need your signed approval to retrieve them using... other means."

"Of course," Harry muttered as he read the contract. A small smile adorned his features.

Now he understood why Ragnok said his mother was a brilliant woman. Harry signed, almost feeling pity for the fools that stole from him. "I want to visit the vault," Harry said with a smile, picking up the offered folders and putting them in his bag. "Is there anything you know about my father, Manager Ragnok?"

"Not much about your father, unfortunately. Your grandparents, however, were excellent in business. That is the reason why they gave Lady Lily Evans free reign over the account once she married your father. Charlus, your grandfather, always complained about your father being too naive and gentle. James would have spent all their hard earned money by supporting a war that was not his."

While he wanted to know more about the war, something told him it was better if he found this information by himself. However, thanks to the information Ragnok provided, Harry now had an image of his parents: an intelligent and rather ruthless woman, and a somewhat naive, yet gentle, man. Until this moment, his parents were a mere concept - Harry didn't miss or love them. But now that he knew his mother did everything in her power and beyond to ensure his safety, there was a strange warmth blooming in his chest. He ignored it in favour of planning.

First of all, he needed more information to make a decision about his future. His life violently changed and the odds seemed to be in his favour. This world offered him endless perks and many troubles.

The goblin led him to a cart, on which they descended for heavens knew how long until they stopped at a cavernous corridor that ended in an elegant black door with golden accents. Harry did his best to keep his breakfast down and pretended the floor was not moving.

Ragnok handed him a key without uttering a word. Harry absently noted the key matched the door and the vault opened with a loud click. It was full of furniture and other paraphernalia he ignored in favour of the two wands emblazoned upon the wall. He looked away and scanned the room for books. Nothing. Harry did his best to contain his disappointment when he heard Ragnok's steps nearing him.

"Your mother enchanted this trunk herself," he said, showing Harry a simple leather briefcase. "It will only open with your magical signature, Mister Potter. First, touch this button in order for it to enlarge."

"Call me Harry," he muttered, amazed at the travel trunk that replaced the briefcase.

Placing his hand on one of the four locks, he heard an audible click and decided to open it. It was a small wardrobe, one side had five drawers while the other had hangers. Out of curiosity, Harry opened a drawer. It looked way deeper than it was supposed to be... Was the drawer supposed to be that long? He checked the trunk and decided that no, it was not meant to do that. He would blame this physical law violation on magic.

He tried another compartment. One side looked like an organizing shelf while the other had ten square (and not large) drawers. The next compartment was similar. The last one was an unexpected surprise. It was filled with dozens of books, perfectly organized in shelves. There was a strange white space in the middle of a shelf.

"That is a book finder," Ragnok said, almost giving Harry a heart attack in the process, "one of your mother's personal creations. You write the title or author on it and the books will appear in the bookcase. If you write the subject, it will give you titles of the books containing that information. I have no idea of how many books it contains but, knowing your mother's love for literature, I suggest being thorough and not buying any new titles, unless they were published in the last decade, until you are able to see its contents. Your parents had this especially made for you to go to school," Ragnok announced, looking strangely proud.

"I will be taking it with me, then. I also want to withdraw some money, just in case."

"It will be done," Ragnok agreed, writing in his book with a quill.

It was a little after lunch when a pensive Harry Potter exited the bank, after making an appointment for next week. He reviewed all his family's investments (while Ragnok patiently explained how everything worked) and he was pleased with his ancestor's good decisions, even if it meant he now needed to actually understand how the business world worked. Troublesome.

However, Harry took a decision. Next week would be dedicated to learning and putting all his affairs in order. Finding a way of home-schooling would be simple, though finding a subtle way of leaving the muggle world behind would be a bit trickier. It was not convenient for Elizabeth and him to disappear without a trace and faking an adoption would be too troublesome, so at least he needed to forge the documents that would give him and his sister independence. Once again, he thanked his magic because she would make his job easier. Not to mention the goblins that, like any banker, will provide the right services in exchange for golden motivation.

Warily, Harry eyed the people on his way to Ollivander's - some looked at him with unwarranted intensity while others downright ignored him. The magical people were something he was not eager to deal with. Taking a soothing breath, he entered the dusty store, his eyes hardening at the state of the place but his magic dancing at being in contact with more of her own kind.

"Good evening, Mister Potter. I must say it is a surprise to see you," an old, dishevelled man announced behind him. Harry would be surprised had he not felt the man's magic.

"Good evening, sir. As you may assume, I want to buy a wand," he greeted with as much politeness as he could muster to the creepy man. Wanting to leave as soon as possible, he added, "I don't have much time and will be unable to come back until December, so please, if we could hurry." Politeness never tasted so bitter.

"Of course, Mister Potter, we will find your wand soon!" the man exclaimed, with too much enthusiasm.

In that way, Harry was given wand after wand with specifications provided by the strange man. He only sighed each time a wand was taken from him. When he got tired, he put on an anxious expression and looked through the window.

"Let's see, holly with a phoenix feather core, nice and supple. Give it a try."

With an annoyed sigh, Harry took the wand, only for it to burn in a white-hot flame, leaving a beautiful feather and burned fingertips behind. Grabbing it with gentle fingers to examine it, he noticed the wand maker's aghast expression. Harry guessed it wasn't normal, even in this strange world.

"I could have sworn that was your wand... This will be the first time in three generations the Ollivanders will make a personalized wand!" the man exclaimed, his excitement taking over once again. "Follow me, Mister Potter. We will be going to my workshop," the man began blabbering, to which Harry paid no attention. Though he wondered if it was common for old

men to ask kids to follow them in this world. "Along the wall, we have different kinds of wood. Touch each one of them and you'll know when you find it."

Harry intently ignored the man and let his magic dance. He felt a strong pull towards a handsome wood that seemed to be isolated from the others but decided to feel for others just in case. An indescribable feeling washed over him when he touched a wood that was labelled as Yew. Picking that one and the other wood, he walked towards the man, whose slack jaw would be comic if Harry wasn't so annoyed.

"Taxus and Sambucus..." the man whispered to himself, frowning at the wood, "Are you sure?" he asked.

Harry nodded and the man sighed, but took the woods and guided him to a shelf. "Each wood requires a core, you must choose two," the man muttered in a trance.

Once again, Harry examined the shelf. Feeling pulled to curious-looking horns, he picked the jar. Seeing glossy dark hairs, he picked them up as well, his magic dancing inside him in approval. Whatever trance the man was in broke when he saw the objects in Harry's hands, a wide and slightly manic grin spread on his face.

"Ah, horned-serpent horn! I got that sample in my youth. Unfortunately, I was never able to use it. Oh my! The Thestral tail hair my father obtained during his student years at Hogwarts - a temperamental core that almost cut a finger off the last time I tried to make a wand with it. I never used elder wood, you know? The only time I tried ended up with so many splinters I looked like a cactus! This will be a powerful wand indeed; we need a sealer to fuse the cores..." Harry tuned out the man's incessant chatter, caressing the feather in his hands and wondering when it would be done. "Phoenix feather would be the perfect stabilizer. If you don't mind giving me the feather, Mister Potter," the man said, looking intently at his hands.

"How long will it take?" Harry asked, surrendering his feather with reluctance.

"I will have it done next week."

"Very well. If I'm unable to come, I will send someone. How much will it be?"

"Eighty galleons. A normal wand can cost up to fifteen galleons, but this in particular-"

"I don't mind. I will pay half now and half next week," he interrupted the man, saving himself a headache. Taking out his gold pouch, he counted out the necessary coins while he walked towards the counter in the shop. Muttering a polite farewell, he left the place.

On his way out of the pub, Harry sighed. The magical world was both - better and worse than expected. While he walked to the station, he decided to buy food for him and his sister. After all, he could splurge a little now.

However, he had a couple of questions that kept bothering him: who was responsible for him growing up the way he did and, most importantly, why?

# Thief, Birds, and Karma

## Chapter Notes

I want to give you my perspective on Dumbledore so you understand why I am writing him this way.

Albus is perhaps one of the most ambiguous characters in the books. He has positive and negative qualities, but overall, I believe he has the mindset of a war general. And as we know, most of the times, old people are too set in their ways to change. I intend to write him as the leader he was, intelligent yet misguided.

Harry Potter was organizing his mind, the influx of information gave him a constant headache for days.

Within the myriad of books he found in the trunk, the most valuable of them all were his mother's journals. They contained her life through Hogwarts - her ambitious projects, her goals for the future, and her favourite classes. The journal that contained her life after school depicted the apogee of the war, stories of her friends who were hunted because of their blood, and how she fell in love with a reckless, yet kind and charming idiot who happened to be his father. Harry read them with devotion.

While he read them, Elizabeth was distracted by the books in his mother's collection. Now he had an idea of how the magical world worked, his mother had written about how stagnant they were, how they were destroying magic with their ridiculous beliefs, how they censured magic based on their fear. He could not agree more, they still used quill and parchment, they wore antiquated clothes combined with horrid colours not noticing how ridiculous they looked, and they discriminated against the real pure magic that ran through different species.

He read about his mother's deep respect towards magical species, risking her life many times to save them from death eaters, a fact that earned respect with many magical beings. He read about the war and how utterly useless the government had been, he learnt of how deep prejudice and corruption run. Once he read his mother's journals he took a decision, he would continue working for what his mother had strived: the liberation of magic. Lily Evans had been a gentle woman who was unable to do what was necessary to achieve that ambitious goal in her lifetime. He, on the other hand, held no restrictions. Harry believed vermin had a place at his feet and that anyone who dared to cross him deserved pain. As simple as that.

His mother also wrote about the Potter castle. She wrote about the provisions she took when she had been unable to convince his father to move there. She had placed multiple wards around the cottage and had innumerable portkeys around the house in case they needed to run away. However, the boy did not understand why they needed to run and the thing that confused him the most was how his family was attacked. According to what his mother had

written, they took all the necessary precautions even after the Fidelius thing as placed... Something was not right about the event and Harry swore to find out what had really happened.

Sadly, his grandparents had been murdered by death eaters a year after his parents' wedding. The reason why she enchanted the Potter house-elves to sleep in case they were also targeted. She wrote about the little guys being loyal and powerful in extreme, but they needed their Master's magic to survive... With plans forming in his mind, he walked with Elizabeth towards the Leaky Cauldron, having to tolerate the shabby barman that once again opened the entrance to Diagon Alley. They walked towards the bank, he saluted the guards and his sister followed his example.

"Good morning Teller Sharpclaw, I introduce you to my sister, Elizabeth," he greeted the same worker from his previous visit.

"Good morning Mister Potter, it is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Elizabeth."

"Likewise Teller Sharpclaw," the girl greeted with a gentle tone, earning the approval of her brother.

"Manager Ragnok is waiting for you; do you wish me to guide you?"

"I remember the way and I'm sure you have better things to do, may gold overflow your vault," Harry nodded to the goblin, with his sister emulating him and leaving a speechless teller behind. He knocked on the door and a few seconds later it Ragnok opened it, examining his companion. "Good morning Manager Ragnok, I introduce you to my sister, Elizabeth."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," she greeted.

"Likewise Miss Elizabeth," the surprised goblin provided, "Let's have a seat."

"Manager Ragnok I apologize for not stating the proper farewell the last time we met, I was not aware of the proper traditions," the child began once they sat. His mother wrote about goblins, they were a warrior race that valued honour and respect above anything else. She had begun learning their language and customs, stating that it was wise to learn about the ones that managed your money and he could not agree more.

"There is no harm done, anything you wish to discuss before I give you a report on the retrieved heirlooms Mister Potter?"

"First of all, please call me Harry. And yes, I wanted to discuss my family's investments. To be precise, the dragon reserves my mother invested in, I'm curious about whether we could buy the whole shares."

"It can be done, but may I ask why?"

"Of course, dragons are powerful magical beings, the fact that they treat them as livestock offends me," he stated, surprising the goblin once again.

"It will be done, I will have the papers ready," the shocked male answered and wrote in his book.

"There are also more delicate matters I wish to discuss," his tone stated of how serious these were. "I wish to give my sister access to my personal vault, then I want to know if there is any possibility of me gaining Elizabeth's custody in the magical world. I also want to know if there is a way to apply to a magical school overseas for her, I would want to have her at Hogwarts but my fame will give her unwanted attention," he commented, ignoring her dejected look. "I also wish to discuss my parents' will and the families I was supposed to live with after they died. I was left with my mother's sister, Petunia, who in turn left me in an orphanage, and I know my mother vetoed against the woman":

"I see," the goblin muttered with a scowl. "It is not possible to give access to your account to any person until you are an adult. Until you are of age, you can't make big transactions or have any real power over your account aside from retiring money. Now onto your guardians. Your godfather, Sirius Orion Black, is in Azkaban for the murder of 13 muggles, Peter Pettigrew, and betraying your parents. Your godmother, Alice Clare Longbottom, resides in the permanent ward St. Mungos. She and her husband were tortured to insanity a few days after your parents were murdered. Sara Doves died during the way. Remus Lupin and Eleadora Pittsum are in perfect health, as far as I'm concerned. I must tell you though that your parent's testament may not have been given to them because it was sealed under the orders of the Wizengamot."

"Mmm, I find it hard to believe my godfather would betray my parents. As a matter of fact, my mother wrote in one of her journals of him offering himself as a distraction for the death eaters. Is it possible to obtain the records of his trial?"

"It is, records are public, and magic makes them impossible to destroy or hide," he provided writing once more in his book. "About the school, you only need to send a letter and her guardians' permission which brings us to the next matter. You will be unable to gain guardianship while you are still underage, though there is another option: blood adoption. It is quite an expensive potion but as her next of kin you would be able to decide matters such as schooling and living arrangements," he explained.

"I understand, and if she is willing, so am I," the child stated, to which his answer was a bright smile and vigorous nods. "How do I obtain the potion?"

"We will have it done by our brewers, for a fee of course," the man grinned writing in his book. "It will be ready in a week, we can deliver it via owl with the instructions."

"Please do. Another question, do you know who my magical guardian is or how may I obtain the information?"

"Considering you are an orphan, the Ministry has a Limited Guardianship over you. Normally, a member of the Wizengamot is assigned to this duty and in your case, Albus Dumbledore was chosen. Talking about him..." the goblin handed him a folder. "Your heirlooms were retrieved from his possession. We also found a few documents about you, quite interesting because one of them declared you like Lord of the Slytherin house by right of conquest, which will enable you to achieve emancipation at fifteen if you wish. As

requested by your mother, we retrieved your belongings and objects that belong to the thief that have the same value as the ones he took. An eye for an eye and all that; do you wish to examine what we retrieved?" he asked with a wide smile.

"So Albus Dumbledore is a thief who has a disturbing interest in me. If you don't mind I wish to examine what you retrieved," Harry stated, placing a gentle hand on his sister's shoulder in order to calm her down. He observed the manager, who kept writing on his book. A few minutes later. Three goblins arrived - two carrying a large chest and the last one held different folders, they placed everything and left without words.

"If you will read and sign this, it is the contract for the purchase of the potion, three hundred and fifty galleons plus a fee of fifty. This contains the details of where and in possession of who we found your heirlooms and what we took from him, which are inside the chest. This folder contains information about the reserves, we will send you an update. This contains updated information about different magical schools plus backgrounds. However, we're unable to find the records of Sirius Black trial, which means he did not have one," he announced frowning at his book.

"Thank you Manager Ragnok," she said accepting the key and placing it in her bag.

"Do you know someone I can hire to make a discreet investigation?"

"In fact, I do. I will put you in contact as soon as possible."

"There is no rush, I want someone reliable so take your time."

Harry read the contract and signed, putting the other folders in his bag and going over the chest. Opening it with curious eyes, he took out a silvery cloak that seemed to flow like water, many old-looking books with the Potter sign of arms, a few things he did not recognize but decided to read their descriptions later on. What grabbed his attention were the books that did not belong to the Potters and a silver artefact that had something dark inside.

"The Potter invisibility cloak, the books about the Potters history and a few about their family magic, and de-activated portkeys that we retrieved. The books that belonged to the thief and a curious artefact that contains your blood," the male announced.

"My blood... that means blood magic," Harry almost asked, frowning at the object. "I entrust you the object for you to destroy after finding what it was used for, tell me how much it will be," he requested, trying to control his rising anger.

"Consider it done, taking blood from a child is a heinous act," the goblin stated looking perturbed while the girl tried to calm her brother.

"Thank you Manager Ragnok, in order to finish our reunion, I will retrieve the portkey to the Potter Castle, and take out two pouches with five hundred galleons each. I would also like to ask whether you know any enchantress or enchanter," Harry requested politely, his face was still set in stone.



"It will be done... About the enchantress, we have a few working for Gringotts, I can contact them if you wish, for a fee," he offered with a grin.

"Please do, I will leave the chest in your care until I arrive at the castle, I will be sending a house-elf to retrieve it later. We will be in contact and may your blade taste the blood of your enemies, Manager Ragnok," he said inclining his head and his sister followed suit.

"And may your vaults flood with gold Mister Potter," he bowed and the children left.

"Do you remember what you have to do?" he asked his sister once they left the bank.

"Of course I do," she answered with a scowl. "First I go to Ollivander's to retrieve your wand and buy one for me, then I look for a trunk with at least three compartments but no pocket space, then to the bookstore because these savages do not understand what a communal library is and look for books published in the last decade. Then, if I have time, look for another place where clothes can be bought aside from what Hogwarts suggested and I wait for you in the only ice cream shop the brutes have," she huffed, looking annoyed.

"Good, I have to buy a cloak in order to go to Knockturn Alley. Afterwards, we will look for potion ingredients and we will get a few owls, you can also get a pet," he told her ignoring the almost manic grin that spread on her face at the idea of a pet. "Buy anything you deem necessary or catches your fancy," he told her and parted ways.

Harry walked towards Madam Malkin's, annoyed at the attention he was receiving. Whether it was either his looks or his clothes, he didn't care, but he was about to murder the next idiot that stared at him. He entered the shop and eyed it with distaste, an old woman approached him wearing a horrid mauve dress, and he regretted ever entering the place.

"Good morning ma'am, I'm looking for robes," he greeted, politeness feeling like acid in his mouth when being directed towards the woman who kept staring at him.

"Of course, it will be an honour to find robes for such a handsome young man. What about this one, it goes nicely with your eyes or maybe this..." she began blabbering annoying him further.

"A simple black robe," he interrupted the woman.

"Of course dear, what about this one?"

"It is what I had in mind," he answered, putting it on.

"That would be nineteen sickles," she announced.

"Have a good day," he muttered after handing the woman a galleon and leaving the place, hoping to never be forced to go back.

The ideas that wizards had about fashion were repulsive. Even when the store had a variety of hideous colours, the designs were all the same, that is without mentioning the cheap material. He hoped his sister found a decent clothing store, otherwise, he would need either to gouge his eyes out or establish a decent store. It was good he was too vain to do the former.

Entering the Alley, he sneered at how filthy the streets and buildings were, defeated, he walked towards the bookstore his mother frequented. He let out a sigh of relief when he saw the place, simple yet clean and organized. He walked inside the store looking for the clerk, who his mother had considered a dear friend. Behind a counter, a woman was lost in a book she seemed to be enjoying, as a fellow book enthusiast, he apologized internally for interrupting her.

“Good morning, madam,” Harry greeted the woman, a smile appeared on his face at her surprised expression.

“Oh my, you look just like her,” the woman whispered raising a hand retrieving it immediately. “You are Lily's son, right?”

“My mother wrote about you, it is a pleasure to finally meet you, aunt Eleadora,” the boy greeted at the gentle woman.

“It is indeed a pleasure, dear,” she agreed, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Harry exited the bookstore feeling accomplished, aunt Eleadora was just as his mother described: gentle, with a brilliant mind, and an almost unrivalled love for literature. They talked about his mother. About how much his father had opposed having her as godmother only because she was a hag, which earned the man a nice stay in the couch for a few months. They talked about his life and about the books she was no longer able to obtain from the muggle world. After a few hours, she dragged him out in order to not leave his sister waiting, not before giving him a couple of books and ripping a promise to keep in contact and introduce her to his sister.

He walked out of Knockturn Alley with a diminutive smile towards Florean's Fortesque, where his sister was waiting. She was easy to spot with that red cardigan she loved wearing, it was quite obvious she was angry by the way she kept stabbing her ice cream. Sighing at her fiery temper, he took a seat beside her.

“May I know what happened?” he asked, she took out a book and threw it at him. Once again, he thanked his fast reflexes, he didn't fancy a black eye.

“Sue them,” she demanded and kept stabbing her cold victim.

“I will,” he promised, eyeing with disgust a book that had his name claiming to be his adventures. “Aside from this, what else did you find?”

“No decent clothes shops, a place named Gladrags was hideous and apparently there exist only two clothing stores,” she almost whined and kept butchering her ice cream. “I got a trunk, four compartments. I requested the shop owner to keep it basic, but it is covered in dragonhide. Here is your wand, it electrocuted me when I tried to grab it,” she huffed, annoyed. “I also got my wand: rowan with dragon heartstring, 11 inches, quite rigid, an unusual combination. Or that is what the wandmaker said. I also got two maintenance kits and two wand holsters. By the way, I found another apothecary, it's more expensive than Mister Mulpepper's but I believe they have better quality,” she commented handing him his wand, which was covered with her handkerchief, much to his amusement.

Harry had always been able to use his magic, thus he considered the wand as unnecessary. However, the moment he touched it he knew he had been wrong. It felt like he had been missing something and was complete at last, it felt like a warm blanket on a gelid day... There were no words that would be able to convey the indescribable sensation.

“Let's get going then, I think you have already murdered your victim so I'm going to assume you are done,” he teased after a few moments and she pouted, but gathered her things.

“I have 231 galleons left. I had to give the wandmaker a bonus for your demon of a wand. Apparently, it tried to eviscerate him when he touched it. The poor man's hands were covered in bandages. I guess I must be grateful because it had the decency of not trying to murder me,” she told him while leading the way towards the apothecary.

“Keep them, I will pay for the rest,” he told her and they walked with no words needed.

He looked at the store and already liked it better than the other one, it was named Juoma Apothecary. He smiled at his sister and they walked in looking at the organized ingredients, neat labels, and interesting materials.

“Good evening,” he greeted at the middle-aged woman who was behind the counter.

“Good evening, do you need something in particular?” she asked with curiosity shining in her eyes.

“Two first-year kits please,” he requested.

“I'm sorry, but we only sell beginner level kits and I believe it would be too much for Hogwarts,” she said looking quite sour at the idea.

“My mother loved potions and I hoped to follow her footsteps, so I think a beginner set will be appropriate,” he answered with gentleness.

“If that is the case I will get them, wait a moment please,” she told them with a cheery tone. True to her word, she arrived a few minutes later, levitating two large boxes that looked quite simple but had a few tasteful details in white. “I hope you find them useful, each one will be fifteen galleons.”

“Here you go ma'am,” he said taking out thirty gold coins and signalling the trunk for his sister to open. “Could you levitate the boxes to the trunk?”

“Of course, if you run out of any ingredient feel free to owl me,” she answered with a bright smile.

The siblings exited the apothecary heading towards Eeylops Owl Emporium, near the door, Elizabeth met eyes with an Andean condor knowing she would take him with her. Nearing the cage the shop owner grabbed her hand before she could pet him.

“Be careful, he is not a nice guy,” he commented.

“I want him,” she declared to the shopkeeper's dismay and relief.

“If you must,” Harry conceded, amused at the girl's antics. “We need at least three birds.”

The shopkeeper looked torn between amusement and wariness. While the man was entertained with the questionable choices of his sister, a breathtaking snowy owl landed in front of him. Finally understanding his sister's fascination, he chose her. Taking the birds with him to the counter, he almost smiled at the puzzled expression of the shop owner. His sister was waiting for him with three cages, on which there were two large birds and an overgrown barn owl.

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In all his years, William Eeylops never had customers so bizarre. The little girl chose the most hostile birds he had the displeasure of meeting, looking at them as if they were adorable puppies. The boy would not have been too bad, only if he had never seen that owl before, and he remembered every single bird that passed through his shop. Thoroughly confused he told them the price and winced internally, knowing it was too high for the children to afford.

“Very well, would you add food, treats, and four perches?” the child asked and William nodded dumbly handing him what was requested and mumbling a new price. “Good, now I would like you to forget we came here and what we bought,” the child whispered after placing a heavy bag of galleons near the counter and the man nodded.

William shook himself out of his sleepy trance, manning a store was not simple. Three birds had managed to fly away a couple of days ago and now he was unable to find his favourite perch. Having your own business was not as glamorous as he imagined, but the positive thing is that he had found a bag full of gold that made up for any inconveniences... Maybe it was time to take a short vacation.

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“Was that necessary?” Elizabeth asked watching the birds fly away.

“It was, we bought exotic birds and he would have remembered.”

“I meant to let the birds fly by themselves to the orphanage.”

“Ah, not necessary but it is cruel to keep living beings in a cage. They will find the orphanage, the paper I gave them had the exact directions. Let's go now, we can have dinner anywhere you choose.”

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## **11<sup>th</sup> of July 1991, Number 4 Privet Drive, Surrey**

Petunia Dursley was having a horrible time. First, the freak came looking for the monster that was left in her care, after blissful years of peace, they came back. If that was not enough, the police came to their house to investigate, now she realized it had been stupid to lock the cupboard and pretend the child never happened without getting rid of his things. Her husband was in jail for child abuse and abandonment, she was in probation, and her child was about to be sent to a juvie. She cursed those blasted freaks that had ruined her life, she cursed the monster that had somehow given them away, and above all, she cursed her bloody sister for having everything Petunia ever dreamed of and more.

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## 5<sup>th</sup> of August 1991, Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

Albus Dumbledore was exhausted after the meeting with the staff, it was quite obvious Monday's were not his days. Last month, he had been occupied with his duties as head of the ICW, an onerous yet rewarding job.

He tried to ask many people and creatures to pay attention in case Harry Potter went to the Alley, but there were many obstacles. The goblins never gave personal information of an important client and Harry Potter was a really important client, even if the child didn't know that yet. Garrick remembered every wand and the person he sold them to, however, he never revealed the information unless the person was present. Tom interacted with so many people every day that he barely recognized his own face and the same could be said for Madam Malkins. That is one of the reasons he had sent people he trusted to look out for young Harry, unfortunately, they had yet to report any information regarding the child, so he guessed he had yet to obtain his school materials.

He sighed once more, wondering where all his firewhisky had gone. Had he really drank it all? Never mind, Dumbledore had hoped that the child was enchanted with their world, unlike what he expected and wished, the boy had the minimum interest in the magical world and he feared the child would be sorted in a house other than Gryffindor. Thinking about him, he looked for the silver artefact and paled when he noticed it was missing. Running to his quarters, he looked for the books he took from Godric's Hollow, noticing those and many others of his personal collection missing, he almost got a cardiac arrest. With shaky hands, he opened the chest where he kept the invisibility cloak and the de-activated portkeys only to find it empty.

He kept looking at the chest willing it to appear. Nothing happened. He collapsed in the floor and buried his face in his hands in frustration. He had known that taking those heirlooms was not ethical, but it had been the right thing to do. The books contained dangerous knowledge, he had also wanted to hide the Potter grimoire from Harry but he had been unable to access any of the Potter's properties or even get close to the few he remembered, which was not much. Lily had performed the fidelius and now they were lost to the world.

If that was not enough, the invisibility cloak was gone. That object was dangerous in extreme, he had retrieved it the moment he could and, for a while, he toyed with the idea of giving it to Harry in order to gain his trust but all his plans were nought. He could go to the DMLE, but there was no way the artefacts would be tracked. Besides, what could he say? That someone had stolen what he stole from the Potters? He was frustrated but knew he was doing the right thing, Harry was too important for the peace of the magical world to allow him full knowledge of his roots... It was for the greater good.

## Then Better Be...

Harry Potter lay down in a comfortable position, pondering the drastic changes his life had been subjected to. Most of his childhood he had lived in an orphanage that by no means was able to fully cover basic necessities, and even before that, he had lived the life of a pauper with overly ambitious goals. Now, he lived in a castle with commodities he had only dreamt of. Once, he needed to save every penny he was able to acquire, now he had money to throw away... Life was good but it was only beginning to get better.

The day after visiting the bank with his sister, they portkeyed to the Potter castle. If he was honest with himself, he had doubts about the place, seeing how magical people seemed to possess bizarre ideas on what consisted style and architecture. His fears were proved pointless at the end of the day because the castle was what sculptors and architects would have given an eye and a hand in order to have the opportunity to admire. Greenfields with dozens of greenhouses, a large lake, and a deep forest crowned a pearl white building which almost shined with an ethereal glow; various sculptures adorned the grounds giving the place the last touches for it to look majestic. The building itself was colossal with ample doors that were exquisitely carved, though, perhaps a tad overdone.

The inside held the same aura of elegance to the point of decadence: attractive marble floors, elegant furniture, and tasteful ornaments. What surprised him the most, however, was their reception of excited little people, of who he had yet to learn all of their names. They had all requested to be bonded to 'Master Potter', process that had exhausted him but was worth the magic given. In total, the castle had a hundred and twenty-two house-elves that were divided by duties: forty to take care of the greenhouses and gardens, forty dedicated to the cleaning, ten for the kitchens, twenty in charge of the security, and the others to help in business or as personal elves. At least those had been their original roles. Considering only two people were living in the house, Harry coordinated with the head house-elf to employ the remaining ones in more appropriate tasks. Remembering his mother's cautious nature, the first task he gave to his little workers was to strengthen the castle wards.

Their visit to Diagon Alley opened their eyes to what the magical world lacked, having this in mind and with the help of the house-elves that had once served as business advisors for his grandfather and mother, he devised a solid business plan to begin a clothes store. The elves, observing his distaste for the uniform the school requested and his reluctance to buy it, had created clothing he would have paid hundreds of galleons for. Having found the best seamstresses and tailors in his talented elves, he was ready to start the clothes shop.

Finding a good location as well as buying it had been simple; making it look like a decent place had been the hard part. Extremely hard. Compared to that, finding fabrics in the muggle world along with different designs for the elves to emulate was a piece of cake. Also, hiring a person to work at the store was less complicated than expected. The girl was desperate for a job after graduating Hogwarts and being rejected in most places for being a first-generation witch; she had signed the strict magical contract without thinking twice and accepted with almost physical gratefulness the flat they offered above the store.

All in all, the business was almost ready to open. Only a few documents needed to be signed by the Ministry, and with golden motivation, the process was sped up a considerable amount of time. The store would open under the alias of Charlus Evans, who a house-elf would personify. He also had plans for opening a restaurant and there were possibilities of a café, all of them in order to drag the people out of their stagnation without them noticing or opposing. At least not too much.

Harry and Elizabeth's personal affairs in the muggle world were also concluded. Taking his tests and receiving his title was almost too simple, surprisingly so. Ragnok recommended him to forge documents that would convince the muggle system that the Potter siblings were still living in the orphanage. With a bit of magical persuasion on the Matron and a few of the minders, Harry and his sister still existed in the muggle world without really being present. More importantly, they were allowed to leave towards the magical world without repercussions. That last part had been tricky, not to say onerous, yet necessary. He could not afford to leave behind a single loose end.

Thinking about his sister brought the blood adoption to his mind. Elizabeth now displayed carbon black hair thanks to the potion, but that done she was a Potter through and through, a fact that facilitated her inscription to the "Sioux Academy of Magical Science." The top school in the United North American Tribes. It was curious how different the magical and muggle sides were, as a matter of fact, the United North American Tribes had a chief and a council. Reading their curriculum, he almost regretted having accepted a place at Hogwarts; even the "McTavish Educators of Enlightenment", in Ireland, had a better curriculum. It was fortunate Eliza was attending a school in a civilized society, for she was able to order the magical versions of notebooks, pens, and pencils. He had to conform himself with an elegant fountain pen, arduous hours of calligraphy practice, and constantly nursing his aching hands and even more tender pride. He would have discarded the idea of Hogwarts if not for the knowledge that his mother had left him, which was better than what any other school was able to offer. Besides, he wanted to see in person the castle that his mother had loved so dearly.

As Harry stretched on his bed, he was unable to miss his old life. He now had a firmer grasp on his roots and had never felt more motivated to accomplish his objectives. Thinking about his accounts, his manager in specific, he had to contain a snort of amusement. That clever bastard had recommended aunt Eleadora as the enchantress, requesting a thirty galleon fee for the information. He admitted, although, with grudging respect, that Ragnok was a cunning man.

Aunt Eleadora had enchanted Eliza's trunk, so now it emulated his. The woman also enchanted two leather backpacks, which he had designed himself and had it made in the muggle world. It had been hard to convince the woman to accept the payment, which he deposited in her account anyway, but she was more than happy to accept books he bought for her. It was common for aunt Eleadora to have lunch in the castle, though it surprised him how fast his sister had bonded with the woman, sharing their love for books.

Reading about the history of the magical world had been enlightening, it was true that the founding families have sweated and bled in order build the society and the purebloods had good reasons to be proud of their ancestry. However, the ideals the founders once valued

were almost lost in the bigotry and ignorant fear of the people. It was a tradition to celebrate different times a year in order to thank magic for choosing them, a tradition that was deemed dark by an incompetent Ministry. The few things that remained from the Old Ways were the names of the holidays and a few blessings and greetings that were practised by old traditional families, which he considered a shame. It was heart-wrenching to see how much the magical people had perverted their marvellous roots.

"Young master, it's time to wake up, do you wish to take a bath before or after breakfast?" his personal house-elf, Ella, asked.

"Morning, I will be down in twenty minutes," he announced and left his comfortable bed.

Looking at the shower he had to smile, it had taken a bit of explaining for aunt Eleadora to understand what it was, but once she did, she loved the idea and wasted no time in installing it in her own house. Choosing grey fabric pants, a light jumper, and putting on the dragon hide shoes with distaste, he left towards the dining room. He would also open a shoe store, or at least convince his elves to make him shoes that were easier to put on.

"Good morning brother," Eliza greeted him looking cheerful "Are you ready for the train ride?" she asked with mischief shining in her eyes.

"As ready as I can be. What about you?"

"More than ready, and unlike you, I only have to take a portkey at 9:55 in order to be there before five," she smirked.

"I also consider it rather ridiculous to take a train with so many means of magical transportation, but I will survive," he muttered starting to eat his breakfast.

"Aunt Eleadora should be here by now," she commented, looking at the clock.

"Some people actually enjoy sleeping in," he provided. They finished eating in companionable silence and walked towards the library where they found their aunt immersed in a book.

"Since when did you arrive?" asked a surprised Elizabeth, gaining the woman's attention.

"Couple of hours ago, both of you were sleeping so I had breakfast with the elves, visited the greenhouses - which I must say look breathtaking, and I got bored so I came to read. By the way, dear, have you considered opening a potions ingredient shop? There is no way you will be able to use all those samples by yourself," the woman commented with her usual cheerful tone.

"I have not, but I will begin planning for one," he sighed; ready to be dragged into a conversation on which he would be ignored.

They chatted, or better said, the females chatted while the male nodded here and there while reading a thick tome until a house-elf interrupted them in order for them to get ready. Once their aunt applied glamour on her appearance, in order not to attract unwanted or negative



attention, an elf handed him his lunch, snacks, and a water bottle plus a tasteful robe to put in his backpack along with his uniform. Deeming themselves ready, Eleadora apparated them directly to the platform. Once they arrived, Harry thanked once again his cautious nature because, even arriving one hour early, the place had people walking all over the place.

"Remind me to never doubt you again," the woman muttered.

"I will, aunt Eleadora, I will. Don't worry, I will also write. Hedwig will give you my letters. You don't forget to write to me, one of the elves will deliver the letter to my room in Hogwarts, and take care of Tyche," he told his sister, sighing at the memory of the baleful grey owl that seemed to love his sister.

"I won't as long as you remember that Apollo and Hades also need to work out," she threatened, referring to the two birds that seemed to enjoy all the attention they received.

"It won't be a problem, Hades will have no respite from Gringotts and Apollo has many future letters to deliver."

"Good," she pouted looking at the floor.

"I will write," he told her kissing her forehead and smiling to his aunt, with fast steps he left towards the train, uncomfortable with the show of affection.

Entering the last wagon in order to avoid human interaction as long as possible, he chose the last compartment, which was considerably more spacious than any other compartment he had seen on the train. Curious. With a shrug, he entered the place and closed the door and the curtains on it, getting comfortable for a long ride.

He was lost in a book about runes when he was interrupted by the violent way in which a savage tore the door open and invaded his compartment. In the entrance, a bushy-haired girl and a pudgy boy with teary eyes were looking at him. Over the past weeks, he had pondered on how to act within the school walls, in the end, he decided to wait and see, wearing his mask of distant politeness that had earned him the favour of authority figures in the past... Being interrupted by these savages, he began regretting his decision.

"Have you seen a toad? Neville here lost one," the girl demanded. "That book was not in the curriculum. Will you lend it to me once you finish it?" she asked without giving him the chance to speak, a fact that annoyed him even further. "My name is Hermione Granger and I'm a muggleborn, but I already memorized the school books. I tried many spells with perfect results, naturally," she stated and Harry decided that there was no reason to be polite to savages.

"Good evening to you too miss, of course, you can get in my compartment, I have not seen a toad and I'm sure you can get the book in a bookstore," he stated with a condescending tone and a stony expression, almost snorting at the sight of the savage flushing.

"You are being rude," she accused.

"I apologize, where I grew up, people have the tendency to knock the door and wait for others to answer when they ask questions. Was it different where you were raised?" he asked, enjoying the way she flushed even further, readying herself to throw a tantrum. It was fortunate for her that the boy had common sense and dragged her out after stammering an apology.

He sneered when they left and locked the door, just in case another idiot dared to interrupt him. Noticing the sun was setting, he changed into his uniform, which had slight differences to the traditional. For starters, his were better looking, unlike the atrocities the other students were forced to wear. Taking out his snacks, he started eating with an absent air while he read until the train arrived at its station in Hogsmeade. Once again, he thanked his cautious nature when a voice announced to leave the entire luggage in the train. His briefcase and backpack now sported a plaque containing his initials, on which his aunt had put on tracking charms. He placed his belongings inside his backpack and left the train once the human traffic lessened.

He saw a gigantic man guiding the first years through a narrow, dangerous-looking path and could only sneer at how little thought the staff placed on the student's safety. He was one of the last people entering a boat on which two girls were gossiping, throwing nasty glares to the other passenger of the boat. Harry ignored them and took a seat. The view of the castle would have impressed him in the past, but after experiencing the magnificence of the Potter castle, the view was rewarded by a fleeting glance and ignored once again. He entered in a trance-like state on which he critiqued the obvious lack of maintenance and the tawdry decor the castle possessed, the only remarkable features about the place was the enchanted ceiling and the worn hat with a superior intellect than most people he had met. Once again, he ignored with apathy his surroundings until his name was called and every eye of the hall was directed at him.

Harry walked towards the stool with graceful steps, a posture that showed confidence, and a visage devoid of expression. He was the ideal image of what a real magician was meant to be and what few could emulate. Surprised eyes followed his steps; he was not what the wizardry world had imagined. He was not a carbon copy of James Potter... While some re-evaluated their opinion of the boy-who-lived, others were lost in his handsome features, so few noticed how long it was taking for him to be sorted.

"What do we have here...? A brilliant mind no doubt, hardworking philosophy, bravery to spare. But what is this... Pride and ambition... Yes, yes, such a fascinating person. It has been a long time since I had such a challenge," the hat spoke in his mind.

"Won't you ask me where I wish to go?" he questioned, annoyed at the way the hat spoke, putting far too much emphasis on its speech.

"So mean, Harry Potter, just like your grandmother. Let's see now... You have attributes that all the founders cherished. Where would be the fun if you were to choose? Besides, wouldn't that defeat the purpose of my existence? Mmm... What do we have here? Your bravery and conviction would sit well with the lions. Gryffindor will make you great, there is no doubt. Your loyalty and kindness would make the friendly badgers admire you. In Hufflepuff, you will find loyal friends and devoted followers, I know for sure!

"But that sharp mind of yours, Mister Potter, definitely fits perfectly with the cold ravens. You would rule Ravenclaw within the day with that brain of yours, I'm sure... But Slytherin... Oh, my! Your ambitious goals and cunning nature would enchant even the most hostile snake! If you are able to overcome the obstacles it presents, Slytherin will lead you towards a path of greatness that has never been seen before! So much potential..." it trailed off.

"You gave my mother the option to choose," Harry reminded the hat, somewhat confused by its penchant for theatrics.

"She was the first one to threaten me with my eventual demise... Only because she wanted to wear her favourite colour. The nerve! ...So where do you want to be Harry Potter?"

"Anywhere you decide. I have no preference," he stated, smiling slightly at the idea of annoying the hat that was annoying him.

"I see you inherited your father's sense of humour, eh? Now, where should I put you? ..I have no doubts that this will be the perfect House for you, Harry Potter, especially with that mindset. May Mother Magic protect you, dear child, you are going to need it..." it whispered at last and Harry felt the strange sensation of the hat leaving his mind.

"Better be... Slytherin!" the hat shouted and the hall descended into a sepulchral silence followed by tumultuous whispers.

He nodded, thanking the hat and professor. He walked towards the table ignoring all the curious and judging glances but paying special attention to the people who glared at it with open disdain or even hatred. He would wait and see, however, the moment someone dared to try to cause him any problems he was going to teach them why vermin should never try to attack their superiors.

The headmaster gave a speech that he dutifully ignored, once the man finished food filled the table. Harry stared with a blank expression at the plates in front of him. 'Are they trying to make me fat or perhaps their goal is to cause me a heart attack,' he thought when he caught a glimpse of the greasy feast in front of him. He had never had the possibility of overeating, thus, he got used to reasonable meals and light dinners. Serving himself a few spoons of mashed potatoes and roasted vegetables, he took a sip of the strange juice in his goblet and had to control his desire to spit it out. When he was a child, sweets were a luxury, thus, he never got used to the flavour of sugar, thing that the juice had in excess. Once he finished his food, desserts replaced the feast in front of him, deciding that the juice had been sweet enough Harry ignored them and regretted not bringing a book with him. People around him were chatting, pretending he was not present, which was fine by him. Harry was not attending Hogwarts to make friends, he wanted to learn about magic and his mother's time as a student.

"I have a few announcements to make now that you are fed and watered," the headmaster declared once everyone finished eating. "First years should note the Forbidden Forest is forbidden to..." tuning out the old man he concentrated on his own thoughts.

Now that he arrived, there were things that needed to be done. First was writing to aunt Eleadora and Eliza, next was evaluating whether his room was decent or not. He was not

expecting the luxury he enjoyed at the castle but had certain requirements. If not, he was sure one of his house-elves would be able to fix the situation. Now, the problem lay on his roommates. He was not a patient person but he couldn't get rid of every annoying human he found and, sometimes, fear was counterproductive, therein laid his conundrum. He did not notice they left the hall until they arrived at a stone wall.

"This is the entrance of the Slytherin common room," an older girl explained, glaring at them. "If you look carefully, you will notice the snake in the upper left corner. Only Slytherins are allowed in, by no means you can bring any other person. The password changes the first of every month; it will be announced in the morning in the common room so you better remember. I hope is inferred that the password is not meant to be spoken nor told to anyone who does not belong in this noble House. Atropa Belladonna," she announced for everyone to listen and the wall parted, allowing the group entrance.

His first impression on the common room was that he should have chosen a house where his eyesight would not deteriorate for the lack of illumination. The place was not terrible. Perhaps a bit too gothic for his tastes, but not hideously so. Dark stone complemented the grey walls, there were plush sofas in dark shades of green and black carpets near every fireplace. However, the torches did little to illuminate the place and the wall that showed the depths of the school's loch gave a green tint to the room. It was not bad but it was obvious he would need another place to read.

"Welcome to Slytherin. I'm Aciel Yaxley and he is Ander Rosewood, we are seventh-year prefects. I'm sure you were told some rules already but I will repeat them. Only Slytherins are allowed here, don't share the password, don't lose points, and don't get caught. The most important rule we have is whatever problems you may have with other Slytherins, you keep a united front for outsiders. Understood?" she asked glaring at them.

"That said, that staircase leads to the rooms right side for the girls left for the boys, the first three years you will be in the lower levels, being first years, your rooms are in the lowest level. You will share a bathroom with your year mates; however, you will have your own room. Each door has a plaque with your name that signals your room. It is your responsibility to secure it, but I must warn you, if you are found in someone else's room you won't like the consequences. I want you here at 7:30 sharp tomorrow so we can guide you to the great hall for breakfast, you are free to go," the male announced and both left.

Harry sighed once again and walked towards his floor. He was pleased to note his room was the first one, which meant the closest to the stairs but the furthest from the bathroom, a location he approved of. He opened the door and examined his new quarters, like his first impression of the common room, this place desperately needed light. It was better than any room of the orphanage but had the same Spartan air of his room in his other boarding school: a simple bed with drapes, a desk with a matching chair, and a small wardrobe. What took the crown was the wall-sized window that showed the Black Lake depths, just like the common room, he approached the bed and opened his backpack which was at the feet of the bed in order to write his letter and wondering how his owl was supposed to visit.

"Ella," he called his house-elf.

"Young Master!" the excited elf exclaimed popping in. "What can-" she stopped talking, looking at his room with horror.

"Hello, Ella, could you please install some drapes over that window? I don't fancy being ogled by merpeople," he told the little elf.

"I will master, but first I need to change this room. Good Mistress Dorea would be horrified to know her grandchild is living in such a place!" she exclaimed, with an internal sigh he noted that the elf had higher standards than he did.

"I don't mind as long as you cover that window, but could you please wait until tomorrow?" he pleaded with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Do you wish me to wake you tomorrow, young master?" the little elf asked after snapping her fingers, successfully blocking his view of the loch.

"No, I'm used to wake up early, have a goodnight, Ella."

"Goodnight sir."

Once the elf left he finished organizing his backpack with all the book subjects and other materials. That done, he went to the bathroom to clean himself, changed to comfortable sleepwear, and went to bed.

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### **First of September, 1991, Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts**

Albus Dumbledore was sitting on a couch, sipping firewhisky from the bottle, pondering the last disastrous month and the obstreperous beginning of this. First, the Potter heirlooms had been stolen along with many irreplaceable books... And those were just a few. The artefact he created to track the saviour of the magical world was gone, that device alone would earn him a long stay in Azkaban for taking the blood of a child, no one would understand how important or necessary it had been.

If that was not enough, there had been no signs of Harry Potter in Diagon Alley. No one had seen or heard about the child, except maybe Ollivanders, but he was tight-lipped about his clients. Albus had been sickly worried about the elusive child deciding not to attend Hogwarts, but there was no way of confirming his fears. If he went to the orphanage, it would be revealed he was monitoring Harry and Merlin knew that the Matron of the orphanage hated him enough already. Therefore, he took the next available option. He sent former members of the order, except for Remus and Minerva, to the muggle and magical side of the platform to look for the boy.

Dumbledore tended to keep his grandfather persona in almost every situation, but he had been so alarmed when none of his people reported that his mask was almost broken in front of Flitwick, who was perhaps one of the most observant persons he had met. If that was not enough, he had no way of monitoring the train so uncertainty had tormented him for a full day. In his desperation, he went to the orphanage, only to be almost kicked out by the Matron,

who told him that Harry Potter had left early in the morning to a good boarding school and let before he could try to use magic on her.

Seeing the child at the feast had almost made him collapse in relief. The feeling showed to be ephemeral when the last Potter was sorted in Slytherin, the resemblance between him a child he had met fifty years ago chilled him to the bone. However, it was done. There was not another sorting. Harry Potter was a Slytherin which meant it would complicate his plans to mould him in order to ensure no other Dark Lord was created.

Observing the headmaster from his high perch, the Sorting Hat was lost in his own thoughts. The Potter boy was dangerous, of that he had no doubts. If he went to Gryffindor, he would have an army at his disposal. An army that would have believed him if he said it was necessary to eliminate all of their enemies in name of heroism. In Hufflepuff, he would have devoted followers who would murder their families if he asked them to, all in the name of loyalty. He would have the Ravenclaw house beguiled before the week was over; he would have willing slaves who considered his wishes their own just because of his sharp mind... But in Slytherin was where he would gain the most dangerous allies, after all, Slytherins tended to hold the characteristics of all the houses guided by a ruthless ambition... And he blamed the part of Rowena in him that could not wait to see what the future held.

Harry Potter was an enigma with so much promise...

# Bizarre Week

## Chapter Notes

Enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry Potter opened his eyes only to be greeted by darkness, believing he woke up in the middle of the night, his hands felt for his wand. Once he found it, he cast a quick tempus. Luminescent numbers appeared on thin air, reading 5:57, and then the young boy remembered the darkness that dominated his new room. He decided to get out of the warm bed and the gelid air finished the job of waking him, along with the torches that flamed to life illuminating the room and casting eerie shadows. He really needed decent lights. Taking what was necessary for a shower, he walked towards the bathroom, once he entered he remembered with a healthy degree of horror that showers did not exist in the magical world and, while he enjoyed baths every once in a while, they were too time-consuming for his taste. Resigned, he consoled himself with the fact he had time to spare.

Many Slytherins gawked at the boy sitting in front of a fireplace reading a book early in the morning with a strange sack beside him. Said boy, rather than reading, was glaring with pure hatred the fireplace that provided poor light and was already yearning for a good reading place. Little by little, people filled the room until all his year mates were present, along with the two prefects that were meant to guide them.

"I hope you slept last night, otherwise, it will be hell today. We will lead you to the great hall for three days," the girl sneered.

"Other prefects will either guide or direct you to your classes for the week. You are expected to know your way around after the first week. I recommend you to stick in groups, for your own safety. Let's go!" the teen finished with that ominous note and walked towards the door.

People looked at his backpack with obvious curiosity but no one questioned him so he ignored them. It was easy to get lost in the dungeons for it was built to resemble a maze, the dim hallways and the dark stone did not help. However, you only needed to be observant. In all the tweaks and turns they took, there was an almost imperceptible snake engraved at the top of the rock, signalling their way, detail that Harry noted. They arrived at the great hall and noticed a few students and two professors were there.

"Breakfast is available from seven to nine-thirty, lunch from twelve to two, and dinner from six to eight. Curfew is at nine-thirty but you should be in the common room by nine at most," the prefect explained.

"The library is open from eight to eight, you can also loan books, but anything that happens to them is your responsibility. Be quick with your breakfast so prefects Rosier and Travers can give you your schedules and a short tour," the girl almost barked and took a seat, they followed suit and food appeared in front of them.

Once again, Harry sighed, the food in front of him was too heavy and, if he ate any of it, the boy was sure he was going to throw up later. He picked an apple and started eating it along with a glass of milk, taking out a book from his bag to pass time. He didn't notice the way people eyed his clothes and his unknown contraption because he ignored everyone around him, including the hateful glances and the conversations. A while later, a parchment containing his schedule was placed in front of him, he took it in order to examine it and noted with equal amounts of annoyance and relief he had a lot of free time. He placed his books and a few apples in his backpack when the prefects began to leave. They were shown the library, infirmary, and owlery, along with the Transfiguration and Charms classroom, on which they were left for it was their first class.

Harry took a seat in the middle and waited. Professor Flitwick knew his subject and had the talent to pass the information, it was a shame he already knew the theory. When they were told to try the first spell, he thought it was going to be just as simple. However, he was offended when it did not work. He had followed all the steps: the wand wave and correct enunciation, unless...

Then it hit him, whenever he had used his power, he had felt magic rushing through him to accomplish what he desired. In order for it to work, you needed to want it to work and magic would comply. With this in mind, he tried once again, noting with satisfaction the spell worked. He was awarded five points for being the first to achieve it, fact that his Ravenclaw classmates seemed to resent.

Transfiguration had been similar, professor McGonagall was strict and lacked the talent professor Flitwick owned to teach, but she was decent. Once again, he heard the theory he knew by heart thus, ignored the lecture dutifully, until a match appeared in front of him and the teacher gave the order to turn it into a needle. Using what he had learnt during charms, a needle replaced the match on his first try.

"Well done Mister Potter!" the professor announced, standing beside his desk. "Now try to turn it back again," seeing no reason to object he did as he was told and once again it turned to a match. "Excellent! I never had a student that completed the transformation so fast, fifteen points to Slytherin. Now try to add complexity to the design, Mister Potter," she told him and walked away after giving him an encouraging smile.

For some reason, her strict demeanour seemed to soften. What a strange woman.

He thought of different designs while looking around the classroom and he noticed the bushy-haired savage that had invaded his compartment was seething at him, unable to resist the temptation, he smiled at her. Satisfied with her face darkening, he concentrated on his job. Visualising different kinds of needles, he was pleased in extreme with his last result. An exquisite metal needle in shape of a dragon whose tail was the point and open mouth formed the eye. Beautiful indeed, but not useful at all. Well, at least it was aesthetically pleasing.



With a shrug, he presented it at the end of the class. The teacher stared open-mouthed at his work.

"I have never had a student present me something similar in their first year, let alone in their first class. Twenty points to Slytherin for raw talent and magnificent wand work," the professor announced, keeping his needle.

He thanked her and left the classroom towards the great hall, noticing the envious looks that were directed at him. He was no stranger to them, fortunately. Throughout his life, he had always been the best, fact that evoked envy from his peers. Being honest, he confessed feeling satisfied, it meant that he was not normal, it meant he was above them. He was pleased with the idea of not belonging to such a ludicrous group of people. He remembered with shame the times he had yearned to belong and almost shuddered at the repulsive thought.

First, he had tried to belong to his Aunt's family, which was useless. Whatever success he was able to achieve only earned him scorn. He also remembered the first months at the orphanage with disconcerting clarity, he had tried to belong but he was seen as a threat for his attractive features and charm. Older children began hurting him and the adults knew, but they didn't care. Thus, he finished learning the lesson he began to understand at the Dursley's household: power is everything. He began using his magic to defend himself and no one dared to cross him. He began considering other human beings as less than insects and accepted loneliness as part of life... That was until Elizabeth arrived. He could feel her magic and knew she was not an insect. She had learnt from him and eased his solitude, yet he yearned to meet someone who possessed the same nature he did because his sweet little sister was too gentle to understand the lengths he had gone to ensure their safety.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he was surprised to arrive at the great hall, he took a seat and began doing his charms essay. Once he was done, food appeared in front of him, so used to the disappointment he was that he filled his plate with boiled vegetables, some potatoes, and took out his water bottle, eating without complaining about the lack of flavour or caring he was the only one in the hall aside from a young female professor who was looking at him with curiosity.

"Potter! Where were you?!" the female prefect that seemed to hate everyone asked, interrupting his almost finished lunch.

"Here," he deadpanned.

"You were supposed to go with the other Slytherins to the common room to leave your books," she hissed, taking deep breaths to compose herself.

"I was not informed, I apologize."

"Acie!, calm down," the other prefect whispered to the girl. "May I know what were you doing, Potter?"

"Of course, after transfiguration, I decided to come to the great hall to do my homework. I mean no offence, but the common room doesn't have enough light."

"Do you know your way already?" he questioned, looking genuinely curious.

"Snakes are hard to miss."

"Very good Potter, very good," the prefect congratulated him with a smirk, taking the surprised girl with him.

History of Magic after lunch was not what he expected. His mother made the class sound fascinating when it was everything but, yet he decided to give it one more chance. He opted to make good use of his free time after classes and decided it was time to visit the library.

"Good evening, Madam Pince," he told the woman behind the entrance desk, who was staring at him with wide eyes.

The library his mother owned was a gold mine, that is without counting her own notes and ideas for charms and potions. She had an unrivalled thirst for knowledge and no patience for non-sense, therefore, all of her books were excellent. Adding the books from the Potter library, he was not impressed with the collections that the school owned. However, he was going to be a frequent visitor unless he found a better place to read. He was shaken out of his book-induced trance by a gentle librarian who told him it was dinnertime.

"Thank you, ma'am, I got lost in the book."

"Don't worry, Mister Potter. Your mother had the same tendency."

"Once again, thank you. See you tomorrow, Madam Pince," Harry said as a farewell. He was rewarded with a rare smile from the usually bitter woman.

He arrived at the great hall and noticed that, much to his displeasure, it was almost full. He took a seat on his table and scowled at the food again. Like the previous day, he had mashed potatoes and roasted vegetables. Seeing not water available, he took his own bottle and placed it in front of him. He ignored the curious looks he got for this action, or the surprised expressions from the muggleborns at seeing his backpack, or the glares from the Ravenclaws and a bushy-haired girl.

He finished his dinner and grabbed a book to continue reading it until it was time to leave. Once in the common room, he went to his room and found it utterly unrecognizable, beginning on the fact it was thrice as big. The floor was made of white wood and the walls were a deep viridian green on which golden carvings embellished it, the furniture was made of pale maple with an elegant simplicity that highlighted their design. An ample desk containing different drawers with a matching plush executive chair that was designed after the muggle version, and which cushions were covered in the same green leather the walls were painted. Beside rested a wide bookcase and a comfortable sitting place in front of a marble fireplace. However, what amazed him the most was that the window that once showed the Black Lake now provided the view of the fields of the Potter castle.

"Welcome young master, I hope you like your new room," greeted Ella, popping in.

"I'm impressed, how did you change the windows?"

"I asked Mistress Eleadora, she connected this window to the castle and we merely changed them. Do you like the lights, sir?"

"I do, though I believed my mother only charmed enough for the castle."

"She charmed dozens of lights sir, she said that candles were not good light to read and I asked Mistress Eleadora to activate them," she announced with obvious pride.

"You are very intelligent Ella, thank all the elves for their hard work for me please," he told the little worker and she blushed green. "I have a question though, what are those doors doing here?" he asked, signalling them.

"That is Master's bathroom and that is his clothing room, head elf Rome cried when he saw the ones you were forced to use. So we made new ones; it even has a small waterfall that is used to bath. No Potter should live in such a terrible condition, Mistress Dorea would have cried if she saw it," she announced solemnly while the boy was busy digesting the fact that elves had better taste than he did.

"Thank Rome for me then, I know you are tired but could you please deliver this letter to my sister and give this one to Hedwig?" he asked the small female, amused at her description of a shower.

"Of course, sir," she said, opening the window. A white owl came through and she tied the letter to its paw. He felt stupid at not realizing he could do that. With a groan, he began of thinking ways of bringing Hedwig to his room.

"One more thing Ella, can someone bring tomorrow a few perches for the birds?"

"I will do it, sir!"

"Thank you once again dear Ella, rest well."

"Good night, young master!" the little one said with tears welling in her eyes.

He eyed his room once again with approval, satisfied with how things were going so far.

The week went by in the same bizarre yet uninteresting fashion. Tuesday morning he was free while in the evenings he had Defence against the Dark Arts, class on which the professor's stutter made painful to be on, but he ignored with the best of his abilities. Charms was interesting, Flitwick was a genius to teach. Noticing how bored he had been during the theoretical part and how easy the practical side came to him, the short man began challenging him to study deeper theory and find out creative uses of charms for duels. Flitwick also gave him advanced spells to try and if he was able to accomplish that, Harry was promised a project. The highlight of the class had been the jealousy most of his peers seemed to expel in waves and how fast the rumours of his progress in lessons expanded. Professor McGonagall had taken him to her office after dinner that day, wearing an even more serious expression than usual.

"A student complained today about how you bullied her on the train, would you explain yourself, Mister Potter?"

"I was not aware," he answered, truly surprised by the question. It seemed that the bushy-haired savage was unable to handle jealousy. "As far as I remember, only Miss Granger and her friend came to my compartment. She was quite... Excited in her search for a frog, kicking the door open in the most literal way, then she... ehm, requested me to lend her my book and after that, she introduced herself not allowing her companion the same privilege, hence the reason I don't even know his name. I thought I was polite when I told her she could find the book in the library, but then she said I was rude. I was confused so I explained the way I was raised at the orphanage and what I considered manners, but before she could answer, her friend took her away. I really was not aware I offended her, I will of course apologize and I accept any punishment you give me, professor," he finished, congratulating his well-groomed acting skills.

"There will be no need, Mister Potter, I'm sure this is a misunderstanding on her part and I will ensure it does not happen again. I apologize for reacting the way I did," the woman answered in a calm voice, though her stormy eyes betrayed her anger, which he was sure was not directed at him.

"There is no need to apologize, ma'am, you were doing your job. If I could be excused, I'm about to fall asleep any moment," he explained, ready to leave.

"I will escort you, I don't want to have another lost first year," she commented, looking quite chagrined at the notion.

"I know my way to the common room, don't worry. Goodnight Professor McGonagall."

"Goodnight Mister Potter, make sure not to be lost."

Wednesday resulted to be his busiest day. Beginning with the rumour mill that was on a high during breakfast, on which he learnt that McGonagall had been furious with the savage, giving her two weeks of detention and taking twenty points. To add insult to the injury, he had approached her when the hall was full and apologized, the look on her face had been worth the extra hour he stayed at the hall and all the looks he earned.

That same morning he had Herbology with the Hufflepuffs, a subject that was interesting to a certain degree but he would never be able to find fascinating. Flying lessons would have been excellent if not for the teary boy that fell from his broom, and a blond Slytherin arguing with a redhead about a ball. Though, on a positive note, he had discovered he enjoyed flying but doubted he would ever join a quidditch team for his lack of interest in the game. After the lessons, he was happy to leave for the great hall to do homework and have lunch before going to the library to investigate.

It was a pity he had to spend part of his evening with the Gryffindors for Defence against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration... A pity for the savage, who looked on the verge of tears or yelling at him at any moment, that is. Astronomy had potential to be interesting if they ever moved from learning the basics, but considering the lack of brain activity his year mates seemed to share, he had serious doubts. His mother had written how useless the magical

telescopes were compared to the muggle ones, and the two times she had brought one to the school, they had suffered mysterious accidents. Hence, she had created one using muggle materials, it was not the best (it was actually a testament that his mother lacked ability in the craft department), but compared to what the school had to offer, it was thousands of times better.

Thursday he woke up later than usual and decided to stay the morning of his free day in his room with his house-elf bringing him breakfast and lunch, afterwards, he went to the library. It would have been an unremarkable day if not for the elf that popped in front of him on his way.

"Why Master Potter don't eat in hall? Does him not likey our food?" the little one asked pulling his ears in distress. While the elf himself did not surprise him, the dirty pillowcase he wore and bare feet certainly did.

"I apologize for worrying you, can you tell me your name?" Harry asked in a gentle tone, crouching down to look at him.

"Master Potter is so good! I have heard of his greatness! And he wants to know Dudi's name!" the elf began wailing, surprising the other male in the hallway. It took a while to calm the elf for the little thing cried harder when he was reassured. Harry was disturbed at how lacking the elf's vocabulary was and wondered if it was an exception or the norm.

"I will assume Dudi is your name," he stated and received a fanatical nod. "I'm not used to eating heavy food. Besides, I don't really like sweets or meat."

"Dudi can cook for Master! You tell me what you like!"

"I like many strange things so let's make a deal, I will send my friend to teach you and I promise to eat everything you make, deal?"

"Yes! I will pop Master's friend in!"

"No need, but you promise to keep the secret?"

"Dudi does, elves serve Hoggywarty and she serves students, not even long bearded man can ask us to give her secrets!"

"That is excellent Dudi. Demeter?" he asked she popped in, he had to smile at the surprised expression of the other elf. "Hello, I have a favour to ask, would you please teach Dudi how to cook what I like and how much I eat during every meal?"

"Of course young master, I'm happy to cook!" the family cook explained.

"Excellent, I will wait for dinner. Goodbye Dudi, Demeter," he said resuming his way.

He had been pleasantly surprised when dinner came, a warm tizza soup with a slice of bread appeared on his plate along with a goblet of water. Once again, people stared at him and once again, they were ignored.

Friday had been enlightening for many reasons, the first being that History of Magic taught by a ghost was not as exciting as it appeared to be, so it was labelled as homework hour. At least he could make good use of his time.

He had spent what was left of his morning immersed in a book about house charms with his parchment and fountain pen ready. Harry searched for spells that could be used in duels, just to add the humiliation factor. Such as the scrubbing spell that could be painful if used on skin or the waxing charm used without the pain-numbing one. So concentrated he was that he did not notice when someone took a sit in front until he was interrupted.

"Hello, my name is Theodore Nott," a boy introduced himself. How curious.

"Harry Potter."

"May I sit here?" he asked in what most would assume to be an uninterested tone, but he knew better.

He recognized the loneliness in those eyes for he had once experienced it. He could feel the boy's almost physical desire to belong somewhere... Where had he seen the boy, he wondered, he looked oddly familiar.

"I don't mind."

With that phrase, the seeds of friendship between the child of a family of loyal death eaters and the child that was hailed as the saviour of the wizardry world were planted. It is curious how much loneliness can affect your decisions, to the eerie point of engaging with someone who you would have ignored otherwise and begun a friendship to receive a semblance of acceptance. Amusing how it only takes a few words to either save or destroy a person.

Their potions class in the evening was long; he guessed it was to brew complex potions in the future. At the end of it, Harry had been sorely disappointed. The man was an excellent potions master but he was no teacher material. His mother wrote about him, their problems and his defects, but she had always praised his talent in potions. It was obvious that possessing knowledge did not mean having the capacity to impart it. Nevertheless, he could deal with incompetents, it is what he had done throughout his life, what he could not tolerate was the infantile way in which the man gripped to his childhood grudges taking them onto the next generation. He had sneered at him, asked him all the questions, and tried to single him out. For the Slytherin head to be so blatant was a shame to the House.

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### **Friday 6th of September, 1991, Meeting Room, Hogwarts**

Albus Dumbledore was waiting for the teachers to arrive at the first meeting of the school year. He was curious to know how Harry Potter was doing but he was going to be subtle in his inquiries... His ears still ringed and his pride ached after the verbal lashing Minerva had given him when she discovered the child had lived in an orphanage and, no matter how powerful he was, she had no qualms about ripping his beard when provoked.

When everyone was present, the elective professors began reporting, leaving once the older students were discussed. Then, the second years were talked about with a few promising students. At last, the first years turn arrived.

"Any remarkable youngster?" he asked, controlling his curiosity, after all, it was a question he asked every year. He really wanted to know where the young Potter's talent lay. Maybe he took after his father in transfiguration or perhaps he inherited his mother's talent in charms and potions. There was also the possibility of his talents lying in a totally different field.

"Look at this! It was made in the first class," Minerva exclaimed with pride, passing him a needle that he ogled with disbelief.

"Who?" he asked, gapping at the work of art.

"Harry Potter. He turned the match and back again on his first try. The rest of the class he played with the design, he has even more raw talent than James!"

The exquisite needle was passed from hand to hand, leaving people with the same dumbfounded expression on its path.

"I would have suggested Miss Granger, but her immature attitude disappoints me," she said after the needle was returned to her.

"I heard about her punishment, what did she do?" Pomona asked.

"She accused Mister Potter of bullying," this statement earned a reaction from the dour Potions master.

"So instead of punishing the pampered prince, you punished the victim?" Severus asked, wearing a more pronounced sneer than usual.

"Of course not, the version he gave me was totally different from the girl's, so I spoke with Mister Longbottom, who was present during their interaction. He confirmed the boy's description of the events. Besides, I was sceptical before, it is curious the girl waited so long to accuse him, a fact that coincided on the day Filius gave Mister Potter extra work... Did you know the boy was raised at an orphanage, Severus?" she asked in a saccharine tone. He remained silent.

"It seems my class is not the only one on which he excels. I must agree with Minerva, the boy is brilliant. He always gets the charm on his first try; he understands the complex theory and is constantly challenging himself. It is ridiculous to keep him back, that is why I gave him extra work. I gave the chance to all the first years but the few that took it quitted before the week was over."

"Mister Potter is a good student but Mister Longbottom has a green thumb," Pomona explained.

"I think I will follow Filius' example and give Mister Potter additional material. He knows all the material I was supposed to teach this year," Aurora sighed.

"He is an excellent flyer but he seems uninterested in quidditch. What a waste, he could be an excellent chaser or seeker," Rolanda lamented.

For the next half an hour, the teachers talked about the brilliant new student and all the material they would have to assign him for the boy not to get bored in class. Their decision was something Albus disapproved of, but Minerva was still angry with him so he took the wise decision of remaining silent.

"I see. If that is all, I think we can retire for tonight. Severus, wait a moment please," the old man asked.

"What do you want to know? All of Potter's potions are perfect," the man spat, looking quite sour at the notion.

"That is good to know but is not what I wanted to ask. What do you think about young Harry?"

"What else can I tell you? He is good at everything he does, answers every question correctly, he is the ideal student," the man said, looking as if the admission caused him physical pain.

"I meant on a more personal way, what friends has he made?"

"He is arrogant and has no friends," after a moment of consideration, he added with an almost inaudible tone and posture that betrayed his exhaustion. "There is something wrong with that boy..." Severus muttered and walked away.

Albus observed the man leave with cold seeping in his spine, his worries about the boy increasing... All of his plans were crumbling before him; he had wanted the boy to be different. Now, there was nothing to do aside from trying to guide him through the correct path. He tried to ignore the similarities between him and an equally talented boy fifty years ago.

## Chapter End Notes

I want to explain why I wrote Hermione the way I did. While I don't want to make any character bashing and I love Hermione, in canon she had quite an abrasive personality. She is someone who was bullied throughout her life, she learnt to rely on authority figures and it was implied that she was used to be the best on what she did (e.g. in sixth year when Harry turned to be a better brewer than her the first explanation that came to her mind was that he cheated, which he somewhat did, but that only showed how jealous she tended to be).

On this stage of her life, she still has those flaws as predominating traits, thus I think this would be a logical reaction. The reason why McGonagall reacted this way is because James was her favourite student and she was close to the Potters. The image she has of Harry is that of a polite, shy boy who happens to own talent in spades, along with a



remarkable work ethic (because on the two days she had observed him, he was either reading or doing homework).

Also, I know there existed showers in canon but I'm changing that.

# Dealing with Attorneys and Devils

## Chapter Notes

This chapter is longer than expected but I think it all belongs together, that is why I didn't divide it. Thanks for reading!

Weeks flew by without any further hassle. In that short time, Harry had earned his place as the most talented student of his generation. Teachers loved him, well, at least most of the teachers did. Snape, for some strange reason, was projecting his hatred towards James Potter onto his son. The dour man kept trying to find any flaw Harry's potions or essays, not to mention that he kept trying to embarrass him on every opportunity he got. Fortunately, for Severus Snape, he was far too used to being disliked so the treatment he received did not even faze him.

Flitwick, on the other hand, had taken a liking to Harry despite of his mother. He had to keep up with the short man's high expectations and he was never awarded any kind of special treatment, which was exactly the way Harry liked to be taught. Flitwick was beginning to train him in the old art of duelling, stating he had a talent he had only seen on a few others and the work ethic to prove he deserved the lessons. Being mentored by a professional duellist was an advantage Harry had not anticipated but accepted gratefully. The only downside was that he was forced to partake in physical exercise, and while he had a lean constitution, he learnt the hard way it did not equal physical fitness. However, two weeks later, he could already feel his magic growing to adapt and that simple fact pleased him to no end.

During this time, he had also gotten a shadow named Theodore. The boy followed him everywhere but it was not terribly cumbersome and, sometimes, his company was even pleasant. Theodore Nott was quite reserved and respectful, besides, he and Harry shared a similar interest in literature. However, his new shadow's ignorance regarding the muggle world in general never failed to amuse the young Potter. Harry still smiled at the memory of Theodore's curiosity about his backpack, which in turn, led to an interesting turn of events.

"Why do you always carry that strange sack with you?" Theo asked, pointing at Harry's backpack.

"It's my backpack though..." Harry almost asked, feeling extremely puzzled and mildly offended at the odd question. Then, he remembered how backwards the magical world was. "It is used to carry personal items. Personally, I carry all my books, parchment, water, snacks, and a few other knickknacks."

Theo gave him an incredulous look, as if he had made it all up. "Here, examine it yourself," Harry decided to tell the boy, handing his backpack.

"How do I open this?" asked a puzzled Theo.

"You pull the zipper, like this," he showed and chuckled at the boy's wide eyes.

"That zipper thing is like a separable fastener, how you got the idea?!"

"I didn't, it's a common thing between muggles," Harry answered, almost laughing at how his classmate's expression went from amazed to horrified, finally settling on a mildly scandalized one.

"What are the colourful things inside?"

"Folders, I have one for every subject," he explained grabbing one and handing it to Theo, wondering if the boy had decided to ignore the backpack in general or merely the idea of it being a muggle invention.

"So this is how you manage to keep everything organized," Theo muttered, scowling slightly, "I guess this is also a muggle idea."

"Also this," Harry said, showing his classmate one of his fountain pens.

"I thought it was a bizarre version of a quill."

"Try it," Harry encouraged the boy and let out a low chuckle at his amazed expression.

"So this is why you have such a perfect handwriting. I need one of these, and if possible of the others as well," Theo muttered, admiring the fountain pen in his hand as if it was the ultimate work of art.

Harry had to admit that Theo amused him with his reactions, he still smiled at the memory of Theo being horrified with his schedule but following it nonetheless and discovering it was not as hard as he imagined. His shadow even trained with him early in the morning, even if Harry could do without the complaints he was forced to listen. He had been annoyed to the point that he had threatened Theo, the boy's eyes when he described the muggle gym where he would be taken if he kept complaining more than made up for the inconvenience. However, what Harry liked the most about his new companion had nothing to do with the humorous situations, but with Theo's willingness to learn and accept his mistakes.

"How do you do it?" Theo almost demanded.

"I beg your pardon."

"How is it possible that I never see you using the bathroom?"

"What do you know about house-elves?" Harry asked in return, finally understanding what was happening.

"They are servants, why are you avoiding my question?" Theo almost whined.

"I'm trying to answer it, but it seems you won't understand. Search for information on house-elves in the library and then I will give you a book. After that, I will answer."

Theo had been glued to books the whole week and read twice the book he was lent. Afterwards, he had been thoughtful for a whole day.

"If elves are so powerful, why are they slaves?" Theodore asked at last and Harry got ready to give a long explanation

"They are not slaves, Theo, they never were. Wizards are the ones that perverted the noble race that aids us. House-elves and mages have a long history, in fact, it was always meant to be a relationship based on mutualism. Elves can't produce their own magic so they depend on wizards to lend them some through their bond, in exchange, they protect and help the family. The stronger the bond with the wizard, the stronger their magic is. Follow me," Harry ordered and walked to his room, almost smiling and the incredulous look on the other boy's face. "My elves have the magic to do this because they are my friends and confidants, not my servants. However, most elves would be unable to do a tenth because their magic is weak. I was surprised when I saw one wearing a dirty pillowcase and no shoes. Only savages would treat people that way. Especially people as loyal and devoted as house-elves," he stated and waited for his shadow to compose himself.

"I had no idea... We are taught that elves are slaves and nothing more," Theo whispered, looking pained with the admittance.

"Ignorance can be shared and stupidity taught. If you have an elf, you still have time to change that."

"I will," the boy promised solemnly. Harry mused on how easy could be to cure ignorance if everyone was willing to learn.

On a different note, his clothing store - named Magical Whims - had finally opened its doors a week ago. With great success, if he may add. An announcement was made through the newspapers, which apparently had never been done before, so people flooded the place out of curiosity. The new styles were well received by most, excepting a few die-hard traditionalists. A week later, the furore had yet to dim so Harry deemed necessary to hire two more people, muggleborns, by the way. His elves were happy to work and the new restaurant that would soon open, along with the potions ingredient business that was almost ready. And there was much more to come. Theo had given him an idea for a new business, which involved the muggle ideas that had fascinated him. However, Harry needed to speak with Ragnok before making any plans.

Also, Elizabeth was happy in her school. Exceedingly so. She had made new friends, but constantly wrote to him complaining about all the things she missed, one of them was being pampered by him. Harry was making plans for the Yule holidays that he was sure she would love, which involved a trip and shopping, two of his sister's favourite hobbies. Everything seemed to be going well, but as we know, it never lasts.

Harry was entering the Slytherin common room. Theo had shooed him from the library because he had an essay to finish and had not even started. How was that his fault? Harry had

no idea, but his classmate complained about never being able to do homework with him because there were always more interesting things to do as long as he was around. What could he say? It was true. Harry did all his homework during Binns' classes and before meals so there was not much to do aside from studying her mother's notes, which were utterly fascinating.

A sepulchral silence was the only thing that welcomed him once he entered the common room. He noted with curiosity that none of the younger students was present, but what caught his attention the most was the dissension that seemed to be between the usually united Slytherin students. Apparently, he had interrupted a heated discussion between two students. On one side was that seventh-year prefect that sometimes was friendly with Harry, an oddity in the House that seemed happy with ignoring his existence. On the other was another student that he couldn't really remember the name of, but looked familiar enough so Harry suspected that he was a prefect.

"Marcus, don't even dare," the older student threatened once he caught a glimpse of Harry.

"I do what I want, Rosewood!" the other student spat with disdain. "Don't forget who is helping you get that stupid apprenticeship."

"He is only a boy!"

"You really don't want that apprenticeship, don't you?" the younger student asked, giving the seventh-year prefect a mocking smirk.

Rosewood only clenched his fists in frustration but bowed his head. It was obvious to everyone that he had lost the discussion. However, Harry was not interested in any row that the other Slytherins could have, he was only interested in them blocking the only path to his room. Should he wait until the group dispersed or find another place to read?

The decision was taken for him when five older males, including the one that had won the row against the prefect, approached him. The way they were looking at him was enough for Harry to raise his defences, he was far too familiar with those eyes. All his bullies had worn the same expression before he had taught them their rightful place as vermin that should not even dream of polluting the world with their presence.

"It is time we show you your place Potter," the winner of the discussion barked. "Don't dare to think that because the professors lick your boots that you have a right to be here. You are nothing but a filthy half-blood that should have never been placed in this Noble House! It is time I show you your place, at my feet," the prefect hissed in order to appear threatening, but the only reaction he got was a raised eyebrow.

Two of his minions grabbed Harry's arms and that was the straw that broke the camel's back. He had dealt with vermin with delusions of grandeur before, and it appeared he had to do it once more. He could already feel his magic thrumming on his veins, ready to protect him like she always did.

The other students observed with growing horror how the beating that the child was going to take turned into carnage. The two guys that were supposed to hold Harry Potter down began

screaming, clutching their arms in a futile effort to ease the pain. The two of them collapsed a second later, panting in relief. To the spectators' growing horror, a vivid crimson began tainting the white of the two student's uniforms.

The other three attackers paled and Harry simply shrugged, deciding to continue his path. However, their leader stepped in the boy's way.

"What are you waiting for?!" the student demanded, signalling their unwilling minions to continue. "He is only a filthy half-blood!"

Harry only sighed when the two brutes tried to approach him. With a twitch of his fingers, the two of them fell to the floor, yowling in pain. Seriously, they couldn't even take a few broken bones and they wanted to play the bullies' role. Pathetic. The young Potter looked at the leader, considering the idea of only going to his room and stop wasting time, but he knew that he should eliminate his problems before they became bigger.

The boy took a step towards the remaining bully and he took a step back. Harry could recognize the fear in the older student's eyes, but he could also recognize the challenge, which only served to cement his decision.

The Slytherin students gasped when Travers fell to the floor, trashing as if he was possessed, face contorted in pain. Almost everyone was familiar with what was happening and had to control the bile rising in their throats. For a child to control that kind of curse without the help of a wand was unbelievable and utterly disturbing. The pained screams were the only sound that could be heard in the Slytherin common room for a whole minute. No one tried to stop Harry Potter.

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Marcus Travers shuddered when the pain stopped, leaving his body numb until he tried to breath. Each ragged breath felt like hot knives carving into his chest and his throat was so raw the warm air felt like acid. This was not meant to happen.

He heard that monster approach but was unable to move. His horror increased when he noticed the admiration bubbling in his chest. He had been raised with the pureblood dogma, following it blindly and never questioning it. Until today. The pillars of his life had been shattered in less than five measly minutes. Harry Potter was powerful, much more than him, much more than any other wizard he had met. It was a sobering realization.

His own parents had always called Lily Potter a mudblood, gold-digger, and many other adjectives that he was unwilling to repeat. They had always called the Potters blood traitors. Therefore, his parents usually talked about the last Potter as if he was a weakling, falsely hailed as a hero. Marcus had believed them, but now he knew that they were wrong. The boy's magic was suffocating, encasing the whole common room in an oppressive aura.

Marcus looked up despite of his fear. The slight scowl on the boy's face was the only sign of his annoyance.

"I hope this doesn't happen again. As you can see, I'm not a patient person," the monster said in a silvery voice that compelled him to nod, or at least tried to do so. "Good."

The students observed in horror how Travers' face seemed to light up after that simple word. The boy simply left without looking back, as if the situation had been another part of his daily routine, not even sparing a glance at the crowd that parted before him. The Slytherins understood the true definition of fear. No one had witnessed such a brutal display nor heard screams that would haunt them for long nights. They also understood the definition of awe, for the magic that had caused such a horrific event was the most powerful any of them had ever felt.

One thing was certain: no one would ever dare to cross Harry Potter again.

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All the students were mutinous, and if he was honest, he also was. However, Terrence knew better than questioning older students' decisions. His position in the house was not stable enough and he needed the support of the many big names that attended the school in order to obtain a decent position once he graduated. Yet, it did not mean that he supported what the upperclassmen were planning to do.

He didn't need to be an anti-pureblood to know the differences between right and wrong. Beating an eleven-year-old kid was definitely not right, but there was nothing he could do. Travers' said that professor Snape would cover them as long as the boy did not need urgent medical attention and with that knowledge, what was left of respect towards the potion's teacher disappeared.

Terrence leaned against the wall as he kept an eye on all the students that were loitering around his floor in order to stop them if they tried to go up. There was the Malfoy's spawn, talking excitedly with Zabini about the lesson that Potter was going to get. The dark-skinned boy didn't seem interested at all, which made him a much better human being than the other one, in Terrence's humble opinion. There was also the Parkinson brat, trying to convince Greengrass to try her luck in getting a peek of the show upstairs. Fortunately, the girl had a functioning brain and ignored the pug-faced brat.

A shrill scream penetrated the place and all conversations stopped. Terrence clenched his jaw as he tried to suppress the shiver that went down his back. He knew that this was going to end badly. Maybe he should send an anonymous letter to Professor Flitwick and tell him how Potter had ended in St. Mungos and who had been the attackers. Heaven knew that he was one of the few, if not the only teacher that cares about his students.

Terrence tried to ignore all the other screams that followed. He eyed the few remaining students present. Many of his classmates had left towards their rooms and the younger ones fled to their floors. One had even thrown up near his door so he vanished the mess and sent the pale girl to sit with the others and silenced that area, it was the only thing he could do. He heard steps resounding and sighed in relief. He looked at his pale classmate and asked her to take all the girls to their side before Marcus arrived to force them to do another thing he didn't approve of.

Harry Potter walked past him, not even sparing a glance at all the people that were looking at him. Terrence felt all the blood leave his face when he realized what had really happened. His cold hands went to his mouth as he tried to ignore the bile that his body was trying to expel.

At least, he could forget about that letter that he had been planning to send.

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Draco Malfoy moved once again, trying not to make any sound. His usually comfortable bed felt like a torture cot. Earlier that day he had been promised a spectacle. Marcus Travers boasted about giving Potter a lesson and he had been eager.

Potter had ruined many of his plans in school and, naturally, he had resented him. However, now he knew that the boy was a threat and it had nothing to do with popularity. If he was honest, Draco was scared. None of the first years had been allowed to go up even after Potter went to his room. However, they heard the alarmed voiced of the professors. Whatever he had done, was enough to scare the adults and he would be stupid not to be scared.

Should he befriend him? Should he keep his distance? Draco Malfoy had no idea what to do and itched to write his father, begging for counsel. But for the first time in his life, he wondered how it felt to take a decision alone.

Daphne Greengrass gulped her sleeping potion, she knew that she was going to need it. What had happened earlier had been enough to shake her, especially when the girls went to their dorms and caught a glimpse of the five students, unconscious on the floor.

On the other hand, this event opened a myriad of opportunities that she could exploit. Overall, she saw an opportunity to be free. She may be frightened, but she was a Slytherin after all.

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The next day nothing changed in the eyes of the outsiders, but Severus Snape was not one. Yesterday night, he had received an emergency summons from Poppy, telling him five of his snakes were on the infirmary. Two of them needed to be taken to St. Mungos as an emergency, the others needed immediate care. Once they were stabilized and conscious, he asked Travers for information and, to his surprise, the boy remained quiet. When questioned by the headmaster, he said their duel got out of hand.

No one believed him.

So today he was paying special attention to find the responsible. He had an inkling of what may have happened, but the idea was too horrific to really consider. No house acted differently than normal, excepting his. Everyone in Slytherin was tense. Their eyes shifted around in fear and most had notable bags under their eyes.

The first years were the ones who gave the responsible away, never looking at him directly, but looking in his direction. Harry Potter and Theodore Nott acted as usual but Severus knew he had found the perpetrators. The problem was that he had no proofs aside from his observations and the memory of the ominous stories the woman at the orphanage had told. Aside from what Travers' had told him, but he couldn't reveal that piece of information unless he wanted to destruct himself. Making a plan, he was ready to confront the boy.

"Potter, stay after class," he barked. The brat took his sweet time putting his things in his backpack and nodded to his friend. "Last night, five Slytherins were in the hospital wing, two



of them were taken to St. Mungos and they will never be able to use their hands the same way they did. You have any idea what happened?" he asked, torn between the desire of finding him guilty and expel him and keeping him in school with daily detentions. Focusing on any hint of knowledge the boy gave away, he didn't tear his gaze from his student. To his surprise, the boy's only response was a raised eyebrow.

"I had no idea they were at the hospital, heard some rumours here and there but I tend to disregard them."

"Is there anything you wish to tell me?" he asked, desperate for any proof.

"I talked with Mister Travers once, only for a minute. I don't have any idea on who are the others though," the boy stated.

"Leave," he ordered and Severus could have sworn he saw a smile before he turned.

Severus was an accomplished occlumens and a good Legilimency. He had been a double spy during the war so he knew how to identify deception. The boy had not uttered a single lie but that did not mean he was innocent. The only option available was to wait and observe, hoping he made a mistake. This was no longer a grudge against James Potter, this was about protecting his snakes from the evil that boy threatened to unleash.

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Harry left the potion's classroom somewhat satisfied with himself; he had outmatched the head of the Slytherin house. Even when the man had the habits of a Gryffindor, he was still pleased. He arrived at his usual spot in the library where Theo was waiting. Much to his surprise, his shadow was talking in hushed tones with a girl of his house. She had bronze-gold hair that flowed with her movements, creamy skin, and steel grey eyes.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he said, smirking when they flinched in surprise.

"Not really, I introduce you to Daphne Greengrass."

"It is a pleasure," he greeted the witch with cold eyes.

"Likewise, Harry Potter," she said with an ease that betrayed arduous practice. Interesting reaction Harry was not expecting. "If you excuse me, I have to leave," she looked at Theo and he nodded.

"She was warning me about her father's latest ruse," Theo muttered when he saw his questioning glance, continuing with a tone that was barely above a whisper. "She loathes her father with every fibre of her being so she foils his plans when possible. She is gentle to house-elves because her father ordered her not to be and we speak a few times because she is not allowed to... Her father will try to have all the sentenced death eaters executed to earn people favour so he can deem a new business illegal and then buy it," the boy sighed.

"Do you think he will be successful?"

"Maybe, he is the leader of the neutral faction and there are chances the light factions backing him up... My father is a convicted death eater," Theo muttered, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"So is my godfather, though accused would fit better. I think it is time to take an active role..." Harry commented, taking out a black folder that contained a different kind of parchment and a fountain pen, writing his letter to Gringotts.

"I just remembered that no one messed with you. Will you ever tell me what happened last night?"

"Maybe someday..."

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Ragnok was a simple goblin: he loved battle, he loved his family, and he loved gold. As the simple goblin he was, he rarely showed emotion, that is why every worker avoided his office like a plague when roaring laughter could be heard from the inside. He had received another request from the young Potter to open yet another vault, giving him a fair idea of what the new business involved.

He had been sceptical the first time he asked for a vault, but that business was thriving as he had seen few before. Ragnok guessed he should have learnt to never doubt an Evans or a motivated Potter.

He remembered Lady Lily Evans with fondness: first as a fierce child that had the audacity to bargain and the intelligence to be respectful. Then, as a woman who had saved his life when death eaters attacked the outside of the bank, fighting four of them and coming victorious. Then, she had healed him when it got evident no one else would help a goblin. His father, King Huab Tais, declared her a friend of the goblin nation for risking her life in order to protect him.

When she married James Potter, she had invited every goblin she met even when she knew they were not allowed to leave the bank because she considered them friends. When she became a Potter, she was the most ruthless businessperson he had ever met. After Charlus, of course. That is why when her child told him he wanted to but the whole actions of the dragon reserves on which his mother invested, he had not told the child that he did not have enough money in his trust vault, instead, he loaned the necessary gold. He had gotten back his capital and some more in less than two months, thing that he was not expecting in the least.

Soon after the large condor delivered the letter, the child's house-elf arrived at his office with an important and a special request that made him cackle in glee, the Ministry would pay in blood for their corruption and this was just the beginning. It seemed Lily's child had inherited more than her beauty and, perhaps in the future, he could also be called a friend.

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Through Gringotts, Harry hired a lawyer, who according to them, was fiercer in court than any of them in battle. They were going to meet in a week but before he needed to do a few things to ensure his success, which meant writing another letter and arranging a meeting.

Monday evening, Ella popped him in the disgusting Leaky Cauldron. Composing his best smile, he approached the bartender.

"Good evening sir, did the guest of the room fifteen arrive?"

"Yeah, she did, be careful with that woman, lad," the confused man advised and he smiled in return. Perhaps Tom was not so bad after all.

He opened the door to the plain room where a woman waited. He noticed that she was particularly unattractive, her heavy make up along with stiff hair gave her a plastic appearance, but he was pleased to see his clothes on display, even when the model did not match them.

"Is this a joke?!" the woman screeched, eyeing him with disdain. "I came here for the promise of an exclusive, not to meet a useless brat!"

Harry sighed, something that he seemed to be doing a lot lately. He flared his magic and the woman widened her eyes, with a silent order, she sat back again. He guessed people were not used to having their bodies controlled, if the fear in her eyes was any indication.

"Now that we are calm let me begin. My name is Harry Potter," at his declaration the woman's eyes almost popped out, "as I told you through the letter, I have an exclusive if you agree with my terms, look up if you agree and to the side if you don't," the woman looked up with no time to waste. "Good, I will lay my conditions first. As you know, I have never given an interview before and I'm offering the chance for you to write about me. That also means that every time I needed to talk with the press you will be the only one allowed to interview me. However, in exchange for this privilege, I have a few demands. First, whatever you write, dear Rita, will be done to favour me and second is that you have to consult me before writing something. That means not a single coma will be written if I dislike it," he finished, freeing the woman whose greedy eyes filled with rage once he stated his demands, which put her in a leash, shackles, and cage.

"What do you think you can do if I don't agree to, boy?" the woman spat with a sneer. "Your betters have tried to control what I write and they failed. You have no power to force me!" she exclaimed, glaring at him.

He sighed once again at her ignorance and stupidity. Better? Than him? That was impossible and the vermin in front of him would have to learn the hard way. Rita fell down to the floor screaming in agony and she noted with horror that no sound came out from her mouth. After a few agonizing seconds, the pain stopped.

"It is obvious you do not understand the honour I'm giving you. A person like me, lowering himself in order to speak with vermin. I don't need you. Can you guess how many others would kill for this chance? You are nothing but convenient, I can contact any other reporter and they would agree without any hesitation," he sneered at the trash at his feet.

"Wait, I agree... I agree," the woman gasped when he turned to leave.

"I will give you one chance, Rita, if you fail me you will not like the consequences."

"I understand," she whispered, knowing that at least now she had some value to the boy otherwise she shivered to think what he would have done in order to eliminate the evidence. Dealing with the Devil was better than the alternative.

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The day Marcus Travers was left out of the hospital wing, Harry was already planning in case the prefect forgot his lesson. To his surprise, the older boy had asked permission to sit beside them during breakfast, an interaction that the other Slytherin observed with horror and morbid anticipation. When Harry agreed and continued eating in silence, a collective breath of relief was left out.

This continued until Travers asked permission to join them in the library, curious about what his motivation was, Harry agreed. To his great surprise, the prefect offered his help when he saw him reading *The Different Languages of Runes and Mixed Applications*, he would not lower his guard but neither would he deprive himself of a teacher or an intelligent conversation. This pattern continued until the day of his meeting the solicitor in Gringotts, he was still curious about the upperclassman's motivation but did not care enough to find out. His loyal friend, Ella, once again popped him out of Hogwarts into Ragnok's office, which had the door open.

"It is good to see you again Ragnok," he greeted the goblin who was immersed in papers.

"Ah, I would say the same Harry, if it was not for the amount of paperwork I have to fill thanks to you," the man complained, wearing a smirk.

"I guess the business is going well."

"It is, have you found any parselmouth to work in the reserves?"

"I can't put that announcement in the newspaper. One of the reasons I'm travelling to the Asian Empire in a few months is to find one."

"Indeed, any other business I should know about so I can prepare the paperwork and enjoy my Yule?" the goblin asked.

"A few, but Ploutos is taking care of them. Be ready to open vaults at any moment though."

"Ah, the business-elf and his team of ruthless advisors, they are making good business. The restaurant that opened last week is always full, and that new service that they offer 'take-out-food'," Ragnok pronounced slowly, "is a really good service, my people are constant clients."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, I was surprised when people kept flooding the place so we implemented a few muggle ideas. My elves are happy to work, there is not enough to do in the castle."

"At this rate, you will need to get more."

"Perhaps, any idea of where?" Harry asked, wondering what was his manager planning.

"Ministry elves are always for sale, the bastards are unable to understand how valuable they are."

"Is that so? Then it would be fortunate if someone started buying the elves and to leave the poor Ministry without them, don't you agree?"

"A true shame, especially because the payments have to be done through the bank and no one really monitors it," Ragnok answered with a nasty smile. "Too bad they have not changed the price of one galleon per elf since four hundred years ago," he added satisfied.

"A shame indeed, Rome?" Harry called the head elf.

"Young Master called," the elf popped in.

"Indeed, dear Rome, we will have new elves coming in a few days. They worked for the Ministry once so they will be scared, please, be kind to them. I will be going to the castle in a few days and we will give them new names if they want. If there is not enough space in the elf wing, find them other rooms in the castle. It's not like we use them anyway."

"I will do so, Young Master is so kind." the elf muttered with tears shining in his eyes.

"It is the least I can do, and you are all my family, dear Rome, it is only natural. I will let you work now," he said to the elf in a gentle tone.

"Yes sir, I'll prepare the house for the new elves," Rome said and popped out of the room.

"That done, I think I will pay half a galleon for each elf. How many are they?"

"I will prepare the paperwork," Ragnok muttered with a strange version of a pout and wrote in his book. "There are three hundred and ninety-six elves working at the Ministry," he announced and chuckled at the boy's wide eyes.

"And you are saying they won't be missed..."

"They won't, their job is to clean the floor of the basements at night. Through generations, people have forgotten the Ministry owns the major quantity of elves in the United Kingdom and they hired human cleaners. I would be surprised if someone even notices the money."

"Then buy them all, the vermin at the Ministry don't deserve to have elves. Call Rome to retrieve them once the paperwork is done, please."

"I will, but now I believe it is time to meet Miss Blair."

They walked through a hallway and took turns that confused the young boy, finally, they arrived at a meeting room where a middle-aged woman, dressed in formal wear waited. The contrast of her platinum hair and browned caramel skin was quite attractive, Harry decided. Wondering if a tan would look good on him.

"Good morning Attorney Blair, I apologize for the lateness, I distracted Manager Ragnok with personal matters," Harry apologized with a slight bow.

"Don't worry Mister Potter, you are on time. I arrived early just in case. Before we begin, I have to tell you that I do not, under any circumstance, accept a case where dishonesty is involved," the woman stated with a void expression.

"Good, that is what I was hoping to listen. Let's take a seat, the case I want to bring to you will probably be the hardest and most satisfying you will ever find, but I need you to sign this, just in case you reject it," the boy informed passing her a simple non-disclosure agreement.

"You have worked with our race for many years. I assure you, Miss Blair, that you will love this case," Ragnok promised the woman. Reading the paper over again, she signed.

"I'm pleased you are willing to hear what I have to say. First, I want to sue the author of these books," Harry said, showing the books that contained his supposed adventures. "In this folder, we have all the information about the author and the publishers. The second matter will be much more complicated. It involves the freedom of Sirius Black and before you object, I must inform you he never had a trial. Ragnok collected all the information about his case and many details are... Unclear at best. I just want him to have a fair trial," he explained the surprised woman and handed her another folder, then an idea struck him and he felt like a moron for not thinking about it. "Ares, Mars?"

"Young Master called," the two elves popped in and the woman's eyes widened at their sight, he wondered if it was because she was surprised to see elves or surprised to see decently dressed ones.

"Thank you for coming. I have a few questions, what do you remember about Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew?"

"Mister Black was Master James best friend, he came to live at the castle when they were sixteen. Mister Pettigrew was a disgusting rat that thought he could order us around," Ares huffed.

"I see... is there a house or belonging you can feel about either of them?" Harry asked.

"I feel no house from either, but I feel Mister Black in a dark, cold place... Mister Pettigrew, I feel him at a high place in Hogwarts," Mars stated looking thoughtful, ignoring the shock of the other people. "It doesn't feel normal though, I can't visualize his physical shape but I'm still able to feel his magic."

"He is wearing his rat shape," Ares clarified.

"Pettigrew is dead!" the woman exclaimed, tired of the joke the kid was trying to play on her.

"If my elves feel him it means he is not. What do you mean by rat shape, Ares?" the boy asked, ignoring the lawyer's outburst.

"Master James and his friends were animagus: Master was a stag, mister Black a grim, and Pettigrew was a slimy rat," the elf described with a smile.

"Well, that was unexpected. Anyways, I have an important mission for you two. Capture the rat and ensure he is unable to turn or escape," he ordered to the two elves that nodded and popped out. Surprisingly, not a minute later, the elves appeared once again, carrying a cage that contained an ugly rat that was looking around in fear.

"We captured the disgusting rat and we took this away from him," they informed looking proud, presenting two wands and a worn parchment.

"You did an excellent job, can you force him to turn back?" Without words, the cage was enlarged and an ugly man replaced the rat.

"Harry, oh sweet Harry, you look just like your mother," the man blabbered looking around in desperation.

"Ares, is there a way of making him talk?"

"Master will need a Leglimence to take the rat's memories."

"I'm a Leglimence," Miss Blair muttered, still looking shocked.

"I'm really thankful for your offer, Miss Blair. Mars, can you bring the pensieve from the castle?" Harry requested and an excited elf nodded.

"I think it would be appropriate to call Madam Bones," the goblin added, still looking shocked but writing in his book.

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Amelia Bones was having a relaxing Saturday morning, which was interrupted by an emergency floo call from the goblin's relations manager, who was authorized to give her a portkey directly to the bank. The situation alarmed in extreme because no one was given those portkeys unless there was a life or death situation, her worries only grew when she was received by the Bank Manager, Ragnok. She did not know what she was expecting, but what awaited her in the meeting room was not it. A man who was supposedly dead inside a cage, a renowned lawyer, and Harry Potter, talking with two elegantly dressed elves, was definitely not what she was expecting. Finding out Sirius Black was innocent, Peter Pettigrew a loyal death eater, and discovering many names were going to be dragged through the mud was not what she had planned for a weekend.

"I will personally retrieve Mister Black from Azkaban and place him somewhere safe," Amelia muttered in a daze.

"I suggest another option," Mars intervened, "we can retrieve him from the prison and place an illusion so no one notices, then take him to the castle to heal. Mistress Eleadora will be pleased to have someone to nurse, such a shame she is not allowed to be a healer," the elf lamented.

"I agree, you are really intelligent Mars," the boy complimented his elf. She didn't have enough energy to object.

"What will we do with Pettigrew?"

"Can we can have him as target practice?" Ares asked excitedly. "I promise he won't be able to escape, we need a good target, for the new elves and all that."

Target practice? New elves? The day only got weirder and weirder.

"Is there a way you can seal his magic, just in case when the trial takes place," Ragnok asked.

"We can do that!" they both confirmed.

"Good, then you can have him as target practice, but only until the trial," the boy agreed and the elves cheered, popping out with cage in tow.

Damn it! She should have said something.

"Do you think that is wise Mister Potter?" the lawyer asked.

"Yeah, anyone who displeased mother was used as target practice," the boy commented offhandedly, as if speaking of the weather.

"That is not what I meant, but it is good to know. But you believe elves will be able to contain him or even be able to seal his magic?" the other woman asked, looking sceptical, but still too overwhelmed to organize her ideas.

How could Amelia blame her? She was too shocked to do anything else than observe. Maybe she would have her own pity party in the evening and leave Florean Fortesque out of chocolate ice-cream. Yup, that was definitely a plan.

"I do, my elves are more than capable, and after all, they were the ones that captured the rat."

Maybe she would add a bit of that muggle beverage named vodka. Or a lot.

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Andra Blair was a serious woman who had worked hard to get where she was. That is why she agreed to meet Harry Potter, because she knew that would cement her place as one of the best lawyers. She was not expecting what had happened in that meeting. Discovering lies and corruption was normal, but when the trial of Sirius Black arrived, few would be able to end unscathed. She was more than ready to raid Honeydukes after Harry Potter expressed his last request. For such an angelic-looking boy, his mind was terrifying.

"I have one last request Miss Blair" the boy announced when Madam Bones left. "After the trial of Sirius Black, I wish to sue the Ministry," he said, a pleased smile on his lips.

That is when Andra knew that her chocolate ingestion would rise dramatically while working for the last Potter, along with her nicotine consumption.

Oh well, at least she was being paid more than enough for all the hassle.

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Harry Potter was waiting for the Sunday Prophet with satisfaction almost pouring out of him. The week had been productive, to say the least, and now the first results would be shown.

"Why do you want to have breakfast in the hall? The school elves love you and they always bring you, and by extension me, food to your room, which by the way is way better than the hall!" Theo exclaimed looking frustrated and Marcus was looking curious.

"I always wondered why I never saw you on weekends... May I ask what you did to your room? Before that night we tried to enter it but it would not open, and the handle bit Joseph when he tried to curse it," the older boy explained, blushing bright red.

"I have no idea, maybe Ella put on some wards. Ah, considering that she is smarter than me, I'm going to assume she did because I forgot we had to protect our rooms," Harry explained with a sigh that earned him a confused look from the older boy, but before he could inquire further, the owls carrying the newspaper flew in the hall and he smiled seeing the front page

### ***THE BETRAYAL OF THE BOY-WHO-LIVED!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*The title resumes the story, my dear readers, during the last days of August, I was having lunch in the Leaky Cauldron but not even in my wildest daydreams I imagined meeting a boy that had the lightning scar and resembled our beautiful Lily Potter. That is right, I met Harry Potter while he shopped for his school materials! Wanting to take advantage of the fact that I had finally met our hero, I asked for an interview and the boy agreed, much to my surprise, he did not know how famous he is in our world. However, that was not the only surprise I got. Much to my shame, I discovered some heart-wrenching facts that I did not wish to believe because, if they were true, it meant we had not only failed our saviour, but also betrayed all of his sacrifices.*

*One of the reasons I'm writing this article now, is because I had to confirm what Harry Potter told me was real. I must admit I cried for hours after discovering that every word the gentle boy had uttered was nothing else than the pure truth. Without further ado, I will tell about the tragic life of our saviour.*

*We were told that he lived with a magical family, far away from England for his own protection. This could not be further from the truth. After James and Lily Potter were murdered by You-know-who, he was sent to his maternal aunt, the muggle sister of his mother. I looked information about her, the only thing I got was her address, and the disturbing notion that she loathed magic, but I did not believe that to be possible. When I visited the woman, I was horrified at her obvious loathing towards our hero and our society. I discovered her husband had been sent to prison for child abuse and she was on probation for the neglect of Harry Potter. The woman announced with satisfaction how she had dropped our hero on the street and left him to his luck, I must admit that I was not satisfied with such a light punishment to such horrid creatures (read the interview with Petunia Dursley, aunt of Harry Potter in page 6).*

*After this painful confirmation, I looked for the orphanages the young Potter mentioned to have lived in. I was pained to notice he had lived in such a condition for so many years. In*

*the first orphanage I visited, the caretakers talked about the child as if he was a monster, calling him freak for the bouts of accidental magic he showed from a young age. Then I talked with his elementary school principal, who had nothing but praises to give when talking about him. He said he had arranged for orphanage relocation because the boy was mistreated. This relieved and horrified me at the same time because Harry Potter was relocated at the tender age of six.*

*When I talked with the Matron of the new orphanage, I was relieved because she described our young hero as and I quote: "Most gentle and caring child I have ever met, he always finds ways of helping and has such a bright mind that he skipped a few years. I have never met such a well behaved darling before." However, my apprehension returned when she commented a few caretakers disliked the child because, sometimes, strange things happened around him.*

*Now I must ask you, my dear readers, who are the monsters that placed such a powerful child with muggles that hated magic? Who is the monster that did not look out for his health or well-being? Why were we lied to for so long about him? I, for once, want justice! I did not want to believe I was a bad person who rejoiced while our Saviour suffered, but I was. My fellow witches and wizards, I invite you to read the following interview with Harry Potter and know that even with our betrayal, he holds no grudges. I invite you to meet the boy behind the scar, and I invite you to read his truth.*

**RS:** *I thank you for giving me his opportunity, Mister Potter.*

**HP:** *No need to thank me, Miss Skeeter, but please call me Harry.*

**RS:** *So Harry, how was the life with your family? We are informed about your adventures while growing up.*

**HP:** *I beg your pardon for my brusque question ma'am. What are you talking about? I lived with my mother's muggle sister for a time, then I was raised in orphanages. The only adventures I have is running away from the bullies and a few bouts of accidental magic that used to scare me.*

**RS:** *(As you can imagine, I was shocked at these revelations). What do you mean an orphanage? Mister Garryot Hillocked wrote about your life and epic adventures together.*

**HP:** *I have no idea who you mean. The most dangerous adventure I ever had was my weekly visit to the London Library and I have no idea who Mister Hillocked is. I was surprised when the headmaster of Hogwarts told me I was famous, all my life people have judged me for my magic, being either scared or tried to beat it out of me.*

**RS:** *(At these revelations, I had already entered in denial). Are you saying all those stories are fake?*

**HP:** *As I mentioned before, I do not know the man, thus I have no idea what he wrote about. For example, I had no idea magic existed until Headmaster Albus Dumbledore and Professor Severus Snape informed me a few weeks before my eleventh birthday. I'm so happy at the*

*idea of magic existing because it means more people like me are around and that I will finally be able to have friends!*

**RS:** *(At this innocent exclamation my heart broke, because it was clear our beloved saviour had never received the love of a family or the warmth of a friendship). That is all Harry, I hope you have a good day.*

**HP:** *Likewise, Miss Skeeter, I would have never imagined I would give an interview. Take care!*

*With those humble words, the child left and I decided to investigate if all the things he told me about his life were true, which to my shame, resulted being real. I also took the liberty of finding out how his life in Hogwarts was. You must understand my shock when I talked with some mothers and how they described the boy through their children letters. Some called him evil, others the next Dark Lord in training, a few called him a slimy snake that cheated because no one could be so good at school, or swearing that he was bribing the teachers because that is what Slytherins do. You must understand the reason why my heart broke, because I had already seen our hero's painful past that was apparently following him into our world. Worried sick, I wrote to him and I will put a segment of the letter he wrote back.*

*"I did not know that my classmates believed that, though that may explain why I have only a friend in my house that suffers the same treatment I do. I guess there is nothing to do about it, in my muggle school, the same situation was a normal occurrence. I know they did not like me because the theory is easy to understand for me. Performing spells come easy to me but I also work hard to obtain the best results. I understand their jealousy and I don't blame them because we are kids, after all, and it is a normal reaction.*

*Do you know why I was sorted in Slytherin, Miss Skeeter? It is because my greatest ambition is for my parents to be proud of me. My father was talented and my mother was brilliant, I wish to follow their footsteps and be the best person I can become. Thank you for worrying so much about me, Miss Skeeter, no one had done that before."*

*With that heart-wrenching note, the boy-who-lived stated his farewell. What will we do now my fellow citizens? Will we continue hurting our saviour? Will we continue encouraging our children to do the same only because he was sorted into Slytherin? I must admit with great shame, that I was among the ones who believed that Slytherins equalled evil, conveniently forgetting Merlin himself was one. What kind of people are we that our children discriminate others falling into our same zealotry? Will we continue teaching bigotry to our children and hating an innocent? No longer, I say! I will strive to rectify my misdeeds and I encourage you to do the same. I will protect Harry Potter the same way he defended us from the Dark Lord!*

Harry Potter smiled at the article, he admitted that Rita had a talent to move the masses. Sunday was the day more people received the newspaper so most, if not all of magical Britain already had a copy. By the pale expressions and teary eyes that dominated the hall, it was easy to conclude one problem was taken care of. With satisfaction, he finished his breakfast while Theo and Marcus read the paper.

"So this was your plan," Theo whispered impressed "Now the Ministry will kneel and beg your forgiveness, there is no way they will execute your godfather if you don't want to."

"Let's go," he told the other boy. "You may also come with us, Marcus," he told the boy who had looked like a kicked puppy at the idea of being left behind.

The boys were enjoying a peaceful evening in Harry's room when Rome popped in with tears in his eyes.

"Young Master! They are back!" the little elf exclaimed and Marcus eyed him with curiosity.

"Calm down Rome, who is back?" Harry asked, worried about the mental health of his elf.

"All of them! The gryphons, hippogriffs, thestrals, Pegasus, alicorns, chimaeras, longmas, nifflers-"

"I understand, Rome," he interrupted before the elf continued to name all the magical species. "Why are they back?"

"Good Mistress Lily enchanted us to sleep but she did not have time to create enchantments for the others and was scared of hurting them so she asked them to leave until the castle awoke again. We finished cleaning the sanctuary and all came back, some are really old but their offspring was taught the family ideals," the little one sobbed.

"I think I need to see them. The Potter sanctuary has been empty for too long, let's go, dear Rome. I will see you tomorrow Theo, Marcus," the boy said and disappeared.

"Do these kinds of things always happen?" Marcus asked, utterly dumbfounded.

"Every now and then, let's leave before we discover the carpets enjoy the taste of human flesh," the young male commented and the other nodded frantically, leaving the room with hurried steps.

Harry had seen many beautiful things in his life, but never before such an awe-striking sight. Alicorns and thestrals playing around, chimaeras and gryphons sleeping together, longmas carrying nifflers around... It was beautiful. When they saw him, ancient-looking individuals of every species walked towards him and by instinct, he bowed. They reciprocated, they accepted him as their new protector... Once more, the Potter Sanctuary hummed with life.

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## **Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts**

Nothing was going well for Albus Dumbledore and all had the same source: Harry Potter. The boy was not acting how he was expected, the third-floor corridor was not inspected by him so he had to think of ways of instigating his curiosity. If that was not enough, yesterday, an emergency session of the Wizengamot was called because of the article. Ah, that article revealed delicate information most people wouldn't understand, he did not believe that Rita Skeeter wanted to protect the boy, there was something else but he didn't know what.

Nonetheless, people were claiming for blood, hundreds of howlers were sent to school during lunch, from angry mothers at their children but that was the beginning. The people were calling for the head of the person that had placed young Harry in the muggles house and that

meant people were out for his blood, it was good he had covered all of the information about it... And yet he had no doubts the will of the Potters would be unsealed and the boy would learn all about his roots, goblins would declare a feud on him if he ever dared to suggest otherwise. There were also possibilities of Sirius Black being given a trial but, until the moment, people had yet to connect the dots and hoped it stayed that way until after the Wizengamot meeting next month.

Albus had wept until his eyes were sore and his throat was parched the moment he signed the document that condemned that boy to Azkaban. Not for a second he believed Sirius was guilty and there were many inconsistencies, but it was the right thing to do. The man would have spoiled the child rotten and that was not how Harry needed to grow up. He only hoped no one challenged his custody over the boy, things were hard enough without the extra hassle. His wards alerted him the boy in question was coming to his office, along with Filius.

"Hello Harry, it is good to see you. Now you can leave Filius, thanks," he dismissed the professor.

"I'm sorry, Albus, but Mister Potter asked me to accompany him, after all, he is in no trouble and it is not likely for this to be personal," he explained and took a sit.

"Very well," he agreed, yet another thing that did not go his way. "I must ask you about the interview you gave Miss Skeeter," Dumbledore began, waiting for the child to respond but he only tilted his head in curiosity. "Was it necessary to give so much information?"

"I gave the basics of my life headmaster when you told me I was famous you did not explain how much. I believed my fame was like the community heroes that are known one day and forgotten the next."

"I see, but I must forbid you to talk with the press from now on," he said with his grandfatherly persona, it was unfortunate nothing went his way these last months.

"And by what power are you able to forbid Mister Potter liberty of expression, Albus? Only his magical guardian can do that and that is only in case the person is willing to agree. Since when are you his magical guardian?" the professor asked, glaring with sharp eyes.

"I didn't mean to imply that, I guess I let my worries for Harry's well being overwhelm me," he backtracked. He was a powerful man but few knew that he had never managed to defeat Filius in a duel, the little man was deathly in battle. Even when the goblin was older than him, he had no doubt that he would be challenged to a duel and be brutally defeated if he ever discovered he was the one who placed the boy with the muggles. "Though I hope you seek my counsel before talking with any reporter again."

"I wouldn't like to bother, headmaster, you are a busy man. I will ask Professor Flitwick to help me with the next interview if he doesn't mind."

"I will be glad to help, now I think is almost time for classes, Albus."

"Have a good day headmaster," the boy said and both left.

If there was nothing he could do about the boy talking with Miss Skeeter, maybe he could talk with the editor. His wards flared announcing Minerva and he flinched, nothing was going his way.

# **Trials and Guilds**

## Chapter Notes

I almost forgot to post today. Now I'm wishing it existed somehow for chapters to post themselves.

Anyways, please enjoy it!

Aside from his interview, Harry's month was rather uneventful. That doesn't mean his plan didn't progress at all. No, it was quite the opposite. Aside from the public's improved view of the Slitherfins, Harry had the opportunity to sue Gunderoy Lockhart, under the alias the man used to write those ridiculous books. That had netted him a small fortune, which he promptly donated to St. Mungos. Rita, proving her usefulness, milked the situation dry and generated more publicity. It was beyond convenient to have a reporter working for you.

The other changes were based on the way the other students treated him. Although no one apologized, he was no longer scrutinized like before. Now, all the ill intent came from incompetent morons that envied him for one reason or another. But aside from glaring, they didn't dare to act against him. Good thing too because he doubted he had the patience to deal with another idiot.

The Slytherins, seeing Marcus following him around like a lost puppy, began whispering about the imperius. However, when the two boys that were hospitalized in St. Mungos returned to school, all kind of rumours stopped. Perhaps they were frightened by the scars that were unable to be erased even with magic, or maybe it was the way those boys' hands trembled from time to time. Whatever it was, it was a positive outcome in Harry's opinion.

After that small event, he thought no one else would get close to him aside from his two shadows, but he was surprised when one brave soul did.

"Good evening, I have something to tell you," Daphne Greengrass announced with a stony expression, not even bothering with small talk or pleasantries. "My father ordered me to get close to you, so if you could publically repudiate me, I would be thankful."

"Mmm, why would I earn from that?" Harry asked, examining the girl's expression.

"To hopefully provoke a heart attack to a blood purist," she stated with a smile.

"I see... While I would enjoy that, I have a better proposal. Join our little group. I'm sure he will not approve," Harry proposed, more as a joke to intimidate the girl than any real desire to have her close.

"I think this is the beginning of a beneficial partnership," she agreed, leaving him speechless.

And that is how Daphne Greengrass joined their small group.

A few weeks later, Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini followed her example. Harry had noticed their glances and nervous interactions but he ignored them, he had never thought they would have the guts to talk with him. It seemed that between two people they had half of the guts that Daphne did.

“Good evening Potter, Greengrass,” Malfoy greeted, blatantly ignoring Theo. “My name is Draco Malfoy and he is my friend, Blaise Zabini.” Harry only raised an eyebrow in response and the blond boy faltered.

"We want to offer you our friendship," the other boy finished.

"I see... Take a seat, will you? I want to ask something first, is your sight impaired?"

“Ehm, no,” the mocha-skinned boy almost asked, confused at the strange question.

“I see. A shame, really. I would have not believed that is the education that purebloods receive. Purposefully ignoring someone, how crass,” Harry stated in a velvety tone that did nothing to conceal his contempt. None of the boys dared to respond so he kept talking, “I wonder what I can earn with your friendship. Tell me, what can you offer?” he asked, enjoying the way both students squirmed under his taunting gaze.

"My father is-"

Harry didn't even bother to listen to whatever the blond boy was saying. He guessed Malfoy was one of those sheltered kids that only threw their parents name and money to have success in life. A shame, Harry almost got curious about those two.

"What Harry means Draco, is what can you offer, not your father," Theo decided to say, perhaps taking pity on the boy.

That is when the blond faltered. Zabini, who had remained silent until the moment, seemed to arrive to a decision.

“My mother is an expert on poisons of every kind and she taught me everything she knows... Ehm, I’m also good in defence,” Blaise answered with clear hesitation.

Harry only looked at him and smiled. Well, he was officially curious about the boys' motivation to approach him, so he would wait and see what happened next.

“I don't know what to offer...” Malfoy whispered.

“One day you will know.”

Harry didn't say this as a promise, just as an eventual outcome. He could feel Malfoy's magic and knew that he could be a valuable ally in the future. Just like Zabini.

In that way, the small group expanded. However, Harry paid attention to the interactions between his newest acquaintances and his oldest shadow, just in case the formers decided to



go back to ignoring Theo.

---

A small group arrived at the great hall for breakfast, earning many glances on their path. Harry was humming with satisfaction, which made his companions curious. They were eating when the owls carrying the newspapers flew in, many people's eyes widened in fear and others spat their food in shock. Harry just smiled. November first was the day of the Wizengamot meeting regarding him. How convenient and opportune news can be?

### ***LORD INCARCERATED WITHOUT TRIAL!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*That is exactly what happened, my fellow citizens! Ten years ago were dark times for us, but even the worst death eaters were tried with fairness. This man, however, was thrown in prison without given the same opportunity. Sirius Orion Black, who was named by Arcturus Black (the Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black before his death) his heir on the spring of 1981, was captured accused of different crimes. The problem is that no trial took place, as you know, magical records cannot be hidden or destroyed and they are available to the public. Imagine my surprise when I discovered there were no records!*

*I'm horrified to see a Lord belonging to an old family receiving this treatment, because if he was not granted a trial, what will happen with everyday citizens like us? Will we also be thrown to Azkaban with no further consideration?*

*I took the liberty to investigate more about the situation and the results scare me to no end. Sirius Black was the magical guardian of Harry Potter, but the man in question was captured on November 4<sup>th</sup>. However, our hero was placed on a muggle household on the first. Why was the man not notified? Harry Potter's other magical guardian was his godmother, Alice Longbottom, who was tortured to insanity along with her husband by death eaters on November 10<sup>th</sup>. Why was our young Potter not placed with them? While I'm glad our saviour was spared from their terrible fate, I have to wonder why he was not placed with his legal guardians.*

*Further investigation led me to discover the will of the Potter's was sealed! For the ones who don't know, a will can only be sealed in the case of a war, after it has been read to all the beneficiaries and with the signature of the Minister, Chief Warlock, and head of the DMLE, who at the time were Millicent Bagnold, Albus Dumbledore, and Bartemious Crouch, respectively. However, it was never read and it was sealed on November 2<sup>nd</sup>. They were the same people who signed the documents that incarcerated a Lord, and close friend of the Potter family, without trial. Why did they send a baby to the clutches of those muggle monsters? What information did the Potter's will contain for it to be sealed?*

*Today, Friday, I will be present at the open session of the Wizengamot and I urge you to do the same. Rest assured, my dear readers, I will strive to find out the answers for these perturbing questions!*

“You should inform us before pulling a stunt like this,” Marcus complained while reading the article.

“He is right, it is a bloody nightmare because they don't stop staring at us,” Daphne agreed, looking around in disdain.

“I promise nothing.”

“Whatever, I heard yesterday a troll got in the castle. Quirrel came running to the hall and fainted, but no one else saw it, not even the professors,” Draco gossiped.

“It was good that we stayed in Harry's room to have dinner, I like Flitwick even more for giving us permission not attend to the feast,” Blaise added, ignoring Draco's pout.

“He is a sadistic monster,” Theo complained “And you too!” he exclaimed, pointing at Harry.

“It is called exercise, I will one day take you to a gym if you continue whining,” he threatened and the boy's eyes widened in a comic way, but he remained silent.

“It is good to celebrate Samhain as it is meant to, for a change,” Marcus commented and they all agreed.

Harry and his group were having dinner that same day in his room when Ella popped in.

“Young Master, the Wizengamot session just ended,” the little one informed.

“Thank you for coming in person to inform me, dear Ella, have you had dinner yet?”

“I will, at the castle.”

“Would you please do me the honour of joining me and my friends?” he asked, ignoring the three boy's wide eyes and Theo's amused expression, Daphne was too concentrated on her chocolate éclair to notice.

“Of course,” she agreed and sat beside him, a plate appeared in front of her.

“Hello, Ella,” Theo and Daphne greeted in unison.

“Hi!” the little one greeted excitedly.

“First thing first, how are the new members integrating into the family?” Harry asked, referring to the new elves.

“It is so sad Young Master, most of them are healthy now but a few still need time to heal. They didn't want to accept clothes, shoes, or food. Bad masters washed their brain. But they are starting to adapt, many like to wash in the cleaning waterfall,” she commented and began eating her food after a few moments she continued. “They like their new names and enjoy the work. Misa and Cleo enjoy making clothes.”

“Good, they should take care of themselves during their pregnancy,” Harry approved.

“They are healthy and Lady Elizabeth enjoys sharing designs with them. Though we still have to be monitoring some of them constantly for them not to find ways of punishing

themselves,” she sighed and continued eating.

“I will talk to them tomorrow. I feel their magic growing so I won't worry too much. I assume they are been taught the correct use of language and I will need to speak with Rome about how we will be distributing them around the house... I have to think on the Yule presents too,” he muttered and got lost in his thoughts. "What happened in the Wizengamot, Ella?"

“It was fun!” she announced and Harry wondered if psychologists treated elves. “Miss Blair destroyed them! Many people came to watch. When Madam Bones requested a trial for Mister Black, they had to agree for the pressure they received. He was declared innocent, the rat was condemned to thirty years in Azkaban, the man with the white beard and hideous clothing was the most vocal about denying him a trial... Mister Black demanded your parents' will to be released and all the people who were watching agreed, he also demanded your custody and it was approved. Miss Blair is having all the fun though, she is suing Millicent Bagnold, Bartemious Crouch, and Albus Dumbledore for compensations,” she informed with stars in her eyes.

“That is good to know, finish eating before you leave, dear.” She nodded and kept eating, throughout this time Draco, Blaise, and Marcus looked confused.

“Thank you for the dinner, sir.”

“Thank you for the company, Ella. Do have a restful night.”

“Before I leave, I must tell you that the Minister is getting desperate for approval, be careful sir, goodnight,” and she popped out, after a few moments, the shocked boys composed themselves.

"Why did you treat her like that?" Draco asked.

“Like what?”

“You know, a person,” Draco said with clear hesitation, making Harry sigh in exasperation.

“Elves are powerful beings, capable of feats that no wizard would ever dare to dream of. However, they are unable to create their own magic, the reason why they form a bond with a mage. They turn the magic given to their own and, in exchange, they offer their aid. However, that tradition was perverted by our ancestors in their belief that they were superior and started treating what once were close friends and allies as slaves. Nowadays, the bonds are so weak that they don't have enough magic to perform things they once did. The bond I share with the two elves in my house is so strong that father forgets my existence and I live in my room, they can manipulate minds with nothing more than sheer desire,” Daphne explained.

“But we were taught they are nothing more than beasts!” Draco exclaimed.

"We were also taught that no half-blood could ever be more powerful than a pureblood and here we are," Marcus commented and the blond shut up.

"Magic is magic and is present in different ways. Most magical species have different abilities, and many times, their magic is purer than ours is," Harry said in a serious tone.

"What about muggleborns?" Blaise asked with genuine curiosity.

"They do tend to be unusually talented and overly ignorant. Do some research and ask me again, but don't forget that blood has nothing to do with power."

---

Winter holidays arrived at last, much to Harry's pleasure. The school was getting on his nerves and people were on the border of making him lose the little patience he had. But what irritated him the most was the headmaster's disturbing interest on him, such as the time he was called to his office to discuss his vacations, it was good Professor Flitwick accompanied him. He needed to get the man a good present for Christmas.

"Harry, it is good to see you," Dumbledore greeted, ignoring the professor.

"Headmaster," Harry said and waited for the old man to talk.

"I see that you didn't put your name in the list of people who are staying over. I know your godfather is free but he needs time to heal and-"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm not going with him. I'm going to the orphanage, a lot of help is needed this time of the year." It was a simple enough lie.

"I see, my boy, but wouldn't you like to stay at the castle? Our Christmas feast is wonderful!" the headmaster said with an overly excited tone, wearing a genial smile.

"I would rather go home," Harry said, confused at the desperate glint on the old man's eyes.

"I see no more reason to continue this discussion, Mister Potter has classes, Albus," Flitwick announced and they left the office.

Harry frowned at the memory but decided to ignore it for the moment. He guided his group to the compartment he had used the last time on the train. He took a seat and signalled them to do the same.

"If I had known this compartment existed, I would have never ridden in the others," Marcus pouted, glaring at the comfortable seats.

"What are you planning on your holidays?" Draco asked, "we have to go to the Ministry ball, but mother promised to take me to that new restaurant and clothes shop."

"I will listen my grandfather complaints. Well, at least I will have my elf," Theo sighed.

"Same as the bleached blonde, but mother wants me to hang out with a girl that she likes," Marcus complained.

"I will be the perfect daughter," Daphne added before Draco snapped at the older boy.

"We will visit my grandparents in Italy," Blaise informed them.

"The Ministry also sent us an invitation to their ball. Opportunist buffoons won't leave me alone. Anyways, I will travel with my sister to the Asian Empire," Harry said leaving them shocked.

"Sister? You have a sister!" Draco exclaimed.

"Adoptive sister," he explained, taking out a book from his backpack.

"Will we finally be able to get the backpack you promised?" Daphne asked, once again diffusing a troublesome situation.

"You will, a new shop will open in Diagon Alley tomorrow, go there. Give your names and you will be able to choose the design you like," he said.

"That is great! The Ravenclaws would have followed your example if they were not so jealous, the Slytherins are afraid, the Gryffindors stubborn, and the Hufflepuffs don't want to offend you. But I bet most of the school will have them when we go back," Theo analyzed with a wide smile.

"I wanted to talk to you about something," Marcus said in an almost inaudible voice when the train left the station. "Have you ever heard of the Slytherin Guild or Hogwarts Court?" he asked, looking around and only receiving some curious glances. "A Guild is formed when a Slytherin fulfils the following requisites: defeat the person that rules the house by force, defeat the person who follows him or her in power by cunning, and earn the respect of at least half of the people on each year in the House. Harry already accomplished those three."

"What benefits does a Guild have?" the boy in question asked.

"A Guild rules Slytherin, even the prefects obey him. They put the rules and the house follows."

"Mmm, I think I like the idea of a Guild," Harry smirked.

"What is a Hogwarts Court?" Daphne asked.

"A Hogwarts court is a Slytherin Guild applied to school, but with a defined leader or a king," Marcus said, eyes fixated on Harry.

"What do we need to form a Court and what are their duties?"

"To form the Court you need to: have every house respect the leader, have at least ten powerful members, and have a person of each house in the Court. However, the benefits are unbelievable, the last Court was formed seven hundred and something years ago, the Queen was reported to have control over Hogwarts. Common rooms, passages, wards, ghosts, portraits, and many more. It was written that the power she had over the castle rivalled the one from the headmaster because she recognized both as her protectors."

"We will establish a Guild once we return, the Court will have to wait," Harry decided and everyone agreed. They had found their King.

"Brother!" Elizabeth exclaimed and he was attacked with a hug that threatened to bruise him later.

"Elizabeth," he greeted and hugged the girl back. "May I introduce you to my friends? Theodore Knott, Marcus Travers, Daphne Greengrass, Blaise Zabini, and Draco Malfoy. She is my sister, Elizabeth Potter."

"Adopted you say..." Theo muttered and was hastily elbowed by Daphne. Though, she had to admit the similitude was staggering.

"Pleased to meet you. Now, I apologize, but my brother needs to deal with his childish godfather and a few elves," she said with a smile.

"I will see you after New Year," Harry said and the siblings left.

"She is pretty," Draco commented with a slight blush.

"Never mention that to him," Marcus warned, smiling when the boy blanched.

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Harry and Elizabeth arrived at the manor through a portkey and he admired the grounds, satisfied. Even when he liked winter, he appreciated the ever-present spring inside the castle wards. He heard his aunt's voice from the moment he put a foot inside, it seemed his childish godfather would be eviscerated by the angry woman.

"Aunt Eleadora, I missed your sweet voice," Harry announced and was enveloped into a tight hug. He did not miss his godfather's thankful expression.

"Here you are dear, it is so good to see you, I would have gone with Lizzy but the idiot had to try and play a prank. Now we need to find another formal suit," the woman lamented.

"I didn't know it was meant to be formal, it looked like a dress to me!" the man defended himself, cowering behind an exasperated elf.

"And that, dear sister, is the ignorance of this country personified. Do try to not follow his example."

"Yes, that... Wait, how dare you, little brat!"

"I see that you are recovered Sirius, however, do refrain from playing any prank in the property. Though, the guards are always looking for decent target practice," he commented, smirking at the man's wide eyes.

"You got too much of Lily, I swear that the only thing that came from your father is the name and the hair colour," the man complained.

"Whatever, are you ready for the trip?"

“Yeah, I tried to contact an old friend but I can't find him,” the man complained, looking serious for a change.

“Sirius, have you thought about asking an elf to see where your friend is?” Eleadora asked.

“I... No, I never even considered it,” the man said with wide eyes.

“You can stay, I doubt you will have fun with us and it is obvious you want to see that friend of yours,” Eliza told the man who nodded.

“We have time to catch up Sirius, besides we have met every weekend since you were taken from Azkaban, you can always join us later,” Harry said taking pity on the confused man.

“I will stay, but I will go there for Christmas,” the man announced “Have fun pup, ladies!” he said as farewell going to look for an elf with haste.

“I’m kind of glad that man didn’t raise you,” Elizabeth said while they waited for their elves to join.

“I’m too, dear sister, I’m too,” he agreed. “Never mind, now that we are all here let’s go,” and with that order, three humans and four elves disappeared from the castle.

They arrived at a parlour that while simple was tastefully decorated. Harry walked towards a window and raised an eyebrow at the sight, large fields were covered in snow but no other house was in sight.

“If I’m not wrong, Plutos said he bought a small cabin... Once again, I’m showed how much better taste elves have,” Harry commented with a diminutive smile grazing his face. “I believe it’s time for dinner here, do you want to go to a restaurant?” he asked the people in front of him. When he saw the mutinous pout of Lea, the cook for the trip, he added, “to taste the food this country has to offer.”

They popped to the closest magical city, where they found a tasteful restaurant and walked in. Harry thanked his excellent memory for he only had a few months to dominate the language. They were led to a small room that had a table in the middle and waited for their food. He was pleased when it arrived, he had ordered a Kaiseki type of dinner that included a taste of everything, he smiled at his elves wide eyes at the variety of unknown food and saw the sparkle in Lea’s eyes at the possibilities. It seems he would be able to enjoy these delicacies for a long time.

After paying for the dinner and thanking the people who served them, they walked through the city, finding many souvenirs in the process. His aunt was fascinated by the books and lamented the fact she only knew the basics of the language, his elves bought many types of street food, fascinated by the differences. Harry took advantage of their distraction to look for presents for all the elves, considering he now had more than four hundred, it was going to be an arduous task. Afterwards, they popped back to the ‘cabin’ for a restful night.

The next day Harry woke up early, three twenty-seven, to be precise. He sighed at the time zones messing with his internal clock. Knowing sleep was not an option, he began doing his

homework, by the time Ella came to wake him up, he had finished and had nothing else to do. He got ready for the day and went downstairs only to find two zombie looking females.

“Why do you look so alive?” Eliza complained.

“That is not normal,” Eleadora agreed.

“It's a secret,” he stated, taking a seat. A salad fruit and juice appeared in front of him, remembering Lea's curiosity for the food, he called her and she popped in.

“Does young master want a different breakfast?” the little one asked, confused.

“No, dear, it's delicious. I wanted to ask you if you want to take classes in here, you enjoyed the food yesterday, so I thought you would like to learn how to make it,” he explained to the little female who nodded enthusiastically. “Good, today you can look for places to learn.”

“Thank you sir!” the excited elf exclaimed.

“Today both of you go and see the city, I have matters to take care of. Ploutos is coming with me, so don't worry,” he explained the women.

“You are just like Lily; she never lost a chance to make business... Did you know she dated an Asian duellist before?” his aunt asked with a wide smile, her eyes glinting in mischief.

“Of course, they were together for a year and a half,” he responded, spoiling the woman's fun. “If I'm not wrong she broke up with him when he suggested her to leave England because of the war. But do try to tell Sirius, he probably believes my father was her first boyfriend,” he suggested with a smirk.

“Yeah, James and his friends could be... dense.”

Days went by in similar a fashion. His sister had been the one finding presents for all the elves, which included objects from the muggle side of the place. She was making plans with Eleadora for what the menu of the new cafe would contain, taking ideas from the Empire cuisine.

At last, the day to visit the royal palace arrived. Seven people dressed and ready popped to the castle.

Rich colours were the first thing Harry noticed, along with breathtaking carvings, taking an immediate like to the decoration of the place.

“It is good to meet you, Lord Potter,” an old man who was wearing silk clothes and had a slight accent greeted.

“Your Highness,” Harry bowed, thanking the time he spent practising. “I'm not a Lord yet, so please, call me Harry.”

“Ah, I see you have learnt our traditions, good to know,” the man approved with a twinkle in his eyes. “May I introduce my granddaughter and heir, Hwasa Nur Wu,” he introduced a



slight girl with rich caramel skin.

“Pleased to meet you, may I introduce my companions?” he asked after bowing to the girl. “My aunt, Eleadora Pittsum, my sister, Elizabeth Potter, my friends and confidants Lea, Ares, Mars, and Ploutos.”

“Pleased to meet you, it is good to know that you do not share the British idiocy concerning elves,” the man approved. “I myself work along with Yosei, fairies that have similar powers to elves and who, I must admit with shame, my people hold with little regard. Let’s go to the dining room, I’m an old man after all.”

They followed the man and again he approved their good taste, an occidental style table waited instead of the traditional, he guessed they wanted to make them feel at ease with the familiar furniture. They all took a seat and food began to arrive.

“Thank you for inviting us, Emperor Shi Huan,” Harry told the old man.

“I wanted to meet the child of Lily Evans. Did you know she dated my nephew years ago?” the man asked with mischief shining in his eyes.

“I did, Hanyu Takashi if I’m correct,” he said, ruining the man’s fun.

“That one, your mother was a true jewel, too bad the moron let her go. I was more than willing to accept the wedding,” the man sighed.

“My mother was a brilliant woman.”

“Yes, it is good that you inherited more than her beauty,” the man nodded looking at his aunt. “Hags have powerful magic that interlaces with blood magic, ignorant British Ministry does not appreciate what they have.”

“I could not agree more,” Harry nodded.

The rest of the evening was passed between food and laughter, he learnt about how did the empire work. Apparently, the country had been built before muggles created countries. They had multiple cities spread through the continent, where the Emperor assigned one of his Yosei to overview. There were ten magical schools, four dedicated to teaching the basics to children age nine to twelve, afterwards, there were many choices for specializations and five magical universities for later studies. Harry had to admit being impressed, especially when Hwasa mentioned a few of the subjects. It seemed his mother had gotten inspiration from the Asian education system, which would explain the variety of books and extensive notes on different subjects.

Throughout the night, he discovered the emperor was a jovial man with a somewhat twisted sense of humour and the princess was an intelligent teen with who he shared many interests. Overall, it was an excellent evening and he was looking forward to their dinner next week. He had also realized his mother had an excellent taste in suitors, first a member of the royal family and then a future Lord. Although she had loved both, she approved of personal power

and both had that to spare. He decided that moment that, if he ever dated, the person would need to be as intelligent as him, as beautiful as his mother, and powerful in their own right.

It was the twenty-fourth when the princess arrived at the manor. She had taken a liking to his sister and both enjoyed pestering him to take them out. It seemed the Emperor had found a way of having a peaceful holiday by sacrificing him, not that he could blame the old man. They were chatting in the parlour, with Lea bringing them her little experiments with food when Sirius and a worn-looking man popped in.

“Good evening Sirius, yes, of course, you can come. We have no plans nor guests, how thoughtful of you,” Harry said with sarcasm dripping off his words and saw the man about to answer when he saw their guest.

“And who is this lady? New girlfriend, you-“

“She is Princess Hwasa Nur Wu, next in the line for the crown,” Elizabeth interrupted the man before he said something even more stupid.

“I apologize, my godfather has the tendency of forgetting the uses of a brain,” Harry explained.

“I see... I understand how hard is to deal with feeble-minded individuals. Elizabeth, let’s go for a walk,” Hwasa said and both disappeared. Harry only sighed, thinking about how the princess would overstay her welcome and annoy him when there were no witnesses, using this event as an excuse.

“I hope you are happy now Sirius,” he said to the man who looked like an ugly kicked puppy.

“How was I supposed to know?!”

“Ah, asking would be an excellent start. Sorry for the idiot,” he apologized to the other man.

“I’m used to him. Remus Lupin,” the man introduced himself.

“Harry Potter, a pleasure,” he responded. “Mother wrote about you, if what she said was true, would you please control your friend?”

“I will see what I can do,” the man answered, smiling at the pouting Sirius.

“You are getting too cocky squirt. I’m your godfather and that means that you have to respect me,” Sirius demanded.

“When you start acting your age.”

“See what I told you, Remus? He has no sense of fun or humour! What would James say if he knew the next generation does not want to follow our footsteps?”

“He would look at my mother and agree to whatever she says,” Harry answered instead.

“Cruel, that is what the child is. We need to teach him how to have fun, he is always reading! Do you remember the muggle torture machine Lily enchanted? Her son does the same, he runs every morning!” the man exclaimed, horrified.

“I’m going to find the girls, Remus please control him. I hope we are able to talk without the drama queen in the middle,” he said and left. Sirius had a tendency to exaggerate, attribute that amused and annoyed him at the same time.

The holidays flew by with a particularly interesting event. Hwasa and Harry were in a snake reserve to talk with the parselmouths, it was a surprise for him to discover he was one. The emperor had given him a thick tome containing information about parselmagic that he read with devotion. Harry had no idea how he ended up possessing the talent, but he was satisfied. After hiring two people to work at the reserves, the boy wondered how similar snakes were to dragons if parselmouths were able to understand them...

Before he knew it, he was back in England, a day before the train parted to Hogwarts. He had enjoyed experimenting with a new culture, finding food he enjoyed, making many interesting deals, and finding a person who shared his sarcastic nature. Now he was sitting along with his sister, aunt, and Remus in the new cafe he opened. It was an elegant place with three floors and a large patio, being a novelty, people crowded the place to the point the same system as the restaurant had to be implemented. He saw familiar faces approaching and smirked at their wide eyes.

“This place has style,” Daphne said as a greeting.

Harry smirked in acknowledgement, "You already met my sister. I introduce you to my dear aunt Eleadora, and a family friend, Remus Lupin. My godfather tried to play a prank on the security elves and now is serving as target practice," he informed the amused people. "They are my friends: Theodore Nott, Marcus Travers, Daphne Greengrass, Blaise Zabini, and Draco Malfoy," pleasantries were exchanged and they sat down.

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Remus Lupin lived in a constant state of confusion ever since Sirius had found him. After hours of apologies and tears, they began to talk about their lives. When Sirius described Harry, he could not help but imagine a small James with Lily’s personality, however, when he met the boy, he was beyond surprised. He did have some Potter traits but most of him was pure Lily, even his hair looked like his mother’s in the sunlight. He was not expecting Harry to be a Slytherin, nor to accept his furry problem as if it was a simple quirk instead of a dangerous curse.

He was surprised when the child asked if he had wolfsbane in a blasé tone and had been dumbfounded when he was asked to offer jobs to werewolves. Harry said that they tended to have an excellent memory, never forgetting a scent or a face, making them excellent undercover guards for his business. The salary was more than excellent plus the additional bonus of wolfsbane and a safe place to turn in the Potter sanctuary. Dozens of werewolves were given jobs and acceptance, Remus thought that Harry didn't understand how important this had been. With that simple act, he gained the unwavering loyalty of dozens of werewolves. It was understandable for him to be in a constant state of amazement, and now,

when he was meeting the boy's friends, it was no different. Most of them were children of death eaters, but seemed to adore Harry.

"I hope you enjoyed your presents," Harry said to the newcomers.

"The necklace is a work of art," the girl said with a smile.

"Go is a game that I never imagined that existed," sighed a dreamy boy.

"Father almost had a heart attack when he discovered the shoes you sent me were made by muggles," Malfoy's son chuckled "You have to tell me where to get more though."

"A shop will open in a few months, we are still getting the materials," Elizabeth said with a gentle tone, signalling the menu that appeared on the table.

"My father looked on the border of tears when he discovered the tasteful new stores were based on muggle designs. I think he is still having a breakdown after he praised the fountain pens that you sent me," the oldest teen commented, looking blissful.

"It seems my mother was the only one pleased seeing the robe you sent me," a dark-skinned boy said with a smile. "Did you like your presents?"

"I did, books make me infinitely happy," Harry answered, looking amused for some reason.

"How did you get a place in here?" Malfoy's son asked and Remus wondered how did he and Harry even become friends. "Mother did everything she could to get one, but she only got a table a week from now."

"The perks of owning the place," Harry said, laughing at their wide eyes. "Order whatever you like, it is my treat today."

"So that is why so many people come here, there is so much to chose," Daphne whispered.

"You should try the matcha latte, it is delightful," Eleadora suggested the girl and she agreed. Minutes later the food was served and they enjoyed their last evening before classes.

Harry's friends didn't have the best parents, Remus decided, but it would be hypocritical of him to dislike children for their parents' sins. In the end, it was Harry's decision who to befriend and he had no right to interfere in his life. That didn't mean he wouldn't take care of James' son.

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The train ride was uninteresting, except for the fact that most of the students seemed to be carrying a backpack. The feast was plain boring as always, while Harry tried to ignore the looks from the head of his house and the headmaster. However, the other professors smiled at him. He had sent a gift card to his shops and a reserve for both the restaurant and café to all the teachers including Madam Pince, Poppy Pomfrey, Rubeus Hagrid, and Argus Filch. He, for obvious reasons, ignored Snape, Binns, Quirrel, and of course, the headmaster. Harry had given professor Flitwick a special briefcase with the man's initials as a way of thanking him for all the aid.

However, the attention he was receiving would not distract him from the most important event of the night, establishing a Slytherin Guild.

They took a seat in the common room, a thing that was not usual, so many people stared but no one would dare to ask. They waited until the room was full and Marcus spoke.

“We will establish a Guild from this moment on,” he announced, his deep voice demanding all the attention of the observers. “Most of you may know what a Guild is, but I will explain either way. The Slytherin Guild is in charge of placing rules and enforcing them, we order and you obey. Does anyone wish to challenge our authority?” he asked, few seemed to want to, but a look at the boy that had defined the hierarchy months ago was enough to keep them silent.

“It is good we can all agree,” Harry said standing up, and even with his gentle tone, people were not fooled. “We have simple rules, so please, don't break them because no second chances are given. First, the words mudblood, blood-traitor, and everything related to blood supremacy are forbidden. You may believe in that ideology but don't ever let me catch you speaking about it or acting on it. Second, no bullying. I don't care what your excuses are. If you feel the need to feel powerful by harassing helpless insects go ahead, but if I ever hear a whisper about it, you will plead me to be as lenient as I was with Marcus. Slytherin is a noble house, don't you dare to blemish it with your uncouth actions. You will act like civilized people. Third, be polite to everyone, from the house-elves to the first generation magicals, or muggleborns, as you call them. I will not tolerate a single act of foolishness from now on. These are simple rules, don't dare to force my hand because you won't like the results.” he threatened, giving his public a gentle smile that contrasted with his words.

“Also designate a representative from each year to speak with us, excepting our year. Our duty is to help, so if anyone has problems in any subject, we will find a solution. We will be changing the common room for a place where you can actually work in, anything you need, don't be afraid to request from us and as long as it is reasonable, we will make it.” Daphne announced with that regal air that made people nod in agreement. “Good, have a restful night then,” she dismissed them and everyone but them left the common room.

“I expected it to be harder,” Blaise commented.

“Either way we did it, Rome?” Harry called his elf.

“Master Harry called,” the little one said popping in.

“Yes, I want to ask you a favour. Have this place decent for tomorrow and bring as many elves as you need to redecorate it. It needs to be bigger, has good illumination, has enough sitting places and tables to work in, and please, put some curtains on that window. I trust you, dear Rome, you know what to do,” he said and the little elf was analyzing the room with distaste.

“It was time, no Potter should be in such a place,” the elf announced and left with a pop.

“I want to see how this place looks tomorrow,” Draco said in anticipation. “Dobby, my house-elf, is still wary of me but at least I convinced him not to punish himself. I will offer a

personal bond in the summer. Mother wants to meet you by the way; she invited all of you to the manor this summer.”

“I have a trip planned but we can meet, you should also come to the castle, my elves don’t have enough people to take care of. Though the businesses are enough to distract them from organizing a revolt,” Harry said, looking seriously concerned, not noticing his friends’ incredulous expressions.

“I also talked with my elf. We made a personal bond instead of the family one a few days before school. She looks healthy and happier than I have ever seen her, I asked her to make father forget he has an elf so she can be in peace while I’m gone,” Marcus commented.

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“I told you elves are powerful. Now, time for bed, we have too much to do tomorrow,” Daphne ordered and everyone went to their rooms.

The next morning they were sitting in the common room from an early hour, waiting for the people to arrive and admire their new space. Slytherins walked in, amazed at the majestic splendour of what once was a dour place, the light fell from the ceiling and people were confused to notice strange things that were responsible for it. The floor was black stone and the walls pale cream, green couches were arranged in different places surrounding white tables and over silver rugs. Many white bookcases filled to the brim with books dominated one side of what used to be an empty wall, next to small desks with separations to work on. There were many white tables surrounded by comfortable looking green chairs. Few noticed that the room was twice as big as it once had been, but everyone noticed that what the Guild promised became truth, and that horrifying realization made them understand that punishments were included. No one dared to consider disobeying the rules the Slytherin Guild had established.

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Severus Snape was itching to find a way of punishing the boy for such a blatant show of disrespect. Most of the teachers, including the ones that were in charge of the electives, had received gifts from the brat, thanking them for their dedication to teach the next generation. It had been a subtle jab that had hurt his pride, but he was not able to punish the Potter brat for that. He was paying attention to his snakes when he felt his blood turn to ice.

Harry Potter and his friends were sitting in the middle of the table and his snakes were divided by year. As a snake himself, he knew what that meant but did not wish to believe it was possible. He could not have done that... But no matter how much he denied it, the image did not change. A Slytherin Guild was created after more than a century. Severus understood that if he messed with Harry Potter, the whole house would turn on him, the boy had overpowered him without even trying and that idea frightened him more than he was able to express.

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### **Headmaster’s Private Quarters, Hogwarts**

Albus Dumbledore was reading the last report of the long school year. Nothing had been going well for him. After Easter, a few Gryffindor students had tried to pass all the obstacles

and they were almost murdered by the troll. He would have been impressed if not for the amount of trouble it caused. Filius had been livid to discover the measly defences he put on the door and had gone to the DMLE without hesitation, putting in risk his own job, but stating that his honour demanded him to protect the students. Madam Bones had been ruthless with her sanctions; every single teacher that had known was in probation except for Filius. Albus, as the Headmaster, had been the one to receive most of the repercussions. The fine he could deal with, even if his vault had never looked so miserable before. What really bothered him was the constant scrutiny he was now subjected, even the most diminutive mistake would have him kicked out of the castle.

Minerva had been furious enough to almost step down as Deputy Headmistress and rip him a new one in the process. It was good that Filius had managed to speak with her and agreed to share the responsibility. The problem is that what happened with the DMLE was nothing compared to the complications that Harry Potter presented.

Albus observed the strange interactions of the Slytherins the first day of classes after the Christmas holidays, he was curious but he dismissed it as unimportant. That had been a terrible mistake... He noticed their attitude changed in a positive way. All the teachers were glad to report Slytherin had turned into the house with the politest students, they never caused problems, they helped their classmates, and they were civil with muggleborns...

It was too good to be true so he had pestered Severus to tell him what was going on, but the man was always busy. He had searched in the library and was in the border of insanity when one of the portraits of an old headmaster spoke to him about the Slytherin Guild. A group with more power over the house than any professor. Albus' blood curled at the prospect, almost ordering the portrait of the old headmaster to give him more information. It said that the last Guild belonged to Evgenia Tserova, a Slytherin that ruled the house with an iron fist. He remembered the woman from his youth, the wife of Frederick Potter, who possessed an aura of undeniable power even at her advanced age. Never before, he had met a person that imposed so much respect as her. She and her husband made the Potter fortune multiply during their times, not mentioning the fact that they obtained more power in the Ministry than the Minister and the Wizengamot combined.

Albus would be lying if he said he was not afraid of what would the child do with power at his disposal, but having no more ways to guide the boy, there was nothing left to do but hope that another Dark Lord was not created.

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### **Omake: McGonagall vs. Dumbledore**

Minerva was a stoic woman who showed little emotion but, at the moment, she was furious with Albus Dumbledore. She had told the old fool that those muggles were the worst sort of muggles that he could imagine, but had he listened to her? No, of course not because he knew better! See the consequences now; the poor boy had suffered throughout his life. She would make sure he regretted not listening to her.

“Minerva, it is good to have you here-” the man began in an appeasing tone, almost hiding behind his desk.

“Did you know?” she asked, looking murderous.

“I didn't until it was too late,” Albus admitted, closing his eyes.

“You promised you would take care of him!” the woman shouted, pointing her wand at him.

“Now, calm down Minerva, I’m sure that revenge is not the solution,” the man said with wide eyes and discovered with growing horror he could not move.

An incantation later, Minerva McGonagall left the office with a spring in her step and a mane of white hair in her hand.

The next day, students watched in amusement and fear the hairless man that walked in a funny way. Severus would have helped him if not for the fear of retribution. The waxing spell was one of the cruellest punishments a person invented.



# Beginning Rebellions

## Chapter Notes

Don't forget that I will be updating every Sunday starting today ^.^

Harry was reading in the library, enjoying a peaceful evening before the ball of energy, also known as Elizabeth, that went to help his aunt returned. Until the moment, it had been an excellent summer vacation. Many of his plans had come into fruition, though it was unfortunate that even away from school the interest that Albus Dumbledore had on him did not diminish. Sirius had tried to convince him to invite the man over until Harry reached the limit of his patience and hit the man with hard truths about his illegal imprisonment and his irresponsibility. The boy had almost felt pity for the man, who had looked haunted for days. However, he had spoken nothing but the truth. After that event, his godfather had looked at his case with impartiality and put the headmaster at arm's length.

Remus Lupin was a good man whose worst flaw was his gullibility. The man had revealed everything he knew about Harry to the headmaster. The boy only found out because Sirius and Remus were shouting at each other in the restaurant. It was good that Harry decided to keep him at arm's length and he was never invited to the castle after the stunt Sirius had pulled in Yule, bringing a guest without notifying the others. However, his godfather's loose mouth gave him unnecessary variables he would need to take care of sooner rather than later. Harry lamented the fact Remus felt so indebted to Albus Dumbledore because he would have to be treated as an unwelcomed acquaintance instead of the family his parents would have wanted him to be.

His friends, on the other hand, were as loyal as ever. Being in the Guild had unified them in unexpected ways. Harry had never had friends before and having someone who you could rely on was a strange yet exhilarating experience.

Aside from his personal matters, his new businesses were prospering quite nicely. The shops were thriving and the restaurants were always full, while the shoe shop had been a revelation for the magical world. Before, the only kind of shoes available were either dragon hide boots and closed leather shoes, both with different materials and prices, but they were the only ones. People had waited since the morning for the shop to open and were amazed at the variety of models and colours. Implementing the system muggles did for shoe sizes was not easy for the people to accept, but curiosity won over. It amused Harry to no end seeing notable blood purist families wearing muggle designs.

Aside from that, paying a second visit to the Asian Empire had been delightful, he had bought ingredients he would have never gotten in Europe and the books he had managed to acquire made him giddy. Harry had partaken in a few meals with the emperor, sharing their relief at having a peaceful time while the girls tortured another innocent. Much to his delight,

he had discovered that the types of teas he enjoyed could be grown in greenhouses and plans to add one for this specific purpose were made.

Taking advantage of the holidays, his aunt had begun teaching him about blood magic. It was a complicated art that had innumerable purposes. Thanks to aunt Eleadora's lessons, his views on magic began broadening.

Harry didn't understand how people could not see that the only differences between dark and light magic was the ability to control it. Dark magic was not inherently evil, she is wild and hard to tame, you need the discipline to calm her or she consumed you. Light magic herself is tame, far too docile and inoffensive, which also made it addictive because of the little control you need to perform her, anything wilder and you lost control. It was good to find a balance, remembering that neither were good nor evil, they were magic and simply existed.

"Young Master, your friends arrived," Ella announced, taking him away from his thoughts.

"Thanks, Ella," he told the little one and walked out of the library.

"Harry!" Draco exclaimed and hugged him. There it went his peaceful evening.

"Stop being so brash," Daphne reprimanded the boy and walked to the couch.

"The goes the ice queen," Theo muttered in a low voice, intelligent enough to not provoke her ire.

"Let's take a seat," Harry ordered.

"What will we do once school starts again?" Blaise asked to no one in particular.

"I have no idea, the Slytherins love our new common room and there have been no suggestions," Daphne said with a frown.

"We can have a place for the Guild," Marcus commented. "I don't mean to offend but the cold hallways do not motivate me to exercise."

"We will have to ask the elves for a good place," Theo agreed.

"I discovered what happened to Quirrel!" Draco interrupted, his eyes twinkling in that strange way they only did when there was some juicy news, as the blond boy liked to call gossip. "Dobby heard my father and other school governors talking about how the sick the man was. Apparently, a healer recommended Quirrel to enjoy his last months of life so he decided to retire," he commented, his eyes glinting in excitement.

"Any ideas on who will be our teacher this year?" Theo asked with a pronounced frown.

"Gilderoy Lockhart," Daphne announced, "mother is his fan and knows everything about him, including that the 'poor dear is having money problems'," she said in a high-pitched tone, mocking her mother.

“So we are getting a desperate man for money. That explains why the list materials have all of his books,” Marcus scowled.

“Mother said she is not buying that monstrosity,” Blaise chirped, “I don’t think any of you should buy it either, my mother doesn’t have a high standard for books and I’m not willing to discover what made her hate them so much.”

“Do you have any suitable member prospects?” Harry asked, changing the conversation to something productive.

“The Carrow twins, they will begin school this term. Their father is a brute and their aunt is a sadistic harpy. Their babysitter was a half-blood that basically raised them, they don’t believe in blood purity,” Daphne informed the others.

“Terrence Higgs is one of the best in his year, he never bullied younger kids, I don’t have any idea of what his beliefs are but we can find out. Adrian Pucey is in the same year, he has excellent wand work. He was raised with the purist dogma, though, ever since that night, I have never heard him talk about pureblood superiority,” Marcus said, looking thoughtful.

“We will have to pay attention to other houses this year,” Harry muttered after taking a moment to consider the suggestions. “Do any of you need to go the Alley?”

“Nah, we all went at the beginning of the summer and it is good to know the owner of the clothes shop,” Theo said, smiling at him.

“Madam Malkins and Gladrags are desperate for clients, only a few purebloods keep going. The uniforms in your shop are more comfortable,” Daphne informed Harry, a wide smile spreading her lips. “It was finally time for them to get some competition, Malkins made a fortune through being the only shop that sold Hogwarts uniform and Gladrags sold overpriced atrocities naming them fashion.”

“Yeah, besides, the new uniforms happen to make me look better,” Draco added, earning a huff from the girl.

“It is amusing to see father having daily internal breakdowns because he has to admit muggles are not useless. The day mother got him a suitcase he did not come out of his room for a few days. He likes to pretend they are wizarding inventions,” Marcus said, failing at trying to hide his smile.

“You should open a shop inspired in muggle desk material, I think that will be the final straw for my father and he will finally have a heart attack,” Daphne suggested, her face was adorned with a sweet smile that made most of the males in the room uncomfortable.

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Draco Malfoy had lived like a prince all his life, being taught the blood superiority dogma and the Malfoy personal dogma: Malfoys are superior to anything and anyone else. Everything had changed when he met Harry Potter. For the first time in his life, his family name was unable to get him something. For the first time in his life, he was seen for being Draco and was given the opportunity to leave his father's shadow. Not for one moment he had

regretted taking the decision to join. Seeing Harry interact with his elf had confused him, but when he tried the same with Dobby, he was astounded by the change. Now, the elf looked healthy, not like his previous rickety self. He had taught his little friend correct speech through long months of arduous teachings. His efforts had been rewarded with stories of his great grandparents and his father as an infant, which never ceased to amuse him... Loud bangs on his door took him out of his musings.

The bangs only got louder and his heart sped up with every explosive knock, to the point of almost drowning the noise coming from the outside. The boy's breathing had turned shallow and his chest was heaving, the signals he was entering into shock. He did not know whom or what had penetrated the manor's defences but he needed to run away. A pop beside him made him jump, pointing his tremulous hand that held a wand to the intruder. Much to his relief, it was Dobby.

"Aurors want to enter young master's bedroom," the elf informed him with wide eyes.

"Why are Aurors here?!" Draco exclaimed, unable to find the reason for their presence, but relaxing at the knowledge that his home was not being invaded.

"They are looking for Mister Malfoy's secret room, but don't worry; I won't allow them to enter," the little one promised.

"Would you tell me what secret room Dobby?"

"Of course, young master! The room where your father keeps evil artefacts, illegal ingredients, and a particularly nasty piece of evil."

"I see," Draco muttered with a tired sigh, disappointed but not surprised. "Let them in, otherwise they won't leave, but please stay at my side," he half asked half begged the elf, receiving a nod in response.

Draco watched with amazement as a translucent barrier receded a few meters, only for the door to burst open, crashing with the wall. He would worry about fixing his wall later, his main concern for the moment was observing the Aurors barging in, followed by his parents. Putting his best mask on, he sneered at the intruders with disdain, trying to emulate Harry's distant demeanour.

"Good evening, of course, you can enter my room. No, I don't mind. Though I am quite sure that the ones in charge of fixing it will," he said with obvious sarcasm. It seemed that being told off by a child did wonders to calm down the aurors.

"My name is Kingsley Shacklebolt. Sorry for entering that way but we are under orders to search every room in this house for dark objects. We tried to open this door but it did not budge so we had to use force," the man explained.

"Did any of you thought on knocking? Manners can do wonders," Draco commented, his fear making him unable to enjoy the abashed expressions of most of the Aurors. "Please take a seat Auror Shacklebolt, the others can search around. It seems you underestimated the lengths old families go to protect their heirs. Do any of you want tea?" he asked making his

best Harry impression, hoping his mask was able to hide the fact that his heart was trying to jump out of his chest.

“Ehm, no, we are fine,” the Auror said, looking fidgety and reluctantly sitting in front of him. “I have a few questions for you.”

“Please, go ahead,” Draco encouraged the man, enjoying the confusion on the Auror’s face. Though what gave him more satisfaction was to watch his father gape at him, it was the first time he had left the man speechless and he loved the feeling. The experience would be even better if the panic stopped gripping his chest.

“Is there any dark object you know of in this house?” the man asked, returning to his comfort zone.

“Of course not, those are illegal. Not to mention that we are a noble house, it would be an insult to our blood to use such low things instead of relying on our power,” he said with a slight sneer and the man seemed to approve of his answer. Unlike his father, who looked paler than usual.

“That is good to know. Is there any secret room in the house?”

“Aside from the one my parents use for entertainment purposes and I pretend not to know the existence of, there is none,” he stated. The man’s face slacked in surprise at the unexpected answer but he composed himself after a few seconds, fighting to contain his growing amusement. The two adult Malfoys, on the other hand, didn't look amused in the least. Narcissa’s pale skin turned to a hot pink and even her husband had a blush dusting his cheeks.

“Ehm, that was more information than we needed, but I appreciate your honesty, Mister Malfoy,” the Auror said with a smile that he reciprocated.

“No other questions?”

“A few that would be useless in this situation,” Auror Shacklebolt said and one of the Aurors signalled at him. “It seems that the room is clear, I apologize for our intrusion.”

“No need to, you were doing your job and it is good to see that you were doing it right. Please, let me walk you to the door,” Draco offered with all the grace he could muster.

“We know the way; we don't want to bother any longer.”

“I insist, Dobby, please walk them to the door,” he asked the elf, who simply nodded in response.

“It was good to meet you, Draco Malfoy.”

“Likewise, Auror Shacklebolt,” Draco answered with cordiality, enjoying his father's expression when he only received a nod of acknowledgement before they left.

“That was brilliant, my dragon,” his mother congratulated him but was interrupted by an irate male.

“May I know what that was?! I will be the laughing stock for those comments. I taught you better than to act like a moron,” his father berated him, wearing that disapproving sneer that in the past had affected him so much.

“Did you want me to tell them about your secret room full of dark objects instead?” Draco asked in a calm tone and his father blanched. “I will continue to pretend I know nothing of your illegal deals and you continue to pretend I’m an ignorant child,” he stated, the anger he had accumulated for years pouring out. “While I know you don’t care about this, Grandmother Brigitte would be deeply ashamed. But I do care, so I will pretend not to know for as long as possible. I know you are disappointed because I’m not willing to follow your steps and become a corrupt death eater but at least I know that grandmother would be proud. Please, leave my room,” he asked his parents.

Draco observed with satisfaction as the pale’s man skin turned a chalky white, but the tears of the woman pierced his heart.

Once they left, his hands began to tremble and his breathing came out in harsh pants, his knees gave under him. He didn’t regret what had happened, but it was the first time he had defied his father and while he was static, the fear that was beginning to suffocate him prevented him to enjoy it fully. Dobby popped beside him and put a cup of warm tea in his hands which he drank automatically. He entered into shock and did not notice his elf popping him in the Potter castle, but he did feel his friends surrounding him and knew he would defy his father a thousand times. If it meant his friends approved, he would do it over again.

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To say Lucius Malfoy was shocked was an understatement. Draco had gone against him. While he had noticed his son had changed during school, he had never imagined the meek Draco would ever rebel in such a way. He had been hurt by the harsh truths his boy spurted, never expecting to hear such a brutal criticism from his own child. Narcissa had broken down in tears, but he was so confused that was unable to console the crying woman. Draco had acted like a true pureblood and that made him immensely proud. However, the things he had said... He had called him weak and a shame for the family, not exactly in a subtle way. The problem was that he couldn’t deny a single accusation. His mother would have been hurt seeing the path he chose to follow and, for the first time, he questioned his methods and beliefs.

“I need to speak with Severus,” Lucius absentmindedly informed his distraught wife. He walked towards the fireplace, threw floo powder and enounced his friend’s direction, almost giving the man a heart attack when he arrived unannounced.

“The fact that I gave you free entrance to my house does not mean – What happened?” Severus asked the pale man that plopped on the nearest couch.

“Aurors came to my home today... Draco changed so much,” Lucius whispered and narrated what had happened earlier. “What is Draco doing at school?” he asked. A question that

obviously surprised the professor. A year ago, Draco did absolutely nothing before asking his father and informed him about every single detail of his life. Things had indeed changed...

"I see he didn't tell you, a Slytherin Guild was formed at the beginning of the year and Draco is part of it," he sighed, Lucius came out of his stupor with that revelation.

"I... He never told me."

"I could have guessed. He also befriended Harry Potter and a few others," Severus said, wearing a sardonic smile and sagging on the couch.

"He never told me... This summer he has been so busy we have yet to have an appropriate chat. He is always at the library or with his friends, and now I learn he is ashamed of me. How ironic, I always tried to motivate him by showing him my disappointment, it seemed the tables have turned," Lucius muttered, taking a deep breath. "At least he talks with you."

"Not anymore, ever since he befriended Potter he ignores my existence. It is obvious that between his new friend and his godfather, he chose the former," the man sneered, but obvious pain could be seen in his expression.

"But he adores you, most of the times you are closer than we are," the blond man whispered and with a dry chuckle, he added, "Being a parent is not as easy as I imagined."

"Cheers to that," Severus said handing his visitor a bottle of firewhisky.

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Harry was sitting alone in his compartment while he waited for the others to arrive. Once again, his sister and his aunt, along with his godfather came to see him to the station. He was still thinking about the conversation he had with his godfather regarding Remus Lupin.

"Harry, you should stop being so cold to Moony!" Sirius began his diatribe, "I know what he did was not right but he now understands why."

"Does he? You may trust him, Sirius, but I don't. Trust is hard to earn and easy to break. He did not even earn it and yet he broke it."

"You are being immature Harry, you can't hold a grudge forever!" the man exclaimed, looking exasperated.

"Perhaps I am, but tell me, what he has done to earn my trust. He never apologized. Every time we meet, he asks the same things: where am I living? What are my plans for future business? Curious that he wants to know that when we used to discuss the books we enjoy and other themes that I consider interesting. Now, he only cares about the things he had never asked before. If the castle was not under the fidelius I'm sure you would have told him where I lived already and he would have told the headmaster," he accused the man.

"I... Well... Moony feels indebted with Dumbledore for allowing him to attend school," the man tried to justify his friend, but winced at how hollow his words sound.

"I know, but if he is unable to choose, I won't force him. I refuse to answer delicate questions and the longer he insists the more I'm convinced he has already chosen."

"I will try to speak with him," Sirius sighed in defeat, children were more troublesome than what he expected. "I will be going to my mother's house and begin the reparations, Nile promised to help," he told his stubborn godson.

"He has excellent taste, but do hire some curse breakers. If something happens to any of my elves I will make sure you regret it," the boy said with a smile.

"Yeah, I know," the man muttered with a pout. "How is the daycare going?"

"Pretty good, actually. It is a perfect cover for all the werewolves' children to receive education and for first generations to get jobs. The elves are happy to have so many people to take care of and it is quite popular with parents," he informed the man, smiling a little.

"Yeah, I have never seen so many children in one place... Don't the werewolves cause problems in the sanctuary?" Sirius asked, tilting his head to one side, reminding the boy of a dog.

"No, a few tried to fight but they are scared of gryphons. Wolfs-bane helps to keep them calm and a few potions ensure their turning is painless so they are not irritable and their aggression diminishes. Aunt Eleadora makes an especial batch of potions for their recovery, so the day after the full moon they feel like new."

"You are a good kid, those people were miserable before," Sirius congratulated him with obvious pride.

"It is not being good, I know how it feels like to be rejected by something you are not able to control. I'm helping people in similar situations because I know how painful it is," Harry explained in a blasé tone, not noticing the pain on the man's expression.

The train of his thoughts was interrupted by the door opening, Daphne and Marcus came in discussing something vehemently. She sat in front of him and passed him the newspaper, reading the headline he almost smiled.

## ***BARTEMIUS CROUCH HOUSES DEATH EATER!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My dear readers, I must write this news with no little amount of horror. Yesterday morning, Aurors were under orders to give a surprise inspection to Bartemious Crouch, ex-head of the DMLE, for the crimes he committed while holding that prestigious position. What no one expected to find was his supposedly deceased son very much alive! The boy in question was under the imperius, kept in a room under the care of his elf!*

*Bartemious Crouch senior first tried to stop the inspection and when his son was found, he fought with our Aurors and gave his son the opportunity to escape. Chance the young man took, but not before murdering one of our Aurors and stealing his wand, also murdering the*



*elf that had nursed him for so long. In this tragic way, we discover that the man that once ran for Minister is nothing more than a filthy criminal! I have to wonder, dear readers, if his brutal methods during the war were meant to protect us or satisfy his thirst for blood. It chills me to have once trusted a callous criminal with my safety!*

*Once Crouch senior was taken under custody, after injuring many Aurors who were only doing their jobs, he was questioned. However, the man refused to give information and the Aurors were forced to dose him with veritaserum to discover any other crimes. Imagine my surprise when the man confessed to change his wife and his son during one of their visits to Azkaban! You need to have no heart to leave an innocent woman and decide to save a murderer instead. Other information revealed was too delicate to publish, my dear readers, but I assure you the current head of the DMLE, Madam Bones, is working hard for our safety.*

*I have to wonder though, if this man was in power for so long, how many other criminals remain in power. Millicent Bagnold, the ex-Minister that approved all of this man's sadistic tendencies, has yet to appear, deciding to hide in shame. Albus Dumbledore, the current Chief Warlock, who personally signed many of the documents that allowed Crouch senior so much freedom and let's not forget his knowing participation in the illegal imprisonment of Lord Black, has yet to pronounce himself.*

*I believe is time to stop being so passive in the face of corruption. We are magical Britain and we have the power to decide who remains in power. My dear witches and wizards, let's not forget that we are the ones who put politicians in power and we are the ones who have the power to take them out!*

"Inspiring," Harry muttered, a slight smirk on his lips.

"The Minister is getting desperate for approval, so don't be surprised if he does something stupid to earn your support," Daphne warned.

"I don't particularly care about the man, but the fact that the headmaster has many people to answer to pleases me."

"He is in the border of getting kicked out of the school, any mistake and he is out," Marcus gossiped, looking pleased with the prospect. "I respect the man but I don't like him, he is always changing the name of our festive days to that muggle non-sense."

"I agree, but let's not forget our traditions were declared dark a couple of decades ago so few families still remember how meaningful they are," Daphne sighed.

"Never mind that, we can always fix moronic mistakes. Have you seen the others?" Harry asked with a frown, it was almost a quarter to eleven and they were nowhere to be seen.

On that opportune moment, three boys appeared, however, they were pale and their hands were shaking. Two redhead twins were behind the boys guiding them inside, the two youngsters in front of Harry jumped to aid the newcomers.

"What happened?" Daphne demanded.

“Gryffindors tried to attack us,” Theo explained, calming down a little.

“It was not us!” the twins exclaimed in unison when the girl glared at them.

“It was not them, many seventh years cornered us,” Draco confirmed.

“They stunned two from behind and we stunned one, between the five of us it was easy to knock out the other three,” Blaise explained looking like himself again.

“I must thank you for helping my friends and bringing them here,” Harry told the boys who were looking uncomfortable.

“That’s okay, we don’t like bullies,” the one in the left explained.

“Good to know, would you like to join us for lunch?” Harry asked, trying to find a way of paying back the Gryffindor students for their kindness.

“We have decent food,” Marcus added.

“If that is so, my brother and I will join!” the one in right agreed.

“Good, have you ever tasted pasta?” Blaise asked with a glint in his eye. Harry sighed at the boy’s antics, Italians and their obsessive national pride.

During lunch, they learnt that the twins had four brothers and one sister, and it was inferred that with that awful load of kids the parents did not have time for them. By the way on which they described their younger brother, he seemed to be spoiled but mostly ignored and he was curiously in the same year as they were, it seemed that Harry needed to pay more attention to his classmates. They talked about their older brothers with admiration except for the one that still remained on school, a simpleton with delusions of grandeur and enough egotism to actually believe he was important.

Harry decided he would continue observing the twins. The boy had been surprised by the number of ideals they shared, a thing that awoke his untameable curiosity. A long time ago, he had noticed that the redheads possessed a latent talent, but he had dismissed the twins because of the pranks. Perhaps there was much more hidden under the surface... He hoped that was the case because George and Fred had the potential to become so much more. They were the first official candidates for the Hogwarts court.

The Weasley twins left their compartment when they noticed the sun was setting down, complaining about the tantrum that certain Lee would throw for leaving him alone. Harry was concentrated on his book until Marcus decided it was time to discuss how they would establish the rules of Guild to the new students.

“How will we announce our rules? The other students may get ideas if we don’t,” Marcus commented, breaking the silence.

“Let Theo do it, he is good with words,” Blaise suggested.

“The older students will try to rebel if I do it all alone, I may be good with words but they only respect Harry,” Theo shrugged.

“I think it would be good if Marcus was the one to begin,” Daphne said after a few moments. “He is the oldest and most of the house respects him, he can issue the challenge to the other students... Marcus, you will need to speak with the other prefects. Order them to guide the new students through the long route and explain the basic rules, once they arrive, we will tell them ourselves. I believe it would be wise to have you with us all the time.”

“I have no problems,” Marcus agreed. “You will do the same thing as last year, state the benefits. Everyone believes you are polite and easy to approach so if they have any requests, it will be easier.”

“It is good that they don’t know her,” Draco muttered.

“Harry will be in charge of dealing with any troublemaker,” Blaise said at last. Every person in the compartment agreed and waited to see what the new term would bring.

The Guild led the house towards the common room after the feast, satisfied at how impressive the place was. People divided into groups to receive the first years and leave space between them and the small group.

“Before our new members arrive, is there anyone who wishes to challenge the Guild?” Marcus asked, seeing a few seventh years having an inner debate but deciding to remain silent. The prefect knew he would keep an eye on them in case they decided to cause any trouble. “Good,” he approved with a smirk, the change in the common room remained as a constant reminder that the Guild did not make empty promises. The prefects came in, followed by the small group of children, who looked around in awe.

“Thank you for escorting them,” Theo began, giving the new students a gentle smile and dismissing the prefects. “First, I wish to welcome you all to the Noble house of Slytherin, I know the prefects already explained the basics on how the house works but I have a few things to add. As a noble house we have many rules to ensure our status is not threatened by imbecilic actions,” he announced, pleased to see all of them paying attention. “First, the words mudblood, blood-traitor, and any other vulgar expressions are forbidden. You can believe in blood superiority as long as you don’t preach nor act on it, the moment that we discover you breaking this rule there will be severe punishments and second chances don’t exist,” he barked and examined the ones who seemed to not agree with the rule for further observation.

“Second, no bullying is allowed. If you ever feel the need to compensate your weakness by tormenting someone weaker, then don’t ever let them identify you nor the house. If we hear any whisper from any Slytherin breaking this rule and blemishing this house with their uncouth behaviour, there will be consequences. Third, always be polite. We are the house of cunning and ambition, it is always smart to keep all of your options available. From the smallest house-elf to the most annoying first-generation magical you are to be polite,” Theo finished his speech glaring at the children in front of him. “Any questions?”

“Yes, who do you think you are to put rules in the house?” demanded a daring child who would have fitted better with the lions.

“We are the Slytherin Guild,” Blaise responded with an easy smile.

“And why should I care? I’m a pureblood and I won’t obey blood-traitors or a disgusting mudblood!” he exclaimed, not noticing how the older Slytherins inched away from him.

“Is that so?” Harry asked with a gentle voice, placing a hand on Blaise, who was ready to curse the moron. “You just broke our rules, and it was said, there are no second chances,” he announced and the eerie silence that reigned the room was broken by high-pitched screams that horrified the observers. It was curious to see two new girls remaining stoic; he would have to pay attention to them.

“Please stop,” begged an older girl with tears running down her face after a few seconds. “He is my little brother, I promise I will make him behave,” she pleaded and he conceded.

“Please do, I would hate to give another demonstration,” Harry said, impressed at the girl’s courage. It was curious how love made people do stupid, yet amazing things. “I hope I won’t need to punish anyone else,” he said with a smile and sat down again.

“As you were told, we are the Slytherin Guild, it is our responsibility to take care of the house which includes placing the rules and, unfortunately, punishing you when necessary,” Daphne announced in a clear voice that commanded the attention of the first years. “Our duty is to guide and protect the house, so if any of you has any problems with any subjects we will assign someone to help you. If you need anything, do not be afraid to request it as long as it is reasonable. Also, you have to designate a representative in your year to speak with us. Don’t forget the rules and you will enjoy all of the benefits the Guild has to offer. Ask the older students about how much their life has improved since we took charge,” she said and was pleased to see so many people nodding at her statement. “It is time for bed now, have a restful night,” she dismissed them and every Slytherin went to their rooms, leaving them as the only occupants of the room.

“That went well,” Marcus nodded pleased.

“Before I forget again, I must tell you why we were so late,” Draco murmured, looking serious. “Do you remember that Aurors came to inspect my house a few weeks ago?” he asked and they nodded. “Father ordered Dobby to get rid of most things in the room and he told me about his plans. But the thing that worries me is that he said the ‘nasty piece of evil magic’ was out of the room last week, when most people do their shopping for school. I know my father is vengeful and I don’t put it above him to give it to the child of one of the Aurors that inspected my house,” Draco whispered.

“I understand, can you call Dobby? I have a few questions for him,” Harry asked the blond, looking deep in thought.

“Of course, Dobby?”

“Mater called,” the elf said, popping in.

“Yes Dobby, thanks for coming,” the boy told to his elf, whose eyes began to water.

“Hello Dobby, I have a few questions about the dark object that was in that room,” Harry announced, interrupting the elf’s emotional outburst. “What does it do and what does it look like?”

“That nasty piece of dark magic absorbs the soul of a person, controlling their mind and actions. It looks like a diary, so the victim only needs to write on it for it to leech on their core,” the little elf informed with wide eyes.

“I see. Is it possible for you to still feel where it is?”

“Oh yes, I could never forget something so foul... It is in the castle, in a high place,” the elf muttered, losing all semblance of colour.

“It seems that your theory is correct Draco... Let’s wait and see what happens. If it results dangerous for the school Dobby will retrieve it, but I’m curious about what it can do,” Harry stated, once again, looking lost in his thoughts.

# Four Times Trouble Plus Two

## Chapter Notes

And I almost forgot to post. Again.

For all of those who wonder how this story is developed, KARD is my muse. You should check out their new album "Red Moon" (it's really good)!

Without further ado, please enjoy it!

Time flew by for the Guild between classes, monitoring their house, and their training. The idea of having a place for their personal use plagued them to the point they had asked a Hogwarts elf for a room to use. They were guided to the seventh floor, to the opposite wall where a man was teaching ballet to trolls. The school elf had paced three times in front of the empty wall, where a door appeared. Come and Go Room, that is how the elf referred to it, and while most of the members approved of the room, Harry voted against it.

“But why?! We will have everything we need here” Draco whined.

“This room was created for the use of any student in need. We want a room but we don’t need one. It would be an insult to the castle to use one of the rooms designed for everyone for our own benefit. There are other options, we don't need this.”

With those words he left and the others followed, some with more reluctance than others.

It was curious how magic seemed to like the respect given. That same evening they walked towards their common room but found themselves in a different place. On the end of the passage was carved the school crest. With a shrug, Harry approached and an entrance appeared. Many torches were illuminating a space so ample it rivalled the great hall with easiness. A pile of books was deposited near the door, ancient-looking and some in languages none of the presents recognized. The group was once again amazed by Harry's natural understanding of magic, which she seemed to reciprocate.

They found their headquarters.

Harry's elves had transformed the room in a few days - the efficiency of the little ones still amazed them to this day. Now, the room had many different areas: a part with dozens of dummies to practice on, a rocky place perfect to duel, a space dedicated to exercise - which, much to Harry's amusement and Theo's horror, resembled a gym - a special room for potion brewing, and a sitting place in hues of white, green, and golden. Enchanted lamps illuminated the room.

"I really like this place," Marcus commented while searching in a white bookcase. "It is much easier to study here than in the common room or the library."

"I know... We are ages ahead," Blaise said with a heavy sigh, looking gloom for some reason.

"Quirrel is a disgrace," Draco commented nonchalantly. "At least we have Professor Flitwick and that man is great."

"He is great when he is not cleaning the floor with us. I swear that he takes special enjoyment in doing so," Theo complained.

"You have to admit that we won't have a better teacher," Harry interrupted the boy's whining.

"I have never denied it, but only you can have him teach you twice a week. The bimonthly reminder that I'm nothing more than a training dummy is more than enough," Theo huffed.

"Harry, the Carrow twins have a simple request," Daphne informed, interrupting the boy's tantrum and waited for Harry's acknowledgement to continue. "They asked to share a room, their father is... One of the worst persons in existence and they are scared to be alone."

"They will have it, did they mentioned anything else?" Harry asked, curious about the twins.

"No. You saw them, they tend to be aloof but I have known them for years."

"Very well, Ella?"

"Sir called?" she asked popping in.

"Yes dear, I have a favour to ask you. Find Flora and Hestia Carrow, wait for them to be alone though, ask them how they want their new room. You can assign someone else if you don't have time, but please, tell me what are your impressions of them."

"I will do it Sir!" and she popped out. A few minutes later, she was back surprising the ones in the room. "They just asked for a room with two beds, nothing more sir," she said, frowning. There was not a hint of her previous excitement.

"Mmm, please get them decent beds and everything you think they will need."

"I will tell Nile, the girls were polite and kind. They are two good girls who are scared," the little one lamented.

"Thank you for your insight, Ella, you are amazing," he complimented and the elf popped out after many effusive thanks. "Marcus, what do you know about them?"

"Excellent at potions and charms. Although they don't talk much, all the teachers like them."

"Good, I think it is time to expand the Guild. Daphne, bring the girls tomorrow on their free period, Marcus, bring the candidates you were thinking on after dinner," Harry ordered before getting lost in his thoughts.

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The next day, two slight girls entered the room. Harry was pleased to see how much control both of them had over their reactions. He eyed them for a few seconds, approving their expressionless masks and controlled breathing.

"Hello, please take a seat. I have a few questions to ask you, but I want you to be honest. No one will punish you," he promised with his most soothing tone, yet the girls remained tense. "What is your opinion regarding blood superiority?"

"Our father tried to raise us with that belief," the one in the right began.

"However, the woman that raised us was a half-blood. She was really kind to us..." the other muttered.

"So we don't believe in it."

"Excellent, now, what do you think of house-elves?"

"Our house-elf protects us every time she can," the one in the left explained, her eyes were fixated on her lap.

"Since we can remember she heals us..." her twin said, taking a deep breath.

Harry examined the girl's expression. For a moment, he could see Elizabeth in them, that was enough for his protective streak to wake.

"That is good to know. Now, the last question, you have a week to think about the answer. Don't forget it is your decision and no one will ever hurt you for whatever is it that you choose. Would you like to join the Guild?"

The two girls looked up in surprise and then at each other. The Guild was expanded.

That evening, after dinner, Harry sent the twins along with Draco and Daphne to their new room. The girls, while still distant, looked more relaxed and had enjoyed the food, taking an especial liking to the chocolate ice cream. It seemed that whether magical or muggle, females were weak for that particular treat. Now, the boys sat in silence, waiting for Marcus to bring the next possible prospects. The door opened and the boy in question entered, followed by two nervous-looking students, who paled the moment they saw Harry, not even paying attention to their surroundings.

"Good evening, please, take a seat," Harry announced breaking the silence. "You are not in problems so there is nothing to worry about, though I have a few questions. Your honesty will not be punished, so please, speak freely," he explained, but none of the newcomers relaxed. "What do you think about blood purity?"

"I was raised with that ideology," Terrence began explaining after long seconds of heavy silence. "Once I began Hogwarts though, I saw how many muggleborns had more innate talent than many purebloods. I was confused, but nothing changed, so I began wondering why I was raised that way because my family is only a fifth-generation magical, including



me,” the boy said, trying to keep his calm while he explained and finishing with a steady voice.

“My family is a pureblood one, we don't belong to the sacred twenty-eight, but we are proud of our roots,” Adrian stated with a tense posture expecting a punishment that did not come so he continued talking. “I don't mind half-bloods but I hate muggleborns. They have no respect from our traditions and believe they are better,” he muttered, grinding his teeth and glaring at the floor.

“Did it ever occur to you that they don't follow the traditions because they do not know them?” Harry asked.

“They could learn,” Adrian argued and Harry had to congratulate the boy for sticking to his ideals.

“The problem, Adrian, is that they don't have a way to learn. How did you learn? I bet your parents taught you. First-generation magicals are unable to get any kind of information, don't forget our traditions were declared as illegal decades ago so no information is available. Even the history books were edited to hide that part of our roots. Therefore, they are led to believe we share the same traditions and the school only reinforces that idea,” he explained to the boy who looked like he wanted to argue but was unable to find a decent argument. “Few families still practice the old ways, but in their desire to not mingle with first generations, they forget they could teach them and expand the number of people that practice them.”

“I have never considered that...” Adrian muttered, a pronounced frown marring his features, “but what about the old lines? Many are getting extinct and muggleborns don't have any special magic.”

“I have to ask you something, what is the ability the Blacks are known for?”

“Metamorphmagi, the last time it showed was six generations or so ago,” the boy stated, confused at the strange question.

“Right and wrong. Nymphadora Tonks, daughter of Andromeda Tonks neé Black is a metamorphmagi. If I'm not wrong, she's training to be an Auror,” Harry explained and his audience's eyes widened in surprise. “Andromeda married a first-generation wizard named Edward Tonks. Apparently, the ability needed new blood to appear once again. I personally believe that new magicals are born within muggles to strengthen magic and create new lines. After all, wizards had to come from somewhere,” he explained and the boy seemed to have a meltdown. “Anyhow, I have another question, what do you think about muggles?”

“If I can be honest,” Terrence began, looking around for approval. “For not having magic, they are not that bad. However, they destroy everything in their way. I would rather have no contact with them,” he finished looking resolute.

“I don't know much about them except for what my father taught me,” Adrian admitted with a grimace.

"I agree with you Terrence, they destroy without care but they can create wondrous things. Adrian, do you know about the new stores that opened in Diagon Alley and what products they sell?"

"Of course, the backpacks are amazing and the shoe store is one of the best places," the confused boy stated.

"Did you know all of those stores base their ideas on the muggle world? Backpacks are common and you can find a restaurant on every street," Harry explained and, once again, the poor boy looked lost. "I'm giving you the opportunity to join the Guild, you have a week to decide and we won't hold it against you if you deny our offer. It is late so you can leave for your rooms, goodnight."

Both boys simply left after polite farewells.

"We should talk with all the Slytherins about this," Marcus said once the boys left. "It'll make things easier to understand and they will be more willing to follow the rules."

"You are right. Tell the prefects that tomorrow every Slytherin needs to be in the common room after lunch."

"It is good that tomorrow is Saturday," Blaise mused.

The next day, the Guild plus the two new snakes waited in the common room for the rest of the house to arrive, lounging in their sitting place until the door opened and the prefects guided the house in.

"Everyone is present," Marcus announced walking towards his friends.

"Good, the reason why all of you are here is nothing to worry about. This Noble House's reputation has never been cleaner thanks to your excellent conduct," Daphne congratulated all the presents, who relaxed noticing they were not in trouble. "The reason for your presence is because, until the moment, we haven't shared our reasoning behind our first and most important rule, a mistake that we noted yesterday.

"Muggleborns, as you call them, or first-generation magicals, as we prefer to call them, don't follow our traditions. However, you forget our roots were declared dark five decades ago by an incompetent Minister who believed they were the root of every Dark Lord. Therefore, there is no information available. Even history has been tweaked to hide them. When first generations arrive at the magical world, they are led to believe we share the same traditions and customs, with the current headmaster only enforcing that idea by celebrating their holidays. They have no other way to learn because we have blocked all their paths, we know our noble ways, but we refuse to share them. Knochurn Alley, the only place where they could get books about the subject, has a zero-tolerance policy against them. It is our duty, as citizens of Magical Britain, to teach them our ways so that in a future our beloved traditions will be reinstated," Daphne explained with that regal air of hers that made people agree with her.

“We believe first-generation magicals are born within muggles so they can bring new blood and strengthen our own,” Theo began explaining. “I’m sure most of you know the Blacks, who, aside from their madness, are also known for being metamorphmagi. It has come to our attention that people believe the last time that particular trait has appeared is six generations ago. That information is wrong. Nymphadora Tonks, daughter of Andromeda Black and Edward Tonks, is a metamorphmagus. Her father is a first-generation magical. It seems the Black’s needed new blood for their prized trait to reappear,” he explained, shocking people into silence.

“We believe new generations strengthen the magic of old lines and have the potential to create new ones. You are not forced to believe in what we do, but research about the subject,” Harry said in an almost lazy tone

“We know that you have been told that muggles are nothing more than beasts, but that is not true,” Daphne began explaining. “They are our polar opposites, actually. They advance so fast that most of the times they destroy what sustains them in the first place. However, the things that they manage to create without the help of magic are nothing less than astounding. I know all of you have heard of the new shops in Diagon Alley and most of you own their products. I’m pleased to tell you that their ideas are based on muggle objects. Backpacks, fountain pens, briefcases, different shoes, restaurants, and cafés are common in the muggle world,” she declared and noticed with a great amount of satisfaction the revelation had caused many people to enter into a shocked daze. Flint seemed to be having a brain shortcut along with many other fanatics and Parkinson's wide eyes were directed at her clothes and shoes with horror.

A few days after the overwhelming information was delivered, most of the Slytherins were in zombie mode until they assimilated the facts. While few were reluctant to admit that muggle inventions were useful, most took it in stride and continued using them.

Another event that pleased Harry was the slow, yet steady growth of the Guild. Everyone got along with each other, thing that would be almost impossible with a big group of people, but they somehow managed to do so.

After the eventful weekend of the Guild, they were enjoying a tranquil time at their headquarters when they noticed the wards announcing two people at the door. Curious, Harry asked Blaise to open it. Two redheads were looking at a piece of parchment when they noticed many eyes on them. They immediately straightened up looking so surprised their eyes almost came out from their sockets.

"We were ehm... Exploring," the one in the right said and the other nodded.

“I see... It is good that you were not following us. Come in, but I must ask, why are the Gryffindor devils wandering in the snake's den?” Harry asked, enjoying the twin's admiration while they eyed the room.

"What is this place?" one asked.

“Mmm, let’s make a deal You will be allowed to join in if you tell me how you found us,” Harry offered with a smile, they looked at each other's eyes and nodded.

“Would you explain what this place is first?” one said looking around.

“This is our humble abode, the headquarters of the Guild,” Marcus explained with a smirk.

“It doesn’t appear on the map, we just saw you disappear so we got curious,” one explained taking out the piece of parchment.

“This is the Marauders Map, the key of our success,” the other presented the map with obvious pride. “I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good,” he recited while touching the map with his wand and on the parchment appeared the map of Hogwarts.

“By any case is the map made by Prongs, Padfoot, Moony, and Wormtail?” Harry asked while the others were examining the parchment.

“How did you know?” one of them demanded, narrowing his eyes.

“My father was Prongs and Sirius is Padfoot,” he explained and the twins looked at each other once again, having another silent conversation they nodded.

“The map is rightfully yours,” the one with the almost invisible scar in his jaw said, handing the younger boy the parchment.

“You can keep it, I don’t really have the need but we can find a way to replicate it... Thinking about it, my father left a journal, but it was full of pranks so I haven't read it yet, I can lend it to you if you want.”

“We only play pranks on bullies,” the one with more freckles on his nose announced.

“And to test our ideas,” the other added.

“But we want to know what kind of pranks they played,” one declared and his brother nodded eagerly.

“Good, but first, I need you to introduce yourselves properly. Fred and George are not the same person, so, if you would...” that simple phrase convinced the twins of the path they wanted to follow.

In that curious turn of events, the Weasley twins joined the Guild, amazed at how well they got along with the other members. The twins admired their dedication, deciding to join their study sessions and the other members of the Guild discovered, with more than a little amusement, that the twins’ weakness was the female fury. Daphne bullied them into joining their morning exercises and the Carrow twins managed to include them in the duelling sessions through that unique way females had of scaring males, or at least, annoy them until they agreed. All in all, they had turned into valued members of their group.

In a similar fashion, Terrence Higgs and Adrian Pucey accepted their offer to join the Guild. At first, their interactions were of the tense kind, but observing the simple camaraderie and easy acceptance, they didn't take long to integrate. The youngest twins also began integrating; opening up and little by little.

Harry would never forget the day they came to him for protection. It had been quite a grim situation, however, it was the day where a before and an after were marked in the young girl's lives. Both had looked so pale, and one had a letter clutched in her hand. They looked so fragile and innocent, reminding him of his dear Elizabeth when she was frightened. The other members of the court could only watch with concern as the two girls approached him.

"Harry, we know that we can trust you," Flora said, looking at the floor.

"Please help Missy, our house-elf," Hestia said with tears shining on her eyes and she handed him the letter she was carrying.

The boy understood their fear at last. There exist many kinds of heinous monsters, and it was obvious their father and aunt belonged to that category. The letter contained threats to the girls for daring to best 'worthy pureblood heirs in school'. The eldest Carrows stated their elf would suffer their punishment until they arrived... It was written with blood.

Harry felt an uncharacteristic surge of anger and it took him all his self-control to contain it. That was the moment he decided those beasts were going to suffer a painful demise in the future. He stayed silent for a moment while plans were formed.

"Ares, Mars," he called his elves and they popped in, sensing the tense atmosphere they stood straight, waiting for orders. "Can you feel the elf of these two girls?" he signalled the twins and both nodded. "Please, go to her and take her to the castle, tell her the twins are safe and asked you to retrieve her from that house. In a few hours, or at most tomorrow, they will call her to form a bond and explain what is happening. The people in the house, make them think they freed the elf and also make them forgetful about the girls," he ordered and both elves nodded, popping out.

"Thank you," Flora whispered with tears streaming down her face, her mask breaking.

"Father hates us. He tends to be violent and our aunt is way worse than him, but Missy takes the worst of it to protect us. Our babysitter tried to run away with us, but we were found... They killed her," narrated Hestia with no apparent expression, but the pain was there, permeating her voice.

The rest of the Guild heard with horror the atrocities these young girls had been forced to endure, promising to protect them. On the other hand, Harry was planning. Hestia and Flora belonged to the Guild, which meant it was his duty to protect them. For the moment, they would stay in his house for the holidays and summer. He would ask his elves to confuse the monsters to the point they would barely be able to remember their own names. Once they were of age, the monsters would have the punishment they deserved, delivered by their victims.

"You are safe now," Daphne said, comforting the girls. "You know? Father also hates me. Mother almost died while delivering Astoria so they didn't try to have more children. He tried to find ways of cowing me into submission since I can remember, though grandma kept him in check when she was alive. My elves have always been kind. When mother was busy with her friends they played with us and kept us company... I learnt a few years ago that they were being punished for spending time with us," the girl sighed, "I was angry. I decided to take

revenge on my parents... I laced their morning tea with belladonna, though my elves changed the teacups before they could drink it,” she commented with a mirthless chuckle. “That was the day I bonded with them... I can’t believe I just told you that,” Daphne huffed.

“Well, you are not the only one with crappy parents,” Fred snorted. “Dad is always working and most of the times he doesn’t even remember how many children he has.”

“Mum is always fawning over Perfect Percy and Little Ginny,” George said, emulating his mother’s high-pitched tone. “She also tries to control ickle Ronnikins. Bill and Charlie try to avoid the Burrow as much as possible, though I don’t blame them.”

“Once we are seventeen we are leaving that house,” the other Weasley commented.

“Yeah, my mother is not that great either, but she is not bad,” Blaise said in a lackadaisical tone, as if discussing the climate. “She is out most of the times, either trying to get a new husband or planning ways of killing his actual one.”

“I thought those were rumours,” Terrence muttered, trying to conceal a shudder.

“Nope, as real as magic. I’m not sure why she does it, though I have a basic idea. Her first husband was my father and she married at seventeen. Perhaps she got tired of him, maybe he cheated on her, or something similar, the thing is that she poisoned him. I have no idea why she continues doing it, but I guess it pays the bills. She doesn’t have much time for me, though, during her little free time, she teaches me some things.”

“Well, my mother is the best woman in the world,” Draco stated with conviction. “Although my father makes up for it. He is always saying how inadequate I am or how ashamed of me he is. There is also the usual blabber of muggles being beasts, first generations being dirt, and the ‘oh, so noble Malfoy family’... Of course, there is also his daily diatribe of how should we worship Voldemort and how superior purebloods are.”

“Ditto, my grandfather is exactly the same. Purebloods this, purebloods that, and purebloods are better. He wants me to follow my father’s footsteps, why? I don’t know, maybe he also wants me to spend my whole life in Azkaban,” Theo commented.

“I guess most purebloods have the same modus operandi, my father and yours could be brothers,” Adrian joked, though his face was marred by a scowl.

“Count me in, though my mother is bat-shit-crazy. Between both of my parents, they are trying to force me to chose a political carrier and follow my father’s footsteps. Be a corrupt politician who believes in blood superiority and would follow the first idiot who proclaims itself a Dark Lord,” Marcus sneered.

“My older brother’s go through all that, I’m just the spare,” Terrence explained in self-depreciation. “Most of the times they forget I exist so I return the favour.”

“I guess it is my turn then,” Harry sighed. “I don’t have much to say. Grew up in my aunt’s house where they hated magic, then I was taken to an orphanage where they hated magic. I was six when the headmaster of my elementary school took interest in me for being so

intelligent, he made sure I was transferred to another orphanage. The life there was not bad, the Matron had taken a liking to me and most of the caretakers appreciated the fact that I was tranquil. Soon, I became the favourite and many didn't like that. There is where I met Elizabeth," he narrated and noticing the confusion on many people faces, he explained. "My sister."

"You have a sister!" a gaping Fred exclaimed.

"And she is also pretty," Draco confided the group.

"So, she is your adoptive sister," Adrian muttered. "Why is she not studying in Hogwarts or is she still too young?"

"My sister is one year younger, but I sent her abroad. The attention she would get for being a Potter would be overwhelming and I would like to protect her for as long as possible."

"Blood adoption," murmured a shocked Flora.

"Father wanted to use that potion to have a male heir. However, it is far too expensive and few brewers are able to make it. Besides, whoever the family adopts will not be accepted as a member of the main branch for the family magic would reject them as soon as they tried," Hestia explained.

"I'm hungry," Theo almost whined.

With those simple words, the serious atmosphere that had overtaken the room vanished. The rest of the day was spent in the room, easy conversation flowing between the members. What few noticed was the deep bond that was created. No one knew what the future held, but whatever was waiting for them, the Guild would remain together.

Harry watched his companions, it had been an emotionally taxing evening that had drained them all. At the moment, he had no wishes to dine in the great hall so he would ask the school elves to bring them food. Containing a sigh, he glanced at the youngest twins, who were napping in the couches.

"Marcus, go and explain to the teachers that both of them are not feeling well and you gave them permission to skip classes, do what is necessary for them not to be in problems," he ordered, signalling the sleeping girls and Marcus left the room.

"They are monsters," Draco whispered, referring to the twin's relatives.

"I'm glad those beasts won't reproduce," a disgusted Blaise sneered and everyone in the room agreed.

"They are pureblood supremacists who hate the idea of their only children being female. Don't forget it was common for purebloods to kill the first child if it was born female and use the remains to make a potion and ensure a male would be born," Daphne explained with a stony expression. "The war before the International Statute of Secrecy was established was because of that same reason that led Morgana la Fey and Merlin to war. Morgana defended

the fact that females were equal to males, but Merlin believed that only males had the power to rule. And yet, history remembers him as a hero and her as the villain.”

“Who won?” Blaise asked.

“Morgana la Fey,” Harry answered. “Merlin's desire to control King Arthur because of a prophecy was his own downfall. However, Arthur believed in the man even after his death so he declared Morgana an enemy, not knowing she and his wife were the same person. The detail lays on the fact she did not fight the man, because she had won already. Females were recognized as equals. Not to mention Arthur did not live long and that the Kingdom collapsed a few months later. That done, she disappeared.”

“The things we should be learning in history,” Adrian grumbled.

“Only the oldest families have the books recording the events of centuries ago. The Potter library has the most curious information about the first magical clans in Europe,” Harry said with a certain amount of pride in his voice.

“In a future, let's rewrite history,” a smiling Theo proposed.

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October arrived with a particularly sombre note when Fred and George barged in the headquarters looking pale and breathing hard. Harry raised an eyebrow but waited for them to talk.

“Something is killing unicorns in the forest,” Fred panted, his chest heaving and wide eyes filled with fear.

“It has been going on for almost a year!” George exclaimed with a hysterical undertone to his voice.

The boy understood their reactions, unicorns were almost impossible to kill. They were unbelievably fast, immune to curses, and hard to find... Something dangerous was roaming that forest. It was easy to conclude because everyone knew that killing such a pure creature brought hefty consequences. It was either someone or something that had lost its mind or was horribly desperate for the magical properties unicorns contained in their bodies.

“Did they find the bodies?” he asked the twins, who looked a tad more composed.

“They did, Hagrid was crying in the forest and Filch was comforting him. It seems that whatever is hunting them down drinks their blood,” George muttered, paling even more.

Drinking the blood of a being so pure did not only carry horrible consequences, it destabilized the inner core, making whoever was committing the heinous crime dangerous. For an unstable core could be powerful, but it was a time bomb... Harry needed to take the unicorns far away from the forest.

“Let's go and talk with Hagrid, the more we wait the more time we give that beast to harm another innocent. Rome?”



“Yes sir?” the elf popped in, looking curious.

“I need you to pay attention to my call, recruit as many elves as you need from the castle for this task. I want you to feel all the unicorns in the Forbidden forest and pop them to the sanctuary... Something is killing them,” he whispered and the little elf’s eyes widened in horror.

“We will do it!” Rome exclaimed and popped out.

“We will tell the gamekeeper that I know someone who will take away the unicorns to a safe place and they won’t come back until it is safe,” Harry informed the others and they agreed.

Walking through the castle on a Sunday was a strange affair, they were so used to the noise of people that the empty hallways only aided to sombre their mood. They arrived at the grounds and walked towards the gamekeeper’s hut, where Harry knocked on the door. They could hear barks inside and a man scolding a dog.

“Who’s there?” the man opened the door pointing them with a crossbow, once he saw the children, he relaxed and smiled at them. “What can I do for ya?”

“Good morning, Mister Hagrid,” Harry saluted the man. “I don’t know how to explain this, so I will be blunt. We know that unicorns are being murdered in the forest, I contacted a good friend of mine that owns a magical reserve and he said that he could retrieve them this same evening.”

“That is so good to hear!” the man exclaimed and began weeping. “I’m so sad when I find a new one dead, even Aragog is helping me protect them. Thank you so much!” the man exclaimed and encased him in a bone-shattering embrace. Even if Harry was irritated at the unwelcomed contact, Harry understood this man had a pure soul and that somewhat made up for his crass manners.

“We wanted to inform you so you no longer endanger yourself by venturing the forest in search of the beast,” Daphne informed the man with a kind smile.

“Aye, thanks! I have a favour to ask you, my friend, Aragog lives in the forest. He and his children are scared of whatever is hunting unicorns. Could your friend also take him?”

“I think we can get your friend a house to live,” Draco agreed, looking at the others.

“You see, well, the thing is that Aragog is an acromantula. I promise he will behave,” the man said and Harry blinked twice in case his ears decided to prank him.

“I would need to speak with him, the sanctuary contains many species that my friend considers sacred and if the life on one was taken... There would be terrible consequences,” Harry explained to the gigantic man.

“Is okay, we have hours before lunch so I can take you there. You’ll also meet Fluffy, he’s my dog. Too big to fit in the house so he lives in the forest,” the merry man explained, opening the door for his enormous dog to come out. If his other pet was too big... Harry would rather

not dwell on that thought, the boy looked at his friends and all of them nodded, but he denied with his head.

“Only two can come, otherwise, the group will be too big,” he said and they looked at each other, Marcus and Terrence walked towards him. “Wait for us,” he ordered and they followed Hagrid.

Walking through the forest during the day was not scary, but it was easy to understand that during the night, the huge trees would cast deceiving shadows and the forest noises would drive even the sanest person to insanity. Hagrid hummed a happy tune and called for his other dog to join. The students heard heavy footsteps and were frozen in their places when a Cerberus emerged from the tress.

“This is Fluffy, raised him myself!” Hagrid exclaimed with obvious pride, the gigantic dog’s heads turned to one side to observe them. “Fluffy, they are friends! Came here to protect the unicorns and Aragog,” he told the dog and it began wagging its tail.

For their own sanity, the young males decided to ignore the excessively amicable Cerberus that approached them. Hagrid continued walking until they arrived at a dark part of the forest, where Harry was able to glimpse spider webs on the forest tops. Fluffy was nudging them with his heads, searching for someone to scratch him and the boy complied with a sigh. They walked further and saw a cave covered in spider’s silk from where a gigantic arachnid emerged. Its eyes were wide and a leg was missing, though the fact that it could probably challenge an elephant was enough to intimidate them.

“Hagrid, my old friend, what brings you here?” the spider asked.

“Aragog! I brought friends with me, they’ll take the unicorns to a safe place and I know how you and your children are scared so I asked them to take you as well!” the tall man explained in that cheerful tone of his.

“Is that so? Hagrid’s friends, where will you take us?”

“There is a sanctuary that a friend owns, however, there are conditions,” Harry stated at the spider and his friends paled. “The place is sacred for the family, if a single inhabitant resulted harmed, you will be expelled.”

“We need to feed ourselves,” Aragog explained and he noticed more spiders arriving.

“I understand that, and you will be fed. Cattle is given to all the carnivores and plants exist in abundance, but I have an important question. How many children do you have and how frequently they reproduce?”

“I have three hundred and thirty-eight descendants. However, only one of them is female, she will give birth approximately the same amount of children in twenty years. Unlike normal spiders, we live long lives so we only reproduce once, our eggs bloom at different times. Some take years and other months so we will not overpopulate the sanctuary you are offering us.”

“I’m relieved to hear that, house-elves are in charge of taking care of you, do you promise not to harm them?”

“We promise, protector child. Our old enemy is waking... We accept your conditions,” the giant spider said.

“And I promise to keep my word and protect you, Rome!” he called and the elf popped in, ignoring the giant spiders.

“Organize the other elves to retrieve Aragog and his children please.”

“It will be done, the others have retrieved the unicorns and we discovered that only twenty-seven remain,” he said shaking his head in regret.

“Thank you, Rome, once we leave, come with the elves to take them to the sanctuary,” Harry explained and the little one nodded and left with a pop. “That is all Hagrid, Aragog will be safe.”

“Thank you!” the man exclaimed, weeping once again. “Do ya mind if I stay behind? I want to say goodbye to Aragog.”

“We think Fluffy and Fang can show us the way out,” Harry told the distraught man. “Take care, Aragog.”

“Likewise, protector child.”

They walked out of the forest with Fang acting as a guide, the dog seemed to be happy to leave the place, not that anyone could blame him. Harry was thinking about many things, including what to do with the beast that was attacking the unicorns when a sharp pain in his scar made him stagger a few steps. Terrence stabilized him while Marcus pointed his wand at something behind his back. The dogs were growling at something covered in a black cape with a hood that shadowed his features but the putrid odour of rotting flesh was clear to recognize. Whatever the thing was, one thing was sure: it was dangerous... It glided closer when Marcus threw a curse that it avoided and it raised a hand that had a wand. Fluffy reacted that moment and jumped at the thing that ran away from the dog.

The three boys were panting and Harry noticed the pain in his scar receded once the thing left... He composed himself and signalled the dogs to get out of the forest. Whatever it was, he didn't like it. If there was something the boy despised, it was feeling weak and that thing had somehow managed to make him feel that way. He needed to have his scar checked by a healer, he guessed aunt Eleadora would be happy to do so.

“What was that?” Terrence asked in a whisper after a few minutes.

“I have no idea,” Marcus answered, looking shaken.

“Whatever it was,” Harry announced, “is about to die. Its body was decaying so it has a few days at most.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence and Fang ran out of the forest while Fluffy seemed to be happy to take a nap in that spot. When the others saw them, they ran to meet them.

“What happened?” asked Flora, frowning at them.

“We discovered what was attacking the unicorns,” Harry sighed, rubbing his forehead.

“It looked like a dementor,” Terrence muttered, looking pale.

“It does not matter, it will die. Unless it somehow gets a new body, but it is quite obvious that if it has not done that until now is because it is not able to. Let’s go, everything is done here,” Harry ordered and the group walked towards the castle.

It was quite ironic how October left with the same sombre note it had begun, it seemed that Samhain had quite a perturbing sense of humour. This year, they had also decided to stay in the Slytherin common room, professor Flitwick was so pleased with Harry’s advance in the biweekly duelling lessons that he had given them permission to not attend the feast as long as they didn’t get in problems. It was the first time that Fred and George entered the common room, it was amusing how they wore their hearts on their sleeves in situations like this.

“So this is the infamous snake den, if we had known before...” George sighed.

“We would have agreed with the hat and be proud snakes,” Fred finished looking around.

“Oh my, the descendants of the family that has belonged to Gryffindor since the school was founded in Slytherin... What a scandal,” Daphne mocked them with a smirk.

“True, our mother would have chewed us alive,” Fred agreed.

“Ah, but their common room is nothing compared to this one,” George said eyeing the lights with curiosity.

“You must have seen this place before, we could only do homework in the library because the only lights we had were torches,” Marcus commented with a shudder.

“Don’t forget it was always cold and merpeople liked to peep on us,” Adrian added.

“The wonderful magic of elves,” Harry explained to the twins.

They had a tranquil dinner, talking with each other. However, as every good thing in the world, it has to end. The common room door opened and many agitated Slytherins walked in, whispering to each other in hurried tones and avoiding to look their way. A female prefect approached them and silence descended on the room, no one even spared a glance at the lions eating with them.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I have news,” she announced looking at the floor. “While we were returning a commotion took place in the second floor, Filch’s cat was found petrified, hanged by her tail next to a message written on the wall. ‘The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the heir... beware’, it was written in blood,” the girl managed to say over her ragged breaths.

“What were you doing on the second floor?” Harry asked with no inflexion in his voice.

“The stairs to the dungeons kept moving so we thought it would be better to take the other route,” another prefect explained, seeing the girl’s anxiety.

“Very well, Farley, go and rest, an elf will take a calming draught to your room. Avery, you and the other prefects lead the others to their room, if anyone needs a calming draught or a dreamless potion call for an elf, but panic is no excuse for lack of manners. Goodnight,” Harry ordered and people left the common room. “Let’s go to our headquarters.”

They walked in silence thinking of all the possible solutions to what happened on the second floor. The chamber of secrets was Salazar Slytherin prized legacy, from there on, it was quite easy to connect the dots. The founder had been known for being a parselmouth who owned a basilisk, which solved half of the riddle. Though he had no idea how it had managed to petrify instead of kill. There was also the possibility of it being a prank, however, he liked to plan for the worst-case scenario. So, the main question was who had managed to open it... Then, he remembered Dobby warning them about the evil diary, it was in the school but it did not mean it was responsible. Either way, he thought it was time to retrieve the blasted thing and send it to Gringotts for its analysis and disposal, a thing he should have considered doing ages ago but, apparently, his brain only worked in a rational way when emergencies were present. He opened the door and walked to a couch.

“Draco, call Dobby and tell him to retrieve the diary. Marcus, Terrence, Adrian, your job is to ask the teachers for information about the chamber on Monday. My four devils, go to the room of requirement and ask for books about the chambers, Salazar, and parselmouths. Tomorrow we will look for anyone who was not at the feast and we can begin from there,” Harry ordered while drafting a letter to Ragnok, describing the diary and hiring the bank’s services for an in-depth report about the diary and its destruction.

“Harry, Dobby brought the diary,” Draco said and he looked at the elf who was levitating the book.

“Thank you Dobby, will you tell me where did you find it?”

“Yes sir, I found it in a red and golden room, between the books of a student.”

“Again, thank you. Would you do me one last favour and take this letter and that diary to Gringotts? Tell whoever attends you that it’s urgent, so it must be delivered to Manager Ragnok in person,” he requested the elf, who nodded and popped out.

“We don’t know whether the diary is connected to the chamber or not, either way, we have to find the place. A basilisk is there, if possible, I will offer the snake a place in the sanctuary but if not, it is too dangerous to leave roaming in the school,” Harry sighed, feeling already tired.

“I think Rita Skeeter will like this piece of news,” Daphne informed with an evil smile that he reciprocated, and was reminded once again why females were such a dangerous, yet beautiful creatures.

The next day, the Guild sans lions were sitting in the Slytherin table, being the only ones calm among the tumult that seemed to involve the entire school, including teachers. The tense disposition of the professors was enough to convince Harry about the seriousness of the situation, which meant the chamber was real and perhaps had been opened before. The owls flew in and Harry sighed, the school was getting lax if they believed no one would find out about the message. It was a shame that he had been forced to uncover their negligence, but it meant that the DMLE would get involved. Madam Bones was a ruthless woman who did her job and he held a great amount of respect for her by that simple fact.

## ***HORRORS IN HOGWARTS!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My fellow citizens, it is with a heavy heart that I must inform you that yesterday night, after the Samhain feast, our children were returning to their rooms when horror struck. On the wall of the second-floor corridor was a petrified pet hanged besides a message written in **blood**! It read: "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the heir... beware."*

*I was horrified to discover our innocent kids were subjected to such a cryptic situation. As it is my duty, I talked with the head of the DMLE to see what kind of measures they were taking to discover the culprit because this kind of thing goes beyond any joke. Imagine my surprise when she reported having no knowledge, but to my great satisfaction, she took immediate measures. On her frenzy, she found a letter delivered the day before that came from Hogwarts, though it was not written by the headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, but by the Charms professor, Filius Flitwick. The same man that reported the dangerous creatures last term when the headmaster refused to do so, even when three students resulted so injured, they had been sent to St. Mungos.*

*Now though, I have a question to ask, why didn't Albus Dumbledore report this incident when it was his responsibility? Is he trying to once again hide the terrible things that happened under the rug? Does he not care about the safety of our offspring? One thing we know for certain is that Filius Flitwick is an honourable man, who unlike the other authority figures in the school, worries about our children and is not afraid to put his job in the line.*

"That woman works fast," Terrence said impressed, signalling the picture of the wall in all its glory, along with the horrified expressions of the students.

"I had no idea professor Flitwick reported the incident," Harry commented, looking impressed by the article. He had given free rein to Rita and she did not disappoint.

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Albus Dumbledore sagged on his chair once Madam Bones left, he didn't want her to be involved. He had tried to convince her that it had been a simple prank but failed miserably. The woman had demanded the expulsion of the responsible and he had been forced to agree, his place in the school was dangling, a breath in the wrong direction and he was out.

These months had been nothing but stressful for him. Unicorns in the forest had been murdered and he was sure that Tom was responsible for those heinous crimes. He had tried to keep professor Quirrel in the school after the DMLE fiasco but failed, and now, he was

unable to find the possessed man. If that was not enough, the chambers had been opened again and he knew who the culprit was.

After Harry Potter was placed with Petunia, he received a letter from Gringotts stating that the new Lord Slytherin by right of conquest was Harry. The small vault was created by the last Gaunts and it contained nothing else than a few Knuts, so he hid the paper. Unfortunately, it was also stolen last year. There was no other option. It had to be the boy, he was the heir of Slytherin.

The great Albus Dumbledore was at loss on what to do. Sirius was distant and Remus was unable to get any personal information on the boy. He considered approaching the hag that Lily had befriended, but he dismissed the idea as soon as it appeared. Hags were dark and the options of him getting any other thing that cursed were nonexistent. Now, he had to plan and be careful with the boy, no matter what mask he used, Albus could see a monster beginning to grow and Severus could see it too. This time, he would stop the roots of evil.

# Gentle Lion and White Raven

## Chapter Notes

Happy Sunday!

Harry Potter was confused. While walking through a hall, he could swear he saw a girl who looked similar to Elizabeth before the blood adoption, but he had never seen her again so perhaps it was just his tired brain playing tricks on him. Maybe he was overworking himself...

November had arrived with vengeance, making the temperature drop to a worrying degree. It was good the elves had tempered the Slytherin common room and personal rooms. The older boys in the Guild had told him horror stories about how cold it used to be. However, that was perhaps the only positive thing that happened lately.

The goblins had given Harry worrying reports about the diary he had sent them. Apparently, that inoffensive looking book was a Horcrux, a piece of soul created by a process so foul they had not charged for its destruction. The worrying part was that they had found another containing the same magical signature in his godfather's house, but they had destroyed it without telling the man. Harry considered telling Sirius but he was not able to keep any kind of information to himself, and he kept seeing Remus Lupin.

Out of curiosity, he asked aunt Eleadora about those soul fragments. It didn't end well.

After a thorough questioning of the reason for his curiosity, the woman finally gave him a book. An antique journal that belonged to her great grandmother, it contained information about blood magic so foul that any hag that used it would be cursed by her own blood. The creation of a Horcrux was amongst them.

Its purpose is to anchor the soul to this realm by mingling a piece of one's soul with an object. The process for this goal was something that no one in their sane minds would do, so disgusting was the ritual that Harry was unable to finish reading.

Only a depraved monster would create one. The goblins and he agreed that an object so foul could not exist so they had made it their goal to destroy every one of those cursed things by using the diary's magic signature to locate more. It would take months for a location to appear, but for now, they had time to spare.

On a more positive note, no other message had been left and no attacks took place, so Harry assumed the diary was responsible. Now, they only needed to find the blasted chambers, but their research, while informative, had been fruitless. But considering the attack had taken



place on the second floor, Harry believed it had to be near. He and his friends were walking towards the astronomy tower when they saw Mister Filch and his cat.

“Goodnight, Mister Filch,” they saluted in unison at the man.

“Goodnight, going to classes and not out after curfew I hope,” the man who was known to be bitter answered in an amicable way, the wonders of politeness.

“Indeed, straight up to the astronomy tower,” Daphne explained with a smile.

“Good, I wished everyone was like you kids, go ahead then,” he said walking away whistling a happy tune with his loyal cat following.

“It was really kind from you to donate the cure for his cat, Harry,” Blaise said, looking at the man.

“He loves his cat as his own child, it would be cruel to deprive him of her company,” Harry explained, resuming their walk.

“The man looked miserable before,” Theo agreed.

After class, they were on the fifth floor going towards the dungeons when Harry felt the castle's distress and allowed her to guide him to an abandoned corridor. The door at the end of it was blocked by a chair and someone crying could be heard inside. Blaise and Draco unblocked the chair with some effort and he opened the door. The girl stopped crying once she saw him.

Harry frowned slightly before composing his expression to an amicable one. That girl resembled Elizabeth. While their appearances were not that similar, their magic was. The little girl was wearing her uniform with no shoes or cloak to protect her from the biting cold, he placed his cloak on her shoulders and conjured shoes, silently thanking the arduous practice Flitwick forced on him.

“May I know your name?” Harry asked the girl in a gentle tone.

“Luna Lovegood,” she stated in a clear voice and he had to smile at her dreamy expression.

“I’m Harry Potter and these are my friends-”

“I know who you are Harry Potter, the castle likes you...” she said with a small smile.

“That is good to know, would you like to go with Daphne and Blaise to her room? I’m sure you will like having a sleepover,” he told her and, after a moment of consideration, she nodded.

“Don't be too hard on them, Harry Potter,” she said and Daphne guided the girl towards the dungeons with Blaise shadowing them.

“What a curious girl... We have to talk with Flitwick,” Harry muttered, wondering if the girl was some kind of seer because she had guessed his intentions too well so he chose the other

option.

“At this hour?” Theo questioned.

“Luna is a Ravenclaw and if there is something they hate more than someone besting them, is being found lacking by authority,” he stated and the two boys followed until they arrived. Harry knocked on the door loud enough and, after a short time, a short man opened the door in nightwear and looking alarmed.

“Harry, what happened?” he asked the unusually serious boy.

“A short while ago we found Luna Lovegood locked in a room on the fifth floor,” he began explaining and the man sobered, his eyes narrowing at the information.

“Come in and tell me everything,” the man said and they walked towards the sitting place.

“She was wearing only her uniform, no cloak or shoes. The door was blocked by a chair so it was no accident. Daphne and Blaise took her to our common room, she will sleep with her tonight. I’m sorry to tell you this, professor, but I don’t trust your house not to harm her,” Harry explained with as much calmness as he could summon. The man seemed to age in front of him, burying his face in his hands.

“Thank you, Harry, I will take care of everything,” the man sighed.

Theo and Draco exchanged a look when they caught a glimpse of the old man's expression. Long gone was the amicable and cheerful charms professor, being replaced by a severe man with a dangerous aura that wore his face.

“It is time for bed. Before I forget, thirty points to Slytherin for their selflessness and quick thinking.”

The smile that Flitwick gave them was not enough to ease Theo nor Draco.

“Goodnight, professor,” Harry answered for them and the trio left.

Next day, the boys were waiting in their common room for the girls to arrive. It was quite early and they were tired, but curiosity was winning over. A radiant Luna walked beside Daphne and the twins followed them, wearing small smiles. Harry's heart warmed at the sight of the girl. He was sure Elizabeth would love her when they met, with that thought, remembered he had to plan for the holidays.

“Good morning, I hope you slept well,” he told the girls, the other males smiled when Daphne scowled at him.

“I would have if an idiot did ask me to wake up so early,” she huffed.

“I had the best night of my life, never before I had done a sleepover or had friends,” the dreamy girl answered and Daphne's face softened.

“Do you have a cloak?” Blaise asked, much to the surprise of the others.

“Daphne lent me one, now let's go, it is about to begin,” she said with a gentle smile. It was easy to understand why Harry had taken her under his wing.

They walked to the great hall, Luna talked about different creatures Harry never heard of but swore to find information about them. The new member was a little ball of sunshine that made him smile at her antics. Once in, he noticed the Ravenclaw's point glass contained no stones, the few persons in that house table were quiet, trying to remain inconspicuous. The Guild walked to their usual spot, waiting for the show to start. The snakes looked at their new member with curiosity but did not linger on her. Half an hour later, the hall was full and the rest of the raven house came in, followed by an eerily calm Flitwick, who walked to the front of the hall. The students immediately went silent at the sight of an angry Filius Flitwick.

“Good morning students, I have a few announcements to make,” the man announced and, despite of his height, the aura he projected was enough to catch the entire hall's attention. “The Ravenclaw House has lost all of its points for terrible infractions committed since the beginning of the year. First of all, the six prefects of my house have lost their positions so there will not be Ravenclaw prefects for what is left of the year.

“Yesterday night, Slytherin students found one of my first years locked in an abandoned room. Investigating the circumstances, I discovered that my own students had locked her in on different occasions. Cho Chang, Isobel MacDougal, and Mandy Brocklehurst are the bullies who lost their house fifty points each and earned detentions for what is left of the school year. I also discovered that many of her belongings were hidden from the victim, I would point names but that would include most of the girls from first to third years, they lost forty points each and earned five months of detentions. Most of the house took part in verbal bullying and the older students who knew did nothing against it, I would say names but that would include most of the house, they lost thirty points each and earned three months of detention,” the man announced with a stern-face.

“In the end, there were no points to be taken but at least the castle will never be cleaner. Once again, I commend the exemplary Slytherin students and, after discovering the depth of the abuse that took place, I award Mister Potter fifty points for taking care of one of his peers and inter-house cooperation. In all my decades working in this school, I have never felt ashamed to be head of the Noble House Ravenclaw until this moment,” the man finished his speech with obvious disapproval directed at his house and walked to his seat.

Whispers broke out in the hall and many people looked at their table and at the disgraced house. Luna was eating her breakfast with a small smile directed at her food and Harry had to smile at her innocent disposition.

“Granger is glaring at you again!” Draco exclaimed, looking exasperated.

“She does that frequently?” Harry asked curiously, he never paid attention to his peers.

“Always, now with a tad more of killing intent, if you ask me. How is it possible for you not to notice that?” Theo asked, groaning. Harry only answered with a shrug.

“I don't think I will ever anger Flitwick,” said Terrence, still looking surprised, the others simply nodded.

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Albus Dumbledore was having a mental breakdown, it was already mid-November and no muggleborns had been attacked. He had been so sure it had been Harry Potter who opened the chambers but nothing happened until now, unlike last time.

Furthermore, this morning he discovered that the boy took a girl under his wing, what was happening? He was in his desk, waiting for Filius so he could answer some inquiries he had, was the boy on his path to be evil or not? Had he somehow gotten the situation wrong? The only way to know was by visiting the Chamber of secrets in person. but the last time he asked Fawkes to flame him, he received a burning beard in response and been brutally ignored for weeks. The wards alerted him that the professor was coming in and he composed himself.

“Good evening, Filius, please have a sit,” he told the man with a cordial tone. Filius was one of the few who could see behind his facade so he had to be careful with his words.

“Albus.”

“I wanted to speak with you for a few reasons. First, don't you think you were too hard with the children in your house?”

“Did you not hear what I explained in the morning?” was Filius' response, narrowing his eyes and examining his every move.

“Of course, but children make mistakes.”

“Indeed, and they continue making them until someone corrects them. Your way of doing things is waiting and hope for the best, my way is disciplining them for their wrongdoings so they learn from their mistakes. This lesson will not be forgotten,” he stated, perhaps with or without knowing, he had struck a sensitive nerve.

“I see... I also have to ask you about Harry Potter, do you think it was wise to award him so many points?”

“Of course, he informed me about Miss Lovegood and took care of her. You have awarded more points for reckless behaviour,” Filius said almost nonchalantly and, once again, struck a sensitive spot.

“Very well then, what do you think about Harry?”

“Excellent student who has an admirable work ethic.”

“Yes, besides the academics, I meant on a more personal level,” Albus probed with caution.

“Why should I tell you? Albus, this is a school and you are a headmaster. If you wish to know about someone talk with them, especially if it is a student,” Filius scolded him, making him feel like a child and Albus sighed, Filius was one of the few who could accomplish that.

“I worry about him, Sirius is not the most responsible adult around. He may be spoiling the child too much,” he explained, trying to appease the older man.

“Then speak with Sirius Black. Besides, a little spoiling after the life he has lived will not harm him. You should stop thinking about Harry Potter as a small James because they are not the same. Behave your age, Albus, and either talk with him or stop probing in his life.”

He was chastised. Now Albus understood how the younger people felt when he used his grandfather persona.

Filius left the office with no further words, fact that he thanked because he could no longer take the verbal beating. He guessed it was time to call Minerva, but she was enchanted with the child of her favourite student and, in her eyes, he could do nothing wrong. Maybe it was better if he called Severus. Yes, that was it. He was the head of the house and even if the child had created a Guild, they had to follow authority orders. He called for an elf and waited for Severus to arrive, it was time to pay close attention to the boy who had been allowed free reign for too long.

"Why did you call?" the man in question asked, surprising him, Albus must have been too lost in his musing to not notice when he arrived.

“Take a seat Severus,” Albus told the man and sighed, age was making him easy to tire. “I want to ask you about the boy.”

“His group has expanded. The Carrow twins, Higgs, and Pucey. The Slytherins adore him, they are like puppies following his every word... I’m not even allowed entrance to the common room unless it is an emergency, though I know the password, the castle doesn't allow me to,” Severus explained his quandary, wilting before Albus’ eyes.

“I see, has his behaviour changed at all?”

“Of course not, he knows how to keep up his facade. Draco is still not talking to me.”

“I guess it is because of the treatment you give the young Potter, maybe it is time to change tactics, my boy. Treat him better and maybe there are still chances of saving your relationship with your godson,” he suggested, grabbing the last strings of hope to get information about the boy.

For now, it was the only thing he could do.

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Narcissa Malfoy had just received a letter from her son, however, she didn't know whether to feel proud or heartbroken. Draco wrote to tell her he would only spend one week of the holidays with them, afterwards, he had plans with his friends. But he had asked her out on a date to a new food place that would be opening soon. However, her little dragon had not mentioned Lucius at all. The knowledge that her son was not only disappointed but also ashamed of her husband filled her with anxiety.

Lucius had been once a gentle man, but he had changed so much after he joined the Dark Lord, and now, even if the man was dead, he was wreaking havoc in her family and she would not allow it. Decision took, she walked with firm steps to her husband's studio and

opened the door, the man who was about to protest shut up when he caught a glimpse of her stormy expression. With no words, she deposited their son's letter for him to read.

"I don't see the problem, during the summer he did the same thing but the only difference is that he will be sleeping in another place," he tried to appease his wife.

"So you don't mind that he didn't mention you at all? Before, Draco sent a letter to you and another one to me. Did you not notice that he barely spoke to you during the summer? Or that he no longer searches for your approval or even your opinion? Are you so blind that you don't notice you are losing your son? Wake up, Lucius! Because if you don't do something soon, Draco will drift away and you won't be able to win him back," Narcissa stated and left the man alone.

She loved her husband, she truly did. But if she ever had to choose between Draco and Lucius, the decision was already taken. Now it was in Lucius' hands whether to keep this family together or not.

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Lucius Malfoy was in a conundrum, never had he imagined that Draco would distance himself. He had been his son's hero and example to follow. Now though, even before the Auror incident, he had been distant, talking when necessary and spending most of his free time with his mother. He wanted to have someone to blame but knew there was no one but him... He had received reports about Draco's excellent performance in school and perfect behaviour, professors praised the way he was polite and gentle with all his classmates, something he was sure he had not learnt from him. It was hard to confront the fact that your son's exemplary behaviour had nothing to do with your teachings.

There was no news about any problem in Hogwarts aside from the one in Samhain. Lucius had hoped the diary the Dark Lord entrusted him would be enough to drive the old man out and, perhaps, bring some trouble to the Weasley household. Yet, there were not even whispers of any kind of problems with the Weasley's youngest spawn and now this.

Somehow, Draco had known about his illegal dealings and less than honest behaviour and he was ashamed. Somewhere along the line, his son had decided not to emulate him or his mistakes. Now he had to decide whether he continued the path he had been walking for so long, or whether he would change to keep his family.

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It had been a strange week for Harry Potter, though little Luna had been the highlight. She integrated with the Guild sooner than expected, making good friends with the twins, fact that worried him a little for all the catastrophes they could cause. Elizabeth was anxious to be back home and he had been informed that Hwasa would stay the holidays with them. He could almost hear the old man's laughter at his plight.

Harry decided to give the Emperor a brief respite of his hyper granddaughter, but not without planning his revenge. Thus, he decided to receive the girl for Yule. Of course, hearing this, his friends decided to visit without exactly being invited, though Daphne and the Carrow twins would be staying over... And, at that moment, he noticed he would be surrounded by

females. It was good to have Sirius, he decided, he would be the perfect human shield. Besides, he could always spend time reading and ignore his godfather's cries for help.

At least his elves no longer wanted to revolve because of boredom. The expansions to the cafes and restaurants, along with the other businesses, and the eternally full daycare was enough to keep them busy. Besides, his people got along remarkably well with his elves. Harry guessed it had to do with empathy for the derision they received from the morons in power.

It had been curious to discover vampires didn't drink human blood unwillingly given because it brought too many unpleasant consequences - such as being burnt by the sun, being weak against pure things, and, surprisingly, making them easy to kill by anything that nature produces, such as a stick or even garlic. However, Harry's greatest surprise was not related to his employees but to Aragog. The giant spider began giving the elves acromantula silk, stating that it was a way of thanking him for protecting them. In that way, he had a cheap supply of acromantula silk for the clothes shop. Without thinking twice, Harry talked with Hagrid to give him half of the money, which he immediately rejected. So after long hours of discussion, they agreed on Hagrid getting new clothes along with a nice pair of shoes every three months with no price limit and a few visits a year to the sanctuary, though he still needed to plan a safe way of doing that and send a nice present to the overly kind man.

The last time Harry met Ragnok had been to discuss the possibility of opening a store that sold muggle based desk materials. The man's smile was so wide that Harry was worried about the goblin's facial muscles. The desk material shop would open in the summer, but only introducing the least revolutionary objects in order to adapt the population little by little. Perhaps in a couple of years he would be able to use pens and notebooks, hopefully.

Harry was walking from the library to the headquarters after a nice chat with Madam Pince, so lost in his thoughts he was that he did not realize he somehow walked to a place he did not recognize. While he tried to identify where the hell he was, he heard that annoying laughter that could only belong to Peeves. Annoyed, he was about to turn around when the poltergeist in question appeared.

"Lonny a longy bottom is crying," the idiotic apparition giggled in delight until he saw him. "Oh, the prince of snakes is here... What is the princy doing here, it will be so fun-"

"Leave before I call the baron," he threatened, the thing looked around in fear and flew away.

Harry kept walking until he heard something move inside a room to his right, he almost dismissed it when he heard a sob coming from the inside. Curious about it, he opened the door and saw a boy he faintly remembered. What was his name again? Nathan? Vanille? While he was lost in his thoughts, the boy looked up and his eyes widened and he recoiled until his back was to the wall.

"Do you need any help?" Harry asked the boy, who looked about to faint.

Harry took a moment to observe the scared student and tried to keep his expression neutral. The boy's clothes were torn, so were many parchments and books around him. Someone had

done this and, while it was strange for him to help anyone, he would never allow someone to go through what he did.

“Are you cold? Dinner will be in two hours, do you want to come with me and meet my friends? No one will hurt you, I promise,” he told the boy, who nodded with caution.

He guided the boy with gentleness, talking about inane subjects to put him at ease. Harry opened the door and the boy's eyes widened at the sight, the members of the Guild were curious but asked no questions. He guided him to the sitting area and began the introductions.

“He is our new friend,” he told his friends, who simply nodded in response. Sweet Luna was the one to break the silence, making the shy boy feel comfortable.

“I know you are scared, I was too, but no one will hurt you here... If you want you can be one of us,” she offered.

That day Harry earned the loyalty of one of the fiercest lions.

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The Guild was in their compartment, leaving the castle for the holidays. Neville had warned to them after the first day, the other members had accepted him the same way they accepted Luna. It amazed Harry to see the once empty compartment almost full by people he considered friends. They spent the train ride between conversation and laughter, talking about their plans.

“Though I will spend the holidays with Harry, I'll visit my sister,” Daphne told the others.

“I already told mum that I will be only one week at the manor. Though we planned a few dates, I bet she will love sushi. By the way, she wants to meet my friends,” Draco said, looking around with eagerness.

“We wish we could, but our dear mother will kill us if we are seen with a Malfoy,” George groaned.

“But we will visit over the holidays, so you better get us something sweet from Harry's new place,” Fred threatened.

“Same as usual,” Blaise shrugged.

“I will be with daddy, but I promise to join you for a few days,” Luna said with that dreamy expression of hers.

“I'm still surprised my grandma gave me permission to stay over a few days,” Neville muttered with a small smile.

It had not been hard to convince Lady Longbottom, a polite letter from the boy-who-lived asking her to allow his best friend to visit and he would do the same over summer was enough. The invitation he had sent to the inauguration of the new places may have also helped.



“Yeah at least you can stay, the three of us have to hand out excuses to our parents just to be able to visit the castle in the mornings,” Marcus grumbled, signalling Terrence and Adrian.

“Count me in that group,” Theo complained, glaring at his ice cream.

“Is my home some kind of public meeting place?” Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes,” the Carrow twins answered in unison. He gave up and went back to his food.

They arrived at the station and said their farewells. He was walking with the youngest twins and Daphne behind him when a familiar ball of energy hugged the life out of him. He smiled at the girl and at his aunt behind her but saw no Sirius.

“What did he do now?” Harry asked with a sigh.

“He thought it was a good idea to welcome you by trapping the house. Auntie turned him to cat for a short while and now he is cleaning under the watchful eyes of the elves,” Elizabeth explained with an amused glint in her eyes.

“Never mind that. She is Flora and she is Hestia, you already know Daphne,” Harry introduced the twins and Eleadora smiled at them. “She is my sister Elizabeth and my aunt Eleadora.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the Flora greeted while Hestia gave them a shy smile.

“Hello aunt Eleadora, Lizzy,” Daphne beamed at the woman and his sister.

“It is good to meet you dears, call me aunt or Dora. Daphne, you look even prettier than the last time I saw you,” the woman greeted, hugging each one of them. “Let’s go before Hwasa arrives, I don’t even want to imagine how that man will destroy his image if we allow him to,” she grumbled the last part and took out a portkey.

The group arrived at the parlour, only to be greeted by one of the most bizarre sights they had the misfortune to witness. A bald grim was cowering behind two elves, who were also cowering behind a chair while Hwasa cooed at a baby version of a white tiger. It seemed his godfather had learnt the hard way that you should never mess with a hormonal teenager, even more, if said teenager was a temperamental princess with political immunity.

“It is good you made yourself comfortable, your majesty,” Harry teased the girl who was lying on the couch. The others in the group were too occupied gaping at Sirius bald form to pay attention to the girl.

“It is the least I could do after such a gracious invitation, Lord Potter,” she bowed at him in a mocking way.

“May I ask what did my godfather did to deserve such a punishment.”

“He tried to scare Yoko, so he turned into a mutt.”

“You shaved a dog?” he asked amazed by her ruthlessness.

“Of course not, I hit him before he turned, I will share the memory later,” she promised and kept playing with her mini tiger.

The beautiful silence only lasted a few seconds before his sister shouted and hugged her friend, both babbling and including the other three girls. Harry watched them leave with amusement, silently mourning his tranquil holidays. His aunt was trying and failing to control her smile. A cautious Sirius didn't leave his hiding spot until the girls left for their rooms. Harry had to fight with himself in order not to laugh when his godfather turned. A bald Black was a sight to behold.

“That girl is pure evil!” the man complained, not noticing his baldness.

“It was your fault for trying to mess with a princess... Sirius, what do you have in your hair?” Harry asked in the most innocent way he could manage.

He would never forget the horror in the man's face when he felt no hair, or his high-pitched scream when he touched his nonexistent eyebrows. The man refused to go out of his room until Harry took pity on him and sent him a hair-growing potion. Aside from that amusing mishap, the holidays were a monotonic event and, as always, his sister woke him up at ungodly hours to open their gifts.

He asked Hwasa to bring handmade necklaces with names engraved to give every elf. The princess in question received a gift card for Honeydukes and a beautiful hair ornament, his sister received expensive earrings, his aunt a collection of muggle books, and Sirius got a batch of hair-growing potion. Daphne received a bracelet, Flora a gift card to his clothes shop and a necklace, and the Hestia also received a gift card and beautiful earrings. Not knowing what to give to the rest of his friends, he sent gift cards and added a necklace for Luna. He also sent presents to the same professors of last year and Hagrid received two paid trips to his dragon reserves.

Harry was surprised by the number of gifts he received from fellow students that he didn't know the existence of and some professors, most of them were books his mother already owned, but he was thankful nonetheless. The Guild, knowing he already owned a great number of books he had yet to read, sent him curious objects he did not understand the use of. Dear Luna had sent him drawings of strange creatures his aunt recognized, and the older twins sent him ‘ugly toffee’ to try on someone and tell them the results. Hwasa surprised him when she handed him a heavy wooden box that was exquisitely carved and a long plain rectangular box on top.

“The one in the top is mine, the other is from the old man,” she announced.

He was curious to discover a katana of all things, he raised an eyebrow at the older girl and she shrugged. The other box contained a stunning silk Hanfu and a letter from the emperor.

*‘Young Harry, thank you for taking care of my granddaughter and allowing this old man a peaceful respite of my energetic heir. Do not forget to visit when you have some free time’.* Harry had to smile at the letter and all the tumult in the living room convinced him the man felt more thankful than he expressed, thus such a pricey gift.

Draco, Luna, and Neville arrived on Boxing Day, accepting the chaos on the castle as if it was an everyday occurrence. Luna and his sister bonded as he expected, though, under the leadership of the princess, he could only hope not too many disasters took place. Neville had been starry-eyed when he saw the greenhouses. Much to his surprise, his friend had begun talking with Ceres, the elf in charge of the plants, in highly technical botanic terms he did not understand so he left and searched refuge in the library.

The members of the Guild had been able to meet on different occasions, either in the Alley or in the Potter castle. Narcissa Malfoy had been delighted with the invitation to the inauguration of the new café, fact that only a selected few could brag about. They spent an entertaining meal introducing Draco's mother to different kinds of food that she enjoyed and even managed to dominate the use of chopsticks. No one asked Draco why he did not invite his other parent.

"My father is willing to take petty revenge and give an evil object to a kid," Draco muttered, even paler than usual the day Dobby told them the diary was in the school. "I feel so disgusted to share the same blood as him... He never had a great reputation but I believed those were lies sprouted by jealous fools, now though..." he whispered. No one would forget the day Draco Malfoy saw the real Lucius and decided he would be nothing like the man.

Before they knew it, they were back at Hogwarts, trying to solve the puzzle of where was the Chamber of Secrets located.

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The holidays came to an end and Lucius Malfoy was worried. Narcissa met with their son constantly, but the child never asked about him. The only time he had joined them, without asking his wife or child, Draco greeted him in a formal way, he took his mother's hand and guided her somewhere in the Alley. That had been the moment he understood it was not a capricious child throwing a tantrum, it was his heir deciding he would not follow his footsteps. That realization elated him and filled him with sorrow, his only child saw the real Lucius and he was not impressed. In his stupor, he apparated to Severus' house, the man seeing his expression, silently poured him a glass of firewhisky.

"Draco has matured," Severus began saying with a shaky voice. "You know of the problems I used to have with James Potter. I projected my hatred over the man on his son. Draco confronted me before leaving school for Yule. I ended up telling him why I hate Potter so much, hoping he would understand," the man sighed taking a gulp of the alcoholic beverage. "He told me I was a bully unable to mature and confront my problems... He doesn't want to know about me."

"I haven't talked to him in months, the longest conversation we had was last year, when I explained the importance of blood purity. It was the first time he had debated with me. At the time, I was really angry at his insolence and showed my disappointment... I thought he was throwing a tantrum but he is not. I don't know what to do."

"I already lost my godson, you are still in time, Lucius," Severus advised, proceeding to nurse the bottle in his hand.

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“House-elves,” Harry groaned burying his face in his book. The rest of the Guild looked at each other in confusion. “Their magic is able to transport them anywhere they want, they can take us to the chamber.”

Realization hit the rest of the people and they started planning while Harry cursed his brain. The basilisk was going to be hungry after being in that forsaken place for so long, so the first thing would be to ask his elves to leave dead livestock on the chambers. Even if their purpose was to be food, there was no reason to be cruel. He would order them to always keep their eyes closed and when they popped him in, he would take Ares and Mars with him. Harry hoped the snake was willing to reason because his heart ached at the idea of harming an innocent. Plans made, he called Rome to arrange for twenty elves to leave the food and be careful, that done, it was time to convince his friends of going alone.

“You have an expression that I don’t like,” Theo said with a scowl. “Don’t you even dare to try to suggest what I think you will.”

“I will be going alone,” he announced and Theo cursed, but before any more chaos was formed Luna spoke, her dreamy expression disappeared.

“I don’t like your idea but it is for the best. If any of us go, the only thing we will find is death. Take only Ares with you and order Mars to be ready to either retrieve or dispose of the basilisk,” she ordered and he nodded, the other people in the room were shocked by Luna’s announcement. Many times, they had wondered if she was a seer and things like this only enforced that idea.

“Ares, Mars, Rome!”

“The food was given, no one was harmed,” Rome reported, his shoulders tense.

“Thank you, Rome. Mars, recruit the best security elves to either retrieve or kill the basilisk, do you know how to do the later?”

“The first morning cries of a rooster,” the elf stated.

“Excellent. Ares, are you willing to go with me to the chambers?” Harry asked the elf, not able to order such a dangerous task.

“It will be an honour,” the elf bowed and he nodded.

“We will be going in half an hour, if he needs to be retrieved you will hear my call... If he needs to be disposed of, I will send Ares to inform you. Be prepared.”

A tense half-hour went by, marked by grim expressions but every time someone opened their mouths to talk, Luna shook her head at them. It was amazing the amount of power such a young girl held. Once Ares appeared, Luna spoke.

“Remind him of his duties, you will come back,” she said and he nodded. Harry and his elf popped out, and in their anguish, they did not notice the magic emanating from the castle.

Harry and Ares arrived at a dingy chamber, but even in that poor light, the poison green of the basilisk skin could be seen so both closed their eyes. Taking a deep calming breath he spoke.

*"We intend no harm, king of snakes,"* he hissed and he could feel the air ripple.

*"Who are you?"* the snake hissed in a threatening way.

*"We are the ones who sent food, we came here to offer you a safe place to live where you will get as much nourishment as you wish."*

*"And leave this place? I was so hungry but Salazar never came back, then his heir appeared telling enemies are inside Hogwarts... Protect the children, that is my father's will, but the traitor orders me to hurt them. I was so hungry and I had to eat, but the Lady's magic is still strong,"* he hissed with a psychotic edge in his voice and Harry felt compassion for the snake, no person should be forced to experience loneliness.

*"Remember your duty,"* he hissed, remembering Luna's advice.

*"Protect her, protect Hogwarts, but enemies live in Hogwarts! But those enemies were protected by her... I had been so hungry, so lonely. But the enemies live within the ones I'm supposed to protect. How do I know who is who? My father wouldn't want me to attack the Lady's blessings, but he never came back."*

The snake began rambling, always mentioning the traitor, Salazar, and the Lady. Harry tried not to feel pity for the animal. Time had taken a toll on the innocent and robbed him of his sanity, whether he liked it or not, the basilisk was a threat and he would be treated as such.

*"I apologize for disturbing you, do you wish me to send more food or water?"*

*"Freshwater, have not tasted that since Salazar took me to the forest. Food, yes, I have been so hungry... There was never food here, sleep, yes I had to. But the enemies still live here and I can't rest until they are gone. Hunt them! Yes, I will hunt them. But the Lady doesn't allow me to,"* the basilisk began to speak to himself.

*"May I have your name?"* Harry asked with caution and Ares' hand squeezed his tighter.

*"Name... Father gave me a name. But the traitor said that I have no right for a name. What is my name? The Lady sings to me every night but the enemies still roam free..."*

It was in vain, Harry squeezed Ares hand for them to go back.

They arrived and Harry collapsed on the nearest couch, feeling drained. He did not notice the relieved faces that surrounded him or the teary eyes of more than a few.

*"The basilisk has lost its mind, he is a threat anywhere. Ares, please tell Rome to pop freshwater and more food, it will be his last dinner. His skin will make good armour for all of you so keep it, his venom will be a weapon for you to use. Never forget to thank the noble snake... Give a litre to the goblins, as warriors, they will appreciate the sacrifice. Tell Rome that I want a sculpture in the castle and in the common room dedicated to the snake, I did not*

manage to learn his name so the plaque under will read ‘Noble King who did his duty until the bitter end’. I thank you for your company today, my friend, go to the castle and tell the others,” Harry said with a knot in his throat.

“I will do so, we will always stand by your side,” Ares promised and he popped out.

Harry was enveloped in many warm hugs that night but the hefty weight on his chest did not diminish, but the knowledge that people he cared about were safe calmed him. He would not regret disposing of the basilisk because it meant the safety of people he loved. For the first time, he understood that some threats were easy to take care of while others were enough to break you. Being a leader was not about being the strongest or smartest, but about being the one willing to do what was necessary to protect the ones that you love.

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### **Omake: Sirius Discovers Himself**

Eleadora was a serious woman with no time or patience for nonsense, hence her rocky relationship, or lack of thereof with Sirius Black. The day she had seen the mutt bald in his human form was one of the best days of her life, not seeing the annoying man for a week afterwards had brought a wide smile to her face. All of her good mood was shattered when the man in question followed the girl he deemed as evil like a puppy, wearing the most hideous outfit she had the displeasure to see.

“Why is the mutt wearing... whatever he is wearing,” she asked Harry, trying to erase the image from her memory.

“He discovered the advantages of hairless legs during his reclusion and is trying to show them off,” her nephew sighed, covering his eyes when the man approached, wearing the shortest shorts and a shirt that was far too small for him.

“Harry, the girls are going to give me a facial so don’t bother us,” the man ordered, eyeing his godson with a critical look. “Your skin doesn’t look good, maybe you should try one,” he stated and left while she facepalmed.

She was about to speak when she noticed Harry touching his face self-consciously, examining his hands with wide eyes. She sighed, her nephew was one of the vainest persons she had ever met, putting tons of different creams every night before bed and every morning after showering.

“Aunt, do you know of any magical creams to hydrate skin? Maybe I should open a spa in the magical world,” he mused, examining his image on a cup's reflection.

Eleadora had to facepalm again. As if having one vain person wasn’t enough, now Sirius had to go and discover himself!

# Preparations and Threats

## Chapter Notes

I have decided to update twice a week (every Sunday and a random day because I have the memory of a goldfish) because I already wrote far ahead and have many chapters in storage.

By the way, listen to "Go Baby" from KARD, it is my favourite song this month!

Months flew by after the basilisk incident and the only strange event in school had been Lockhart declaring he had defeated the monster of the chambers, creating a whole spectacle of himself. His declarations and plans for a new book did not last long because Rita published a scathing article about the man and the incongruence of the events in his self-proclaimed adventures. Many people had protested for and against him, but many proofs began to appear against Lockhart from an unknown source. Four months before the school year ended, the man left the castle and Britain altogether, with all his money on tow in order to not confront the heavy lawsuits against him. That had been the appropriate way of getting rid of Gilderoy Lockhart.

In his absence, Madam Bones appointed an Auror who was on medical leave and in those few months, the students learnt more than in the previous year.

On a less positive note, the goblins contacted Harry a few weeks ago because they found another soul piece. The problem was its location. Inside the bank, in Bellatrix Lestrangle's vault. From there on, it was not hard to conclude who had created all those Horcruxes, but they had no solid proof so there was always the possibility of them being wrong. However, Harry began making plans in case they were right and Voldemort was alive. He suggested Sirius to seize Bellatrix's vault and the Lestrangle's possessions as the head of the house of Black, the man had done so with such a delight Harry wondered if the Black madness was real.

The Guild was in their compartment, leaving the castle for summer. Dear Elizabeth had asked him to go to Switzerland because her best friend had brought her chocolate from there. However, that was not the problem, the crew that was going to join was. Between the youngest twins, Daphne, Draco, and Luna, it was going to be quite an eventful trip. And that is if his sister had not invited the wayward princess once again.

"I hate you all," Theo grumbled, glaring at Daphne and Draco who were having an animated conversation about the trip.

"It is not our fault that your grandfather will have a heart attack if you ever tell him you are friends with Harry Potter," Daphne scolded the boy with a slight smile.

“You will have to bring us a lot of sweets to make up for us being excluded. Again!” Adrian said signalling Marcus, Terrence, Theo, and himself.

“Don't forget us,” Fred said.

“At least we are going to Egypt,” George said, earning many curious looks.

“Our family won a prize from the newspaper and we are going to visit Bill,” Fred explained, shrugging.

“If only ickle Ronnikins would stop being so annoying,” George sighed.

“He is still bothering you for your Christmas presents?” Blaise asked, incredulous.

“Yep, he has not stopped reminding us how selfish we are,” Fred chirped, patting his disgruntled brother's thigh.

“Even though we got everyone something, even Perfect Percy.”

“I think he will have something new to complain about with everything we are going to bring,” Harry told the twins, making them smile and high five.

“I also want a graduation present,” Marcus added.

“Did you get that job in the Ministry?” Harry asked him.

“I forgot to tell you, my father was so happy with my decision that he managed to get me the position of Junior Undersecretary of the Minister. I have never been happier to bond with Tubby because she has more idea what to do, though I need a new place because I have had enough of dear father and crazy mother,” the oldest male declared, blowing a breath of relief. “The thing is I'm starting on Monday so no vacations for me.”

“Do you have a specific place to move in mind? Because if you don't, the castle has more than enough space available and a responsible adult will only do wonders for Sirius,” the boy offered, much to Marcus' surprise.

“What is the man doing now?” Blaise asked.

“Being an Auror half time, and being annoying most of the time. He is still talking with Lupin so I tell him the bare minimum. Your supervision will be appreciated, Marcus.”

“I... Are you sure? I don't want to impose.”

“There are more rooms than I can count and more elves than I will ever need. Ah, now that I remember, I have to find them another thing for them to do because they are getting bored,” Harry mused, rubbing his chin.

“Thank you, that saves me the job of tolerating my parents,” Marcus added the last part with a scowl.



“Still telling you that purebloods are superior, everyone else is trash, dishonour is on us for accepting such a low beings!” Draco enunciated dramatically.

“I see your father is still difficult,” Terrence told him.

“We aren't talking, mum is the one who gave me permission to go,” he shrugged. Nobody asked him for more information because it was common knowledge that Draco's relationship with his father was strained at best.

“I wish I could go but grandma doesn't want me far away, uncle Algie asked me to help him in the greenhouses so I will be doing that. Though she is expecting you to visit,” Neville told Harry, who nodded over his book.

“I will join you for a few days, but I'm going to look for wracklesprouts with daddy after,” Luna announced, reading something upside down.

“Can you believe this rag?!” Hestia exclaimed, looking at the newspaper with disgust.

“They are reporting about the great Harry Potter leaving Hogwarts for summer,” Flora sneered, mirroring her sister's expression.

“They are more of a gossip magazine than a serious newspaper,” Theo agreed.

“Let's make our own,” Luna announced with a smile, surprising the Guild. “Mother got two licenses when she thought on the Quibbler, just in case another was ever needed. I think it will be useful for us to teach the magical people... Though we will need many things,” she mused and Harry gave her a blank stare.

“A license is an invaluable thing, Luna. If you use it for a newspaper now, you will not be able to change it later,” Harry warned the dreamy girl.

“I know we will need it and maybe mom also knew. It will be our first step...” she muttered, letting the phrase hanging in the air while she went back to her magazine.

Luna had given the Guild an invaluable tool that Harry would use to its full potential. Sadly, it would not be hard considering the competition. Though he had no idea how to make a newspaper or how they even functioned nor what they would need, so his project for this summer would be to obtain all the necessary information and materials. Or relegate it to someone that actually knew what to do.

The reason only one newspaper existed in magical Britain was because the tight control the Ministry tried to keep on information. Thus, a publishing license was almost impossible to obtain and not even giving a fortune away would accelerate the process. That was the reason people like Dumbledore or Voldemort were unable to have their own newspaper. Thinking about the school's headmaster brought a frown to Harry's features. For some reason, the man was always observing him as if he expected him to do something wrong or go berserk. Snape had been doing the same, though only glaring at him when he thought Draco would not notice.

Sighing, he cleared his head because concentrating on those men would only make him paranoid, so he concentrated on the trip. Harry admitted he was curious about the country and its magical villages. If the sweets were as good as Elizabeth swore they were, he was thinking of opening a new candy store, maybe it was time for Honeydukes to have competition.

“We already arrived,” Hestia interrupted him with a gentle voice. Harry looked away from his book and gave the girl a small smile as thanks.

They walked out of the wagon towards where families were waiting. The older twins located their family fast, waved goodbye, and ran towards the large group of redheads. The same happened with most of the members of the Guild and only a few remained.

“Don’t forget you have to be at my house in three days at eight-thirty in the morning,” Harry reminded Draco, Daphne, and Luna who nodded and left, walking towards their families.

The usual ball of energy embraced him, making him grunt. Harry looked up to greet his aunt and was surprised with Sirius instead. At least the man had behaved. His aunt was already talking with the younger girls behind him.

“It is good to see you, dears. Tell me how your exams went,” the woman urged Harry's friends.

“We were among the firsts of our year,” Hestia told the woman.

“That is great! I will not even ask you,” Eleadora sighed, pointing at Harry and, for some reason, Sirius perked up.

“So pup, you didn't get it all from Lily eh,” the man announced with a big smile. “That's great! None of us was among the firsts of the year. I’m so glad that at least you got something from James,” his godfather said, putting an arm around his shoulders. Eleadora could only sigh at the brainless moron.

“I don't even need to ask because he is always the first in his class,” she announced, popping his happy bubble.

“Argh, Lily’s genes were too strong! I tell you!” the man groaned, making a scene.

“Whatever you say, let’s get going,” Harry said, ignoring Sirius’ complaints of how much of his mum he had inherited. Eleadora took out a portkey and they left the station.

The trip to Switzerland had better than Harry expected for many different reasons and, although the princess had been part of the group, he had enjoyed it. He had been pleased to discover a new place and culture. The different foods were noted to be served in a future in his restaurants. The females and Sirius had dragged him to the muggle side to explore and he admitted not been disappointed at all. He had plans to open a sweets shop in the Diagon and getting the chocolate from here and the variety of cheeses gave him many ideas for the restaurants. While he pondered all his options, Elizabeth was in charge of buying souvenirs, an activity she enjoyed a tad too much.

Harry also had plans of opening branch offices in Hogsmeade and Godric's Hollow, he was sure the inhabitants would appreciate it and Ragnok would be even happier than usual, which was not much unless gold was involved. Seeing the number of shops in the muggle side of Zürich gave him the idea to open a shop where only wallets, purses, and briefcases would be sold, though he needed to get more ideas on the different designs. Maybe some kind of perfume shops where he sold muggle and magical samples. This place gave him so many options to try...

Before going back to England, he needed to pay a visit to the Asian Empire, thus, he sent the entire group back sans two of his elves, Ella and Mars. That is how, in some twisted and bizarre way, he had an unexpected conversation with Hwasa about his sister.

"I know you worry about her," Hwasa began when they were strolling in the grounds of the imperial castle. "Elizabeth, I mean, but you don't need to watch over her all the time," she informed him with a small smile.

"I admit I worry about her." Harry could not even bother to lie and decided to concentrate on the slight breeze.

"You have matured since the first time we met," she said, raising her chin to look at his face.

"It is not my fault that you ended with the height of a dwarf," he teased the girl and earned a playful swat in the arm.

"I have an average height!" she exclaimed, an indignant pout that only deepened when the girl noticed his amusement. "Whatever, that is not what I meant. When you were still a squirt, you believed everything had to be done your way. Now though, you are allowing Elizabeth to take her own decisions and your friends to get closer to you," she whispered, looking at the beautiful colours of the sky before dusk.

"I wish I could say the same," he murmured, taking a few steps to avoid the coming hit. "But I guess you have somehow matured... Thank you for taking care of my sister," he told her, making the girl smile a little.

"Someone had to and you are a social inept... She may be naive but she is far from stupid, she knows all you shielded her from in the orphanage. There is no way she can adore you more."

"I did what was necessary, but thank you... Are you ready to receive the mark in winter?" he asked, enjoying catching the girl by surprise, for a change. "Your grandfather asked me whether I thought you were ready and my mother wrote about it. Did you know your grandfather offered her one?"

"I had no idea," she sighed, "as far as I knew, only the royal family received it."

"I guess he wanted to ensure my mother joined the family. She rejected it because she didn't like tattoos." Or more specifically, the pain of getting one, though he would not say that aloud.

“I think I would have gotten along with her,” Hwasa whispered and gave him a small smile. “I’m ready to receive it, my grandfather wants me to assume the throne when I turn eighteen.”

“I know, though I hope you never forget the little guys,” he reminded her while pointing at the Yosei that were flying around, fixing the garden.

“I will follow your example and delegate everything I’m unable to do,” she promised and he huffed at the princess’ audacity.

“Whatever, let’s go back,” he told the girl when the last lights of the sun shone on the grounds.

They walked in silence and he appreciated the company. Harry really was thankful with the girl for guiding Elizabeth where he had no idea how to proceed. It was good to see the lively princess had more insight than he imagined. Yet, he pitied the old man because, with all the chocolate she had bought, the tranquillity in the palace would not last long. It was good he was returning to Britain in a few hours.

When he returned, the Potter castle was immersed in chaos despite the late hour. Sirius was pacing around, looking furious. Marcus was sitting on a couch with a stony expression, his aunt was hugging a distressed Elizabeth, and the twins were holding each other’s hands. He was about to lose his temper and tell him what was going on until he saw the newspaper on the coffee table.

## ***AZKABAN BREAKOUT!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My dear readers, your eyes are not playing you a trick! I’m under the duty of reporting this horrible event that the Ministry wanted to hide from the population, exposing us to grave danger. Three days ago, a mass breakout took place. Amongst the fugitive death eaters are: Bellatrix Lestrange née Black, Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange, Antonin Dolohov, Corban Yaxley, Theodred Knott, Will Jugson, and Augustus Rookwood, among many others (see page 7 for the complete list of escaped prisoners). Those people are dangerous murderers who took the life of dozens, including my dear brother.*

*The Lestrange family and Bartemious Crouch Junior, who was discovered to be alive last year and has avoided capture until this moment, are notable for their cruelty. They were the ones who tortured Frank and Alice Longbottom to insanity after the war was over. They were also part of the inner circle of the Dark Lord during those dark times. Antonin Dolohov and Corban Yaxley were amongst the most feared death eaters for their cruel yet effective tactics, which has cost us many innocent lives. Theodred Knott was feared for his horrible torture methods that only a few Aurors survived. The atrocities these people have committed make me shudder in fear now that they have managed to escape their imprisonment.*

*The head of the DMLE is doing what she can and even more with the depleted resources of the department. However, the Minister has not deemed her efforts enough and has tasked the fearsome Azkaban guards to look over our safety. Forgive my sceptical view on his decision,*

*my fellow witches and wizards, but I do not believe Dementors make the best protection. In an interview with Madame Bones, who was the only person in the Ministry willing to inform us, I received preoccupying information about how many limitations the ones charged with our protection are being subjected to.*

**RS:** *Thank you for agreeing to this interview Madame Bones.*

**AB:** *Nothing to thank me for, the people should be aware of the dangers so they are prepared.*

**RS:** *It is good to know you care about our security. Is there any suspect behind the breakout?*

**AB:** *There is, we believe Crouch Junior is responsible. When we examined Azkaban, we found Bartemious Crouch Senior's body. He was tortured to death.*

**RS:** *(At this moment my blood chilled, only a monster would kill their own father, yet only a monster would submit his children to the imperius for years.) I see, is there any recommendation you can give the people?*

**AB:** *It is quite painful for me to admit this, but we don't have enough Aurors in the department and our resources had been cut to almost nought. We will give our lives to protect our people, but the citizens can help us in return. Always have your wand with you and, if you go out, be in groups of three or more.*

**RS:** *I have no words to thank you for this interview Madame Bones, especially because you are risking your position for our safety.*

**AB:** *I have one more thing to say, Rita. Although revealing this will probably cost me my job, I believe it is necessary. This is not meant to create panic, but to remind the people that the best fighters during those dark times were not Aurors, but brave people who defeated large groups of death eaters by being prepared... The Dark Mark was on the sky when we arrived, we don't want to believe He-Who-Must-not-be-Named (note that she used his name) is back, but we should prepare for the worst and hope it is not what we believe.*

**RS:** *(I was left speechless with this information.) I have no idea what to say.*

**AB:** *I don't want to believe that is true. I lost all my family except for my niece during the last war, but I will not blind myself and risk the people who have entrusted me their protection.*

**RS:** *I thank you for your honesty, Madame Bones, and I promise I will take all your recommendations to heart.*

*The same way you must be paralyzed in fear I was too, no one wants to remember those dark times, but we have a duty to ourselves, to our families, and our children. Let's not blind ourselves the way we did last time and let's be ready to act. I promise you, my fellow citizens, I will do my best to inform you and I will follow the recommendations Madame Bones gave us. I believe she will put our security before anything else and I trust her to be in charge of the DMLE because I have no doubts she will go beyond her duty for our safety.*

Harry finished reading the article with some surprise, he would have to congratulate Rita for it but there were more pressing matters. The first was related to security. He would send his elves to talk with all the werewolves and vampires that worked with him to see if they knew of more people he could hire to be constant guards in the Alley, using his businesses as a disguise. He would also offer them a safe place. Last time, an innumerable amount of casualties had been werewolves and vampires. Not this time. The next priority was to order Rita to investigate why the DMLE was so limited and reveal the information. It would also be good to donate to that department under the condition that only Madam Bones would be able to decide what to do with the money, it was good his business was thriving because he did not have the money to finance a war and he would not touch his family money. Next would be hiring more first generations, as much as there were available and give them appropriate training in the areas they specialized to have his own people in case of an emergency. He would offer the werewolves and vampires the same option, it would be good to have a healer on each team.

He was no fool, a massive breakout did not happen on a whim. It required careful planning and a capable leader, and Madam Bones implied Voldemort was back and there were also the Horcruxes. He had no idea how the man had managed to survive or even if he was alive, but he would rather take all the precautions necessary than being caught unprepared.

Harry also needed to speak with Ragnok to offer his outer guards some kind of protection because he found unacceptable the way many goblins had lost their lives while guarding the bank last time. He would need to speak with Ares and Mars about the hide from the basilisk to see if there was enough to get the goblins enough under armours and, if possible, get others for his friends and family. Besides, they were in charge of security. Harry wanted to wait a few years until he increased the power of the wards in the castle for the amount of magic it took, but now it was necessary. He would also ask his elves to increase the power of their wards and, considering the number of elves that lived in the castle, his home was going to be the safest place in Europe.

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Lucius Malfoy was in the border of a panic attack. Dangerous death eaters escaped Azkaban a few days after Draco returned from his trip and the dark mark on his arm had turned pitch black two weeks ago. The problem is what he was going to do. He could see the resolution in his son's eyes, he had already chosen a side and it was not the one he wished. Narcissa was distant and they had only one conversation since that day, one he would never be able to forget.

"The mark has turned black once more," he whispered to his wife, who blanched.

"You won't bring that man here," she said after a moment of silence. "Last time, you took all the decisions but not anymore Lucius! If you go back to him, I'm leaving and I will take my son with me. I have no doubts that Draco will not join your Lord, and I swear if you go to him... That will be the last day we are a family," she promised and walked out of their room.

He was no fool, although he sometimes acted like one. The days his child came back from school before his trip, he had been cordial and Lucius could almost pretend their relationship had not deteriorated at all. However, the day the article came out, Draco had not even spared

him a glance. His son was spending most of his time out of the manor and it was rare for him to come to sleep. A few days ago, Draco took Narcissa out and they didn't return until late hours... Her favourite brush was no longer in their bathroom.

His family was ready to leave.

When he was young, he had believed in what the Dark Lord preached and promised. He enjoyed his time as a death eater and lived under those ideals until now. What was he going to do now? A firm knock on the door of his studio interrupted his musings and a serious Draco walked in. His son was only thirteen but he had grown up so much.

"I need to speak with you, father," he announced and took a seat on the couch opposing his.

"Very well, speak then," Lucius said and cursed his biting tone, blaming the alcohol he had been consuming.

"I don't know whether or not Voldemort is back," Draco began, making him wince when he said that name without fear. "But I know death eaters are planning something, the question is whether you will join them or not," the boy stated, there was no warmth on his eyes.

"I do not see the importance of my allegiances," Lucius retorted, trying to avoid the bloody discussion.

"But I do, because I will be in the side Harry is in and that means the opposing side to the death eaters. I'm not planning on living under the same roof with an enemy," Draco declared and his heart broke. At last, he understood the seriousness of the situation and took a decision he should have long ago.

"I will not join them." Even Lucius knew how empty his promise was.

"While I'm relieved to hear that, I must ask what stance are you planning to take because not joining them is not enough if you are planning on aiding them in another way," his son said, it was clear he was no longer a boy. When did his son stopped being a child?

"They will try to murder me if I do not comply."

"Is that your answer?" Lucius felt a pang of raw pain tearing his chest at his son's cold words.

"I don't know Draco, it is hard to risk my life in such a way," he said in a placating voice but the disappointment in his son's eyes was impossible to miss.

"Mother and I will be leaving the manor until you decide." Those were his last words.

Draco didn't even say what would happen if he joined or had any kind of dealings with them because there was no need. Now, Lucius had to decide between his family and his Lord. His time was running out...

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Theodore Knott was sulking for missing the trip and because Harry had not arrived at the country yet. All thoughts were forgotten when he read the newspaper his grandfather had left on the table and blanched, this could not be happening. His father had somehow escaped prison. His grandfather had left early when the man didn't leave his room until midday... With shaky steps, he walked to his room and locked the door.

"Mink," he whispered, calling his friend.

When the elf appeared, his worst fears were confirmed. He was sporting a bandaged arm and a pale face.

"Master's father is back," the little one whispered, his big eyes shining with unshed tears.

"I think it is time to leave, do you want to come with me?" he asked Mink and the elf nodded so fast he had no doubt his friend was scared. "Pack everything you need and I will do the same," Theo told the little elf with a serious voice, a loud knock interrupted their planning and he nodded, the little elf popped out.

"Theo! I have excellent news!" his grandfather announced and he fought with himself to control his expressions. "Your father is back!"

"I did not know he had been freed. Is he at Saint Mungo's?" he asked, trying to look as innocent as possible.

"Of course not, he escaped that prison! He and his friends were brought here late last night."

The information that was being carelessly thrown at a thirteen-year-old was a testament of the old man's insanity, at least in Theo's humble opinion.

"It is good to know that grandfather, but we need to get them medical attention. After being in that place for so long it is dangerous to leave them without appropriate care," he said, sounding concerned with great effort. In his excited state, the old man didn't notice his grandson's tense posture.

"You are right. I have raised you well... I will contact the Travers and Carrows, they can imperius a healer," the man announced and left the room, muttering under his breath.

As soon as the man left, Theo filled his backpack with what was necessary. When he was ready, Mink popped in with a sack in his hands and a familiar golden key along with what looked a heavy stack of parchments.

"I cannot leave with Master without a plan. He needs money so here is the family vault key. He can take out money with that and here are the parchments his grandfather keeps hidden," the elf said, looking up with shining eyes.

"You are so intelligent Mink. Now let's go, first to Gringotts and then we will go to the Potter castle," Theo announced and took the hand the little elf was offering.

That day, Theo left that house to finally be with his family. That was the day he decided he would stand beside Harry on whatever side of the conflict he took.



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Ever since the day the massive breakout news took place, Marcus Travers had been worried out of his mind, avoiding his parents for as long as possible. Now, however, he had a letter from his father requesting his presence to discuss important matters. He spoke with the Guild, they took all the necessary preparations for the inevitable encounter and planned for any possible scenario, there was no way he would ever be more prepared. He apparated to the gates of his old house and opened the door, walking inside. His heart stopped when he saw two persons he had never seen, but their hollow cheeks and crazed eyes betrayed them. He saw a woman with an empty gaze, casting different healing spells.

“Ah, Marcus, it is good you found the time to visit,” his father said with cynicism.

“I apologize, father, the Ministry is in chaos and the Minister is hiding while I’m in charge of doing all the paperwork. Being honest, I have not even had a decent meal in days,” he said and his father’s stance relaxed a little when he noticed the exhaustion in his son.

“It is good to see you, Marcus,” his mother greeted.

“Likewise mother, if I may ask, who are our guests?”

“Of course, they are our friends, Petro Gibbon and Alexis Rosier,” his father introduced and the young man did not miss the way his father's wand was ready to take action.

“Pleased to meet you, it is good that you are receiving appropriate care.”

“So this is Marcus... Your father was worried you will not join our noble cause,” the one in the right hissed with a distorted version of a smile plastered on his face.

“Getting rid of the trash marring our world is my cause,” he announced and his parents smiled.

“Good, let’s begin with this one. Your parents freed the idiotic elf so we were bored these days, give me your wand,” the other ordered and Marcus raised an eyebrow.

“I think your stay in Azkaban has affected your senses,” he said and before his father could interrupt, he continued, “Madam Bones is keeping all the healers under scrutiny. As a matter of fact, I’m sure if this one does not report soon, Aurors are going to raid every house using her as an excuse.”

“Now I understand why it was so hard to find a healer, I will erase her memory when she is done. Good thinking, Marcus,” his father congratulated and he nodded.

“I believe it would be better if I took her with me to the Ministry and performed the charm there, making her believe she was being followed and sought refuge,” he said and his father nodded in approval. “Is this what you wished to discuss?”

“Among other things... Our Lord is back son, he is back! He has not summoned us, but our mark has never been clearer,” he said, showing his son the dark mark in his left arm. “It is

good you believe in our cause, when he summons us, I will request a mark for you, Marcus. Soon you will have the honour to join us.”

“I have no words to thank you father,” Marcus said, forcing a smile. Suddenly, he noticed the woman’s wand hand trembling, she broke the curse. “It is time to return to the Ministry and, unlike you father, I’m in no position to delegate,” he announced, looking at the woman and shaking his head in the slightest for her to notice.

“It is a relief that you will join us, in your position you have access to the information we will need. However, do rest a little, you look tired and it will not be good if my only son were to fall ill,” his father said with a proud smile, wand no longer in his hand.

“Also take care, father. I will try to come sooner next time.”

“Don’t worry Marcus, you were working and we need you in that position,” his mother announced.

“I will be leaving, take care,” he said and grabbed the woman by the arm guiding her outside. “I will not harm you,” he promised in a whisper and she nodded, he apparated them to the Potter castle.

Marcus understood he and his family were on different sides in this war, he would ask Harry what he should do. However, one thing was clear, his parents were a threat to his real family and threats needed to be disposed of.

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It had not been a long time since he had joined the Guild and yet, he felt closer to them than to his own blood. With that mindset, Adrian Pucey smiled when his father talked about the new era that would arrive soon while the man drank his morning tea, which he ordered Tiki to lace with the draught of the living death. Slurring a few words, his father fell asleep on the table.

After the mass breakout, the Guild had joined and made plans, pinning the most dangerous backers of Voldemort, where a few of their parents were named. Draco had his father under an ultimatum and if Lucius joined the death eaters, the man was going to fall terribly ill. Thus, passing his responsibilities to his wife, who was on Harry’s side. Theo had already left his house and was living in the castle. His grandfather believed he had sent him to live with some relatives for a few years, until he was old enough to be useful. Marcus had been avoiding his father but he was going to see the man today, in the worst of cases, Travers senior would have a terrible accident. Terrence, being the youngest son, was under no immediate danger. Or at least that is what the Guild had believed until three ex-prisoners were taken to his house. Terrence’s parents were under the idea they had sent their youngest son to Beauxbatons for the rest of his education and summers under the strict school program could only be beneficial to him.

The next threat was his father. While the Pucey’s were not the richest, his family had a great amount of influence in the Ministry. It was quite unfortunate that his father had accidentally overdosed on the draught of the living death. Adrian’s elf would impersonate the man and be quite vocal about his newfound ideologies, he was sure Tiki would make a wonderful job.

Not for one moment he doubted this to be the right decision. Harry gave him a real family, he gave him somewhere to belong, and a reason to strive to be better. No one doubted that Harry had their best interests in mind or that everything he did was for their protection. They would have probably done it themselves seeing how much of a threat their families represented.

No threat to the Guild was allowed to exist.

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Harry Potter was reading his mother's notes about the basics of blood magic in the library, putting a marker on it, he closed the journal and looked around. The whole Guild was in the castle, he had given each of them complicated tasks but they had done it to perfection. He had talked with the people that worked with him and he had been pleased with the results. Most of the werewolves in the country were now under his protection, as well as three vampire covens that were reluctant to join death eaters. First generations were hired to teach werewolves that were denied education and, considering Greyback's sick obsession with turning children, there were much more than expected. Ollivanders was content with all the new wands he had sold and even offered to teach a particularly fascinated teenager the basics about wandlore, stating that he had no children of his own and needed to pass his knowledge to the next generation. Sirius had been horrified when he realized how many people were denied education and the last vestiges of adoration he felt for Dumbledore were gone. Harry hoped he could manage to open Remus' eyes too.

His aunt and godfather were teachers for the ones who wished to specialize. It was good his aunt had lived a long life and learnt many arts, while Sirius discovered his talent to pass knowledge. Harry had even contacted professor Flitwick to see if he could work as a duelling teacher. The man came to the castle to meet his possible students before accepting. Noticing the number of teenagers that he had never seen at Hogwarts, he had accepted with no further thought but under one condition: to contact a few trusted friends of his to teach as well. That is how they got a curse breaker, a runes expert, a spell crafter, and a potions master that had lengthy conversations with his aunt about things he did not understand but swore to study in a future.

Harry did not know he had earned the loyalty of a whole race for treating them as people, he did not know he was labelled as a valuable ally by the vampire covens for the selfless protection he had offered. He did not know he was labelled as a friend of the Goblin Nation for his uninterested gifts to ensure their protection. He never knew the impact these changes caused in the future.

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George and Fred returned early from the trip. When their parents caught the news about the breakout, they returned that same moment. They told Harry a lot of people were coming to the burrow, they had long meetings and were part of some kind of secret vigilante club. Taking advantage of that situation, they visited the castle every single day and left before dinner. The twins did not mention it, but Harry noticed how hurt they were because of their parent's lack of attention. He tried to show them how invaluable they were for the Guild.

Neville, like the twins, was left most of the day alone. His grandmother was too busy in the Ministry during the mornings and with her friends during the evenings. He also returned to

his house before dinner and came the moment his grandmother left. It was good to have him at the castle. The boy that once had been chubby and shy was now assertive and looked healthier than ever.

Draco had been disappointed about his father and had been ready to send Dobby to dose him with the draught of the living death after a week of no contact. The man, however, had surprised them when he swore an unbreakable vow to never again join or aid Voldemort or his followers in the slightest. Lucius Malfoy had power in the Ministry and they were going to use that to their advantage.

Dear Luna was occupied with the planning of their newspaper, taking care of every detail. Her father was an invaluable source of information and help, aiding his daughter with her new project. The youngest twins, Elizabeth, and Theo helped when necessary. Thinking about the boy, brought a proud smile to Harry's face. He would never forget his pale face when his elf popped them in the castle, nor he would forget his loyalty. Theo had left his family without looking back and the documents he brought would be extremely useful in a near future.

Terrence also left his family when they received three fugitives, considering his family had little to offer, they had only changed their memories. Adrian, on the other hand, volunteered to dose his father, stating he was a threat if left alone. Now, his loyal house-elf impersonated the man in the Ministry and they used this to their advantage. Blaise had also returned earlier than expected, but that was because his mother found a new husband. His mother cared about nothing that was not related to her fortune, so he had no troubles with her. However, Blaise was almost living at the castle, a positive thing in Harry's opinion.

Daphne had decided to stay with her family and take an active role, her father was no immediate threat but they were ready to take him out if necessary. She used her position as heiress to probe around his father's acquaintances to see if she could find out more about their loyalties. People with alcohol in their systems were easy to talk with. She also used her mother's acquaintances to see what stance they would take in the upcoming conflict. Daphne had somehow turned into their informant.

Marcus was the member that had surprised him the most. Harry no longer had doubts about his loyalty. The day Marcus went to meet his father, he returned with a frightened female who had given them all the information about the people she had been forced to heal. Thanks to this, now Madam Bones had an excuse to have curse breakers checking the healers. During the last war, healers had been either murdered, tortured to submission, or been put under the imperius, effectively making sure the resistance had fewer chances of surviving, and thus, fighting back. The worrying news that Marcus had brought with him was that Voldemort was back and they needed to be ready. Last time the man had been capable of so much because he had been prepared and the people had not, as simple as that. This time, they would make sure he was unable to gain the power he did last time... With this in mind, Marcus had put his father under the imperius to act as a spy for them when Voldemort called him.

What also intrigued Harry about the information Marcus had given him was the dark mark that connected Death Eaters and Voldemort. It reminded him to the one the royal family used to mark their members and ensure the Emperor was not betrayed. It was important because it

could not only summon the ones with the mark, but it could also relay short messages. A fascinating topic he would have to research about, maybe a mark for the Guild would be useful.

Aside from that, knowing the man was back, Harry was taking a more active role. He would never forgive Voldemort for murdering his mother and he was going to make sure he paid for her death. He had ordered Rita to write a controversial article about why was the DMLE regulated and about the laws that had been passed in the last decade, aiming to harm Voldemort's followers who were working inside the Ministry.

Sirius and Harry were planning to donate enough money to get the DMLE running once again. Madam Bones had been impressed with many of the people under his protection and she promised to accept them in the trainee program. With all the potions werewolves had access to, their lycanthropy was no more troublesome than a nightmare once a month. The others would be divided into different places, with the daycare been the most guarded. Harry made his personal mission to hunt down Greyback and ensure he was disposed of when he noticed the number of children he had turned. His aunt agreed with his decision wholeheartedly and contacted many hags to watch the movements of the man. Apparently, children were precious for hags, for most were unable to conceive their own, thus they were more than happy to help to get rid of the trash.

"Harry," Sirius said interrupting his musings and he looked at the man. "I just came back from the burrow, Dumbledore asked to use Grimmauld place as the order's new headquarters."

"What was your answer?"

"I said I would have to speak with you... I told Remus the house was habitable again and they are under the impression we are living there," he sighed at his friend's obvious loose mouth.

"Let's continue making them believe that, though we will have to ward the family library. With so many people coming and going, I don't doubt there may be one with sticky fingers. Is there anything valuable?"

"No, I even gave the elf to Narcissa. She somehow managed to bring him back to his senses. The house has plenty of rooms and I have no doubts many members of the order will stay every once in a while. We have to be in the place for a couple of days to pretend we are living there," his godfather said with a defeated sigh.

"Not necessarily, there are three rooms in the main floor, I will ask Nile to make them look as if they belong to us and add a bathroom to each so if they don't see us, they will believe we are in our rooms. We can tell them we get our meals from the restaurant so no need to buy food and they will get no excuses to stay for longer," he explained and the man brightened. "If Dumbledore wants to put the house under the fidelius don't forget it is your house and you will be the secret keeper or they will have to find another place," Harry said and his godfather nodded.

"I talked with Moony today and he wants to see you. I know that he is acting like a fool, but give him a chance," Sirius almost begged.

“He was the one who told Dumbledore we were living there the moment that you mentioned it. I can meet with him, but as long as he has no intentions of changing, he will be treated the same way. Sirius, he expects me to tell him everything and yet he refuses to tell me anything about himself or my parents.”

“I know... I just keep hoping,” Sirius muttered with a weak smile and left the library.

Harry decided to go back to his books and lost notion of time.

“Harry,” Luna said, breaking his trance. “Our newspaper is almost ready to be published,” she announced with a smile that he reciprocated.

“That is good, any ideas on how to make it known?”

“Mmm, I have been thinking that in the article Rita publishes in a few days she should announce she is leaving The Prophet and joining ours.”

“Excellent idea, Luna. Any ideas for the name?”

“Yes. The daily edition will be called Magic Times Herald, the one delivered on weekends will be the Sunday Herald,” she announced with pride.

“Excellent Luna, thank you for your hard work. Feel free to contact Rita,” he told the girl and she rewarded him with a beaming smile.

“I will. Daddy contacted his friends to act as reporters and the only thing we need is for your lawyer to finish the contracts,” she informed him and left with small jumps

Harry could only smile fondly at her antics.

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Albus Dumbledore arrived at his house in Hogsmeade and poured himself a glass of firewhisky. These last weeks had been stressful, to say the least. Death eaters had escaped Azkaban, but until the moment, there were no signs of their whereabouts. The idiot of Fudge wanted to place Dementors in Hogwarts in an effort to earn some kind of approval from the magical population that was about to kick him out of his job and, until now, he hadn't managed to gain enough support to avoid the situation. Another thing that worried him was Voldemort. Severus had shown him the dark mark that once again was clear. Albus knew that Tom had somehow managed to come back and he had no idea how to deal with him, the last war had been bloody enough and he was not proud of all the sacrifices he had been forced to make.

When he asked Sirius to use his house, he was hoping to somehow gain access to Harry Potter and try to guide him. He was no longer sure the young boy had been the one to open the Chambers of Secrets, feeling guilty for accusing the boy based on his own experiences and comparing him with an evil man. If that was not enough, he had been denied the moment he offered himself as secret keeper for Sirius' house. It seemed Sirius had also matured and no longer held him in a pedestal, he only agreed to the fidelius and the man chose his house-

elf as the secret keeper. Sirius even refused to give him a parchment with the directions, stating that he needed to meet any person who would be allowed in his house.

Starting from that nuance, nothing had gone right. During the meetings of the Order, he never saw young Harry. The time Molly had offered to move in and take care of the males by his suggestion, she had been rebuked with quite harsh words by an irate Sirius, who had Minerva's support. Remus had made no progress and the man seemed more depressed each time he saw him. In a desperate attempt of making sure Remus and Harry bonded, he hired the man as a teacher, hoping the repercussions were not too grave.

Another thing that worried Albus was the information he had received from some of his contacts about creatures disappearing from the radar. He was not sure how they had managed to do that, but they did. Vampires and werewolves alike were nowhere to be found. The dangerous beasts had taken too many lives last war and he was sure that they would do so again... He had not wanted to push for the reform that made almost impossible for creatures, especially werewolves, to get a job or even access to the basics, but it seemed it would be necessary. The few innocent amongst them would be sacrificed for the greater good.

# Dealing With Trouble

Rita Skeeter had always been a pragmatic woman who enjoyed writing. She found great pleasure in making powerful figures tremble by her words. For years, she had forgotten why she joined the press and got lost in the sensationalism that fame brought. However, everything changed.

The reason she joined Harry Potter was fear and survival, now though, she could see how rotten her world was. She was an intelligent woman who identified a leader when she saw one and that boy had managed what no other had until the moment. She observed the respect and, dare she say, pure devotion all his employees eyed him with. She saw how respected was that boy amongst the goblins, a feat that no other person in the country could claim.

Being a half-blood, she understood how backwards the magical world was and was surprised when she identified so many muggle devices being used. Harry Potter was the leader of the new generation, of the creatures he respected as people and respected him in return. He was the beginning of a new era.

There were already rumours in Knockturn Alley about the boy and the Dark Lord. The coming conflict would be nothing like the last one and she was ready to play her part.

With her love for the written word rekindled, she wrote her next article.

This was going to be the beginning, people were going to realize the putrid corruption they lived amongst and many would not like the people thinking on their own. With a decided nod, she passed her last article for the prophet, one that would leave her signature in this new era.

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Harry Potter was having breakfast in the castle when Hedwig flew in, carrying the newspaper. With a smirk, he relieved her from the burden and gave offered her the closest platter of meat. He examined headlines with satisfaction, it was obvious Rita planned to leave with an explosion behind. He would need to find a safe place for her. This article alone would put a price on her head.

## ***ENEMIES INSIDE THE MINISTRY!***

### ***SABOTAGE IN HOGWARTS!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My dear witches and wizards, I publish this article with great affliction. Not a long time ago I published another one containing an interview with Madam Bones, who informed us of the deplorable state the DMLE is subjected to. As I promised, I investigated the reason, but the answers I got only created more questions.*



*During the last decade, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has suffered a cut of almost 90% in their budget, making it the department that receives the least financial support and I'm forced to ask, where is that money going? If that was not enough the Wizengamot has taken too much liberty in imposing regulations on our protectors. The most controversial laws that had been approved are the following: no Auror is allowed to cast an unforgivable under any circumstance, no Auror is allowed to cast a dark curse under any circumstance, no Auror is allowed to cast a lethal curse under any circumstance, no Auror is allowed to cast a curse under any circumstance, Aurors will be punished if they harm someone (guilty or not), no Auror is allowed to carry potions, no Auror is allowed to carry any other weapon than their wands, and so on.*

*I have to ask you, my fellow citizens, don't you see the pattern? The first regulations were somewhat sound. However, as time went on they have become ridiculous. They are basically ordering our Aurors to protect us with first-year spells when the enemies are firing unforgivables. Before, it was mandatory to carry basic potions as was having another weapon aside from a second wand. I wondered why our Aurors were almost ordered not to fight back so I searched for what persons voted for the new regulations and the findings make me sick.*

*These regulations were founded, written, supported, and voted on by families that, during the war, swore to be under the imperius. If I wrote names this article would be extended for too long my dear readers - that high is the number of people who avoided Azkaban saying they were under that terrible curse. I need to ask, why have they bounded our Aurors in such a way? Is it possible that they were not under the imperius and acted on their free will? Perhaps the curses cast on them still remain because only criminals would want Aurors to be defenceless. Now that so many dangerous criminals have escaped, are the Aurors supposed to fight them with tickling charms? I took the liberty of interviewing Alastor Moody, who is one of the country's most renown Aurors and resigned two years ago.*

**RS:** *I must thank you for agreeing to this interview Mister Moody.*

**AM:** *Call me Moody, I like your articles and Amelia vouched for you.*

**RS:** *Thanks Moody, my first question is why did you retire when no one asked you to?*

**AM:** *Because I don't tolerate morons or traitors! During the war, we fought curse for curse, which was the only way so many of us survived. Amelia and I never agreed on the regulations they imposed on us and, considering many of the ones I fought are the ones placing them, I have even less desire to follow them. I retired because they are no longer training Aurors, they are raising human shields ready for slaughter. The kids won't survive a confrontation and I couldn't stay to see them die.*

**RS:** *(Hearing the regret on this man's face convinced me that every word he had said was the harsh truth.) I understand and agree with you. Is there any suggestion you have to avoid that dire outcome and ensure our Aurors protection?*

**AM:** *It is simple, people are the ones who decide what laws and regulations are passed. If they react now, there won't be unnecessary deaths. I hope people read this and riot, go to the*

*Ministry and demand those regulations to be abolished! The Wizengamot can't go against the people's will unless they want a revolution.*

**RS:** *Thank you once again for the interview, Moody. I will heed your advice and hope that the honourable magical citizens do the same.*

*As you read my fellow citizens, we have the power to abolish those ridiculous laws. I will be in the Ministry, demanding the Wizengamot to ensure our safety!*

*I wish that was the worse information I was forced to convey, but I have a duty to all of you.*

*During the same investigation about the DMLE, I found out horrifying news about Hogwarts. Former Death Eater, Severus Snape, was employed when the war ended. Albus Dumbledore vouched for the man, saving him from a life sentence in Azkaban.*

*During the last decade, the amount of Aurors and Healers has diminished 70%, but why? Looking for information in the Education Results I discovered that students who took potions for their NEWTS lessened each year to the point the last two years were composed on six Slytherins and a two Ravenclaws. Severus Snape has been teaching potions for a decade in the school, is that a coincidence? I have talked with many Hogwarts students belonging to different houses and years. All their answers on the man were similar.*

*I will not write names in order to protect the children, but I will write general statements. All the Gryffindors I interviewed agreed the man hated their house, to the point of taking house points for breathing too loud or not answering a question when he also takes points for answering. They said he singled them out and always tried to give them detentions and take at least ten points per class. Hufflepuffs agreed that the man called them dunderheads, which is not only insulting and degrading but also diminishes students for the smallest mistakes. Ravenclaws said that the man has taken points for answering questions, being know-it-all, being annoying, and so on. They all agreed that they preferred to self-study. Slytherin, the house that Snape serves as Head of, had some interesting information to give as well. His own house deems the man unfair, stating that his treatment of other houses brought them discrimination. The house agreed that, if possible, they would replace the man. Not a single student had a positive thing to say about Severus Snape.*

*The man has harmed our society in such a way that it will take years for us to have the number of healers and Aurors that we once did, but now I must question his motivation to do so. Why Professor Snape accepts less than ten students for the last years? I don't have an answer, but I know I no longer want him teaching our kids. We pay a small fortune for their education, we don't send them to be insulted. I won't tolerate the man to continue harming our future and I encourage you to do the same.*

*My eyes have been opened and I'm sure that the ones who want to keep the truth hidden want to silence me. Therefore this is my last article in The Prophet. It has been a pleasure writing for you and I hope you continue reading my work in the future, as the new journalist of The Magic Times Herald.*

Harry finished reading, a smile tugging the corner of his mouth. It was good that Rita had decided to keep working for them. He admitted that the woman had the talent to sway people.

He looked at Luna, who was eating with that dreamy expression of hers - the girl had given them a weapon that few would be able to counter. Their newspaper was now ready for circulation; the editors had worked overtime to ensure the first publication was perfect. They would wait until Sunday to send it to every household in magical Britain. Setting up the first edition of their newspaper and the different sections to make it entertaining had been easy enough, as was hiring first generations and buying all the necessary equipment. What had been complicated was setting up the owl farms and editorial buildings in different parts of the country, all with the maximum security he could provide. Attorney Blair was excellent redacting magical contracts and his employees had no problems accepting the conditions that ensured their safety. Everything seemed to be going well until Dobby popped Draco in, who was looking alarmed and carried a letter in his hand.

“Harry we have a problem,” the boy began explaining after taking a deep breath. “Rita’s article worked and a Wizengamot session is programmed in two days, however, they want to take advantage of the public eye being on the regulations that will be abolished and pass regulations for all the magical creatures. Especially werewolves,” Draco almost wheezed, looking even paler than usual.

“I see... We still have time. Marcus, make your father tell you all about what are they planning. Adrian, tell Tiki to gather all the information necessary and speak with the neutral faction to see which person is in which side. Draco you take care of your father and tell aunt Narcissa to persuade her acquaintances to see how terrible that idea is,” Harry was saying when Daphne spoke.

“Harry, my father is the unofficial leader of the neutral faction, if I’m unable to convince him we have to replace him.”

“You can decide what to do with him... Daphne, you already have an idea to what side many families sway, talk with Narcissa about them,” he ordered and she nodded, leaving the room with firm steps.

“Sirius has a vote and I will ask Miss Blair to begin moving. I will go and visit Neville, his grandmother will be easy to convince and she has sway in the light faction. I wish I could see the meeting in person,” Harry muttered with a scowl.

“We can do that,” Draco announced, confusing him. “Attend, I mean. As heirs we are allowed to attend as long as your guardian agrees.”

“Excellent, then I believe most of us should attend. Pay attention to those who seem to agree with the idea, they will be the first ones to be gone,” Harry announced, preparing everything for the multiple letters that would be sent.

The next two days went by in a blur of activity, each member of the Guild occupied with one thing or another. Friday arrived at last. In the worst-case scenario, all of the people under Harry's protection would be offered a place in the Asian Empire or the means to survive in the muggle world.

Daphne played with her father as if he was a mere infant, her subtle suggestions on how werewolves would react combined with her charm had her father talking with the neutral

faction to reject the regulations that would only bring trouble. Harry thought that the girl looked mildly disappointed on how manipulable her father was. Madam Longbottom had also been easy to convince. Once she was reminded of how many innocent children would suffer, she almost turned into a militant for his cause and talked with anyone who would stop to listen.

Lucius Malfoy probed here and there to see the source of the stupid new regulations. It was not surprising that the Minister's senior undersecretary was the one who wrote them, the surprise came from the supporters- all belonged to the so-called light faction. Sirius swore and perjured that Dumbledore was the unofficial leader of the faction. If what Harry's godfather said was true, then the headmaster was a caddish hypocrite. Offering Lupin a job in Hogwarts while promoting discrimination against people that were classified as creatures only for being different. For some reason, Dumbledore never struck Harry as a bigot, but then again, he hardly knew the man.

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Harry entered the room beside Sirius and saw Draco, Daphne, and Adrian beside their parents. People filled the room little by little and he almost scowled at the headmaster, who dared to show with a hideous neon orange robe. He was followed by two people who looked just as ridiculous as him and Marcus.

"The one in green is the Minister and the pink atrocity is his undersecretary, Dolores Umbridge," Sirius told him under his breath.

It seemed that this pink monstrosity needed to go. Even if she had not written those moronic regulations, her attire was hideous enough to blind innocent people.

"Good morning members of the Wizengamot," Dumbledore began, far too informal for Harry's tastes. "We are meeting today to speak about the regulations for the DMLE. As we know, people are in an uproar so we will make them less strict, but let's talk about them first. The first one, no Aurors, under any circumstance, is allowed to cast unforgivable," the man said with a cordial tone and Lucius raised his wand, signalling his desire to speak.

"Very well, Mister Malfoy."

"They are unforgivable for a reason. However, if the enemy attacks with a crucio, you cannot expect our Aurors to respond with simple charms. Answer fire with fire, if they use unforgivable so should we, in that way maybe more lives will be saved," Lucius stated with authority, most of the hall nodded at his sound reasoning and Dumbledore sighed.

"I suggest that Aurors are allowed their use only if they are attacked with them," Adrian's elf - impersonating his father, suggested. People began to whisper and most seemed to agree.

"No more arguments?" Dumbledore asked, looking quite sour. "Very well, that rule is abolished. Next, Aurors are not allowed to use any kind of lethal or dark curses," he announced and Madam Longbottom raised her wand.

"Augusta," he nodded to the woman, looking pleased. She scowled in return.

"I think we can summarize the next regulations with this one. Lethal curses are defined as curses that are capable of causing mortal damage. Before, I would have not approved of their use, however, we now have dangerous criminals on the loose that will use them on our people. I vote for not only abolishing this ridiculous imposition but also for abolishing the others. During the last war, knowing curses was as much as a requisite as carrying potions and a second wand along with another kind of weapon. We have already lost many families due to death eaters, let's not hand them our children in silver platters," Neville's grandmother declared with passion.

It seemed she had touched a sensitive nerve because most of the people in attendance agreed with her. Without waiting for the Chief Warlock to ask, one by one raised their lit wands. That was it, they were abolished. Harry expected the Death Eaters to put some kind of resistance, but not even one of them spoke until the moment.

"Very well, that concludes the matters with the DMLE," the Chief Warlock announced, looking quite serious. "However, a new matter was brought to me regarding new regulations for creatures, in especial werewolves and vampires. Madam Umbridge, the floor is yours," Dumbledore said, giving the pink toad permission to talk.

The grating voice the toad possessed almost made Harry regret attending. Taking a deep sigh, he tried to block the noise and looked around the hall. He could see many people approving of her speech, which consisted of hate propaganda, not a single fact was stated. It was time to act, Draco's father stood up raising his wand and effectively interrupting the spluttering woman.

"I understand your speech is based on your personal beliefs and so are the regulations. But I'm forced to ask, in what way will this benefit us? Werewolves already have a hard time getting any kind of jobs and vampires live in seclusion. Though it is true there are many werewolf victims, I will remind you of Greyback. That man uses each full moon to his advantage and turns as many people as he can... Children, I must also remind you. As far as I'm concerned the only dangerous werewolf is Greyback and his group of criminals, the others look for safe places to turn and infect no one. Instead of ordering them to register, forbidding them to work, and ensuring they obtain no education, why not simply make wolfsbane available and give them a safe place to turn. Instead of wasting time and resources in frivolous banalities, let's be practical," the man stated and the pink mistle of nature flushed red.

"Ehm, ehm, I didn't know you were such a fanatic supporter of beasts, Mister Malfoy," the woman said with that grating voice of her.

"It's not being a supporter, it's being intelligent. If a part of the population is unable to get jobs, thus pay takes or have access to the basics, there is only one possible answer: they will turn against us. I agree with Malfoy. Let's make wolfsbane available and save ourselves a possible struggle based on ignorant ideas," Cygnus Greengrass announced.

"Besides, most of the werewolves have been turned as children, is it fair to force them to live the way they do when any of our offspring could suffer the same fate?" Madam Longbottom asked and he could see many in the so-called light faction agreeing with her.

"I believe you should give us the name of the expert you contacted to write those regulations, undersecretary Umbridge," his godfather announced, making her turn puce. "I have brought my own: Vadis Stefano from Italy and Takashi Tomo from the Asian Empire, they are waiting outside if you wish to ask their opinion. Considering in Britain we do not have a specialist for magical cursed species... Well, considering you didn't even bother to use the correct term, I wonder who you contacted, undersecretary Umbridge," Sirius said in the most patronizing tone possible and Harry swore the woman was about to have an attack.

"Beasts are beasts that should be controlled! I don't need a specialist to put them down!" the woman yelled, losing any semblance of self-control, along with the support she managed to obtain.

After all, who wanted to be seen agreeing with the Ministry employee that has the nerve to scream to a Lord. A Lord who also happens to have every reason to hate the Ministry. In Harry's opinion, the woman had made everything simple. The constant whispers of the crowd and camera flashed reminded the Death Eaters to behave, especially now that Rita had a vendetta against them.

"Watch your tone undersecretary Umbridge, you are directing to Lord Black. I'm surprised you were able to write those regulations considering you do not seem to know about or even respect our traditions," Lucius chastised the woman with such a disapproving tone she shut up, looking furious. "I think we should no longer debate when the matter has quite an obvious answer, I vote to reject any regulation on magical creatures," he announced, raising his wand, it was satisfying to watch most of the people raise their wands as well.

"Everyone in for rejecting the regulations?" the Chief Warlock asked, looking at his supporters and few of them looked at the ground but did not change their vote. "Very well. This meeting was rather short. I hope that we can take out time to speak next time. Meeting adjourned," he announced and people started to chat with each other or leave. The reporters already hunting for their preys.

Sirius and Harry walked towards the exit when they were intercepted by Dumbledore. He wore his typical grandfather persona that made all his defences go up, the way he was looking at Sirius was a dead giveaway of his disappointment. Harry looked to the side and saw his friends approaching, he shook his head slightly.

"Ah, Sirius, I wasn't expecting you here," he greeted in a cordial tone.

"Why not Albus? It is my duty," Sirius answered with a familiarity that almost made Harry smile at the face of the headmaster.

"Of course. Harry, I see you came too. I was hoping you wouldn't follow those archaic traditions Sirius, children should be given time to be children."

"And after the life my godson has lived I couldn't agree more, but he is the last of his line. In less than five years he will become a Lord," he told the old man, making him sigh.

"And do you agree with this, Harry? After all, most of the time you are in your room when we visit, you should have fun with children your age."

"It is my legacy," Harry said in a nonchalant tone, not really answering the headmaster's questions. "Sirius we have to get going, Miss Blair is waiting for us," he said, signalling the woman waiting at the door.

"We have to leave, see you, Albus," his godfather nodded at the man and he followed his example.

"We have to do something about that woman," Hestia said when they told her what happened during the meeting of the Wizengamot.

"I agree, sister of mine." Harry wondered since when the devil duo had infected the girls with their mannerisms.

"Marcus, do you think you could be ascended?" Blaise asked the older boy.

"I do, but not at the moment. I need to be at least twenty to assume the position of senior undersecretary. Besides I have access to all the information she does and after this stunt, the Minister will rely on me even more," he explained, looking quite pained at the idea. "Is the newspaper ready?"

"It is, Sunday we will send it and Monday we will publish a fascinating article about how low education standards have fallen in Hogwarts, it will be humiliating slap for the Ministry," Luna informed Marcus, who was still annoyed at having too much work to collaborate in an active way.

"You are crucial for our plans Marcus, one way or another you help the Guild," Harry reassured the older boy.

"Let's change topics, I don't want to talk about the Ministry," Theo complained.

"Mother and Astoria are enchanted with the new sweets shop, especially with all the varieties of chocolate," Daphne said with a smirk.

"Yeah, mum is too, she and Kreacher go every time they can," Draco complained, but everyone knew how much he loved it.

"Never mind that, mother always got her purses from the muggle world. I think she bought at least half of your store," Blaise commented with a slight pout.

"Business is the perfect cover. Madam Bones accepted twenty-nine new recruits, all werewolves. She is ecstatic about the donations she received and is currently talking with the head of Saint Mungo's to see if they would accept recruits. Until the moment everything is going well," Harry commented, smiling slightly.

"I'm sure that the millionaire donation you made last year after suing Lockhart is helping. The hospital would accept a dementor if you told them it was trustworthy," Fred teased him and he smiled in return.

"Professor Flitwick is amazing while duelling, even though he says he was getting rusty. All the werewolves are learning and they love working at what they like... We really are

changing things,” Terrence muttered with a smile of pure happiness.

“Of course we are,” Luna said, “and we still have much to do.”

“Has Voldemort summoned anyone yet?” George asked, looking around.

“Only the ones who escaped, he is waiting to summon the others. Father heard them saying he is weak and will need months to recover. That is if he recovers. They will wait a year and, if there are no changes, he will get a new body,” Marcus sighed, looking quite ill at the idea.

“I will ask aunt Eledora, most rituals require some kind of blood sacrifice. She will tell us what we need to look for and protect ourselves, just in case,” Elizabeth told them, her brows were furrowed and her mouth slightly pinched. “Sirius brought all the books from the Black Library, let’s search for rituals there. Maybe we will even find something interesting,” she suggested and everyone agreed.

The addition of Elizabeth to the Guild was not something Harry had planned for. However, few plans regarding his sister were effective. He remembered her suspicious glances every time his friends came and he remembered Hwasa’s advice, Elizabeth was naive but nowhere near stupid. Therefore he decided to tell her about the Guild and she demanded to be in, seeing no reason not to agree, he accepted. In that strange turn of events, his dear sister became part of the Guild. Contributing whenever possible, especially with the newspaper.

The Magic Times Herald was divided into different sections: news, entertainment (that contained crosswords, curious facts, among others), household (it contained tips on house and garden decoration, ideas on simple recipes, and tips about how to deal with different family situations), education (that contained parts of history that were forgotten, information about other countries, and old spells), sports, international news, and a special section for the opinion of people. Quite simple but innovative for the magical population.

Sunday arrived at last and Harry inspected their newspaper with great satisfaction. Luna's dad shared his secret for moving pictures to be printed in colour, thing that added to the attractive of their publication. He would have to gift something really nice to the man for all his help in the project.

### **THE MAGIC TIMES HERALD:**

#### **THE NEW NEWSPAPER FOR THE BRITISH MAGICAL COMMUNITY**

*Fellow citizens, we introduce ourselves as people who strive to communicate the truth through the written word. We are the newspaper for the everyday magical who desires to know what events are taking place in our world. We created this for the people, thus we created a special section designated for the worries of our population. No matter whether you are a first-year student or the Minister for Magic themselves, our purpose is to listen to your worries and research about any topic that troubles you. That said, we invite you to read our articles and may Mother Magic guide us in this new adventure!*

**GENEROUS DONATION FROM HARRY POTTER AND LORD BLACK TO THE  
DMLE**



**By Rita Skeeter**

*It is a pleasure to write for you again, my dear readers! If you remember, a few days ago I reported about the restrictions the DMLE had been subjected to, thanks to our prompt response, those ridiculous regulations were abolished. However, no one made a single move to give them resources. Our young hero took matters on his own hands and, along with his godfather, donated quite a fortune to ensure our protection. In the following interview, I was able to speak with them and Madam Bones, head of the DMLE.*

**RS:** *Thank you for agreeing to this interview Harry, Lord Black, Madam Bones.*

**HP:** *It is good to speak with you, Rita (our humble hero greeted me with a warm smile).*

**RS:** *And it is a pleasure to meet with upstanding citizens. My first question is for you Harry, why did you decided to donate? You are young, no one expects you to.*

**HP:** *The safety of my loved ones is something I'm unable to put a price on. Your article left us quite worried, so my godfather and I took this decision.*

**RS:** *I thank you for your kindness, most of the children your age are more concerned on buying the fastest broom on the market (I congratulated our selfless hero, let me also remind you that last year he also donated to Saint Mungo's). My next question is for Lord Black, how much money you donated?*

**SB:** *We donated a million galleons (I must admit, my dear readers, that at this moment I was unable to hide my astonishment). However, we did it under the condition that only Madam Bones is able to withdraw money and use it as she sees it convenient. The money was not given for frivolities, but to equip our Aurors with necessary materials and give them proper training.*

**AB:** *This donation has helped in ways that you are unable to imagine and I thank them once again, we have been receiving recruits who are more than capable and in less than seven years we will be able to regain our strength. I have to thank Mister Potter once again because he also recommended us a magnificent potions mistress that is giving our recruits remedial training and a duellist champion that is putting them to shape. I thank you, Rita, and the people who reacted in time because our department has never been stronger and even Auror Moody returned to active duty.*

**RS:** *I'm glad I was able to help, Madam Bones. Though I have to ask you if any escaped prisoners had been sighted.*

**AB:** *We have been receiving some reports that we were unable to confirm, but we will be ready to act and apprehend those criminals.*

**RS:** *Thank you all for the interview and for the protection you are giving us.*

*My dear readers, I was pleased to see that now our Aurors will be receiving the necessary equipment, but let's not forget that we can help them and at the same time protect ourselves*

*by always carrying our wands and walking in groups of three or more. I hope you enjoyed this article and may Mother Magic bless you!*

Harry read the article with a rare smile adorning his face, the traditional farewells would not go unnoticed by the old families and would pass by as a non-conventional farewell the ones who did not know of or remembered the old ways. It was the beginning of re-introducing their traditions into society and eventually make them part of everyday life. He was pleased to see that on the subscriptions list, many names were appearing in dark ink. Soon, the Prophet would be forgotten.

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Albus Dumbledore was frustrated, all the regulations on Aurors had been abolished, and including the ones he had fought so hard to establish in order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. However, the thing that frustrated him the most was that the leaders of the three factions had gone against the creature regulation, he didn't know if they were forced or they did it by their own free will, but if he had debated with them, his image would be the last thing to suffer. Another thing that frustrated him was Sirius' elusive nature. He would be lying if he said he wasn't worried about the things that he was teaching Harry. The worst part probably was the man's decision to introduce Harry to the politic world.

The boy's fame was already a dangerous weapon, but when you added his fortune and his family's background... Harry was young and impressionable. People would do anything to gain his influence, they would tear him down and corrupt him in the process. Why was he the only one to see this? Somehow, he had to find a way of protecting the boy and ensuring he chose the right path.

Now, however, Albus had other worries, such as why Augusta was taking a strong stance for the use of curses when she was known for loathing anything related or even close to dark magic. Or why Lucius Malfoy was taking a pro-creature stance when the man was a known believer, not to say fanatic, of blood supremacy, also why he had voted for abolishing the Auror regulations. Voldemort was back and already planning his comeback so Malfoy's actions made no sense. What was happening? Maybe he was placed under the imperius or someone had blackmailed him. He needed to send Severus and find out why was one of the most politically powerful Death Eaters acting in such a way.

Thinking about Severus brought him another headache and a few doubts. He had always known the man was no teacher, but having facts slapped in his face in such a public way was a humbling experience. He needed the young man more than ever because of Tom's return, but the Board of Education was firm, for a change. Once more Albus vouched for Severus and once again his place in the school was dangling on a thread. Everyone was demanding results and the slightest of Severus' infractions would have them both out of the castle. He needed to have a stern talk with the man. His teaching methods would no longer be tolerated.

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Lucius Malfoy was relaxing with his beautiful wife, who was reading the new newspaper with a small smile. He admitted that the new newspaper was better than the Prophet could ever hope to be, he especially enjoyed their traditional greeting and the parts of history most had forgotten. Seeing his wife and knowing his son would come to dine with them and tell

them about his day with his friends filled him with joy. The weeks his family left were necessary for him to understand the loneliness and the pain of not having them by his side. He decided that no ideology was worth losing his beloved family. Not once he regretted this decision and he was sure he never would. Even if his relationship with his son was not the best, it was improving day by day and he loved the new way he and his family communicated with each other.

"I think you will love this article," said Narcissa, passing him the newspaper. If the headlines were any indication, he would indeed love this article.

## ***HOGWARTS: THE LAUGHING STOCK OF MAGICAL EUROPE!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My dear readers, you read it right! I don't know how to deliver this news, so I will be blunt. Hogwarts is no longer the finest magical institution and has not been for almost three centuries. Even the other schools in the country are ranked higher! My last article contained information about the subpar potions professor and my curiosity perked at the education other schools offer. Much to my dismay, I discovered the jewel of our crown was not considered a decent magic school by the ICW; therefore the OWLS and NEWTS that we take have no value outside of Britain! Further investigation led me to find the reasons why our education has been so lacking, and to my deep shame, I must agree.*

*Most magical communities - especially the United North American Tribes, the Asian Empire, the Amazonic Nation, and the Central Africa Clan - teach children from age eight. However therein does not lie the only differences, specializing at a certain branch of magic is encouraged from age thirteen, and unlike to our electives in Hogwarts (which are normal classes in other countries), they have a wide variety. Specializations include healing, duelling, warding, spell crafting, blood magic, elemental magic, runes mastery, rituals, and the list goes on. I felt your horror at such topics being taught to children, but further investigation led me to astounding results. Magic such as blood magic or elemental magic is not seen as dark in any other place outside of Europe! People use elemental magic for crops, blood magic is used to protect family members from anyone who wishes them harm, and rituals are made to thank Mother Magic and to ensure she keeps flowing in their descendants. Most magical communities don't have a term for squib because they don't exist! I was so surprised about this information because we are taught that they are dark arts, only used for evil, but other countries consider them sacred magic.*

*Knowing this led me to a dire realization: in a war, our country wouldn't survive. We limit ourselves so much that runes are considered a specialization while other countries consider it general knowledge. What should we do to remedy this situation? I propose adding little by little other subjects. As you may remember, most of the free time in Hogwarts, which was quite a bit, was spend being bored or in utterly unproductive hobbies. I also discovered that there are at least five teachers per subject, each teaching a certain age group while in Hogwarts we have a teacher per subject for all the school. Are we overworking our teachers? Where is the money of the school fees and the stipend the Ministry gives the school going each year?*

*The ICW has an especial curriculum that most schools adhere to, the students that graduate from a school that does not is forced to take a standardized test to work in any other country. I got a list of the students that passed the test and only five names belonging to our country are available: Filius Flitwick, Albus Dumbledore, Lily Evans, William Weasley, and Charlie Weasley. If the current headmaster knew about this situation, why didn't he try to remedy the situation? This perturbing information forced me to beg Madam Marchbanks, the Head of the Education Regulation Department and Governor of the Wizard Examination Authority, for an interview. I invite you to read the revelations that are written below.*

**RS:** *Madam Marchbanks, thank you for meeting me.*

**GM:** *After all the information you gave me is the least I can do.*

**RS:** *Am I correct to assume you were not aware of the situation?*

**GM:** *To my great shame. I dismissed Filius multiple times when he came to speak to me about how basic our education was... I also remember Lily Potter sending me quite a long letter and her results of the ICW standardized test. I believed them to be overachievers, now I take this as an opportunity to apologize in a public way.*

**RS:** *I appreciate your honesty Madam, what did Albus Dumbledore do to improve the education in his position as headmaster? He was among the people who took those tests.*

**GM:** *I had no idea he had! He did nothing, even when I ask him year after year to change that ghost he keeps as history teacher.*

**RS:** *I do remember seeing that students who take history NEWTS have diminished by almost 90%, which is a shame for a core subject.*

**GM:** *Indeed. But now we have a valid reason to exert our authority in school. I promise we will ensure our education improves. Albus is no longer in charge of the personnel.*

**RS:** *May I ask the reason why? He is the headmaster.*

**GM:** *Albus is a good man and he has faith in people. He vouched for Severus Snape in order for the man to remain the castle.*

**RS:** *That is terrible! Many students were terrified of the man. How is it possible for him to be allowed to continue teaching? (at this revelation, my fellow citizens, I admit I lost my composure. I will never forget the frightened children or their teary eyes, telling me about the professor who enjoyed instilling fear in them).*

**GM:** *To my shame, I admit that I wasn't firm enough. Albus promised that Severus would change and I want to believe in him. However, both will be under scrutiny, the moment the professor does something wrong don't be afraid of sending me a letter, even taking points without a valid reason will cost him his job.*

**RS:** *I'm glad that you have taken an active role Madam and I don't doubt we will see results in the near future. Though I'm curious about who do you think should be the next headmaster*

*or headmistress?*

**GM:** *I would like to say that Minerva is the best option, but the recent years I have seen a professor with impeccable conduct who is the first to contact the authorities in an emergency. Filius Flitwick has proved to be an honourable man that puts as a priority the safety of the children, I believe he would be the best option if Dumbledore were to leave.*

**RS:** *I confess I was hoping for him. I confess he was my favourite teacher when I was in school. His office was always open and he had this delicious chocolate treats that he animated when I was really sad. Thank you for this interview, Madam.*

**GM:** *Thank you for bringing this to my attention dear, I promise things will change for the better.*

*As you read above, my dear witches and wizards, Madam Marchbanks will ensure Hogwarts is once again amongst the best schools in the continent. Now though, I'm forced to ask if Albus Dumbledore is fit for the position as headmaster. If he has done nothing to improve our education, can he be trusted with such an important position? As we know, he has contributed for so long to our society that maybe we should allow him to rest, he is an elder after all. Maybe it's time to appoint a new headmaster and allow Mister Dumbledore to enjoy his retirement. May Mother Magic bless our children!*

"I hope this will be used to kick Dumbledore from the school, but knowing the man, he will talk his way out of it. The good thing is that he is running out of favours and Madam Marchbanks is looking for excuses to dismiss the man," he told his wife.

"Who do you think should be the next headmaster?"

"I don't know, McGonagall would have been the one I chose but Flitwick has earned my respect."

"I know, Draco told me about what happened when they found little Luna locked in an abandoned classroom. Flitwick gave months of detention and the house had no points, to this day no one in the house dares to bully another person... I also remember him finding me crying after a blond idiot rejected me, he took me to his office and gave me one of the most delicious biscuits I have ever tasted, he also animated them. One of the cookies acted like the blond idiot who is now my husband," Narcissa informed him and he raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"I have no idea what are you talking about," Lucius said, looking bewildered and then sighing. "I remember the war," he said in a soft voice. "I remember seeing professor Flitwick and only my respect for the man forbade me to attack him even when he is a half-breed. It was the best decision I have ever taken... I have seen few people fight the way he did. If he were to become headmaster, I'm sure he will protect the children from the dark times are coming," he said showing the great respect he had for the man. Narcissa only nodded.

"Mistress, the friend Severus came to visit Master Lucius," Kreacher popped in and informed the couple.

“Thank you Kreacher, could you please make some snacks for them? Lucius will be going.”

“Yes, Kreacher will. Mistress is so kind,” the elf sobbed and popped away.

“I will be going. Do you want me to invite him to dinner?”

“No, Draco is still at odds with him and with good reason, if I may add. I will be in my study,” she informed her husband and left the garden after giving Lucius a kiss that heated his core.

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Severus waited for Lucius to arrive, and the man did with a smile on his face. It was obvious the situation with his family had improved, either that or he had lost his mind at last because there were few reasons to be happy at the time.

“It has been a long time Severus,” his friend greeted.

“It has, I’m going to assume your family is good again.”

“It is. Draco has matured so much. I’m proud of him,” he informed with a smile.

“I’m glad to hear that... He still hates me,” Severus admitted with a sigh.

“But you still have not changed. My son values his friends as his own family.”

“I tried to, but the Potter brat is insufferable... It doesN't matter, the article that Skeeter published has parents claiming for my head. I have to be on my best behaviour because a single complaint and I'm out,” Severus said, wishing to have firewhisky at hand.

“You can always resign and work in another place.”

“Not any longer. Our Lord is back Lucius, he will need me as a spy once again,” he said and observed the blond man, not expecting a stony expression to replace his affable one.

“I was hoping you changed,” Lucius said in a soft voice, his words caught Severus unaware. “I’ll tell you this only once Severus, and you will decide what to do. During the last war, I imperilled my family to serve a Lord that rewarded us with pain. Not this time. I have decided to make my family proud. We’ll stand against him this time. You are my best friend and that is why I’m telling you this. If you go to him this time, Draco will never forgive you and neither will I, you can join us or you can join him... I hope you will join us, my friend, because I will always choose my family,” Lucius said with a serious expression and left the room.

Whatever Severus had been expecting this was not it, Lucius had been a loyal fanatic but now... Should he tell this to Dumbledore? Maybe not, otherwise, he would find a way of using the Malfoy family, something he would never allow. But what should he do now? If he didn't choose to be a spy, Dumbledore would guilt-trip him once again, he sealed his fate the day he went to him instead of telling the Potters. Now, it was time to pay for his mistakes.

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Harry and his friends were relaxing in the lounge after a brutal training session. Professor Flitwick enjoyed reminding them not to get overconfident with their new skills. Ella brought them all drinks and snacks, which almost disappeared under the assault of famished teenagers

“Have you bought all your materials?” Flitwick asked them.

“Yes, we learnt to go at the beginning of the summer to avoid being trampled,” Daphne told the man, making him laugh merrily.

“That is indeed true, I’m glad I was not the only to figure that out. This term you will begin visiting Hogsmeade,” the man told Harry.

“Yes, I think it will be good to clear my mind. Though if it were for them, I would never go out,” he accused the rest of his friends.

“We don’t know where the fugitives are, that is true. However, you are all able to protect yourselves,” the man reminded them looking proud.

“But not good enough to land a spell on a professional duellist,” Theo complained.

“I have more than half a century of experience under my belt, so I would be disappointed if you managed to defeat me when you are still learning. If it makes you feel better, I have been getting better, or rather regaining my skills, a few decades without practice can do that to you,” the man chuckled, enjoying his food.

“Besides, my brother already opened branch offices in Hogsmeade, so there will always be reinforcements if needed,” Elizabeth said, taking a spoonful of ice cream.

“Yes, I must congratulate you again for all the help you are giving those people Harry, few think about them the way you do,” Filius said with a bright smile.

“There is no need, they are people and need to be treated as such,” Harry dismissed the congratulations with a wave.

“I’m sure your mother is proud of you,” he told the boy, who let out a small smile in response. “Anyways, did any of you advanced with the patronus?” the professor asked, having decided that if dementors were going to be let loose, the least he could do was teach his students how to defend themselves, and was pleased when most nodded.

“Most of us are able to produce wisps, though Elizabeth and Luna are able to produce corporeal ones,” Blaise said, signalling the youngest girls.

“I’m proud of you, that is more than many adults are able to do. I’m sure you all will be able in the future, though I’m surprised Harry has not overworked himself to try to get it.”

“Being honest, I have not tried the spell. Aunt Eleadora is a slave drive... I will try at school,” he informed the man, who chuckled at his antics.

“It's good to know that you will eventually try. Are you ready to leave for school then?”

“Yes professor, though we will be needing lots of chocolate,” Luna said with a dreamy sigh.

“Anyhow, I wanted to ask you something, Professor Flitwick,” Harry said, smiling at Luna.

“Of course,” the man agreed.

“I’m sure you know Rubeous Hagrid, the gamekeeper. I have talked with the man and he has been very kind to us, he even collected pictures of my parents and gave them to me. I want to ask why he lives in that hut and not inside the castle, or if a donation would be able to give him a better place to live... I also wanted to ask you if you think it is possible for him to reassume his studies,” Harry told the older man with a serious expression.

“Hagrid is indeed a good man. When he was expelled, he had no place to go. His mother left when he was young and his father just died, Albus recalled as many favours as he could to find him a place. At last, Armando agreed to hire him as a gamekeeper but he had to live outside the castle. He built his cabin himself, Hagrid worked really hard for everything he has Harry, but I’m sure an anonymous donation for the gamekeeper will be appreciated. When the Ministry snapped his wand he kept the pieces and read tons of books about wandlore to try and repair it. He did it with some success, which is remarkable. When possible I give him lessons,” the man reminisced with a sad smile.

“I want to help him, the dragon handlers in the reserve he went to visit were amazed by the easiness with which he managed dragons. They also told me how surprised he was at having a proper bed and bathroom. I cannot allow a person to live that way.”

“You are a good person Harry, few people have tried to help him. I don’t know whether he will accept the job or not, but I’m sure that you can find him teachers. I don’t know how hard will be to make sure he can take his OWLS and NEWTS, but many of my students work at the Ministry and I can ask around,” he promised and Harry nodded.

“I will send him a letter to inform him, if he accepts the job there will be no further need because he can take his tests abroad,” he promised and Filius nodded, beaming at him.

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Remus Lupin was sitting in the last compartment of the last wagon of the train, knowing it was usually empty. He was impressed to see how spacious and well-furnished it was, resembling a lounge more than a compartment. Perhaps if he had known, he would have ridden here instead of the crappy ones, but being fair, most places would pale compared to this.

As he got lost in thought, he pondered his strained relationship with Sirius and the nonexistent relationship with Harry. Dumbledore promised everything would be better this year because they would be closer and at least establish rapport. If he was honest, he didn't believe a word the man said. Remus was so sure he had been doing the right thing by informing the headmaster about everything he knew about the boy, but nothing had gone well ever since.

All his contacts within the werewolves that Harry was thinking about hiring cut their ties with him and every time he met with the boy he felt him even colder than the last. Sirius had



been harsh with him the last time they fought, stating that he couldn't have Harry and stab him on the back at the same time. Sirius had also screamed some facts Remus wanted to believe were not true, such as why Dumbledore signed his illegal incarceration when he gave Snape a second chance after all the crimes he had committed. Or why Harry was sent to Petunia, who in turn sent him to an orphanage. No matter how much he tried to deny it, Sirius had managed to plant the seeds of doubt and now he was when more confused than ever.

He heard steps approaching his compartment so he pretended to sleep, with his robe covering his face so the students would leave without bothering him. He heard the door opening and felt an intense stare boring into him and more people entering the place.

"I can't believe someone dared to invade our compartment," a feminine voice that sounded indignant in extreme complained.

"I was not expecting this either," a male agreed.

"Let's make sure this doesn't happen again," another male voice suggested.

"I don't think the others will be pleased, it's good he stayed back because his aunt wanted to speak with him," yet another male voice said.

"How do we tell our unwanted guest that he is invading our place?" another female voice asked and he was getting annoyed at being called an invader, maybe it was better if he just left.

"What are you waiting for?" a familiar voice asked and he froze in his place.

"Sorry Harry, but that man is in here," one of the boys said.

"Never mind that Draco, let's go in, we have more than enough space," he ordered and walked in.

"Who do you think he is?" one of the many boys asked.

"I'm not sure. Probably the new professor saddled with babysitting duty. I don't really care," Harry muttered. "Where are the others?"

"The twins always arrive when the train is about to part, Neville must be about to arrive or waiting at the platform. Daphne is going to help her sister to find a compartment with other first-"

"Alone? You let her go alone after what happened last year?" Harry asked in such a strained tone that Remus shuddered.

"Of course not. Terrence, Adrian, Neville, and Blaise are waiting for her to arrive so they can come together," one of the boys explained and the tense atmosphere disappeared.

"Good, I won't allow for anything similar to last year to happen again."

"We know," a soft female voice told him and silence descended.

He would be lying if he said he was not curious about Harry's friends, he was sure they were all Slytherins but there could not be possible so many males in the same year. Now he was confused, he heard the name Neville being mentioned and hoped it was Frank's son. Until now no surnames were mentioned but he didn't need to be a seer to know most of those children were Death Eater spawn and, by some strange reason, they befriended Harry Potter... Beyond befriending, they obeyed his orders and the idea of the boy he considered family at the top of the Slytherin chain appalled him. The door was opened and four people walked in.

"I apologize for our tardiness, Astoria wanted me to tell her even more about the sorting," a girl said with a clear voice.

"She also wanted to steal Adrian's chocolate," a male chuckled.

"That little brat stole my chocolate," another boy corrected with a sigh.

"It doesn't matter, we have more than enough," the girl interrupted, shutting them up.

"Who is that?" one of them asked.

"An invader with heavy sleep or penchant for listening to conversations," a girl sighed, once again, they remained silent.

Remus was curious because the children didn't speak in half an hour, not a single word. He paid closer attention to hear anything and noticed that not even their breaths or heartbeats could be heard and he almost gasped at the surprise. One of them had cast silently a *tacet spacium* on a widespread area, that spell was not taught at school for its difficulty and he admitted he was impressed. Unlike many others, this charm made an area totally silent for outsiders, excellent for spying and recognition missions. It had taken him three months to be able to cast it. The door was thrown open and two people ran inside.

"Sorry, everyone went berserk this morning when they noticed we were eating our last bar of chocolate!" one of them said.

"Well, Ron went red and mom screamed at us, but Bill was the one who suggested we may have bought it," another similar voice continued.

"Which we didn't, but mom apologized and Ron went even redder."

"It was funny, but now we want more because Bill stole our last piece," the other said while the one with similar voice muttered something about ugly older brothers under his breath.

"What is with siblings and stealing chocolate today?" another boy complained.

"We don't know, but it's delicious."

"Yeah, it was hard not to eat it all when Harry brought us some," the other agreed.

As Remus tried to put a face on all the voices, he noticed that everything went silent again. Oh well, at least he could try to sleep for real.

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“By the way, our mother loves the-” Fred was interrupted by Daphne placing a finger on her lips and walking towards them, pulling them towards the group. “I’m sorry, that man over there, we are not sure whether he is asleep or not,” she said pointing at the man, Terrence cast once again the spell and they began speaking.

“As I was saying our mother loves our newspaper and Bill does too.”

“So your brother is going to move or not?”

“He is, the bank approved his transference.”

“Though he is already searching for another place to live.”

“Yeah, mother is... special” George said with a huff.

“Talking about other things,” Blaise said before the topic turned dark. “The newspaper is doing great, we have much more subscriptions than we expected for the first months.”

“True, all of mum’s friends are now loyal readers and father’s acquaintances in the Ministry buy ours,” Draco said with obvious pride.

“Marcus told us this morning so many people are reading it that they are changing the Ministry subscription from the Prophet to ours,” Flora announced with a wide smile.

“Don’t forget this year you take your OWLs, you need to be prepared,” Harry told the older boys.

“Of course we will be, aunt Eleadora will rip us a new one if we dare to have less than twelve OWLs,” Terrence said, not quite joking.

“Yeah, we were stupid enough to take care of magical creatures and divination,” George winced.

“But we will sit for the exams of ancient runes, arithmancy, and theory of magic,” Fred said.

“Excellent, what did your parents say about your grades?” Harry asked and the twin’s enthusiasm drained away.

“Mum was too busy congratulating Perfect Percy and scolding Ron to notice,” Fred sighed.

“Dad was too busy working, but Bill was amazed,” George said with a small smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“I guess I never told you how proud of you I am,” Harry told the twins. “You have a talent for creating things that I have never seen before, don’t forget we will always support you, no matter what you decide,” he reassured the twins and all the Guild nodded. They were family after all.

“I’m hungry,” Luna said after long minutes of comfortable silence and they chuckled.

“Ella,” Harry called his friend who popped in.

“Are you hungry? Lea cooked delicious things!” the little one explained, excited.

“We are dear, could you bring us the food?” he asked and she nodded with a smile.

“It seems she was busy,” Theo said with a smirk.

“They are excited to make sweets, she has taken an especial fancy to decorate chocolate and is doing that almost all her free time,” Harry almost complained, pouting slightly at the notion. And if someone mentioned it later, he would deny it or wipe their memories, whatever worked best.

“With how fast everything sells it is not a surprise. Tell me you opened a branch office of Dulcis Magicae in Hogsmeade,” Draco demanded with narrowed eyes.

“It will open during our first Hogsmeade weekend,” he confirmed and the boy relaxed.

“Should we wake the man and give him food?” Blaise asked.

“He will awake if he is hungry, he may be tired so better not bother, but we will save him something,” Harry said and shrugged in response.

Hours passed by with the group of friends talking about their plans for the future, reading, or playing something. Everything was normal until an alarming gelid air invaded the compartment. Outside, everything was drowning in sinister shadows, a melancholic and desolate aura took hold of them. Luna’s eyes widened when a skeletal hand opened their compartment and a dementor swept in, no one moved until it focused on Harry, it began approaching him and he staggered. That moment she narrowed her eyes and a silvery hare erupted from her wand, expelling the dementor. The others were already surrounding Harry and the man that had been sleeping was wide awake, pointing his wand at the place the dementor occupied.

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Remus Lupin had fallen asleep after the silence lulled him to sleep, but something he had felt many times and abhorred every with all his heart woke him up. He saw the dementor and was about to cast a patronus when a little girl beat him to it, a full corporeal patronus expelled the dementor and returned the compartment to its previous atmosphere. He was looking at her with wide eyes when he saw Harry was sitting on the floor looking pale, he approached the boy and noticed he was already eating chocolate. He sighed in relief and walked towards the door when that girl blocked his path.

“Where are you going Mister Lupin?” she asked, how had she known his last name, he had no idea.

“I need to speak with the conductor of the train and make sure the other students are well,” he told the girl who kept blocking his path. He didn't miss her wand ready in her hand.

“You will not tell what happened in this compartment,” she said, while he was a man who had survived a war, the eyes of the smiling girl gave him chills.

“It is my responsibility as-” he tried to explain.

“You will not say a word,” a pale blond that he remembered as Malfoy's son said.

“That is information that can damage Harry’s reputation if it gets to the wrong ears,” a boy that was the carbon copy of Theodred Nott said.

“I won’t say a word, but I need to check on my students,” he said, giving up.

Although he was a grown adult he was outnumbered and, even if they were children, they were also students who produced patronus and tacet spacium as if they were simple levitation charms. He left to check on his other students with his curiosity wide awake, they were gifted children, there was no doubt, but who had taught them? What else they were capable of doing? Though he had promised to tell Albus everything he learnt about Harry, he had the feeling that if he revealed this information, there would be no turning back and loose not only the boy but also his best friend.

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“That was Remus Lupin,” Harry whispered now that he was more composed, swearing to dominate the patronus because he would never again feel this vulnerable. “I’m sure he will tell Dumbledore when he has the chance so we need to be careful.”

“I’m sorry,” Luna muttered looking at the floor.

“Don’t be, you were great,” Harry told the girl, managing to compose a weak smile.

He ate the chocolate that was handed to him, trying not to grimace at the taste. Luna forced them to take multiple bars and now he understood why. The little girl was a seer, not the kind that gave prophecies, but what was known as a savant seer. They were rare to the point people believed them to be a myth, they knew what they were going to need or whether or not it was a good decision. During wars, they were the most sought after because they knew what was the right course of action or who would be the best leader. Little Luna was invaluable, he needed to find ways of protecting her of anyone who might harm her for her gift. Until the moment only the Guild knew, every member promised to keep the secret under an unbreakable vow. Now that Dumbledore would be paying closer attention, it was time to upgrade their security.

“Who will give the speech this year?” he asked as a distraction.

“I think last year went well,” Draco said.

“But Marcus is no longer in school,” Hestia reminded the boy.

“I think Adrian should do Marcus’ part and the others stick to their previous roles,” Luna suggested with a smile, and what Luna suggested was always done.

“Don’t forget to come to our common room,” Daphne told the members who were not in Slytherin and they nodded.

“I guess I will be talking with the other prefects then,” Terrence sighed, he didn't like the idea of being chosen as one, but he admitted the position had some perks.

Harry was better by the time they arrived at the station and had to order his friends to act normal. They walked to the great hall with their heads held high and looked at the professor’s table with a smile, it was good to see some of his teachers. The Guild divided and each went to their house tables, they sat down in their usual place and waited for the new students to arrive. They did a few minutes later and he had to smile at their eyes full of wonder at the sight of the hall. After the sorting and feast finished, the headmaster stood up.

“Welcome to Hogwarts! Now that you are fed and watered I have some announcements to make. The Forbidden Forest is forbidden to all students. I also present you to the new defence against the dark arts teacher, Professor Remus Lupin!” he said and the students applauded. “I’m also sorry to inform you that our gamekeeper, Rubeus Hagrid has left the school in pursuit of his dreams. We have been unable to find another person to replace him, but please be prudent while walking on the grounds... It is also my duty to inform you that the Ministry has placed dementors in the village and around Hogwarts for our security. Therefore you are not allowed to be wandering on the grounds after six in the evening and all quidditch practices will take place in the morning or with the supervision of a teacher. Now, off you go!”

Harry and his friends left the hall with a smirk, Hagrid was so happy to be offered a job with dragons he cried and accepted on the spot. Arranging him a house with enough space for him and his giant Cerberus was not complicated, only a bit tricky. Now, he was living in a comfortable place doing what he enjoyed and Harry was happy for the man,

They arrived at their common room and said the password, the door opened and they walked to their usual place. As they decided, Adrian stood up with a serious expression, catching the attention of everyone in the room.

“Before the new students join us, is there someone who wishes to challenge the Guild?” he asked with a stony expression and no one answered, though he saw a group of seventh years with challenge blazing in their eyes. “It is good to know, don't forget our duty is to protect the house,” he said signalling to the room, a constant reminder of their power. At that moment the door opened and the prefects walked in, Terrence leading the group, he approached them and nodded.

“Thank you for escorting them,” Theo began with a gentle smile, dismissing the other prefects. “First I wish to welcome you all to the Noble House of Slytherin, I know the prefects already explained the basics of how the house works and Terrence told you about the Guild. We pride ourselves in our impeccable conduct and the excellent reputation we worked hard to earn. Therefore, we have strict rules to protect our status, we don't give second chances so don't break the rules,” he said with a serious tone, to which all the new students nodded. “First, the words mudblood, blood-traitor, and any other vulgar expressions are forbidden. You can believe in blood superiority as long as you don’t preach nor act on it, the moment that we discover you breaking this rule, you will be punished.

“I'm aware that many families are hosting the escaped death eaters, I'm aware that they may have filled your heads with their ridiculous beliefs, but that is no excuse. If someone is caught spreading nonsense, such as their parents promising the dark mark, the consequences will be dire,” he promised, looking at the older students, many paled and avoided his gaze. “Second, no bullying is allowed. If you ever feel the need to compensate your weakness by tormenting someone weaker than you, don't ever let them identify neither you nor the house. If we hear any whisper from a Slytherin breaking this rule and blemishing this House with their uncouth behaviour, there will be consequences. Third, always be polite. We are the house of cunning and ambition, it's always smart to keep all of your options available. From the smallest house-elf to the most annoying first-generation magical you are to be polite,” Theo finished his speech glaring at the older students to remind them that anything they had learnt during the summer stayed in their houses. “Any questions?” he asked the new students and no one moved.

“As you were told, we are the Slytherin Guild. It is our responsibility to take care of the House, which includes placing the rules and, unfortunately, punishing you when necessary,” Daphne announced in a clear voice that commanded the attention of the first years. “Our duty is to guide and protect the house, so if any of you has any problems with any subjects, we will assign someone to help you. Anything you need, don't be afraid to request it. Also, you have to designate a person in your year as representative. Don't forget the rules and you will enjoy all of the benefits the Guild has to offer,” she said and was pleased to see so many people nodding at her statement. “It is time for bed now, have a restful night,” she dismissed them and every Slytherin went to their rooms, leaving them as the only occupants of the room.

“That went better than last year,” Blaise mused.

“I spoke with them while we walked here, this bunch is smarter than last year and it seems Astoria adores Harry because many times I was interrupted by her telling her mates how perfect Harry is,” Terrence said the last part in a high pitched voice that earned him a playful swat on the arm, courtesy of Daphne.

“She does adore you, but that isn't important. Did you notice that group of seventh years? When Theo mentioned the dark mark they panicked, we have to keep an eye on them,” Daphne said, looking serious.

“Harry, we can use the map to track their movements. I will know if they ever decide to act,” Luna said with a smile and he petted her hair.

Whatever happened, they would be ready.

# The Price of Innocence

## Chapter Notes

I know that I said I would update twice a week, but I keep forgetting to log in. I really want chapters to release themselves, it is a hassle to do everything manually (sigh). Thank my dearly loved human for reminding me to upload this one ^.^

Either way, I hope you enjoy it!

Harry Potter was having breakfast when he felt the gaze of Remus Lupin on him. While he tried to ignore it, the constant scrutiny frizzled his patience. Though he was surprised by Dumbledore's lack of interest on him. Perhaps Remus kept his word and remained silent about the train incident. The sharp cries of the arriving owls interrupted his thoughts. He was pleased to see that most of the hall was receiving their newspaper, including the professors.

"Harry," Luna said, tugging his robe slightly. "Today you have to be the last of the line," she advised with that dreamy smile.

"We will," he promised, confused at the strange request.

"We also need to find a boggart, I'm sure Mister Filch will know," she said, taking a sip of her drink while Harry exchanged confused looks with Terrence.

"Why do we need a boggart?" Blaise asked, bewildered at the unusual request.

"To know how deep our loyalty runs," she said with an abnormal seriousness. "I have to get going, the walk to the greenhouses is long," she chirped and left the room with a jump in her steps.

"I guess we need a boggart," Daphne sighed, massaging her temples.

"I'm confused, but Luna knows best. So who will get the boggart?" Theo asked.

"I'll ask Mister Filch and then ask a school elf to retrieve it if he can, if not, I'm dragging Adrian with me," Terrence sulked while stabbing his breakfast.

"We can solve that later, now we have classes with Lupin and I'm curious," Harry commented, sharing a smirk with Daphne.

When the group arrived at the classroom, they noticed all the desks and seats were pushed against the wall, there was a simple closet in front of the backboard. They looked at each other and shrugged, deciding to wait in the entrance in order to keep distance with the professor.



Once all the students arrived, Lupin spoke. "Good morning class, my name is Remus Lupin. The way this subject will work is the following, read the theory in advance because we'll do the practical side in classes and I'll answer any questions in class. I'll give little homework, but I expect it to be done," he said and most students nodded. "Very well, can someone tell me what is a boggart?" he asked and a bushy-haired girl's hand flew up. The professor nodded at her when no one else volunteered.

"A Boggart is a shape-shifting creature that will assume the form of whatever most frightens the person who encounters it," she answered in a hurried breath and then glared at the back of the classroom, or better said, at the people there.

"Good, today you will confront one. So the boggart in the closet is still shapeless. Nobody knows what a boggart looks like when it is alone, but when I let it out, it will immediately become its victims' worst fear. The spell to confront one is Riddikulus, repeat with me Riddikulus. Excellent, don't forget that its worst weakness is laughter, so imagine something funny at the moment of casting the spell. Now, form a line to see and we'll start!" the man exclaimed. Gryffindors fought to be the first ones.

"So this is why Luna said we should be the last ones on the line," Draco muttered with a smirk.

"I guess this is the same reason she asked for a boggart," Blaise nodded, impressed.

Harry observed his fellow year mates as they confronted their fears, which were catalogued it for later, just in case. Some fears were deep, such as the one Gryffindor boy, whose greatest fear was a stoic man with similar features to him. Others were plainly ridiculous, such as the girl that screamed like a banshee at the sight of an earthworm. One, in particular, was especially confusing to him. It belonged to the Granger girl.

When she approached the boggart, it changed until it looked like a replica of him. Being honest, he was flummoxed at being the greatest fear of someone he talked to once more than two years ago. Though he took the opportunity to appreciate himself without the need of a mirror. He had grown much taller, something that he was proud of. The rigorous training professor Flitwick forced on them ensured his figure was aesthetically pleasing, another thing he was proud of. His hair and skin were perfect, as always. His eyes though, a look at them reminded him why he avoided his own gaze in the mirror.

"Once again I was the first in the year... No surprise there, though I'm offended you dared to think about surpassing me. All the professors love me, you know? No matter how hard you try to earn their favour, they will never choose you. I am, after all, everything you want to be. Let's be honest, I have more talent than you could ever dream to possess and loyal friends that adore me. I have the looks and you, dear, you are nothing special. Let's admit it, Hermione, you will never be able to surpass me. You are nothing compared to me," his replica said in a gentle voice that dripped persuasion.

Granger burst into tears and ran away. Harry had to fight with himself to control a frown that threatened to appear. All the class looked at him and he composed his best blank expression in return, many started to whisper and Lupin was looking at him. Daphne noticed the situation.

“You know? After talking to her once during our first year and she being the one who lied after getting jealous, you would think she got over her inferiority complex,” she said out loud, flipping back her hair.

“Well, she's always trying to murder Harry by sheer force of will, but I'm still surprised,” Blaise agreed with a nod.

“It doesn't matter, let's pretend this didn't happen,” Harry told his friends, hoping to leave the incident behind.

The class was reassumed but many people kept whispering to each other. At least they managed to do some damage control. At last, their turn arrived and Daphne was the next one to confront the boggart. Before the professor could release it, she spoke with that regal air of hers.

“Excuse me Professor Lupin, but the only way I'm willing to do this is with everyone leaving the classroom,” she said with seriousness, leaving the man speechless. “I'm heiress of the Noble House of Greengrass. I hope you understand that my father won't be pleased with the situation.” Before anyone could object, she added, “heirs are not seen in the same light as other students, while we have many benefits, we also have responsibilities. We are not allowed to make any kind of mistake because it will be reflected in our families. I personally envy other students way of life because the worst that a bad grade will cause them is a reprimand while, in my case, I will be severely punished because it reflects on my House,” she announced in a clear voice that conveyed regret.

The ones who were about to complain shut up. No one spoke about what happened behind the doors of Ancient Families. it was an inferred rule.

“Very well,” the professor sighed, either convinced with Daphne's explanation or unwilling to begin a family feud. He was about to signal the next when he noticed only Harry's friends remained. “Class dismissed, though the ones who didn't confront the boggart need to write a foot long essay about them.”

Harry only sighed, written assignments were evil.

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Albus Dumbledore was nursing a migraine induced by stress, though the firewhisky may have also been a contributor. Griselda Marchbanks had sent him a notice. The Board of Education would be doing random inspections in the school, if they found a teacher not doing an appropriate job, they would be dismissed. He sighed and began thinking on new prospects to fill the history position - it was obvious Cuthbert wouldn't be staying much longer.

This brought to mind the root of all his recent problems: Rita Skeeter. He hadn't found the slightest information about the newspaper's owners or the devilish woman's whereabouts, even with the promise of an exclusive interview. Few would understand his reasons to hide certain information and even less would support him. History was dangerous, the traditions of the magical world had created much prejudice. They were the reason blood purity existed and a contributor to Tom's obsession. The kinds of magic that had been restricted centuries ago presented an utmost threat - no one should have access to that information.

His musings were interrupted by the wards alerting him of Remus arrival and he composed himself. It was good Argus conveniently found a boggart and for the third years to study the creature. Albus needed to know what Harry's greatest fear to have an idea on how to begin guiding him. Tom was gaining strength day by day, the order was beginning to move but it wasn't enough. Hagrid left the school without looking back, thus his link with the giants was gone. The old man forced his mouth to compose a cordial smile for Remus.

"Good morning, I hope you enjoyed your class," he greeted the young man who was entering.

"It was different," Remus said and took a seat, waiting for him to talk.

"I see... How did your class do with the boggart?"

"Most did well enough, though a few had problems. May I ask what problem Miss Granger has with Harry?"

Albus' smile was almost painful.

"They had a small squabble during the first year and Miss Granger felt it was necessary to involve the teachers. Minerva got angry with the girl for her... let's say enthusiasm while telling her side of the story and not considering the other person perspective on the matter," Dumbledore explained without giving the specifics.

"I guess I will have to ask McGonagall then," the young man said and Albus sighed.

"I don't think that will be necessary, my boy, it was a children's quarrel. I'm sure none of them remembers it by now," he tried to appease Remus with his grandfather persona.

"Miss Granger still remembers it, so it must have been something important," Remus said with narrowed eyes. Dumbledore knew how to chose his battles so he gave up.

"If you must, though I must ask you how Harry and his friends did."

"They didn't - confront the boggart, I mean," the man informed him and Albus frowned.

"I know you have a soft spot for the boy, but you shouldn't give him special treatment," he admonished with obvious disapproval, to his surprise, Remus didn't even react.

"It wasn't favouritism, it was simple logic. Miss Greengrass called to my attention that, as heirs of notable families, they aren't allowed to expose themselves," Remus explained, closing his eyes and looking tired.

"Still Remus, they are students and it is your responsibility-"

"They aren't only students. If their parents catch a whiff they will be punished and you know so," the man interrupted him in a gruff tone.

"...You're right, but Sirius is not that kind of man."

“He isn't, but I'm sure many feuds would have been declared against me if I dared,” Remus sighed once again.

“I'm sure you are exaggerating Remus, Sirius wouldn't have declared a feud over something as menial as a classroom assignment,” the old man said with a smile.

“I'm not so sure, Sirius and I have distanced. The few times we meet we end up fighting and I have no relationship whatsoever with Harry. Besides, Harry and his friends have a pack mentality. If you attack one, you attack everyone,” Remus stated and rubbed his face in frustration. He didn't notice the defeated face of Dumbledore.

“I'm sure that this year you will be able to get close to the boy,” the old man consoled, knowing that his words were empty.

“I wouldn't hold my breath,” the younger male sighed and left the room.

Albus pulled his hair in frustration, Remus was giving up. Sirius was a lost cause, he had been from a young age. Nothing was going the way he wished. Alastor, an old friend of his, wasn't joining the order this time. The DMLE was better equipped than ever and he knew unnecessary carnage would be unavoidable, especially when Amelia Bones was in charge. If that was not enough, Severus was distant ever since he visited Lucius Malfoy, he didn't know what happened and the young man offered no explanation. His only link to Harry, Filius, rejected his offer to join the Order once again. Filius was never loyal to him, but until the moment, he had no problems with the man. The charms professor would have been an asset in more ways than one.

For some reason, Albus felt helpless. Perhaps he needed a new approach to the problem.

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Minerva McGonagall was correcting essays in her office, reading one with particular satisfaction. Harry Potter was the most talented student she had ever taught, she was sure James' talent paled compared to the one his son owned. The child was not only bright but also generous in extreme, always helping his classmates and had even managed to correct the Weasley twins. Somehow he managed to influence his house and now they set a high standard of conduct. Yes, she was proud of her favourite student. She eyed her fountain pen with a smile, it had engraved her name and a tabby cat, Harry gifted it to her last year and she had to smile at his sense of humour. No matter how similar he was to Lily, the boy possessed that unique spark that had once belonged to James. Someone knocked on the door and she composed her serious expression and flicked her wand to open it.

“Remus, it is a surprise to see you here” she greeted the man.

“Hello professor, may I have a short talk with you?”

“Of course, come in and close the door. Call me Minerva, we are colleagues after all,” she said with a gentle smile. “Want some tea?”

“No thank you, professor... I don't think you understand how much I cannot call you that” he said with a small smile.

“If you say so, take a seat.”

“Thank you, I wanted to ask you what Miss Granger’s problem with Harry is.”

“Ah, I see she has not gotten over it though I had some suspicions. She came to me a few days after they arrived during their first year, she accused Harry of bullying her during the train ride. I was sceptical but I still called him to my office. The version he gave me was different from the girl’s so I ended up calling another boy that had been present. He confirmed Harry was nothing but polite. It was also curious that she came to tell me after so many days, which coincided with the day Filius gave Harry advanced work. I punished her with the exact same punishment she requested for the boy. A shame because that girl was so promising, but she gets blinded by her desire to be the best in everything and loses her focus when someone does better,” the woman explained with a pronounced scowl.

“So the girl is jealous,” Remus concluded.

“I’m afraid she is more than jealous... Harry possesses a talent for magic I have never seen before, all his transformations are made in his first try, second at most. Then, he creates marvellous works of art, let me show you,” the woman muttered and took out a beautiful ornate chest from a drawer. “I keep all his works, everything inside including the chest was made by him, I think James and Lily would be proud,” she said, her lips stretching in a warm smile.

Remus' eyes grew wide at her last phrase, the box was what most artisans would consider a work of art, inside there were many pieces that caught his attention. A bronze needle so exquisite he would have sworn Minerva was trying to prank him in revenge for all the problems he had caused while being a student. That is until he saw his initials emblazoned in every single piece.

“He must be even better than James,” he muttered, still incredulous.

“He is, no matter the subject he is always excelling. Though, to my great regret, the area that interests him the most is not transfiguration but charms. He and Filius are close as they can be, the last thing that he told me is that they are working on the fifth year curriculum,” she commented once again taking him by surprise. “He is Lily's son through and through. Harry told me he was planning to compete at a professional level like his mother once did,” she said with obvious pride and a beaming smile.

“I had no idea that Lily duelled,” he muttered in shock.

“How do you think she managed to curse the four of you when you got on her nerves? Or why none of the older girls ever tried to bother her? Or why Slytherins were wary around her? She competed on an international level, though she stopped when the war began,” Minerva sighed, reminiscing one of the most brilliant students that had grazed the school.

“I see, I never thought of it, but now that you mention it... Did you know that in the werewolf’s camps during the war everyone called her the red devil? She was never called by her name... James was a lucky man,” he mused with a smile.

“Both were,” she agreed.

“Thank you for your time professor, have a good day,” he told the woman.

Minerva smiled at the man, remembering with fondness the shy student he once was.

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Remus learnt more in one day about his best friend’s son than he had all these years and he no longer knew what to think. Every time he talked with Dumbledore, he made it sound as if Harry was some kind of troublemaker that needed to be watched... Now though, he realized there were possibilities of it not being true. He would go to speak with professor Flitwick, but being honest, the jovial man almost always made him feel as he was looking at his soul. He was a bit intimidated because of that and maybe also because the short man had no qualms on delivering the truth as it was.

The seeds of doubt were steadily growing and never before had so many questions plagued him.

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“Lupin was looking at us again during lunch,” Hestia sighed.

“To be honest, the man is getting on my nerves,” Theo confessed.

Harry nodded, two weeks passed since the boggart incident. They had their own in an abandoned classroom but were waiting for an appropriate day to confront it. This meant they were waiting for Luna to say it was time.

“Harry today would be good for you to speak with him. Remus Lupin is confused, but he is starting to open his eyes. Now he needs one more push, go to him,” Luna encouraged him.

“It is our free evening, I will go to his office now,” Harry said, but didn't wait for a response.

“Please do that, we will be waiting for you. We should also confront the boggart when you come back,” she said and everyone agreed. “I’m sure Tubby or Ella can pop Marcus in.”

Harry left the room while Luna planned, the little girl said it was necessary, he had no idea why and neither did the others but everyone agreed with her. He was sure it was going to be important, but now he concentrated on the conversation he needed to have with his godfather’s friend. He walked with decided steps towards the man’s office, planning on how to phrase the truth in order for the man to at least consider listening to him. He arrived at his office and knocked on the door, it was opened soon after by a tired-looking man who widened his eyes in surprise at seeing him.

“Good evening professor, I need to speak with you,” he told the man.

“Of course, come in and take a seat,” the man agreed promptly, they walked to his desk and sat on opposite sides of it.

“I need to ask you something and I need to know the truth,” Harry said with a serious expression that put Remus on edge. “If I trust you with something, would you go to

Dumbledore and tell him?"

"I... Well, he is a wise man," Remus whispered, wincing at his words.

"That is not what I asked but it is an answer in itself. That is the same reason I don't trust you," the boy stated with a slight frown.

"...You don't understand. He is the man that gave a chance when no one else did," Remus whispered lifelessly, the unimpressed look he received in return forced him to close his eyes.

"Now that we are being honest I have a few things to say. Have you ever asked yourself why you were the only werewolf to attend Hogwarts? If Dumbledore wants to help so much why doesn't he accept more? I can assure that there is no lack of children who suffer lycanthropy," Harry stated and Remus' face slackened in surprise, having never considered the idea. "He is an influential man, if he wanted to, he could have ensured more receive education, but why doesn't he? He is the Chief Warlock, his signature was needed to imprison Sirius without a trial. Either he is irresponsible enough to sign a blank paper or he was aware he sent my godfather to Azkaban without a trial. He is a master's legilimens, why didn't he ensure that the Order had no spies? Why did he offer a Death Eater a steady job and he forgot about your existence? Why did he send me to the Dursleys? Why did he seal my parents' will? Many other guardians were named by them, in that way, I wouldn't have grown in an orphanage."

Harry took a deep breath to control his temper, maybe talking with Lupin was a mistake.

"I will say this once and only once Remus, you are either with us or with him. It is your decision," he stated and stormed out of the office.

Once he was calm enough, he decided he needed anger management therapy or something similar. Having emotional outbursts was not beneficial.

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Remus Lupin screamed in rage, it couldn't be true. Dumbledore helped him, but then why no other werewolves could say the same? During the war, he took the most dangerous assignments, ones that sent him to the enemy lines and every day was a fight for survival. He hadn't told his friends why he kept leaving or why he looked tired, he knew that was the reason Sirius believed him to be the spy. And yet he remained silent because Dumbledore asked him to.

Deep understanding struck him and hysterical laughter broke the room's silence.

Remus remembered James being placed as head boy, though it was against the rules to have two people belonging to the same House in the position. Not to forget the fact that James wasn't exactly an example to follow. He remembered James complaining about it because it was unfair and he had done nothing to earn the position, which meant James really didn't want to patrol the hallways or actually do homework.

He remembered Lily being furious at the situation and drafting a letter to the headmaster with James' help. Nevertheless, they were dismissed. Did he want both of them together? Remus

asked himself at the moment but dismissed the idea as ridiculous. They reached a truce in sixth-year after James discovered she was dating someone, but they were barely cordial to each other.

However, Remus would never forget the teachers' worry at the idea of losing Lily if she ever left the country, as she was planning to do. That was during their seventh year, when the war began turning more violent. Was Dumbledore planning on keeping Lily by making her fall in love? He always wondered but never dared to think about. Now though, he could remember small things similar to this one and his blood froze.

Perhaps it was time to confront Dumbledore and accept that the man was only a human, just like him.

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Albus Dumbledore was doing paperwork, the terrible bane of his existence.

The inspection took place yesterday, Cuthbert was giving classes when they entered and Albus winced at the sight. Most students were sleeping while the few who were awake were doing some kind of homework or playing with each other. Cuthbert was asked to retire by a polite curse breaker, the ghost smiled and said: "Took them long to find my replacement, I have wanted to investigate that war everyone is talking about for some time now." With that response the ghost dug a deep hole for Dumbledore, now he had infractions for not asking the man a simple question that never occurred to him, he also lost his opportunity to find a replacement.

Now, the new history professor was an old curse breaker who wanted a tranquil retirement and loved teaching. The students would be in for a shock because, as old as the man was, he was strict and demanded nothing less than excellence.

Severus' classes were also supervised and Albus was on edge for a whole hour, in the end, nothing wrong happened, much to his relief. The moving stairs were deemed dangerous and seeing they had no gamekeeper, Dumbledore was ordered to place a barrier on the forest or suffer another infraction. He was also ordered to hire new teachers for either the first two years or the last two, if he didn't they would place someone. If that was not bad enough, an audit was ordered and he needed to submit many things he would prefer forgotten and never looked upon.

Albus sighed and buried his face in his arms, Madam Marchbanks was ruthless and more would follow. He looked to the side and almost screamed in frustration, his inkpot was turned and all his hours of hard work were now nought, all his paperwork was drenched in ink. He sighed once again and vanish it, grimacing when he saw blank parchment. The wards alerted him of someone coming. An angry-looking Remus barged in his office and walked in front of his desk, maybe it was indeed time to retire.

"What can I do for you, Remus? You must have something important to say if you barged in my office that way," he admonished the young man.

"I do. Many things, actually. The first is why you sent Sirius to Azkaban?" Remus asked. Albus sagged in his seat, the following conversation was not one he wanted to have.



“I didn't know he was innocent and-”

“I'm smarter than that,” the man growled.

“I believed he was the traitor.”

“You are a legilimence, why didn't you ask to see him? Or grant him the rightful trial? You are the Chief Warlock.”

“It was a mistake, but at the time I believed it was necessary.”

“As sealing the Potters will? I was told there were other guardians for Harry.”

“I believed that Petunia would raise him better. I may be biased, but -” he tried to explain.

“She sent him to an orphanage! Why were you not monitoring him?”

“I admit that was also a mistake,” the man sighed, the weight of guilt constricting his chest.

“I remember teachers whispering about how the bright Lily had plans of leaving Britain. Was she the reason you made James Head Boy?” Remus asked, leaving Dumbledore speechless.

Albus indeed remembered being amazed by how talented Lily Evans was. He remembered she took the ICW standardized test during her sixth year in preparation to leave. He knew the war would only worsen and couldn't afford to lose such a powerful warrior. For a time, he even played with the idea of potions out of sheer desperation, but she had the makings of a potion mistress and already she checked everything she consumed as training. He dismissed the idea and named James Potter Head Boy, hoping the boy found a way of convincing her to stay. Somehow they fell in love, an unexpected but welcomed surprise. It seemed his silence lasted too long, because Remus took it as a confirmation.

“I had my doubts at the moment, but I dismissed them. Do you know what they had in common? It was their mutual dislike over you,” he informed and Albus flinched at the unnecessary information. “They only began trusting you when they joined the Order, but I see we all made a mistake. I trusted you when you said Harry was being raised by a loving family, I trusted you when you implied he was some kind of trouble maker that needed constant vigilance and I told you everything I knew about him. Even though I'm thankful for your help, I don't think I can keep helping you,” Remus said and left his office.

Albus buried his face in his hands... This was not supposed to happen. He always wanted to protect his people, hence, he shielded them away from the harsh reality. They didn't need to know how many were sacrificed to ensure their safety, they didn't need to know how dangerous was all the information he was forced to hide. He carried the burdens of his heinous acts, all to protect his people.

At the end of the day, he is a leader, and a leader's duty is to do what is necessary, no matter how terrible. It is his unwanted duty and Albus would assume it until the bitter end.

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Harry Potter arrived at the Guild's headquarters, fuming after the meeting with Lupin. He took deep breaths to calm himself when Luna approached him, not willing to lose his temper. With no words, she hugged him and he hugged the girl back, she always knew what he needed and she reminded him so much of Elizabeth it was hard to remain angry. Once he was calm, she led him to where a portable wardrobe was and the others were lined.

"Are we in classes?" he teased.

"We will go in the order that we arrived," she said, signalling the others and he raised an eyebrow at Marcus, he shrugged and Harry had to smile.

"She ordered my elf to kidnap me so here I am. I'm glad though, Tubby is better doing paperwork," Marcus explained with a sheepish smile.

"I guess it is my turn then," Harry announced but Luna pulled him back by his sleeve before he could open the wardrobe.

"Not yet, you will be last and Theo first," she told him and he nodded.

Luna opened the wardrobe and a replica of him emerged. The eyes of his replica were emotionless and his features were contorted in a sneer, it walked towards Theo.

"Mmm, why did I even give you a chance? I don't even know why I wasted my time with you, Theodore. You are useless," his replica spat.

Harry looked at the boy, he was taking hurried breaths and his hands were shaking. He walked towards him and placed a hand on his trembling ones. When Theo looked at him, he gave him a small smile, trying to communicate without words how valuable he was.

"Riddikulus!" he exclaimed and his replica's clothing became something the headmaster would approve of.

The boy smiled but still looked perturbed by what had happened. The next one was Daphne, who was looking even more emotionless than normal. The boggart, much to his surprise, was once again him, but this time he looked older, a disdainful sneer curled his lips.

"Ah, Daphne, after all this time you proved me wrong, your father was right. You are a female and will never be as useful. Look at the others! They are doing great things for me and you... You dear, are nothing," it announced.

Daphne didn't react in any notable way, but her shoulders were tense and her hands in tight fists. The way he did with Theo, Harry placed a hand in hers, drawing lazy circles on her wrist, she looked at him at last.

"Riddikulus," she whispered with a shaky voice, his doppelganger's hair turned hot pink.

One by one the members of the Guild took their turns with the boggart, much to Harry's bewilderment, he turned out to be their greatest fear. Marcus' boggart was him being expelled of the Guild for some terrible mistake. Draco's boggart appeared as him in the border of death because the boy failed him and Blaise's was him sneering at the boy for being unable to

perform at the standards he desired. The youngest twins fear was him punishing them, the same way their father and aunt once did.

Fred's greatest fear was him dismissing him as yet another Weasley and George's was to fail the Guild. Terrence was frightened of not being useful enough in the future and Adrian's fear was Harry being disappointed because he had turned the way his father always wanted. Luna's deepest fear was to not belong anymore and Neville's was being not good enough to continue being a member of the Guild. One way or another, their deepest fear centred on them disappointing him... Until that moment, he didn't understand how deep the impact of his acceptance was in his friends, but he did now. They were loyal to him and he swore to himself to be loyal to them in exchange. He was the last one to confront the boggart; strangely enough, his look-alike emerged. Being his own fear was not something he expected.

However, the person that walked out of the closet was not him. His hair lacked those red highlights he loved and inherited from his mother, his hair was a mess, and its clothes were shabby... Its eyes looked alive and there was a small smile on his lips. Harry felt the blood leave his face.

"My greatest fear is to be normal," he announced to the others, forcing a smile on his face. "I think we all have learnt something today, that our worst fears are ridiculous because they will never happen."

"It's true, they will never happen because no matter what we do, Harry will accept us. We are the Guild and we are family," Luna said, in one of her rare serious moments, but then she began giggling in delight and hugged Marcus, much to his bewilderment.

Harry tried not to look at his doppelganger, whose eyes didn't leave him until his friends forced it back to the wardrobe. What he saw was something he would never tell a soul, it was his biggest secret. But he wouldn't forget those warm eyes and those plain features that made his replica look content.

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Remus Lupin was having an existential crisis while he nursed a bottle of cheap firewhisky. For the first time in his life, he dared to confront his hero. Once he thought about it, it was obvious Harry told him nothing else than the harsh truth. Now, everything changed. He would send a letter to Sirius and talk with Harry tomorrow... Maybe he needed to speak with professor Flitwick. But that could wait until tomorrow. First, he planned on nursing his firewhisky and, if possible, take care of a hangover the next morning.

Next morning, he was woken by an elf that was muttering about 'drunken masters and their lack of respect towards Lady Hogwarts'. Remus groaned. The last thing he needed was to be scolded by a disapproving house-elf. The elf scowled at him when he noticed he was awake and popped out of the room after giving him the stink eye. Remus sighed, today he had classes most of the day, so he would ask Harry to meet him after dinner. It was time to apologize and beg for forgiveness. After catching his reflection, Remus decided to make himself presentable and speak with Flitwick before classes.

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Filius Flitwick was enjoying a fascinating book about physics when someone knocked on his door, curious on who may be visiting this early, he flicked his wand for it to open.

“Remus! It's a surprise to see you here,” Filius squeaked at one of his ex-students.

“Good morning, I hope I'm not interrupting.”

“Not at all, come on in! Do you want something to eat or drink?” he offered with a kind smile.

“No, I'm fine, professor. I wanted to ask you a few things if you don't mind,” the young man requested, looking anxious.

“Of course, go ahead, but please call me Filius,” the man said with a smile.

“I can't do that, it would be too strange... What do you think of Harry?” Remus asked after taking a deep calming breath.

“Harry is one of my best students, he advances as much as you allow him to. During his first year, I had to give him advanced material because he was bored during my classes. I gave the same opportunity to all his year mates, but the few who took it dropped it before the week was over. The chance I gave him isn't free, he is working hard to earn his extra lessons.”

“So he is Lily's son,” Remus sighed.

“He takes after Lily on many aspects,” Filius agreed, deciding to give a little push to the young man so he talked about his real worries. “Indeed Remus, now why don't you tell me the real reason you are here?” the old man asked with a gentle voice and the man in front of him sagged.

“I wanted to ask why you didn't join the order?” he asked in a small voice, looking at his lap.

“Ah, I see. You know I'm an old man, right? As a matter of fact, I met Albus when I was eighty years old. He was quite a supercilious young man. Throughout the years, he has overcome that particular trait. However, other less sensible ones were cemented. I have no doubt Albus tries to be a good man, but he tends to forget that the ones surrounding him are not chess pieces, but people,” he explained with a benign expression.

“I realized some things that are hard to accept,” Remus sighed, looking far too tired for his age and despite the pain on his chest Filius smiled, one didn't stop being a teacher because your students grew up.

“You realized he is a simple human, capable of committing mistakes,” he said and the other man nodded. Filius opened his drawer and took out his especial chest, the captivating scent of chocolate filled his office and the young man looked up in child-like curiosity. “I have these special treats for students who come to seek my help. If you want me to, I can also animate it,” Filius suggested and the other male chuckled.

“I don't think that will be necessary,” Remus answered with mirth shining in his eyes.

“Shame, impressions are my speciality,” he said handing him the small chocolate treat. “Now that you noticed Albus is human, ask forgiveness to the ones you harmed believing he was a god. I wouldn't blame you for resenting him, but don't forget that resentment eats the soul.”

“Thank you for the advice professor,” Remus said with a wide smile.

“No problem, maybe next time you will want to see one of my impersonations,” the man commented with a chuckle.

“Maybe next time, have a good day!” Remus told the man and left the office with raised spirits.

Filius smiled fondly at the retreating man. It was rewarding to see his children grow.

---

Harry Potter walked to Remus' office, curious about the reason to be summoned. He knocked on the door and waited for a little before it was opened.

“Harry, come in,” the man said. Harry didn't question his change in attitude.

“Remus,” he said as a greeting and took a seat.

“I thought about what you told me about. You are right. I wanted to apologize to you. If it serves as consolation, he made you sound like a troublemaker, like a younger James, if you would. I'm glad you are more your mother's son,” he said, his apology sounded sincere but it would take more than that to trust the man.

“You are forgiven for now Remus,” Harry told the man, it would take time to actually forgive him, but the words harmed no one.

“...I spoke with Flitwick and McGonagall, they tell me that you are an excellent student,” Remus said after an uncomfortable silence.

“I try to,” Harry nodded, not knowing what else to say.

“Lily was a great woman. When we were young, your father fancied her from the moment he saw her at the sorting, he tried to ask her out ever since. In third-year, when he insulted her best friend in front of her we had the worst week at school. Sirius' hair was full of split ends and he was about to go crazy, Peter tripped so much he was afraid to walk, I was unable to find any chocolate in school. But the funniest was your father, for a whole week he could tell nothing but the truth, never before he accumulated so many weeks of detention nor been almost mobbed by most girls in school,” he reminisced with a smile.

“You never talked about my parents.”

“I know... I'm sorry,” Remus sighed.

For now, that was the only thing he could say. He remembered a time where the worst of his problems was lycanthropy. A time when James and Sirius were the biggest idiots in existence and earned the ire of Lily, who as gentle as she was, had a harpy's temper. Now that he

remembered, he noticed their particular bad luck streaks happened after one of the idiots insulted Snape. Thinking about the man he sighed, he needed to find a way of apologizing for the part he took on tormenting him. It seemed the day would be marked by apologies.

---

Severus Snape was in his private quarters, sulking. Ever since he talked with Lucius he couldn't stop wondering. What if he joined no one this war? He snorted. As if he was allowed to remain neutral. He was a stupid teenager with delusions of grandeur when he joined, motivated by the idea of destroying Potter and impressing Lily.

It didn't take long for him to see the reality was not what they were promised. They were sent to the carnage in order to weed out the weak ones. That was the day he understood he hadn't taken the right decision, because Lily turned into an enemy. And yet he remained loyal to the Dark Lord because he saw no other option.

That was until he heard the prophecy, instead of doing the right thing and telling Lily and her family, he went to his Lord. He understood how terrible his mistake was when the man promised to forgive her life if she didn't interfere. He knew the woman and she wouldn't back down. However, he still hoped to have her and went to Dumbledore. Yet another terrible mistake because while one demanded servitude the other demanded eternal loyalty. Lily died and it was his fault, he may not be the one who cast the killing curse, but he was the one who sent the egomaniac after them. That day he lost her, along with his last wisps of freedom.

Days like these he wondered what if he was the better man. What if he never betrayed Lily? What if he actually tried to love her as a friend instead of demanding her to return his affections? What if he accepted to go to the Mayan Empire to pursue his mastery? He didn't know, but sometimes he dared to daydream.

Someone knocked on the door and he ignored it, but whoever was outside was quite insistent. With a scowl, he walked to the door to kick out the moron that kept disturbing him... He never expected to see Lupin.

"Goodnight Snape, I need to speak with you, may I come in?" the man asked, looking nervous.

"No," he deadpanned.

"Well then. I don't know how to say this, ehm... Well, I kind of wanted to apologize. Ehm, you know, for treating you the way I did when we were students. I'm sorry," Lupin apologized with honesty; Severus was too astounded to react so he took a little while to compose himself.

"Why now?" he asked in bewilderment.

"It seems right, I waited too long."

"I don't know what to say, but I appreciate it," Severus said at last and the man nodded.

"Have a restful night," Remus said and left the place, obviously uncomfortable.

Severus closed the door and proceeded to get drunk. The day took a bizarre turn and he needed the alcohol if he wanted his sanity to survive.

---

Lord Voldemort was a great wizard, but now he was reduced to this deplorable state. It did not matter though, he could wait for a new body and had more important things to plan. His loyal death eaters were being nursed back to health, once they were ready, he would call the others, the ones who had denied him... He would punish them and ensure they did not doubt his power, maybe he would even allow Bellatrix to have her fun.

He would make sure the world trembled at his feet, once his death eaters were ready, he would announce to the vermin that inhabited magical Britain of his return. His glorious purpose would be accomplished. Yes, yes, that was right! Soon the world would know he was back and he would attack where it hurt the most.

---

Harry Potter and his friends were walking to their headquarters after a hearty Sunday breakfast. On the surface, everything was normal. However, for some strange reason, Luna was uneasy. This put the whole Guild on edge, thing Harry still believes ensured none of them resulted injured.

He felt the curses coming before he saw them; on instinct, he created a shield around them. From the corner of his eye, he saw the attackers. Older students who belonged to his House and others as well.

“You, Potter, are a filthy mudblood. We allowed you to rule our House for too long!” one of the Slytherins hissed.

“Our Lord is back and soon our world will be cleaned of filth, we were promised his mark, but we will give him a gift and we will be rewarded!” another exclaimed with heavy breaths.

Harry analyzed the situation, he didn't think he could take them all out in once. However, this time he was not alone.

“Stun them all,” he ordered his Guild in an almost disinterested tone.

What followed few would consider a battle; a more appropriate term was carnage. The attackers expected to fight unprepared children, not trained students. While the members of the Guild were no professional duellists, they worked hard and it was enough for now.

Daphne sent curses that never missed the target, Blaise was unable to be detected until it was too late. Theo created the best shields and, along with Draco, they covered everyone. The twins, true to their reputation, were devils when paired together. Terrence and Adrian had excellent teamwork and few were be able to escape them. To everyone's surprise, little Luna and gentle Neville were ruthless, not a single curse missed, not a single curse sent caused just mild pain. Harry observed with satisfaction as the others took care of the threats while he Accio the wands from the ones who were defeated. Far too soon the conflict ended.

“Each of you takes one to our common room, except you, Theo. I want all the Slytherins to be present, please, also bring Marcus,” Harry ordered and the boy nodded.

The door flew open and the ones who were lounging in the sitting places jumped when the group entered, many bodies were floating behind them. No one talked, there was no need. There was going to be a public punishment. Students walked in with caution, eyes widening at the pile of bodies in the centre of the room. No one spoke; the place was submerged in a sepulchral silence that turned the atmosphere even more nerve-wracking. At last, Theo entered with a serious-looking Marcus by his side, the few missing Slytherins followed with unsure steps, meekly joining their house.

“Marcus, good to see you,” Harry greeted with no inflexion. The older boy only nodded. “Now that we are complete, incarcerate them and revive them.”

The witnesses observed as the attackers were surrounded by ropes and awoken with a spell. They observed their confusion and understanding, they tried to rebel and lost. The Slytherins, having witnessed the kind of punishment the Guild granted were beginning to panic. The ones who didn't belong to the house looked confused and, while they seemed to understand their position, they were unwilling to accept it.

“Bloody cowards! Untie us and I'll show you!” the only Hufflepuff in the group shouted and the witnesses paled.

“Oh my, since when is attacking from behind an act of bravery?” Daphne asked in a saccharine voice.

“If we tell the headmaster, what do you think will happen?” Flora asked with a gentle smile that made the boy shut up.

“After all, you attacked many heirs today and, if that was not enough, you also attacked the boy-who-lived,” Hestia said in faux surprise.

For the first time, the older students noticed the trouble they were in. Their family names were nothing compared to the golden boy of Hogwarts, who also happened to be the last Potter. If this went public, no bribe would be enough to cover it up. Even if the Dark Lord accepted them, what use could they have? If the kids spoke, they would be expelled in the best-case scenario and sent to Azkaban in the worst.

“Voldemort won't help you,” Neville whispered to them with mirth, long gone was the gentle boy.

“You must understand our duty,” Luna said and looked around. “If we don't show the others how following a man that enjoys rewarding his followers with a crucio is not a good decision, many will commit the same mistakes,” she said looking at Harry, who nodded in response.

“I will be lenient this time,” Harry said in a honeyed tone that put them on edge. “I hope you remember that second chances don't exist,” he paused for a moment and looked at the



members of his House. "The first and second years will only witness the first part, then go to your rooms."

Harry approached the Hufflepuff boy, who was still looking angry. The boy began screaming, he convulsed and contorted, he yelled until his throat was raw. One by one they were punished. Once it was over, the youngest fled to their rooms. Some had unshed tears while others trembled to the point older students helped to walk. They wouldn't forget the lesson.

"Fred, please call some elves to attend the children. Adrian, tell the elves that they can take the potions from our room," Harry said and both boys nodded, leaving the room.

"Please," begged a Ravenclaw girl in a strangled voice.

"I'm sorry," Harry sighed, "but it is my duty. I know which families are housing death eaters. I know which of you were promised the dark mark. If you follow Voldemort, it is your problem, but the moment you attacked the students you made it my problem. Thanks to this, Slytherin has a new rule: no one is allowed to have the dark mark. Look at them and remember that sight, you will wish for the same fate," he promised.

The witnesses simply nodded and once again screams filled the room.

That was a day no Slytherin would ever forget, it was the day they understood that, while the Dark Lord promised, the Guild fulfilled. It is true that they had benefits no other student in Hogwarts enjoyed, but they forgot the nature of the ones who ruled the house. Giving yet ruthless, their leader offered them a chance and many would take it. After all, how dangerous could the Dark Lord be if he was defeated by a toddler? A baby that grew up to be a scarier monster than him.

---

Harry Potter and his friends were ready to visit Hogsmeade before leaving for the Yule holidays. The last months went by in a blur of activity and Harry admitted he needed a few days away from everything in order to keep his sanity.

"Harry, did you tell them to be alert?" asked Luna, looking around.

"I took all the possible precautions," he appeased the girl, who still looked uneasy.

Since yesterday, Luna was on edge, almost begging Harry to make sure all the guards were prepared, both in the Alley and in Hogsmeade. Now that they knew of her gift, he followed all her recommendations. They were as ready as they could be.

Draco led the Guild to the sweets shop, where he bought many bars of chocolate, as per Luna's instructions. Or perhaps that was just Draco being his sugar-addicted self. Hours went by and the group relaxed, entering café to enjoy their time.

An unnatural gelid air permeated the village, a feeling they were now familiar with. The group ran outside when screams began filling the air, Death Eaters were beginning to attack with the help of dementors. The Guild was ready.

“Expecto Patronus!” the group announced and multiple silvery animals emerged, the most notable being a large basilisk. After the last dementor attack, Harry began practising the charm he ignored for so long.

At least this was going to be good practice.

---

Filius Flitwick ran towards his students, ready to protect them. But then he saw Harry and his friends conjuring corporeal patronuses, fighting death eaters curse for curse, a resistance none of the attackers was expecting. He saw the school elves popping in and leaving with a few students each, but it was not enough.

Filius knew that they needed to buy time for all the children to be taken to safety, so, with a heavy heart, he allowed his students to fight, knowing he would drown himself in guilt if something happened to them.

This conflict would soon claim its first victim.

---

Bellatrix was ecstatic, today was the day they were announcing her Lord’s comeback. They arrived at the village and she smiled at the terrified screams that received her. While the others were wreaking havoc in the Alley, she was in charge of harming the most precious jewels, the snotty brats. A group of useless ankle-bitters emerged and she was ready to crucio them when they conjured corporeal patronuses. It shouldn't be possible!

With her back up gone, she wasted no more time and attacked. Bellatrix ended up duelling two look-alike red-haired brats, that dared to try to curse her. Her! Though she admitted the bastards were fast and, unlike the ones fought during the last war, they were fired dark curses that couldn't be blocked with a shield so she was kept on the move. It would be shameful if brats killed her by sheer good luck, good thing she had far too much experience.

---

The inhabitants of Hogsmeade were terrified when they recognized the familiar figures. No one tried to fight, too busy trying to escape. Now, they observed in awe as school children fought against their tormentors. Two small twin girls battled two older men, while the men weren't good duellists, everyone could recognize the green of the killing curse being sent at the girls and yet they didn't flinch. Another two twins, who reminded many of the terrible Fabian and Gideon Prewett, were fighting Bellatrix Lestrangle.

A small blond girl and a mocha skin boy fought Rabastan Lestrangle, while a beautiful blond girl fought his brother along with another boy her age, matching the man. Two young boys were fighting a still masked death eater while two older ones were duelling another two criminals. What took their breath away was Harry Potter fighting Dolohov, not faltering against his opponent. Even Professor Flitwick was fighting three at the same time, recognizable opponents were Bartemious Crouch Junior and Corban Yaxley, another one fell against the man and the battle continued. All around them people were either fighting to keep the dementors away.

Why were children fighting and adults hiding?

With an enraged shout, an old man joined the battle. Many followed his example. The attackers were expecting carnage, not a battle and they were pushed back.

“Retreat!” an enraged Bellatrix shouted.

They began leaving the battle in dark smoke, a few retrieving their fallen comrades. They won this one and, for the first time, people understood they could fight. They were not defenceless. Many of the strangers began aiding their own comrades with healing spells. It hadn't been a massacre, and yet, lives were lost. On their side, there were four dead and many injured, along with six dead attackers.

Despite the sombre mood, people discovered their courage and it marked a before and after on their history.

---

Once the death eaters left, most of the children collapsed in exhaustion, professor Flitwick ran to them. After diagnostic spells and healing minor injuries. he smiled. The children he had met years ago grew up, it hurt him to see warriors so young, but it was the path they chose.

“You all did a marvellous job,” he congratulated them.

A few tired looking Aurors arrived, wearing determined expressions that morphed to surprise when they saw no Death Eaters. The battle at the Alley was brutal, no one expected the attack. It was good the workers decided to step up and helped the Aurors because, even when they were better equipped, they lacked numbers.

The worst part was probably the atrocity that declared itself as Voldemort. People lost their courage and fled, but the ones who fought wouldn't be forgotten. Workers indeed, but also werewolves and vampires. Silver scars and chalky skin betraying their secret. They fought to protect the society that shunned them only because one person gave them the chance to belong. Never would they allow their judgement to be clouded again, neither they would allow others to forget.

---

Harry Potter looked at his friends, they were safe. He looked at the people he worked with and felt a sharp pain, three fell and the others were mourning. He approached the group, controlling the emotions that were rampaging inside him. Three of his people and one villager were murdered.

They knew Voldemort was back, now they needed to find a way of fighting him. Luna began weeping while Blaise hugged her. Fred was leaning on Adrian and Daphne was helping Theo. They were a family, and they would ensure each other's safety. At that moment, Harry knew that he wouldn't risk them again.

The group was taken back to Hogwarts after speaking with the Aurors, the carriages pulled by thestrals that were no longer invisible. Filius observed with a heavy heart as his children petted the animals, that battle had cost their side something that could never be retrieved: innocence.

He led the children to the great hall in order to check on the students that had fled and eerie quietude descended on the room. Most of the students who went to Hogsmeade that morning witnessed the beginning of the battle, they watched their fellow students fight against Death Eaters. A teary-eyed Gryffindor girl began applauding because, even if she was scared, they saved many lives, including hers. Others followed and soon the hall was filled with tumultuous applause, Madam Pomfrey didn't waste time and began checking the children, a pale Minerva who seemed in the border of tears and a relieved Remus followed. A grave Albus was not far behind, besides a crying Pomona, and a concerned Irma.

“What you did today was dangerous and you could have paid with your lives. I expected better from all of you. And you Filius, why didn't you send them back?” the headmaster asked, his stormy expression giving most of the hall an idea of how he had survived two wars.

“We know what we risked. You say we should have fled and leave professor Flitwick fighting more than a dozen death eaters with little help. We decided to stay because, even if we were only distractions, they wouldn't look for the other students while we kept them occupied,” Harry answered with no inflexion, challenging the man with his eyes.

“At least we have an idea on how to defend ourselves and not thanks to the education this school has provided. We decided to stay back and protect as many as we could,” Daphne said, even with her messy hair and dirty clothes, she managed to keep her regal aura.

“Albus, I'm not speaking here as a teacher, I'm speaking as a man who has seen three wars and survived. I'm no child. If your memory fails you; I'm sixty-seven years older than you. The reason I didn't send them back, even if I wished to is because they wouldn't have left. Last war, people like these children were the ones who saved the most lives. I still regret the fact that they are only young in age, but that is life. Unlike you, not everyone seeks glory, there are people who fight in spite of it and it's time you understand so,” the man admonished and Albus sighed, remembering why he avoided confrontations of any kind with the short male.

“I need to speak with all of you, follow me-”

“They will be resting today. If you need to speak with them, pay them a visit during the Holidays,” the man said, no threats needed to be spoken because Albus knew better than to provoke the ire of a gentle man.

“Very well,” Albus announced and left the hall.

Minerva hugged with all her might the most troublesome and yet the bravest Weasleys she had the honour to teach. Remus hugged Harry, relieved to see the boy alive. All the professors and many students approached the group with different emotions shining in their eyes.

“Fifty points, to each of you for bravery and sheer dumb luck. Now go to rest,” Minerva ordered, many groups of students left, some still frightened, others relieved, but mostly tired.

“They are so young,” Pomona whispered, looking at the heroes of the day.

"They are," Filius said with tears glistening in his eyes, portraying the deep regret that he felt for the price they had to pay today. "It has been a long day, I need some food and to take a nap."

Perhaps he also needed to lace his food with a calming draught and a sleeping potion, but Filius would never say that aloud.

---

The next day, the Guild walked to the Slytherin table and took their usual place. They ignored all the glances and began eating with gusto, the chirp of the owls coming in the hall called their attention. Birds flew in leaving the mail and newspaper, Hedwig carried the newspaper and a short letter from aunt Eleadora. Harry read the letter first and sighed.

"Aunt Eleadora is informing us that we are all grounded. Elizabeth is furious for missing the action... Terrence, you deal with her" he said rubbing his face.

"Why me? She's your sister!" he demanded with a scowl.

"Rita is looking for a raise," Daphne interrupted them, passing the newspaper.

## ***ATTACK IN DIAGON ALLEY AND HOGSMEADE!***

### ***HARRY POTTER SAVES THE DAY!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My dear readers, yesterday, our world was victim of a terrible attack! At midday, Diagon Alley was full of life as people ran errands before the children arrive from Hogwarts. What no one expected was the brutal attack we suffered. From one moment to the other, death eaters filled the Alley. However, unlike last time, they were not allowed free reign.*

*The workers of the new businesses began fighting back with fierceness! Those monsters tried to attack the day-care, where most of the parents leave their youngsters to do the shopping, but they encountered resistance. People started emerging and fighting back, putting themselves as shields to protect our beloved children. Everything seemed to be going in our favour when a mistake of nature proclaimed itself as the Dark Lord! Many people started fleeing, but our heroes refused to back down. The Aurors arrived and the attackers were driven back. There were nine death attackers; however, eleven of our mysterious heroes lost their lives, not counting the casualties in Hogsmeade (see page 4 for the list of deceased).*

*I tried to interview the Aurors to ask them about the attack but none was available. They received an emergency call from Hogsmeade, informing them that the village was under attack! Similar to the situation in the Alley, many workers put themselves as shields to protect the students who were visiting the place. However, a particularly valiant group of students decided to fight back. According to many villagers, it is something no one expected to see. Children were fighting against Death Eaters spell for spell, teaming against the strongest ones like Bellatrix Lestrange. Yes, my dear readers, our children decided to fight back! I had the opportunity to speak with Graham Thicknesse, who lived in the village for eighty years.*

**RS:** *Thank you for agreeing to speak with me, Mister Thicknesse.*

**GT:** *I have no problems and I felt people should know what happened.*

**RS:** *Very well, then would you tell me what happened yesterday?*

**GT:** *Of course, it was a normal day by all means. That was until the unnatural aura of suffocating sadness invaded the village, dementors arrived alongside Death Eaters, but instead of capturing them, they were attacking us! People fled, few are able to cast even the wisps of a patronus and we were scared. Out of the blue, a group of thirteen students remained standing, they didn't run... I will never forget their determination. They produced corporeal patronuses, they drove the dementors away and started fighting. I remember that, at the moment, I believed they would meet their early deaths for trying to be heroes. To my surprise, they engaged them as equals. Little girls fought like seasoned warriors, all to protect us. Many of the workers from the new businesses joined the battle while the others kept the dementors away. A Hogwarts teacher was also fighting, a short man that engaged five death eaters at the same time alone and came out on top! It was amazing... I was ashamed, you know? I was seeing tykes that could be my grandchild risking their lives for a coward old man. I jumped into battle and began fighting back. We pushed those monsters back, that we did!*

**RS:** *(At this story you must understand my surprise, the tale seemed more fiction than reality, but if you saw the man, you would have understood how real his words were.) I'm surprised, do you know who were these students?*

**GT:** *I recognized a few, Malfoy's son, Arthur Weasley's twins, though the one that impressed me the most was Harry Potter.*

**RS:** *You mean the boy-who-lived?*

**GT:** *Yes, the only Potter I know of. He looked like a warrior, he was fighting Dolohov.*

**RS:** *But, I apologize, that sounds too unreal (I said bewildered, but I hope you understand my incredulity, my readers).*

**GT:** *I wouldn't believe it either if I hadn't seen it with these eyes. That boy is indeed our saviour, but not because of what happened more than a decade ago, but because he inspired us to fight back.*

**RS:** *Thank you for answering my questions, is there anything you wish to tell the people?*

**GT:** *Yes, there is. During the last war, we believed them to be invincible and we run away instead of fighting. They are humans, powerful ones indeed, but what they have in power we have in numbers. I shan't back down ever again, last war they intimidated us to submission, not this time. We overwhelm them in numbers and this time we are ready, let's fight back.*

**RS:** *Thank you Mister Thicknesse.*

*This solemn announcement filled me with determination and inspired me to fight back, I realized that, during the last war, we forgot that we also haVE magic and reacted like muggles to the situation. Not this time! I will fight back to protect my loved ones, the same way the Hogwarts Heroes did! We can make a difference my dear witches and wizards and I will join the movement! May Mother Magic guide us all!*

“She may earn that raise,” Harry commented.

Harry was ready to rest because he knew it was just beginning. Last night, many Slytherins requested protection, most of them had Death Eaters as parents. Of course, Harry granted them. The fewer soldiers Voldemort had the better.

---

Pained screams permeated a dilapidated dark room in an isolated house. Severus Snape did his best to block the sounds and conserve his composure, the Dark Lord was furious because of their failure and they were paying the price. Ironically, he managed to stay in the man's good graces by the article Skeeter wrote about him. Though was punished, it wasn't as severe as the others.

Another reason the man was furious was because Lucius refused to answer his calls. The Dark Lord lost one of his most valuable pieces in the Ministry. The attacks were planned taking into account the little opposition from the few Aurors available, no one expected what happened. If he was honest, Severus was satisfied with the outcome. He may dislike the dunderheads, but it was his duty to protect the students.

More screams filled the room and he closed his eyes, it would take days for the man to calm down. Which meant it would take days for him to stop using a crucio for everyone who spoke to him.

Severus didn't enjoy his life, but it was the one he was forced upon.

# Realizations and Machinations

## Chapter Notes

I almost forgot to update today, to be honest, I am not sure if it's still Sunday but I will pretend it is. By the way, I know that the mirrors were used by James and Sirius, but I'm changing that. Peace!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Albus Dumbledore was having a migraine, and if that wasn't enough, in an unconventional moment of depression, an epiphany left him with a morbid existential crisis. That day began like any other. He met some old acquaintances in the morning and during the evening he had a meeting with the Order. From the moment he arrived at the house, a deep foreboding sent shivers to his spine, making him feel quite wary.

An annoyed Nymphadora opened the door. Her hair was flaming red, betraying the anger that her impassive visage hid. Her expression didn't change when he smiled at her. If possible, she got even angrier and walked from the door with an annoyed huff. Confused by this reaction, Albus followed the young woman to the kitchen, where the whole drama took place. Sirius was wearing an uncharacteristically grave expression - Remus was beside him, his eyes were a vivid amber. Minerva was wearing a pronounced scowl, and Kingsley was beside her, looking serious. On the other side, Molly was red in the face, Arthur and William were trying to appease her. Severus was behind them, sneering at everyone. Nymphadora walked to her cousin's side, glaring at the other half of the room.

"I see tempers are running high today. May I know what happened?" Dumbledore asked, wearing his grandfather persona in an effort to calm the people.

"That man shouldn't be allowed to raise children!" Molly exclaimed, regaining her anger and pointing at Sirius. "I went to look for the poor dear and you were right, Albus. Harry is not been taken care of! He's not in the house!" she screeched, her chest was heaving in agitation.

"I told her Harry is with his friends because he doesn't like when unwanted visitors come," Sirius stated in a disinterested manner, but an almost murderous glare was directed at the woman.

"I didn't know you were so interested in Harry's personal life to the point of speaking about it, Albus. As far as I remember, you left him with those horrible muggles," Minerva said with eerie saccharine tones that sent shivers to Dumbledore's core.

"Molly and I did have a conversation regarding the boy's life years ago, though I believed it was settled," he said trying to appease the atmosphere.



“How can you say that?!” Molly yelled at him, incredulous. “There's no food in the house, the poor boy is allowed to befriend Death Eaters and you say the matter is settled?! The last time you came to my house you were concerned about him being surrounded with such a bad influence!” the woman accused and Albus almost groaned. He could have lived without the others knowing that particular detail.

“You're calling my children Death Eaters?!” Minerva barked. A dangerous glint appeared on the old woman's eyes and Molly took a step back, momentarily cowed. “Those kids are the most dedicated students that the school has; excellent examples of conduct. I will not pretend their parents are saints, but I'll tell you this, Molly. Don't mess with my children unless you want to mess with me,” Minerva threatened and the other woman was left speechless.

“We're getting off track,” Kingsley announced, interrupting any possible confrontation. “The reason we are joined here is to talk about Voldemort,” he said, looking at Dumbledore. Sighing in relief, the headmaster nodded at him.

“Indeed. I have been looking for information about where he could be. So far, I haven't pinpointed his location. However, it's safe to assume that his followers are the same ones as in the last war. Now, Kingsley, what is the DMLE planning to do about him?” he asked, that feeling of foreboding taking hold of him once again.

“I was waiting for you to arrive in order to announce this, Dumbledore. I'm leaving the Order,” he announced, surprising every person in the room. “I'm an Auror and my duty is with the DMLE. The reason I joined the last war was because the Ministry was about to fall. This time is different. The Aurors are being trained to fight, we have the right equipment and new recruits are filling our ranks. I'm sorry, but I'm more useful with Madam Bones commanding me.”

“I'm also leaving the order,” Nymphadora announced after a short moment.

“I would leave, if it wasn't that James and Lily belonged to it,” Sirius muttered.

“I see... Though I admit it was an unexpected announcement, I wish both of you luck and, if either of you wishes to join again, the doors will be open,” Dumbledore said, regretting the departure of two valuable assets.

“Thank you. Let's go, Tonks. Mad-eye will throw a fit if we're late,” Kingsley told the girl. She nodded. Both of them waved goodbye and left the house.

“Aside from those regretful announcements, what else do we have? Severus, what information did you manage to acquire from your old acquaintances?”

“The Dark Lord has called all his followers. As far as I know, every single one has gone back to him, except for Lucius Malfoy,” the dour man informed the remaining members in an even voice, ignoring the shocked expressions from most of the room.

“That man can't be trusted! Are you sure he hasn't answered his call?” Arthur asked with wide eyes.

"I'm, as a matter of fact, the Dark Lord is furious about his desertion. He ordered the Lestranges to plan his capture. As you may understand, that means his life is in grave danger," Severus muttered, though the worry in his eyes couldn't be hidden.

"Although I believe Lucius may have changed, we can't know for sure. Let's allow for events to flow. If he hasn't gone back by next summer, we will invite him to join us," Dumbledore announced with a gentle smile, although he could see the people in the room didn't agree with his idea.

"He's a Death Eater, who knows what he's planning?" Arthur voiced with a pronounced scowl.

"That's the reason we will wait and see. Now, Remus, have you contacted any of the werewolf packs?"

"I did, and they will not join Voldemort," he said with a slight smile.

"That's excellent. Is there any way you can convince them to fight for us?"

"No, they will not join the war and that was their final decision," Remus said impassively.

"Very well... William, was there any luck with the goblins?"

"Of course not, and I told you so. To my good fortune, Manager Ragnok was in an excellent mood for some kind of business and I wasn't fired or eviscerated for asking about where their loyalties lay," William said with a scowl.

"I apologize, my boy, but we need to know if they will remain neutral or not."

"I could have answered that for you," Sirius said with a charming smile. "They will remain neutral unless something threatens their best clients. Neither of us belongs in that category. We are lucky none of the Death Eaters do either... Quite obvious, if you ask me," he gushed, receiving a soft smack from a smiling Minerva.

"Anyway, does anyone have something to add?"

"I do. I want Harry to spend a few days at my house. The poor boy needs to experience what a real family feels like," Molly said, looking determined. Albus was trying to think of a way to convince Sirius to agree, but when he glanced at the man, he decided to remain silent.

"Molly, the only reason I have put up with your insinuations about how I take care of my godson for so long is because you are a good woman who allows her maternal instinct to rule. However, I will end that now. If you want to fight me for Harry's custody, let's do it the right way. Go to the Ministry and request his guardianship. We will go to trial over it. But if you're not willing to go that far, leave us alone," the man said, putting emphasis on his last words. His calm demeanour silencing the perplexed woman.

"I think you're overreacting, Sirius. Molly has only the best intentions at heart," Albus said with a disapproving frown that was ignored.

"I know that and, as I said before, it's the reason I've tolerated her for so long. However, I've reached the limits of my patience. Harry is used to making his own decisions. Thanks to some idiot who left him in that orphanage, he is mature beyond his years and I will not try to force him to do something he doesn't want. That includes being in the house while people he neither knows nor wants to meet are present."

"Harry is young and will make mistakes, but they will be his own and he will learn. It's time for you to stop trying to make his decisions for him," Remus said.

"Let's finish this discussion here. I think we've discussed everything we needed to. Enjoy your holidays," Dumbledore said with a cordial smile. "Before I leave, I wish to speak with you," he told Sirius, who raised an eyebrow at him but remained silent, forcing him to keep talking. "I'm concerned about young Harry. The way you phrased it earlier made it sound as if you allow him free reign."

"I have no idea what gave you that impression. Even though you are used to being around children, you have never raised one, so excuse me if I don't take your concerns as important," the man dismissed him, waving away a solid argument to which he had no answer.

"Perhaps that is true, but I'm old enough to know children need a firm hand to guide them."

"You're right, children do, but Harry is not a child and hasn't been for a long time. Most parents struggle with their kids to make them study, do their homework, help in the house, organize their rooms, and be polite. My godson needs no reminder to do his homework, is the best student of his year, is polite, organized, and responsible. What else can I ask for? In what ways do you wish me to correct him? He is what most parents would kill for their children to be. You want to be able to make his decisions and dictate his life."

Not once Sirius looked away, openly confronting him.

"I can see his arrogance, Sirius. You're only cementing his belief that he is better than his peers," Albus accused, letting his accumulated frustration show.

"Is he really arrogant? Are you sure you aren't projecting your own flaws on a person who does have the skill and isn't scared to show it? He is indeed proud of his abilities and accomplishments, but he has no delusions about them. He knows he is strong, but he also knows that in a duel he would be unable to win against an experienced fighter. He knows he has much to learn and he also knows there are people who are better than him. Now, tell me, why are you so concerned about him? Why are you trying so hard to control him?" Sirius demanded, his penetrating gaze observing the old man's every movement.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dumbledore deadpanned and left the house.

Without meaning to, Sirius touched a sensitive nerve. He indeed believed the boy was arrogant because Albus had been so in his youth. He indeed was trying to guide the boy, but until then, he hadn't noticed he was trying to control him... It was nothing but the harsh reality. In his efforts to ensure the greater good, he somehow lost his vision.

Until now, he saw the boy as a replica of him and Voldemort, never as his own person. Until now, the boy gave him no reason for him to believe he was dark - he had wanted to believe so because of the house he was placed in. He hadn't noticed how deep his prejudices run... It was a frightening realization to notice that he and Tom were different faces of the same coin. Unsettled, he proceeded to drown his worries with firewhisky and, if possible, erase the day from his memory. Without meaning to, he turned into what Gellert always wished him to be.

That night, Albus dreamt of icy blue eyes observing him with pride.

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Fred and George Weasley were having a terrible holiday so far. The train ride had been the usual affair, with their friends agreeing to meet in the Alley or the castle. Everything was normal until they joined their family, then, it all went downhill.

"I can't believe you're so irresponsible!" their mother yelled at them once they arrived at the Burrow. Too surprised to know what to do, they remained silent. "You joined the battle in the village. Are you both crazy?! Why didn't you leave? Why didn't you protect your brother?" the woman demanded, leaving them speechless at her sudden outburst.

"We did what we thought was right. If we hadn't distracted the Death Eaters, they would have attacked the other people or even tried to attack the students that were left in the village," George explained, still confused by his mother's reaction.

"I don't care! You should have protected your brother instead of fighting! You're both children!" she screamed at them and Fred lost his temper.

"You're worried about your son, that's all," he accused his mother. "Where was Percy, then? Why wasn't your perfect son protecting your youngest one?" he asked and was slapped by the furious woman.

"Percy was being responsible, unlike the two of you! Both of you are grounded. I don't want to see you out of your room for the rest of the holidays!" she screamed at them.

Fred held his cheek in shock, understanding filled his being to the point that the revelation was drowning him. She was not worried about them, she was worried about the rest of her family and her other children. Their father was proud and so was Bill, but not her. In her eyes, they were not good enough. George held his hand and they walked to their room in silence. Ginny was watching with tears running down her cheeks, but too scared to speak. Percy's expression was unreadable and Ron was looking at the floor. They left with their heads held high, knowing they did the right thing, but that didn't diminish the pain of knowing your own mother did not love you the way she loved her other children. That was two days ago and until then they were locked in their room. Food was brought to their room by a distressed Ginny, who was worried about them, sneaking in when she could.

"Let's leave the house," Fred told his brother.

"I bet they won't notice... Except for Ginny, but she will cover us," George sighed, wearing a cynical smirk.

"Let's go. The others will worry if we don't appear soon," Fred murmured with a contented sigh.

"True. Lea!" George called the familiar Potter elf.

"Mister George calls. What does he need?" the little one asked with a toothy smile.

"Could you pop us into the castle, please?"

"Of course," she said and offered her hands. They took them and left the Burrow.

Terrence and Daphne were engaged in an intense game of chess when an elf popped in. Daphne turned up to see the new-comers and her eyes widened. She ran to the twins' side and began probing Fred's cheek with gentle fingers.

"Who did this to you?" she demanded to know.

"It doesn't matter," he whispered, taking her hand and guiding her to a couch.

"Can I?" Terrence asked, taking out his wand and signalling his bruised cheek. Fred nodded and the boy began casting healing charms.

"Mother didn't enjoy the idea of us not protecting ickle Ronnikins," George chuckled without a hint of amusement.

"Harry will want to know you arrived," Daphne told them and they nodded.

"Is he in the Library?" Fred asked, there was a hint of a smile on his lips.

"For almost two days he didn't leave that room, but Elizabeth's friend dragged him out today," Terrence said with mischief shining in his eyes.

"So the princess is here..." Goerge said, mirroring the boy.

"Let's go. I think they went to the sanctuary. Do control yourselves, I don't fancy the idea of taking care of cursed morons for the rest of the day," Daphne admonished and they smiled in return.

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Hwasa was an intelligent teenager who understood the immense satisfaction a good book could bring. However, she was unable to understand why Elizabeth's brother seemed to live in the castle's library, reading as if his life depended on it. Tired of this situation, she decided to do something about it.

When she arrived at the library, the boy was so lost in the book she brought him that he didn't notice her presence until she took the book away. The boy was far too pale for his own good, which betrayed how little he spent under the sun... Without waiting for his consent, she dragged him out for a walk.

"You do know there are civilized ways of requesting people to walk with you and kidnapping is not one of them?" Harry sighed at the impish girl beside him.

"It's not polite to ignore your guests. Besides, Elizabeth wanted to go with your aunt to the bookstore," she shrugged. "Though I could see you were enjoying the book."

"I was until I got interrupted... Did your grandfather allow you to lend it to me?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. After all, the royal family mark was a secret.

"Well, he didn't say no. Besides, he knows about all the books that go in or out of the library," she shrugged, concentrating on a charming, blue-looking flower.

"It's poisonous," he sighed, grabbing her hand before she could touch it.

"What is it?" she asked, admiring the flower.

"It is called Nila Mauta. It means blue death, an enticing flower that holds enough poison in one petal to kill a dragon," he sighed and pulled her to keep walking. "I didn't notice before, you have claws instead of nails," he teased, pointing to her long nails.

"They are not claws," she huffed and looked at her hands in appreciation. "They are perfect," she muttered with a pout that made him smirk.

"Perfect weapon for assassination," he answered, but to his surprise, the expected hit did not come.

"Of course. It's one of the reasons I keep them this way," she informed him and Harry sighed at the unnecessary information provided.

"Don't tell Elizabeth. I'd rather not deal with my possible accidental demise by claws."

"Idiot."

They kept walking until they reached a clearing where unicorns were grazing and a few chimaeras were playing with gryphons. Hwasa sat in the grass and observed the other residents of the place, who at the moment were ignoring her. She patted the ground beside her and Harry sighed but complied. Sitting beside her, they relished in the tranquillity of the place.

"There's too much sunlight," he grouched, making the girl smile.

"It won't kill you."

"It may not but I will get sunburnt," Harry muttered, admiring her tanned skin that almost had a golden shine to it. He wondered whether it was because of some kind of moisturizer or whether the girl was a strange creature that shone under the sunlight. Then he almost snorted, what kind of ridiculous being would sparkle under the sun? Maybe it would be good to ask what kind of creams she used.

"But you will live... Elizabeth told me about your heroic actions before arriving home," she spoke, breaking the silence.

"She was furious because she didn't participate, but I'm glad. I want her safe."

"You won't be able to protect her forever."

"I know, which is why I wish to enjoy this for as long as it lasts."

"You're doing a good job... What about your mouldy-thing problem?" she asked. Her name for Voldemort ripped a chuckle from Harry and she blinked in confusion.

"Voldemort, you mean," he corrected, a smile playing on his lips. "He is not much of a problem at the moment. He's licking his wounds."

"I still don't know how this country raises so many Dark Lords. In the Empire, we pay attention to anyone who may threaten the order of things. If they turn out to be a problem, we dispose of them before they can grow stronger. I know it sounds more like a dictatorship, and in a way it is, but we have been isolated from non-magicals for long. We do what is necessary to keep the balance," she whispered, playing with the grass.

"I know, but the problem is that this country is run by incompetents. Revolutionaries are born every day. Some have enough charm to gain followers. others reach positions of power... Neither thinks about the balance."

"You're a revolutionary," she accused with a slight smirk.

"I am, just like my mother before me," he confirmed and she looked into the distance, lost in her thoughts.

"Promise me you will keep thinking about balance, not perfection," she said after a brief silence, her intense onyx eyes never leaving his own.

"Do you want an unbreakable vow?" he joked in an effort to diffuse the intense atmosphere that was created.

"Your word will be enough, for now at least."

"I promise," he swore, accepting her pinkie.

After a long walk, they went back to the castle for dinner. Much to their surprise, a group of people was waiting at the entrance to the castle. Harry noticed most of the Guild was present, along with a bored-looking Sirius and a confused Marcus.

"What happened?" Harry asked and everyone looked at him.

"Your walk was long," Sirius said with a wide smile and a glint in his eyes that he ignored.

"We were waiting for you," Daphne said, pushing Sirius to one side and ignoring the offended look the man gave her. "Fred and George arrived after lunch; we need to talk," she

said, her face portraying the seriousness of the situation.

“Let's go to the library,” he said, but one look at the princess' narrowed eyes made him sigh. “Perhaps it would be better if you followed me to my study. Hwasa, I think Ella will be a decent company, and if a certain person misbehaves, you can hand him to the security elves. They always appreciate the target practice,” he told the girl. Without further ado, he walked inside and his friends followed.

They walked through the halls in silence until they arrived in front of a plain black door that Harry pushed open. The insides contained nothing impressive: a mahogany desk, wide bookshelves, and a place to sit. All in all, the room would be considered plain if not for the wondrous coat of arms belonging to the Potter family dominating one wall and the opposite one showing the names of every Potter that had ever lived. At the moment, only one name glowed in golden letters.

"We left our house," George said, collapsing on a couch.

“Mother was angry at us not protecting our youngest brother and daring to fight,” Fred informed with a sigh.

“You will be staying here; there's no way I'm allowing you to be on your own,” Harry told the boys and they nodded.

“That's not all,” Daphne said, her steel eyes even colder than usual. “That woman dared to slap Fred,” she added. The ice queen dominated by anger was a strange yet beautiful sight to behold.

“It doesn't matter... Not anymore,” Fred muttered and Adrian comforted him.

"When we were little, we heard Charlie and Bill talking about how they didn't feel like part of the family... They said they lived with people who looked like them, but who were almost strangers,” George whispered with closed eyes and Daphne held his hand in support.

“At the time, we didn't understand what they were talking about, but we remember that, even when both left, everything remained the same. While we grew up we began to understand... Percy is the favourite along with Ginny. Ron isn't, but our parents pay more attention to him because he's the youngest son. We remind mother too much of her brothers for her to be close with us,” Fred sighed.

“We will always be here for you,” Luna said with her trademark dreamy smile.

The group talked until late hours, until there were no other stories to tell and silence felt comfortable.

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The days flew by with a couple of interesting events. Hades, the Andean condor, brought an urgent message from Gringotts. It was written by Ragnok, informing Harry that two Horcruxes were located. One was in Little Hangleton, where curse breakers had been sent. They detected parselmagic protecting a dilapidated shack. Therefore, he asked whether Harry



could arrange help from one of the parselmouths that worked for the dragon reserves, if possible one who knew parselmagic. The other was located at Hogwarts. They were not sure where, exactly, but it was somewhere high up, so they needed to plan a way of destroying the thing.

Harry wrote a letter in response, promising to send a parselmouth and making an appointment to discuss the delicate details. Caressing the bird, he handed the letter and it flew away, understanding the importance of making sure the letter arrived without further delay. Otherwise, the castle remained unperturbed, except for a few balls of energy that managed to wake all the inhabitants for Christmas, dragging the poor souls into the living room to open presents.

Harry was doing his best to sleep with open eyes while the girls were squealing in particularly high pitches, though he suspected those belonged to Theo and Marcus. Aunt Eleadora was smiling at the children, satisfied at the number of people she could spoil. Sirius was leaning on Remus, sleeping without caring for the noises that surrounded him and getting as much rest as possible before the others arrived.

"I thought we were the loud ones," George grumbled.

"We were, dear brother, but we have been bested," Fred announced in a theatrical way.

"Whatever. The others will be here soon so this is as calm as it gets," Terrence sighed, smiling at the youngest twins, who were wearing bright smiles for a change.

"Won't your family notice that you aren't in the house?" Harry asked the twins.

"Who knows? They haven't noticed until now so I don't really care," George scowled.

"They'll think we're throwing a tantrum and don't want to go out," Fred shrugged.

Harry looked at them, nodding in tacit understanding. They were hurt and not thinking in a rational way, but they had solid arguments behind their reasoning. The Weasleys didn't notice their children were gone. Remus paid them a visit a few days ago, confirming their suspicions. Their mother was still angry and their father was not in the house most of the time. The only one who noticed was their sister, who begged Remus not to say anything to their mother.

While he was angry, Harry could understand the reasons for the Weasleys' negligence. They had seven children to raise. Three that needed their parents' constant attention and their eldest ones who did not want attention, but their mother called for their presence. In comparison, the twins were almost never present in their minds unless they did something that demanded their parents' attention. Considering they played little to no pranks and the letters from the school stopped coming, Fred and George were delegated to second plane.

"Mister Draco and his family are waiting outside," Rome announced to the group.

"Please allow them entrance after the usual checks, and then bring them here," Harry told the little elf. With a smile, Rome nodded and popped away.

One by one, the missing members of the Guild started popping in until everyone but Luna was present. The girl joined her father on a trip to search for some strange creature. The Malfoy family was the last to arrive, walking to the seating area with sedate steps. Narcissa was wearing a bright smile that widened when Draco joined them. Lucius was looking as serious as always, but a hint of a smile appeared on his lips when he saw the haggard men in the couch. With firm steps, he approached them while his wife began chatting with the hag, who by no means scared him, but he would rather avoid a woman who had the power to curse his family jewels off.

"I see you are discovering the joys of parenting," Lucius said as a greeting.

"How do people do this? Does having children give you some kind of hidden power to stop needing sleep?" Sirius complained.

"Be thankful that at this age it is once per year. When they are babies sleep is nothing more than a fond memory," he explained, smiling at the way his son's eyes shone while he talked with his friends.

"I hope you're ready for what the little devils have planned for today," Remus told the man.

"I would rather not know and feign ignorance at their attempts to make me join."

"I tried that last year, that cruel woman forced me to," Sirius whined pointing at Eleadora.

"Unlike both of you, I have a wife who will defend my honour," he quipped.

"Well, we are free men who are enjoying life," Sirius announced with a gleeful smile.

"Ignore the idiot. Have you taken any extra precautions?" Remus asked in a low voice and Sirius' face morphed into a serious one.

"I have. Believe it or not, Severus is my friend. He told me the moment those people were assigned to capture me. Dobby is following me everywhere and Kreacher is always with my wife. He adores her," Lucius murmured, looking perturbed. "Eleadora also enchanted special portkeys. They will transport us to a safe place the moment one of us is unconscious or harmed in any way. Draco spends most of his time with his friends, so we know that he is safe. Thank you for worrying."

"It's only natural. Harry will kill us if something happens to one of his friends, and that extends to their families," Sirius shrugged.

"I'm surprised that a thirteen-year-old is able to intimidate you so much. I believe he inherited that from his mother. As far as I remember, you were too scared to cross her when you were students."

"She was a scary woman. I remember how even the proud Slytherins hid from her. But you had already graduated by that time, old man," Sirius retorted.

The banter continued until the time for breakfast arrived. The group walked towards the gigantic dining room, passing many elves who were talking about some interesting project.

Harry admitted he had the best cooks in all Europe at seeing the variety of dishes on the table.

Hedwig flew in with a newspaper, looking quite proud of herself. He smiled at the owl and gave her a few treats before untying the paper and smirking in delight. Rita was indeed going to earn a raise.

## ***DEMENTORS: GUARDS OR THREATS?***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My dear readers, after the attacks in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, this question has plagued me. As we know, Dementors are under the control of the Ministry, or that is what they want us to believe. The breakout from the prison during summer should have been impossible if what the authorities claim was true. The total number of Dementors is over a thousand, but there are no more than three hundred prisoners. If they were doing their duty, all those who were trying to escape would have been kissed. Why were they not? Did they allow the prisoners to escape? And if the Ministry controls them, what does this say about our authority's loyalties?*

*I was unable to let this matter go, so I investigated further about those creatures' actions, both this summer and twelve years ago. I want to remind all my readers that, during the last war, Dementors were on the Dark Lord's side, helping release all the Death Eaters that our Aurors managed to capture. How do we know they did not do the same this time around? If that was not enough, they also attacked our Aurors and civilians. They sowed death wherever they went and the Ministry was unable to stop them... They fought alongside Death Eaters, murdering our people. During the attacks a few weeks ago, they followed the same pattern. They swarmed both Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, helping Death Eaters instead of apprehending them as Minister Cornelius Fudge promised they would. If it were not for our heroes, many more innocent lives would have been lost.*

*Now those criminals are on the loose and a mistake of nature is claiming to be the Dark Lord. Why are Dementors still trusted when it is quite obvious they are not decent guards? It is clear that they are dangerous. I believe it is time to reform our prison system. There are not enough human guards and the prisoners are submitted to daily torture which ends up robbing them of what is left of their sanity, making them even more dangerous.*

*Few questioned when they were placed near our children because the Minister promised it was for their protection. I have to ask, can we trust the man who places those disgusting creatures near our beloved children? I will not tolerate having those things close to the school ever again!*

*I believe it is time to adopt other countries' ideas. There is Switzerland and its reliable dwarves prisons and the famous chupacabra guards in the Mayan Empire. I believe it is time to take a step forward and leave behind some of the most antiquated ideologies, such as the idea that everyday people are unable to fight because we have proved that is not the case. My dear witches and wizards, it is time to open our eyes to the injustice and corruption that controls our country. Do not forget that we are the ones who hold the power; let's raise our voices and, in that way, ensure our safety. I have no doubt that this article will gain me*

*dangerous enemies, but I will not allow crimes like this to go unnoticed. May mother magic protect us in these difficult times.*

"Is the article that good?" Daphne asked with a raised eyebrow and he gave it to her.

"We will talk about it later," Harry told the smiling girl.

The table was filled with laughter and life after that. The calm atmosphere and high spirits dominated the place.

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The Burrow was another story entirely. Bill Weasley remembered once again, why he left the house as soon as he could, although he missed his siblings, it was not enough to bring him back. His mum was cooking, forcing Ginny to help while his brothers were lazing around. He learnt the hard way that in real life there were no exclusive skills or roles for males and females. Life forced him to learn how to survive without a mother doing everything for him and it was hard. Therefore, he began resenting the way his mother trained his little sister to be the perfect housewife and allowed his brothers to be useless brats that would suffer when it was time to confront real life.

If that wasn't enough, his mum smothered them, not allowing any kind of privacy under her roof. Bill knew she was trying to show her love, but after losing her family during the war, she became overprotective and avoided anything that reminded her of the family she once had. That was the reason that the moment Percy was born, she put her two eldest children aside - because they acted like the brothers she dearly loved and the same could be said for George and Fred...

Thinking about them made Bill want to rip out his hair in frustration. Ginny told him how their mum treated the twins. He tried to reason with his mother and the only thing he earned was ringing ears and a throbbing headache. She believed Fred and George were children throwing a tantrum and didn't understand how deep she might have hurt them.

She didn't realize how much they had matured. With a heavy heart, Bill admitted that his brothers were right this time. That didn't mean they were safe from his anger. Bill immediately realized that his brothers weren't home and Ginny said that they sneaked out every day, the problem is that they didn't come to sleep. Was he worried? Of course. Would he make a drama? Never. Mum and dad had too much to worry about and telling them that the twins fled home would create a rupture in the family.

So Bill questioned Ginny about their brothers' friends and got an extensive and slightly worrying group of people the twins associated with. He managed to contact Neville Longbottom to question the boy about his brothers and agreed to meet in a restaurant, which was a day that he would never be able to forget. The day he had realized his brothers grew up and the day his life had turned into a complicated affair.

Bill walked into the restaurant, looking around in appreciation. Until then, he only managed to visit one of the cafés and the food it served was one of the most delicious things he ever tasted. He was looking for the Longbottom boy when he saw two familiar redheads and had to restrain himself from running in their direction. As he got closer, he got a clear sight of the

group. His brothers were sitting beside a woman and the most perfect-looking person he had ever seen in his life. Restraining his curiosity, he sat in one of the empty chairs and glared at his brothers with all his might.

"May I know where you've been for such a long time? I almost went nuts looking for you," Bill hissed, not needing to raise his voice to convey his anger.

"We left a couple of days after we arrived. No one would notice," Fred said, keeping his calm demeanour in place. Bill's anger deflated.

"Before we continue talking, we present you our friend, Harry Potter, and dear aunt, Eleadora," George said signalling the other occupants of the table.

"A pleasure to meet you, thank you for taking care of my brothers" he nodded, reining in his emotions in order not to gape at the strangers like an idiotic goldfish. He wasn't expecting to meet the boy-who-lived and refused to ruin his image.

"Likewise," the boy spoke said gently.

"It is good to meet you, dear," the woman stated. "I admit I was worried about your family not noticing my children were gone, but knowing they have a brother that cares about their wellbeing calms my heart," the gentle witch commented, directing him a kind smile.

"I'm glad they have found people to lean on when I'm not present," Bill sighed, the last wisps of anger evaporating, allowing the stress of the last days to crash down.

"We didn't want to worry you," George began explaining.

"But we could no longer stay, mum is-"

"I know she can be intense and somewhat careless with her words. That is the reason I'm not dragging you by the ears," he interrupted Fred, understanding his brothers because he, too, would have left if given the opportunity.

"We'll go back the morning we need to leave for the station," Fred told him, looking resolute.

"I don't mind, but you'll have to meet with me a few times for me to know how you are doing," Bill notified his wayward siblings with a smile. "McGonagall sent a letter, she is proud about how much your grades improved and supports you in the careers you chose. Though I have no idea what she was talking about - mind explaining?"

"I want to be an enchanter, but Potions fascinates me so I'm considering a mastery," Fred said, blushing slightly.

"I discovered I love Runes so I'm thinking about a possible mastery, though being a healer also sounds interesting," George shrugged, unable to hide his smile.

If Bill was honest, he admitted being surprised by his sibling's thoughts on the future. It seemed he fell into the same trap as the others and believed they wanted to do the same thing. In a way, their enthusiasm reminded him of his own student days, how had he had worked to

obtain his twelve OWLs and how hard it had been to apply to Gringotts without anyone supporting him. He smiled at his brothers, promising he would support them.

“So how many OWLs should I be expecting?” he asked.

“At least twelve, our teacher will murder us if we dare to have less,” Fred muttered the last part, avoiding looking at the kind woman.

“They will get them without problems. After all, I’m teaching them myself, something that few can brag about,” the woman announced.

“May I ask where your specialities lay?” he asked the woman with curiosity.

“Of course, dear. I’m an enchantress, a healer, and a Potions and Runes mistress. I specialized in a few other things, but I have no interest in pursuing any further mastery at the moment,” she said, dismissing her accomplishments with a shrug while he gaped at her.

“The things you can manage to do after living two hundred and thirty years,” Harry added, enjoying the bewilderment in the twins' brother's expression.

“I... So... Yeah, okay,” Bill accepted and took a sip of his drink. "What will happen to that joke shop you were thinking about?"

"We will create some products in our free time."

“Maybe we will open the shop as a hobby,” George shrugged.

That was the moment he understood that his little brothers were no longer children. They understood that a career was important. While it didn't define your life, it influenced it. Both of them were cementing their futures, not obtaining good grades to please, but for themselves. Bill was proud. Both of them would do great things in the future, of that he was sure. That meal he spent talking with the other people at the table and getting acquainted with Fred and George, rather than the Weasley twins.

At the end of their meeting, Bill felt satisfied knowing his brothers' were safe. While they were not seeing the whole picture, he could not blame them for leaving home. He looked at the boys that were no longer children with nostalgic eyes and wistful smile. He hoped they could enjoy their time as students because dark times were approaching and he could do nothing to shield them from what was coming.

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Harry Potter walked towards Gringotts with different thoughts wreaking havoc through his usually well-organized mind. The book Hwasa lent him was a revelation in more ways than one.

Now, he had a deeper understanding of the Dark Mark, about how it was perverted to become the disgraceful sign of Voldemort. Magic marks were created to establish a connection based on trust. However, in its most basic form, it was a slave seal. Though it did not rob your free

will, it acted as a deterrent in case of the marked person attacking the one that controlled the mark.

In the royal family, it had been used for more than millennia. They learnt the hard way that, in the path of power, no family existed. Therefore, they created a way to ensure the assassinations between royalties came to a halt, which was a success but brought unexpected advantages. It was able to call all the marked people, to leach magic in minor quantities in case of an emergency, and to send brief messages. In ancient times, the royal mark was a sign of honour and only the royal family was allowed to bear it. Its secrets were passed from generation to generation, to the new emperor or empress, thus, he was unable to understand how Voldemort managed to create his mark. Harry needed more information about how it worked, which was another reason he needed to speak with Ragnok. Gringotts had the best Curse-breakers and analysts in the world, and now he needed to hire their services. He was sure Lucius would be willing to have that thing looked over.

Harry entered the bank and greeted the outer guards, who returned the greeting. One of the things he enjoyed the most about visiting the bank was finding civilized people with decent manners. He saw a familiar teller free and approached his counter.

“Good morning, Sharpclaw,” he greeted the goblin, who composed a sharp smile.

“Mister Potter, it is always a pleasure to have you visiting our humble abode.”

“Humble abode... I believe your standards are set too high,” the boy said, making the other male chuckle.

“Manager Ragnok is waiting for you. May gold continue filling your abundant vaults.”

“And may your enemies continue trembling at your name,” the boy smirked at the teller.

Harry walked towards Ragnok's office, an amused smirk playing on his lips. It was good to have those small conversations with Sharpclaw; the man always managed to lift his spirits with their banter. A heavy sigh escaped his lips at the idea of the meeting lasting longer than usual. Although he enjoyed visiting the bank, staying seated for hours to no end was not among the activities he enjoyed the most. He saw the goblin's office door wide open and took it as a silent invitation to enter. The man in question was reading through a thick folder with what most would consider a disturbing expression. However, Harry had learnt it was his happy one, always present when business was going well.

“Good morning Ragnok,” he greeted the goblin, who looked up in surprise and smiled.

“As punctual as always, Harry. Before we get down to business, how is Miss Elizabeth is doing?” the goblin asked with a toothy grin.

“She is as energetic as she can be, learning everything she can from Aunt Eleadora.”

“Ah, so she is on her path of becoming someone to reckon with.”

"Far too much for my taste... You seemed happy, any good news?" he asked, changing the topic from his unpredictable little sister.

"Excellent news: the stationery store is thriving. A while ago I received this contract from the Ministry, they want to buy supplies in bulk," he informed him, handing him a folder.

"What do you recommend?"

"Hand it to Miss Blair for inspection first. The Minister wants some kind of publicity and is offering more money than necessary. If the contract is approved, then agree to it."

"I will do that. How are the other businesses doing? When I ask Ploutos he only manages to confuse me," Harry admitted. The elf and his constant enthusiasm for numbers only assured him everything was going well enough.

"Excellent. Your wise investments are cash cows. The dragon reserves have never been better; the dragons are cooperating more than they ever did before. I was informed that one of your dragon handlers is raising Cerberuses to take care of security," Ragnok almost asked, his expression was contorted in confusion.

"That would be Hagrid. There were some people who tried to steal the eggs. His dog, Fluffy, stopped them, so he asked me permission to raise more and I agreed. The man has talent to communicate with other species. The dragons love him," Harry shrugged and pretended not to notice the dumbfounded goblin.

"That is not what I was expecting... Next matter is regarding the businesses in Diagon Alley. The clothes shop has expanded to the point it is one of the most visited places along with the shoe shop. The perfume store is having an incredible amount of sales. If I'm honest, I was not expecting that. The bag shop is thriving; people are fascinated with the variety on sale. The food places are going to need expanding if so many people continue visiting and I would also consider expanding the day-care," he advised and Harry nodded in agreement.

"I have been thinking about doing that. I will begin planning for the expansions. Are the branch offices doing well?"

"More than well, actually. They have been a constant source of money, already paying their investment... You should consider expanding Dulcis Magicae; their products sell almost as fast as they are produced."

"I know, Ella spends most of her time in there. She enjoys decorating all the sweets she can manage," Harry grumbled, a slight pout giving away his discontentment with the situation. "I will expand it. I have another matter related to business, Ragnok. My aunt met a first generation enchantress a few weeks ago. According to my aunt, she is really creative and invented this," he explained, taking out a mirror from his messenger bag and handing it to the goblin across from him. "It enables communication between the two people who own the brother mirrors. I agree with this being a brilliant invention and wish to invest in it. However, I need a background check first. If she is reliable then I can work with her in the future, if she is not I wish to buy her idea outright."



“Brilliant device indeed, what is the woman's name?” the goblin asked, probing the mirror with curiosity.

“Anna Roberts. She graduated from Hogwarts seven years ago and works at Flourish and Blotts. This mirror has potential as the foundation of many future inventions based on Muggle devices,” he explained with a smirk that the goblin reciprocated.

“I will dispatch people to have her background checked and will send the results to you in a week at most.”

“Thank you for the help, Ragnok.”

“It is my pleasure to make more gold,” the goblin smirked and Harry huffed.

“Of course it is. Never mind that, I guess the other things are going well?”

“That they are; the acromantula silk you provide has a superb quality, thus it is easy to export it.”

“Yeah, I need to find more uses for it. Now that Aragog and his children live in peace, the only use they have for their silk is as a gift to keep them safe. They produce so much that all my elves are dressed in it and my sister is tired of seeing her clothes made of that. Even Aunt Eleadora refuses to keep accepting more and not many are able to afford it, so we don't have many clothes made from it for the shop... Wouldn't you like a couple of meters?” Harry offered, looking hopeful. Maybe he could gift a couple of hundred meters.

“I don't know what to say about that offer. Acromantula silk is extremely valuable. However, goblins are a warrior race and we accept nothing for free,” the goblin explained, looking bewildered. It seemed the boy possessed the same twisted logic his mother tended to use.

“Then I can give it to you as a payment for all your help. Please accept it, the elves will rebel if I keep giving them silk,” Harry almost begged and the confused male nodded.

“I believe it is time to begin discussing more delicate matters,” Ragnok told the boy, whose expression morphed into a serious one. “Death Eaters are beginning to move their money, just as we predicted. They are following the same patterns from the last war. The Minister is starting to receive curious donations, as are many other people in the Ministry.”

“At least we have a list of the ones who are receiving an extra incentive. I was informed that they were trying to contact vampires and werewolves to join. All my allies are contacting the ones they know to offer them protection. What we fear is Greyback. That beast is getting desperate because we have been protecting all the children that we are able to. We are beginning to organize hunting parties, but a corralled animal dangerous.”

“That is indeed true. I offer some of my people to help - the most experienced trackers and hunters.”

“Thank you, Ragnok. They are also trying to contact different centaur herds. So far we have no idea whether they will join. The giants and Dementors are a lost cause. I hope you have

implemented the rune stones I sent you a few weeks ago. Aunt Eleadora made them herself to protect the castle from Dementors."

"We have added them to our wards. I believe we have not thanked you for the many lengths you have gone to protect our people," the goblin told the boy, who raised an eyebrow in curiosity when he began searching in his desk.

After a few moments, Ragnok smiled, taking out a simple black box and handed it to Harry, who eyed it with curiosity and opened it. Inside there was a sleek, narrow blade. Its handle was decorated with a snake coiling around that had emeralds for eyes. The almost scintillating metal gave away the material it was made from - goblin iron. It was a weapon forged by a master in his craft, with a material that was considered almost sacred within the Goblin Nation. He stared at it in amazement for a brief moment and sighed.

"This is the kind of gift I'm unable to accept. Only your warriors are allowed to carry such a valuable weapon," the boy said. With a heavy heart, he closed the box.

"The king has decided to name you a friend of my people. You showed honest concern for our wellbeing. It is a gift to show you our appreciation," the goblin announced and Harry nodded, understanding the great honour he had been granted.

"Thank you, Ragnok."

"Now, moving onto less pleasing topics. The Horcrux in Little Hangleton was dealt with yesterday. The parselmouth you sent us was invaluable to ensure the safety of all people involved. It was a ring that once belonged to the Gaunt family, it contained a nasty curse and a powerful compulsion charm. The Gaunts were purebloods who were driven to extinction by their obsession, they were the last descendants from Salazar Slytherin."

"Voldemort was the last Slytherin descendant," Harry murmured with wide eyes, understanding what the goblin had implied.

"Indeed. We are looking for any children that the last descendants may have had. Marvolo Gaunt died between late 1925 and 1928, he was the father of Merope and Morfin Gaunt. The son was sent to Azkaban in 1925, sentenced to three years for cursing Muggles and attacking Aurors. He was once again arrested in the summer of 1943 for murdering the Riddle family with the killing curse; he is now residing in Azkaban and has never had children. Merope Gaunt, on the other hand, married a Muggle named Tom Riddle. From what we managed to gather from the villagers, she was a meek woman and her husband was deeply in love with her, to the point of running away together and eloping to London. They never understood why he came back a year later without the girl. There are many rumours but we have no idea where the truth lies. We believe her to be dead, which is a shame because the girl was eighteen when she ran away. So far, we only managed to collect that information, but we have reason to believe that Voldemort may be her son."

"The biggest mystery of Voldemort has always been his origins... I wonder where he was raised. I can ask Miss Blair to investigate him in the Muggle world and I will look around in Hogwarts to find anything about him."

How ironic would it be if a blood-purist was born from a Muggle?

"We can give you the ring if you wish to have it," the goblin offered, though Harry declined with a shake of his head.

"I would rather not touch it. Did you manage to pinpoint a more precise location for the other Horcrux?"

"No, the only thing we know is that it is on the upper floors, but not in the towers. It is almost as if the room it is located in, doesn't want to be pinpointed," Ragnok groaned.

"I can ask whether the elves have more of an idea. Have you managed to locate another?"

"No, the devices need to rest for a month. We tried to use one of them to track down Voldemort, but it will be impossible. The Horcruxes are so polluted with evil magic that their magical signatures differ completely," he lamented with a slight scowl.

"It's a shame, though we still aren't sure whether they belong to him," Harry said and smiled at the goblin's incredulous expression. "I prefer to be a sceptic and plan for the worst-case scenarios," he justified his suspicious attitude, one that sometimes bordered on paranoia.

"Anyway," continued Ragnok, "we believe it is time for the Minister for Magic to be changed. The man allies himself with whoever puts the highest number of galleons in his vault. He will hinder many of our plans."

"I will order Rita to investigate the man. Any suggestions for the new one?"

"Madam Bones would do an excellent job, though we can always look for more candidates."

Harry simply nodded. Considering how useless most of the Wizengamot members were, Madam Bones was a logical option.

"Before I forget, I want to hire the most experienced analysts you have."

"May I inquire as to the reason for that strange request?"

"Of course, my friend. I want to analyze the dark mark. I have an idea of how it works but I need more information. Lucius Malfoy will agree to have his mark looked at. Voldemort is quite insistent and keeps trying to call him."

"I can arrange that, but using your caution as an example, I will also keep an eye on the movement of his accounts. You never informed me what Miss Pittsum concluded of your scar," the goblin commented and Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise. Aunt Eleadora was going to kill him.

"I forgot about it. Don't tell my aunt unless you want to lose your client to a violent murder," Harry almost groaned. Having his scar checked slipped his mind for almost a year. So much for being called a genius.

"It seems that the brilliant Potter heir is a mere human after all," Ragnok joked, amused at the boy's distress "However, we need to know if the scar is connected in any way to Voldemort, especially after the way it reacted a year ago."

"I agree. Is there any healer you recommend?"

"If you don't mind being looked at by goblins, I can arrange a meeting in less than an hour."

"Please do. I trust yours more than I trust the ones at St. Mungo's," Harry agreed and the man took out his usual book and began writing in it.

"It is done. We have to wait twenty minutes for the healer to be ready. Is there anything else you wish to discuss?"

"Mmm, what about the Ministry?"

"Nothing useful, but that is no surprise, although there are curious rumours regarding next year."

"As far as I knew, the only interesting event was the Quidditch Cup being played," Harry said, inviting the goblin to inform him of any other things that could happen.

"Albus Dumbledore has been pushing to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament. He is being quite insistent about it. The useless Minister, in his search for approval, is willing to make it happen. Leonard Fawley, Head of the Ministry of Magic's Department of International Magical Cooperation, and Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, agree to this initiative. Although Madam Bones is against it, there is a high probability of the Tournament taking place next year."

"What is this competition about and why was it cancelled?" Harry asked, curiosity shining in his eyes.

"It is a magical contest held between the three largest wizarding schools of Europe that existed in the thirteen century: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Durmstrang Institute, and Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. Each school is represented by one champion. The official purpose was to promote unity between countries, but the real objective was to see which school was better. It was cancelled because of all the casualties it caused, not only among the participants but also among the public and judges."

"So it's dangerous. I wonder what the headmaster is planning. Thank you for the information, Ragnok... I have been thinking about William Weasley, he's a Curse-breaker and works here. Do you know anything about him?"

"I was not aware that Gringotts turned into a social club," the goblin joked, almost chuckling at the boy's surprised face.

"You would love to meet Sirius," the boy grumbled, "two of Bill's younger brothers are close friends of mine. As far as I'm concerned, they consider him one of his favourite siblings. He seems to care about my friends. However, I need to know where his loyalties lie. I don't have

the privilege of allowing a spy near people I consider family and who have access to delicate information,” he informed the goblin.

“I understand. Well, let's see... William Weasley has been working for the bank for almost six years now. However, he has been asking some delicate questions regarding our loyalties. We sent some of our people to investigate the reason. It seems he joined a vigilante group called the Order of the Phoenix. It was created by Albus Dumbledore during the last war. Though he is good at his job, if he keeps pestering us we will be forced to dismiss him from his duties.”

“I know about the Order; my parents were part of it. Sirius told me that it was active once again. I apologize for not telling you; it slipped my mind. I will ask my godfather who are the current members.”

“I would appreciate it. We have excellent employees but we would rather have loyal ones.”

“I will send you a letter as soon as Sirius tells me. If you don't mind, I suggest finding a way to examine your employees in case one is placed under the imperius or a loyalty potion. I can ask Aunt Eleadora to begin researching. I believe it would be appropriate to also apply it to my businesses.”

“I believe that is an excellent idea. Do you mind if we ask your aunt to work with our people?”

“Not at all, that way we will have results sooner. Being honest, security is something that worries me now that Voldemort noticed his raids are no longer useful. I’m still receiving people who come looking for refuge. Madam Bones and Head Healer Abbot are accepting vampires and werewolves to train. Both are pleased to see the number of capable candidates they now have and I also have dozens of guards in the Alley. However, I believe that is not enough. Luna had a dream a few weeks ago in which dozens of Death Eaters and Voldemort were terrorizing people. She said it was in an open field and others were running. They had Muggle children as hostages and two Muggle adults were being tortured,” he explained, sharing his worries.

“Your seer had a worrisome glimpse into the future. Do you have any idea of when it may happen?”

“The Quidditch World Cup, which is the only place where hundreds of magical will join in an open field, though now that you mentioned that competition, it is also a possibility.”

“What precautions are you thinking of taking?”

“Luna said people were only able to run, so they somehow activated a large-scale ward against Apparating and portkeys, or the civilians forgot they could use magic... Now that I think about it, I would bet on the latter. Never mind that. Even though the DMLE now has more recruits than in the past decade, it's not enough. I wouldn't have worried if Luna wasn't so restless. We are training our people and equipping them as much as we can. Ares and Mars are training dozens of elves for security, but Luna is still worried. I'm running out of ideas,” Harry murmured and rubbed his face.

"She is indeed powerful if she knows that something will go wrong... Did she mention how many people Voldemort had on his side?"

"No, but she told me there were many more than expected. He is somehow obtaining followers and that is the real problem. Many students came to me searching for help, teenagers that were going to be marked during the holidays. I need to know who else is joining him."

"Have you considered other schools? Dumstrang's last headmaster was a Death Eater, though we have no idea where the actual headmaster's loyalty lies. Voldemort may be obtaining his recruits from other countries and the other option is the use of inferi. He tried to use them during the last war, but a few people who opposed him mastered Fiendfyre, which made his tactic ineffective. Perhaps he is not expecting anyone who is able to master the curse."

"I've never tried it myself, but as far as I knew, the spell was unable to be controlled. Who were those persons?" Harry asked, curiosity gnawing at him.

"Your mother was one of them. Edgar Bones, Dorcas Meadowes, and Gideon Prewett were the other ones," Ragnok explained while he checked his book. "The healer is ready."

"Thank you Ragnok, I will practice the spell. If Luna has any other feelings I will tell you. Let's go."

The boy and goblin walked into the depths of Gringotts, a place where no other human had been allowed to venture in more than five hundred years. Ragnok was pleased to find a human worthy of trust, who appreciated their friendship and treated them as equals. He admitted being doubtful when the boy told him about the possible threats and explained his source of information: a savant seer. Nevertheless, he took precautions and he regretted doubting him. The attack would have cost him people had he not ordered the guards to remain inside the day of the attack.

That day, Ragnok decided that even if what Harry Potter told him sounded impossible, he would take the boy's worries as real threats. He would not have believed the Quidditch Cup would be attacked, with all the security the Ministry was placing because of all the international guests. However, if the boy worried then so did he.

The memory of inferi being used froze his blood; many of his people had died because of them during the last war. Inferi were not wizards, therefore, they were not violating the treaty when attacking them inside the bank. Now that he thought about it, it would be an excellent idea to get his most trusted employees to learn to control Fiendfyre or ask the specialists to create some kind of ward against them.

They walked in silence until they reached a plain corridor where a door was open. Ragnok guided him to the room, where he saw two ancient-looking goblins waiting. Harry assumed that they were the healers because of their clothing and he wondered if it was a healer thing to choose white as their representative colour.

"Healer Fierceguard, Healer Silverwick, I present to you the friend of our nation, Harry Potter," Ragnok introduced.

“Pleased to meet you,” Harry greeted with the traditional bow.

“Likewise, Harry Potter,” the one he thought was Fierceguard greeted in return and the other nodded.

“Ragnok said a few worrisome things, such as your scar hurting. Can you describe the feeling?” Silverwick inquired.

“Of course. It felt like... as if my scar was being ripped open. I remember the pain and feeling dizzy, but I’m ashamed to admit I remember nothing else.”

“I see... A worrying situation indeed. Please lay in the bed and Fierceguard will analyze you while I ask some questions,” the healer said and he nodded.

“I can leave if you wish,” Ragnok offered, not wishing to intrude.

“I don't mind if you stay and, either way, you will know the results,” Harry answered and the manager took a seat close by, taking out the thick book he always carried with him.

“Have you ever practised Occlumency?” one healer asked while the other was starting to wave a glowing hand over him at a slow pace.

“I do. Since I was eleven I have been meditating. However, the skill comes naturally to me. For as long as I remember, I have been organizing my memories to be able to remember what I read,” he explained and the goblin nodded.

“That is indeed a wondrous talent to possess. Do you have control over your mind palace?”

“I do. In essence, I designed it to be simple. It's a totally dark space: no sound, smell, taste, feeling, or sight. I'm not aiming to be a master Occlumens, therefore I consider that an excellent defence.”

“Indeed it is, the worst kind of torture applied to the invader. So, you have not tried to alter your memories?”

“No. I have no interests in doing so,” Harry answered, because while Occlumency was interesting, what fascinated him the most was Legilimency.

“Has your scar hurt on any other occasion?”

“A few classes during my first year, but after the confrontation with the creature it hasn't bothered me at all.”

“Have you ever had a dream where you felt you were not yourself?” the goblin asked, looking perturbed. The other healer's expression was inscrutable as her hand hovered over his head.

“Not at all. I don't tend to have dreams, but when I do, they are memories.”

"That is all. You will have to give us a moment," he announced and both healers left the room.

He and Ragnok waited for a few minutes in silence until both of them came back, looking agitated. They were talking to one another in their native language. Harry realized that he had not been putting in enough effort to learn it when he noticed he was able to understand only half of what was being said. Nevertheless, the phrase 'incomplete lethal curse' and the sight of Ragnok paling was enough for him to know that there were not good news.

"We found the problem, but it is a delicate matter," Healer Fierceguard began explaining, her hand clenched on the parchment she was holding. "It is a magical parasitic leech, which is the consequence of an incomplete or unsuccessful lethal curse. For a moment, we believed it to be a Horcrux, but we dismissed the idea. Those disgusting things are not made by accident; the specific ritual it needs to be created would not allow it.

"The next option is the one we are informing you about. Magical parasitic leeches do what the name suggests: they feed on the magic of the person and constrict it to the point where it blocks a part of their magical core. They are rare, but we have found a few cases. While you have the leech, your soul will be unable to leave this world if you die, but that also applies to the one that the leech belongs to. In a way, it feeds his magic, which does not allow his spirit to leave while you have it. Neither can die while the other survives," she explained, looking grave.

"Is that how Voldemort has managed to survive for so long?" he asked, unable to react.

"It may be, as it is a link between his magic and yours. A person is only able to die if no magic is left in their body. While Horcruxes keep your soul anchored to this plane, your consciousness ceases to exist until someone performs the ritual to bring back your physical form. Otherwise, Horcruxes remain as objects with a soul inside - evil, but useless. We found dozens in Egypt, but the most they can do is influence a person with a weak will. On the other hand, a leech is a link between two people. It is more unilateral, but a link nonetheless."

"Is there any way of getting rid of it?" Harry asked. Having a part of Voldemort in his head was a disgusting notion.

"There is, and the process is quite simple. We will perform a cleansing ritual. It will not only destroy the leech, but it will also dispose of any possible residue," Healer Silverwick explained. "However, we need to put you to sleep."

"I don't mind. Ragnok, please call Rome or Ella when we are done and don't tell my aunt or my sister," he half threatened, half begged.

"I will not say a word to them," the goblin promised, issuing a smile to cover his worry.

Harry nodded and a healer approached him, putting a finger on his forehead. He was instantly unconscious. They took the boy to a special chamber where the most trusted Curse-breaker in the bank was waiting. The process was incredibly complicated because the leech had tainted much of the boy's magic, so they had to be extremely careful not to damage his core. In the



end, they were successful, although the tired Curse-breaker passed out, as did one of the healers. A few goblins took care of them while the other healer checked on the boy.

After the healer gave the positive signal, Ragnok called a Potter house-elf, who popped the boy out after thanking them profusely. Ragnok sighed in relief. It had been a complicated ritual and he reached the peak of what his heart could take that day. With tired steps, he went to his cavern to have, if possible, a peaceful evening.

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Harry Potter woke up the next day feeling better than ever. He took a long bath and noticed his scar looked fainter. He proceeded to write a letter to the goblins to thank them and used the opportunity to tell Ella to take a few hundred meters of acromantula silk to the bank. She nodded so fast that he guessed she was relieved to get rid of it and, if he was honest, he was too.

Days went by with no other interesting events. However, the day before boarding the train to Hogwarts was memorable, but not for the reasons he would have wished. It had been a normal morning and the whole Guild, plus Sirius and Hwasa, were having lunch at the castle. The conversation had been smooth until one of the morons he considered his friends decided to ask the princess how her country was run instead of reading a book on the topic.

“So how does the Asian Empire work?” asked a curious Theo. The princess raised an eyebrow and the boy faltered, proceeding to take a big bite of his food.

“It does sound antiquated,” Marcus agreed and a few seconds later looked at his food in panic, much to the amusement of Harry. It seemed the older girl was able to intimidate his friends with a simple unimpressed look.

“Please, stop intimidating the cowards,” he told her in Mandarin, earning a smirk from her.

“If you say so...” she uttered and looked at his friends. “The empire is old indeed, but not antiquated. It was founded when territories were reigned by families. However, unlike other dim-witted morons, we don’t use quills or parchment; we are intelligent enough to adapt Muggle technology for our world,” was her sharp response that ensured no one else asked.

“So how was it created if it's so old?” asked Sirius. It seemed the man was unable to notice the panic with which Theo was looking at him or notice when he should remain quiet.

“One of my ancestors had a vision. She saw most of our people murdered because non-magicals were too frightened of magic. She decided to contact all the families and show them her vision. They united and decided to keep our world secret, choosing her as the new leader for the new era. Since then, Muggles fought wars and established their own territories. However, none of this affected us because we didn't live amongst them. We created new cities for our growing population in different places. We care not for what Muggles call countries because we are all people living under the same authority. That is how my people have survived for so long, unlike the morons that decided that Muggles presented no threats,” she narrated, capturing the attention of all present.

"Why are Muggles a threat?" Draco asked and Harry sighed. The boy was still ignorant about the Muggle world.

"We number millions all around the world, but they number in the billions. They outnumber us and, if that wasn't enough, they have created lethal weapons that we are unable to fight against," Hwasa said, but the looks many were giving her almost made her sigh.

"They're Muggles," Sirius stated, directing an incredulous look at the girl. Harry wished aunt Eleadora was present to control him.

"Indeed they are, but their lack of magic only made them more creative in their ways of assassinating each other... In 1945, they were fighting another war. We didn't care about their conflict, which was a terrible mistake on our side. A cruel Muggle country created one of the most disgusting weapons of mass destruction; it is called a nuclear bomb. On August sixth of that year, one was sent to the city of Hiroshima. Around a hundred thousand people were killed in less than a minute and even more were injured," she described in a soft voice. Her pain could be almost felt, and no one talked. "Just three days later, they released the same atrocity on the city of Nagasaki, where one of our cities was. A brave Yosei named Sakura felt the thing coming and knew she wouldn't be able to transport all the children away to safety.

"She did the next best thing. With her unique magic, she gathered all the young children... She sacrificed her magic and life to protect them. No one else in the city was spared. Many of the Yosei went to look for survivors and found the children. However, the city was deemed the place too polluted to be habitable by a substance they didn't recognize. Only seventeen years ago, and with many cleansing rituals, a new city was built. It's named Sakura in honour of the brave Yosei. In that short time, it has become one of the empire's jewels." Hwasa ended her narration with a wistful smile; it was obvious the event had left a deep scar in the people from the country. "If you'll excuse me, I've lost my appetite," she muttered and left the room.

Harry watched the girl leave with a heavy sigh. He stood up and glared at Sirius with all his might. If the idiot had read a bit of history, as Harry almost begged him to do in order not to offend the girl and cause an accidental war, none of this would have happened.

Harry silently followed Hwasa, her slow steps allowed him to catch up to her and compose himself. She opened the main door and he followed, walking in silence until they reached a place to sit beside the lake. She sat down and observed the water. Her expressionless face made him want to smack Sirius.

"I apologize," he told her in a gentle tone that did not disrupt the tranquil atmosphere.

"You don't have to. I overreacted," she murmured. Her face softened but it did nothing to calm his growing anger.

"You didn't... Your grandfather told me what happened," he told her and she sighed.

"I still should have controlled myself better."

"Perhaps, but I don't think I would be able to do much better if I talked about my mother."

“So the old man did tell you,” she huffed. “He has a loose tongue.”

“That he does, but it was his way of establishing a rapport - a questionable method if you ask me.” He tried to joke, but her diminutive smile did not please him.

“I wish she hadn't offered herself to be one of the people who cleansed the place,” Hwasa whispered. Harry almost panicked when he noticed he had no idea of how should he answer. After a few moments of silence, he sighed in defeat.

“I still remember that night...” he muttered, having the irrational need of comforting the girl by sharing his own experience, something he considered idiotic and yet that did not deter him from continuing to talk. “Not much, but enough to haunt me some nights. I remember her begging for my life, not hers... He gave her two opportunities to leave, but she took none. She decided to die in order to protect me.

“I was unable to remember this until a Dementor attack at school; before that, my mother was a mere concept. When I arrived in this world, she turned into someone I admired, but when I remembered... That was the moment I loved her. It must be even harder for you to have loved your mother from a young age and then lose her,” he whispered to her. For the first time, a female he had seen as an untameable force of nature looked vulnerable, and that unsettled him.

“I remember how sick she was; all the radiation she and the others had absorbed was lethal. She would have lived longer if she hadn't had me, but she chose to... I miss her,” she murmured. Unshed tears shone in her eyes; her lower lip quivered slightly.

Harry put an arm around her, allowing her head to rest on his chest. Her silent tears were worse than any kind of sobbing because she did not allow herself to grieve the way she needed and he understood that frustrating feeling. The knowledge that she was hurting and that he was unable to help her left him feeling impotent. Somehow, he had come to care about the rambunctious girl that acted as his sister, but who had gone through far too much. He admired her resilience because, while he had been able to surpass his difficulties, that childlike innocence Elizabeth and Hwasa possessed had not survived.

“Every time you or grandfather speaks about your mother, I wish I could have met her... I'm sure my mother and yours would have been good friends,” she told him after long moments of silence, a small smile gracing her lips.

“Perhaps...” he answered back.

They stayed in that spot until Elizabeth came looking for them. Sirius was in for a nasty surprise. Hell hath no fury as a wounded, hormonal teenager in seek of revenge that happened to have diplomatic immunity.

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Harry Potter and his friends were back at school and, while he was used to the stares his fame brought, the admiring looks put him on edge. The Guild was impressed by how much their social standing changed since the day of the attack in Hogsmeade. While they had been respected, there had also been the obvious resentment at their success living within most of

the students. Now, though, there was real admiration and even most of the jealousy had subsided.

The Slytherins' dedication when following Harry's rules also worked. Now, the house was one of the most praised in the school. Harry thought it would be the perfect moment to look for the final member they needed to complete the Guild and at last form the Hogwarts Court. However, Luna did not agree, stating that it was not time. The only response he could muster was a sigh. He may trust the girl with his life, but sometimes he wished she had a more solid answer.

Following Ragnok's advice, Harry started practising the control of Fiendfyre in the Chamber of Secrets and forced his friends to follow his example. He noticed how pliable his magic became after the ritual. However, he needed to go through the process of relearning all the spells because he overpowered them, a fact that pleased and peeved him in equal measure.

All of his friends were inspired by his hard work and began training even more. Those had been hard months of arduous practice, and most of the time they slept in their headquarters. Also, professor Flitwick was more focused than ever, pushing them to their limits, yet none of them faltered. Harry would never forget how, after weeks of being constantly tense, Luna relaxed at last.

It seemed they were doing something right and somehow managed to change the future.

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### **5th of June, Great Hall, Hogwarts**

Albus Dumbledore was observing his students from his throne-like place at the teachers' table. The hall was decorated in green and silver, which meant that, once again, Slytherin won the House Cup. However, unlike in previous years, all the other houses seemed to applaud them instead of showing open hostility. He looked at that table and sighed. Harry Potter was eating with his friends in that composed and regal, almost apathetic way of his that reminded him so much of Dorea. Her same uninterested and slightly disapproving expression was worn by her grandson.

The past year was full of revelations, some of which he would rather not remember but was unable to erase from his mind. For example, the realization that he shared more characteristics with Voldemort than the chosen boy did. That day had changed his whole perception of how the world worked. For months, he tried to deny it, observing the boy for any hint of Tom in him. Albus resorted to desperate measures in hopes to continue fooling himself and asked the other teachers what they thought about the boy in their usual monthly meeting. To this day, he regretted opening that big mouth of his.

“Now that we are all here, I have a few questions about a particular group of students,” he announced at the beginning of the meeting, earning many curious glances and a few suspicious glares that he ignored. “Harry Potter and his friends are good students as far as you have all told me, but I need to know how much. Madam Marchbanks is adding a few new subjects and professors next year; she needs to know if they will be able to keep up.”

"I'm so happy you asked, Albus. It's not every day that a teacher gets to brag about her brightest students," Bathsheba Babbling blurted in a singsong voice. "Mister Potter is brilliant in Runes, but George Weasley already shows the makings of a true master in the subject, despite my doubts in accepting him last year. I've never had a group as applied as that group of friends. They are years beyond their curriculum and I fear that, before they graduate, there will be nothing left for me to teach them," she lamented, but her glowing smile transmitted how proud she was.

"I have to agree with Bathsheba," Septima Vector said. "Mister Nott has a marvellous talent for my subject and I have never seen a student understanding my most complicated lessons as if they were the simplest puzzles like Mister Potter."

"While most of my students had little to no knowledge on my subject, that group of students is years beyond what school will be able to teach them," Thomas Cumberbatch, the new History professor, announced.

"Those students weren't born with amazing skills, they worked hard to earn them. I have never seen students so dedicated to their studies and practice. I believe we all agree that, even if they find the subject complicated, they will work hard to, not only understand but to excel in it," Remus explained and the others nodded. The man had just killed Dumbledore's information influx.

"I think we all agree that they will be able to take whatever Griselda throws their way. As a matter of fact, she has been talking with them already to see which classes will be the first ones to be added. Although the older students are the ones that worry me because few have the motivation to work the extra hours required to be part of the new classes," Minerva said and Albus sighed.

"Indeed. I gave Mister Potter and his friends the opportunity to take a more advanced curriculum. So far, none of the other students has been able to keep up. I had to force Miss Granger to drop it because the girl looked on the verge of a mental breakdown," Filius explained and many others nodded.

"Precisely. She wanted to take all the electives and, for a while, I considered giving her a time turner. However, I decided not to and I don't regret my decision. She's unable to establish her priorities. It's quite sad to see such a promising witch lose herself trying to compete with another student," Minerva muttered, a deep scowl etched on her lips.

"Anyway, do you think it is wise to allow Mister Potter to take those new subjects? It seems he is too busy with the previous ones. Besides, the boy is getting too prideful about his knowledge. He almost never interacts with his peers," Albus explained but seeing Minerva getting ready to scold made him regret phrasing it that way.

"What gave you that idea, Albus? While he isn't the humblest person I know, he understands the limits of his abilities better than most adults. He has never bragged about his constant monopoly of the position of the top of the year to anyone. He admits without hesitation that there are people within his group of friends who are better than him at certain things. He is not prideful. Don't forget that I met you when you were still a teen and when you were older

than him you had twice the ego and none of his common sense,” Filius rebuked and he almost groaned.

“I apologize. I did not mean to imply that,” he said with a gentle smile.

“But you did, Albus. You are the Chief Warlock and you want me to believe you are not able to phrase things well? We all told you what we think. I believe that any further discussion needs Griselda to be present. If you'll excuse me, I've had a long day,” Filius announced and walked out of the room.

Most of the teachers followed him, many scowling at the headmaster. Remus, in particular, seemed angry at him, but in the end, it did not affect him as much. The man was no longer loyal to him and, no matter what he did, the only result of trying to get into his good graces only seemed to push him away. Minerva was glaring at him, and Albus thanked Merlin for Severus' decision to stay back because she would not try to murder him with a witness present... right?

“That is enough. I'm tired of you always trying to interfere in my students' life because of some fixation you have with the boy. I've allowed it so far, but this ends today, Albus. How dare you talk about a child in that way?! While he is James' son, he possesses all of Lily's good sense. I know you are trying to hold him back - I have no idea why - but I will tell you this: continue harassing my student and I will fight you for the position that you are holding right now. After all your mistakes, perhaps it is time for you to retire,” Minerva promised and left the room.

“Now you understand my frustration. I'm unable to talk about the brat if I don't want to be chewed out,” Severus muttered, wearing a satisfied smirk for a change.

“Do you think I'm wrong?” Albus asked, fearing the answer.

“Yes,” the man muttered after a prolonged silence, looking as if the simple word burnt his tongue. “But there is no way to deny that there is something wrong with him.”

Severus simply left after that, not bothering to explain further. Albus opened a new bottle of firewhisky, wondering if it would have been better to remain silent.

At least he could drown his worries for a few hours, thing that he was planning to do once the feast was over.

## Chapter End Notes

“Neither can die while the other survives”, the reason I changed that part from the prophecy is because I never understood the canon version of the phrase. Voldemort and Harry were both pretty much alive until the moron decided that his greatest enemy was a

toddler. Then the idiot still lived, I don't know if it as because of the Horcruxes but the idea never gave me the right impression. I think the phrase I changed fits better, to my story at least.

# Simmering Strife

## Chapter Notes

Stay healthy, don't be paranoid, listen to "Go Baby" by KARD, and enjoy the chapter!

The members of the Guild were on the train, going home for the summer. Harry was pleased by how tranquil the year was because it allowed him to concentrate on his studies and training. The unexpected support the Guild received for what people considered heroic actions before the Yule holidays brought more benefits than expected. For the first time in decades, the Slytherin experienced acceptance within the school. They relished the feeling and were more committed than ever to follow the rules Harry established. However, as much as he tried, he was unable to get rid of the thought that he should enjoy what was left of his peaceful life.

"Everything hurts," Draco whined. Daphne pushed him off her when he placed his head on her shoulder.

"I would say 'man up' but, seeing as the males that surround me are as whiny as a soiled toddler, I recommend you shut up or I will make sure you woman up," Daphne hissed. If her hostility was anything to go by, her pride still ached from their humbling lesson.

"Flitwick is a sadist," Theo muttered, but did not move otherwise and kept using Terrence as a pillow.

"Did everyone decide which classes to take next year?" Adrian asked the group.

"Martial magic is a must for all of us. An old friend of our beloved yet sadistic teacher is going to give the class," Blaise murmured, his brow furrowed while he read *The Quibbler*.

"Professor Benedict Munter will be a great teacher," Luna announced with a smile.

"Spellcasting sounds fascinating," Neville told the others, "but I think we should take inscription casting and learn the others in our own time."

During the year, everyone learnt the basis of healing, duelling, runes, and magic detection. However, that was hardly their main project. Their main objective was becoming animagi. Sirius told Harry that the Marauders managed to do so at fifteen, so the boy wanted to beat them by a year. However, he was planning to use his mother's method because the Sirius' approach of trial and error was not the most convincing.

Also, everyone in the Guild would begin their specializations.



Theo decided to put his strategic mind to use and chose magic negation, runes, and spell crafting. A good friend of Aunt Eleadora would teach him the latter. Daphne surprised no one when she chose curse manipulation and maleficiums.

On the other hand, Draco surprised many when he chose healing, warding, and abjuration - all of them centred on protective magic. Blaise also surprised everyone when he chose black magic and magic negation instead of potions or something similar. Marcus chose illusions and spell negation, stating that it would be invaluable in his political career.

Flora chose warding and alchemy while Hestia was fascinated by white magic, healing, and abjuration. While those branches tended to be on the spectrum of what the Ministry considered light magic, white magic and abjuration were still considered dark for some reason. Perhaps that is why the girl chose them.

Fred was also fascinated by alchemy and he was already reading all the books he could manage to obtain on the subject. George was concentrating on being an enchanter, but he still took extra time to learn about healing. Terrence was fixated on healing, spell negation, and curse-breaking. If he somehow managed to combine them all, he would become an invaluable ally during any conflict. Adrian concentrated on magic negation and defence magic - apparently, the battle on Hogsmeade cemented his desire to protect the ones he cared about.

Little Luna chose blood magic and elemental magic. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that she would be someone to reckon with in the future. Gentle Neville chose magical destruction - a dangerous branch of magic that few still practised. Aunt Eleadora moved heaven and earth to contact an old hag who specialized in that area and agreed to mentor the boy on the condition that Neville also mentors someone in the future. That power combined with elemental magic and illusions would make the gentle boy one of the most dangerous members of the Guild.

Harry also chose magical destruction, more out of curiosity than anything else. Also, he wanted to follow his mother's path and decided to specialize in blood magic and duelling, though Aunt Eleadora was forcing him to learn potions, something that he didn't mind at all, though he could do without all the nagging he was subjected to. Besides, he was longing to learn his family magic. The problem was waiting until he turned fifteen so the Potter Grimoire allowed itself to be read. It was a shame to wait so long, but it wasn't as if he was spending his time idle.

"Who's going to take advanced runes and arithmancy?" Blaise asked, giving up on the magazine he was reading.

"I think all of us will," Draco muttered while he used Neville as a human pillow, giving up on his attempts to use Daphne, after a particularly cold glare.

"The classes were getting boring. I'm glad we're going to be actually learning," George said and everyone agreed.

"We still have to plan for the Quidditch World Cup," Hestia said, looking at Harry.

“Aunt Eleadora placed wards around the camping place and she is the one who enchanted the tent, so we will be as safe as we can be inside it. Sirius talked with Madam Bones. She will send Curse-breakers a week before the game and Aurors will begin regular patrols,” he informed the others.

“I see she's happy with the number of new recruits if she's tolerating Sirius for so long,” Adrian stated with a smirk.

“I guess,” Harry answered noncommittally.

“So who is coming?” Neville asked to no one in particular.

“My aunt and sister, Remus and Sirius, Draco's parents, and a few elves who want to watch the game. Although, it's likely Elizabeth invited her friend without asking me... Thinking about it, let's just assume Hwasa is also going,” Harry sighed and a few smiled at his frustration.

“Astoria wanted to join us, but father didn't allow her to,” Daphne informed them, her stony expression showing what she thought about that decision.

“Mother will visit a few friends of hers. She would rather wear the same outfit twice than camp,” Blaise chuckled.

“Should we take the mirrors?” Fred asked, taking out a palm-sized mirror from his pocket.

“No. Harry will give us something better in a few days,” Luna announced and the alluded boy smiled.

Luna unveiled his surprise. The enchantress Aunt Eleadora met was an intelligent woman who felt affronted by the lack of communication methods in the magical world. Following Ragnok's advice, Harry contacted her with the aim of working together. Now he was her financial backer and they founded a company named 'Mirror Summons', which was dedicated to creating new communication methods.

So far, she managed to link a large number of communication mirrors, which were a best-seller among the magical people. They sold so fast that Ragnok suggested beginning to export them, something Harry agreed with. The woman also managed to replicate a basic television using them, but it was still a prototype that needed much work. Despite of this, the Ministry bought custom-made giant versions to use during the Cup final, though he suspected they were also planning to use them in the Triwizard Tournament. Harry's personal favourite invention, until the moment, was a necklace with a diminutive crystal that had the basic functions of a Muggle cellphone, subtle and practical. He ordered fifteen of them, one for each member of the Guild.

“I told daddy I would be with some friends for the Cup and he decided to join an exploration party to some Aztec ruins. So, I will stay with you until we go back to school,” Luna informed him and Harry sighed. He nodded in acceptance but was beginning to sulk about how he missed the good old days when people still asked his opinion.

"We told dad we're staying with Lee. He'll tell mum," George said.

"But Bill knows and wants to come and visit a few times," Fred added.

"I have no problems with it, though you have to tell us before either he comes or you go and visit him. You'll be sitting with us, right?" Harry asked the twins and they nodded.

"Dad got tickets, but he didn't mind when we told him we were sitting with our friends."

"Ginny took the chance to invite a friend of hers and Ron did the same," George shrugged, knowing they would enjoy the game from a better place.

"Grandma accepted the moment I mentioned your name, she loves you," Neville said with a pleased grin.

"Of course she does. Does anybody wants to have lunch in the Alley tomorrow?" Harry asked and most nodded. He loathed the fact Fred and George were under scrutiny because their mother was still angry with them.

"Our OWL results will arrive in two weeks. Until then, mum thinks she should ground us for not doing as well as Perfect Percy," Fred sighed.

"Joke's on her when she notices we didn't only get twelve, but that we also got many offers for apprenticeships, something that her favourite son was unable to get," George continued with a smirk.

"What about you two?" Daphne asked the two other fifth-year boys.

"Twelve O's. The head Healer of St. Mungo's offered me an apprenticeship along with George," Terrence muttered, looking sleepy.

"Same, though Auror Moody offered to train me and I'm not sure how to feel about that," Adrian groaned.

"He couldn't be worse than Flitwick," Theo stated with conviction. Adrian opened his mouth to argue but closed it again.

"You know what? You're right. I didn't think about it that way," Adrian announced with a triumphant smirk.

"How's Marcus doing in the Ministry? We can't talk with him as much as you do," Neville complained.

"Well enough I guess. Fudge depends on him to decide if he will breathe or not and the pink atrocity is ignored most of the time. In one more year, Marcus will be able to replace her," Harry sighed, trying to ignore how heavy his eyelids felt.

"Did anyone else try something with your dad?" Flora asked Draco.

“Nah. After the stunt they pulled a month ago, no Death Eater approaches my father. Though it's a shame the bastards managed to escape. Father said Dobby was particularly vicious,” Draco told the others with a brief chuckle that turned into a grimace because of the soreness.

The group of young people enjoyed the ride until they arrived at the station. To avoid security risks, their elves popped into their compartment to take them home without any further delays. They said their farewells and, in less than a minute, the once full compartment was empty.

Harry, Flora, Hestia, Theo, and Terrence arrived in the parlour of the Potter castle, where people waited for them. Harry, as always, was hugged to the point of asphyxiation by his sister. Eleadora greeted each of the children with hugs and gentle words. Sirius was doing... strange things as usual. He was sitting on the floor, hugging his knees, and Remus was watching him with a wide smile on his face.

"What happened to him?" Harry asked and Eleadora brightened.

“He asked out Madam Bones, or perhaps I should start calling her Amelia,” Remus answered with a hearty chuckle, much to the newcomers' surprise.

“I suppose she rejected him,” Harry sighed in understanding. He was about to ask his aunt to heal his godfather of any curse he might have earned when the man spoke up.

“For your information, mini-Lily, I’m a very charming man and she agreed to go out with me!” the man exclaimed with a triumphant smile, then groaned when he saw Remus.

“Did he dose her with love potions?” Flora asked Eleadora and she shrugged in response.

“I heard that! And I didn't. It's all Harry's fault!” the man accused the boy. “Thanks to him, I got back to being an Auror and he asked me to speak with Amelia to know where her loyalties lay. First, we began talking in the office, and then we went out every lunch and a few dinners... Then, somehow, we were spending all of our time together and the next thing I knew is that I was in love! You should be asking if she dosed me!”

“She doesn't need to. Half the male population would give their right arms to get close to her while the other half would give more to be away, so why she settled for you I have no idea,” Hestia explained and Sirius stared at the girl with his mouth agape.

“You're a bad influence on those girls,” the man scolded Harry.

“So, you're shocked because she actually agreed instead of cursing you?” the boy asked, and the man groaned again.

“It has nothing to do with that. It's something she said before accepting,” Remus explained with a wide smile. Sirius clamped a hand over the werewolf's mouth to prevent him from continuing.

“She thought they were a couple,” Eleadora informed them and Sirius groaned, hiding behind his best friend.

“You aren't?” Theo asked, tilting his head in curiosity.

“But you sleep in the same room,” Flora accused.

“And you're always touching each other...” Terrence muttered.

“We are not together!” Sirius exclaimed and fled the room, his flushed face resembling a ripe tomato.

“So, you aren't together... I guess I'll no longer be able to give you couple clothes for Christmas,” Harry muttered and shrugged. “Never mind, let's have dinner.”

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The next morning, Harry and Elizabeth walked towards the bank. Elizabeth was wearing a bright smile - apparently, bullying Sirius put her in high spirits. Harry admitted being surprised by Sirius asking Madam Bones out but, if he was honest, what surprised him the most was the fact that his godfather was not in a relationship with Remus. For a long time, he believed so... It was curious how human interactions worked.

Harry Potter was an observant young man who noticed even the most minuscule details. He did not miss how beautiful Daphne was becoming, or the way most of the students in Hogwarts looked at her. He did not miss how Blaise's eyes were always focused on Luna, but he was unwilling to get closer to her and he guessed the girl also noticed. He did not miss how gorgeous his little sister was turning out to be and how many males stared at her even when she was so young. He did not miss the way in which so many people were entranced by him - only the fact that he was always around his friends deterred any possible advances... Nevertheless, they were all far too young. In the future, perhaps, he would begin thinking about that, but at the moment, he had great plans and was not ready to have someone holding him back.

They arrived at the entrance of the bank. The siblings greeted the outer guards and walked towards the corridor that led to Ragnok's office. On their way, they nodded at Sharpclaw, who nodded back but kept scowling at the witch in front of him. Harry almost scowled at the crass woman as well but kept his temper in check. They walked in silence until they arrived at a familiar office. He knocked and a few moments later the goblin opened his door with the happiest expression he had seen someone wear, so he contained a sigh.

“Good morning, Ragnok. It's good to see you,” his sister greeted the goblin with a sunny smile.

“Likewise, Miss Elizabeth. I presume you are enjoying your time at school,” Ragnok said and gestured towards the couches for them to sit.

“I am. I met many interesting people and I admit I like Hogwarts less every time someone speaks about it,” she confessed with a slight scowl.

“It is true that they somehow manage to lose further prestige each year,” the goblin agreed.

"Good morning, Ragnok," Harry said with obvious sarcasm. "It's also a pleasure to see you. Yes, I have been fine, you?"

"I apologize, but your sister is easier to talk with," the goblin said with a wide grin.

"Whatever, though I'm curious at the reason for your evident happiness."

"The Minister is receiving heavy... donations, let's say. Miss Skeeter received the information and assured us she is writing a very revealing article," the goblin chuckled.

"Excellent. And what about the Triwizard Tournament?" Harry asked.

"It was reinstated, unfortunately. It will be announced on the fourth of September at Hogwarts and on the fifth in the newspaper."

"Did they change anything?" Elizabeth asked.

"Only the minimum age to enter. Otherwise, everything remains the same. The tasks have already been decided and I believe the first is the most concerning... It consists of retrieving a golden egg from a dragon, to be specific, a nesting mother," Ragnok murmured with clenched teeth, his good mood long gone.

Harry totally understood the man's anger. "The travel itself will stress any dragon and nesting mothers are sensitive... Is there any way of preventing this?"

"The Ministry is planning on contacting the Romanian dragon reserve in the last days of August. Using that request, you can make a demand to the ICW on the basis that dragons are an endangered species. As head of the ICW, Dumbledore will suffer the most repercussions. As he is knowingly and willingly requesting nesting mothers, he is violating many rules and there is a high probability of him being dismissed. It would be a miracle if the man managed to keep that position," Ragnok said with a nasty grin.

"Perhaps it would be an excellent idea for Rita to do a special article dedicated to that scandal," Elizabeth said with faux gentleness.

"Indeed, and it would be quite unfortunate if the owner of the reserve decided to bring a legal case against the man for negligence. Quite a terrible scandal, if you ask me," Harry smirked and Ragnok chuckled.

"If that is the case, then we can already start celebrating the ICW having a new head."

"Excellent. I can give you more silk for this favour," the boy offered.

"No thanks. We have more than enough," the goblin almost groaned and Elizabeth giggled in glee.

"Now you understand my conundrum. How is the business going?" Harry asked, an amused smile playing on his lips.

"Everything is running well. Mirror Summons has a bright future if the sales so far are anything to go by."

"I see the magicals are beginning to adapt. When do you think we should introduce the idea of a television? I have plans for it," Harry announced.

"Let's give them a year or so to get used to the idea of communication mirrors first. However, I have information about many countries that would appreciate the device," Ragnok began explaining and handed him a thick folder. "The Frenchs, the whole Slavic region, Egypt, and the United North American Tribes are the ones our branches investigated and who would accept the new devices with no problem."

"You can add the Asian Empire to that list. I received a letter from the emperor and he wants to open two branch offices, one in each of the main cities. I was thinking of giving him a sample of our more recent devices for the exclusive use of the royal family," Harry suggested while searching in his bag for the letter. Once he found it, he handed it to the goblin. "You can fix the details with Plutous."

"Excellent. I will have reports regarding the other countries in less than a week. The investment will be considerably high, but I believe there exists little risk."

"I will leave it in your capable hands," the boy said.

"As with everything you are unable to handle," Elizabeth added, much to Ragnok's amusement.

"I'm not even fourteen yet, let me be." Harry chastised his sister jokingly. "Anyhow, did you get more information on Tom Marvolo Riddle?"

The atmosphere tensed up as any hint of amusement vanished from Ragnok's face. "I did. Miss Blair was vital to put all the pieces together. As I told you before, Merope Gaunt married a Muggle despite her status as a pureblood and her upbringing. As we investigated further, we discovered she was abused by her father and brother, both of whom treated her as a slave. The family lived in poverty, on the outside of a Muggle village. Tom Riddle, on the other hand, came from a rich family. We were told that she fancied him to the point of obsession. Therefore, when both males of her family were sent to Azkaban, she took the opportunity to ensnare the man. We don't know whether she used an imperius curse or a potent love potion, but the man fell for her. You know that they got married and ran away to London already, but we discovered that Merope was pregnant. Perhaps she believed the man wouldn't leave her and she suspended her control over him. The man left as soon as he could, leaving the woman to fend for herself.

"We don't have all the details," Ragnok muttered, looking as if he wanted to say something but unwilling to do so. "Merope Gaunt had no money and her depression hindered her use of magic. We found out that one Caractacus Burke, the owner of an antique shop in Knockturn Alley, bought from her a locket for ten Galleons. The locket was the one we found in Mister Black's house, the one that contained the Horcrux. It belonged to Salazar Slytherin himself and was passed down from generation to generation. We assume she was desperate for

money to survive because it is worth hundreds of thousands of Galleons. We were unable to find any other information on the woman, so we are assuming she perished.

"However, we found the records of a brilliant student who took his OWL examinations in 1942 and had the best grades in half a century. His name was Tom Marvolo Riddle," he explained, and Elizabeth's eyes widened. "Miss Blair looked within the Muggle system and found the same name in their registers. He was born on the 31st of December of 1926 in the same orphanage he was raised in. She searched everywhere until she found out who the caretakers were between 1926 and 1944, discovering an old woman who lives in an asylum. Mrs Cole was the Matron of that orphanage from 1937 but had been working there from early 1926. Her memories were altered so Miss Blair hired an accomplished Legilimens to access them."

"So, our suspicions were correct," Harry muttered.

"Indeed, the woman that gave birth to Tom Marvolo Riddle in the orphanage fitted the description the villagers of Little Hangleton gave for Merope Gaunt. He had several bouts of accidental magic, hence, he was rejected by his peers. Everything started to change when the other children began avoiding him. Nasty things happened to those who bothered him. Mrs Cole suspected the boy was behind them but never found any proof to blame him.

"Albus Dumbledore went in person to give the boy his letter when he turned eleven. We know that Tom Riddle went back every summer to the orphanage but, as we know, the first half of the 1940's was a dangerous time to be in Muggle Britain... When we talked to the old residents of Little Hangleton, we were told that a handsome young man was searching for the Riddle family in the summer of 1943. Around the same time, Morfin Gaunt murdered the Riddles. We managed to get Miss Blair to talk with the man and she found compulsion charms. She undid them, but the man's mind was too fractured to find out much information. However, she did manage to discover that Riddle met his uncle. He took the man's wand after Morfin told him a distorted story about his parents. We believe Tom Marvolo Riddle was the one responsible for those murders and framed his uncle in revenge."

"Tom Marvolo Riddle became Lord Voldemort," Harry muttered to himself.

"We discovered he worked at Borgin and Burkes once he graduated from Hogwarts, despite having many other offers from the Ministry. Apparently, he befriended Hepzibah Smith, who was descendant of Helga Hufflepuff. She was the proud owner of the Hufflepuff cup that was passed down for generations and the Slytherin Locket she bought from that same store for a hefty price. She was found dead in 1955, her house-elf admitted accidentally putting poison in her evening cocoa."

"House-elves don't make that kind of mistake," Elizabeth murmured with clenched fists.

"No, they don't, so Tom is also guilty for that..." Harry inquired and the goblin nodded.

"We believe so. In 1965, he returned to Hogwarts for an interview for the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. We know he was rejected, but we believe he used that opportunity to hide one of his Horcruxes," Ragnok concluded.



“The moron seems to have a sentimental streak, he looked for everything that belonged to his ancestors. Seeing that he has an eye for antiques, there are possibilities of the other founders' belongings being found by him and turned into Horcruxes,” the girl announced.

“That's right... There aren't many objects left: Gryffindor's sword and Ravenclaw's diadem. There is also the founders' sorting hat, but I don't want to think the headmaster is so useless as to not notice that the hat living in his office is a Horcrux,” the boy sighed.

“Given all I've heard of the man, I'd be prepared, just in case,” Elizabeth suggested and both males nodded. Maybe Dumbledore lost his touch.

“I have been asking the school elves and ghosts for any information on a possible evil device. The elves told me they would look in the abandoned parts of the castle during the summer months. I asked the Baron and he ignored me for a whole week. When I asked the Grey Lady, she began wailing and I haven't seen her since,” Harry commented.

“Just in case, don't forget to always carry the blade I gave you, and if you find it, you have to be careful in case it is cursed,” Ragnok warned him.

“I will,” the boy promised. “How do you destroy a Horcrux?”

“Fiendfyre. We believe basilisk venom may also work, but it's too valuable to waste,” the goblin explained and Harry nodded.

“It would be good for Rita to begin writing an article with this information so that we can have it to hand if we need it,” Elizabeth suggested after a brief moment of silence and her brother nodded. “We will also need an unbreakable vow from her; I don't trust that woman.”

“I will speak with her,” Harry said and the girl smiled at him.

“No more Horcruxes were indicated by our device, but we will keep them active, just in case. We confirmed that Death Eaters have been recruiting in other countries, mainly the Slavic regions. You were right, Harry, they will attack during the World Cup,” Ragnok informed them after a brief moment.

“We are ready, more than we could ever be. Luna is calm, so I know nothing terrible will happen. Aunt Eleadora animated golems and we sent them to be marked instead of the students that asked me for help. Madam Bones is ready and so are her Aurors... I think Aunt Eleadora and her friends are about to capture Greyback and his group. Many werewolves and a few vampires are also joining the hunt, the people you sent were invaluable to finding his location,” Harry confided and the goblin nodded.

“It will be hard. I'm sure my people will be willing to join.”

“Although I appreciate it, Ragnok, I will have to reject your offer. We don't know whether there are any Death Eaters with them, but I won't risk it. If one of them belongs to a 'notable family' and manages to escape there will be trouble. You have done more than enough,” he said, looking solemn.

“It is an honour to help. Did Miss Pittsum install the new wards against inferi in the castle?”

“She did before we arrived... I have been thinking about the safety of Madam Bones. I want her as Minister when Fudge is kicked out and she will be a prime target. I was wondering whether your employees could place the new wards around her house without her knowing. Sirius will offer her other security measures and, seeing as they are dating, I believe she will agree.”

“Mister Black and Madam Bones?” Ragnok asked with raised eyebrows. “The world is full of surprises. I thought he was dating his werewolf friend... Never mind. It is possible to place the wards without her knowing. I am guessing Miss Skeeter has the article against Fudge ready?”

“She does, but we're waiting until the Triwizard Tournament is announced to deliver that blow. It will be worth the wait,” Harry promised. Ragnok's eyes lit up and he bared his teeth in a menacing grin.

“I'm sure I will, but talking about articles, I have something to give you,” Ragnok said, his smile was so wide it gave Harry an ominous feeling. The man searched in his desk until he found something and handed it to him. It was a muggle newspaper with headlines he didn't like at all. ‘Harry Potter: Child Genius and Philanthropist’.

“What is this?” Harry asked, taking a deep, calming breath.

“You said you wanted to begin buying materials from the muggle world. Before, a simple charm was enough. Now, muggles have strange technology and it's almost impossible to erase all the data about anything. Miss Blair believed it was for the best if we created a muggle persona so our deals with the muggle world are swifter, it was Mister Black's idea to do it this way. He took advantage of the fact you finished your muggle school and announced you are doing research in your free time, that way, the materials you bought will not go under scrutiny. Your mother was intelligent enough to invest in the muggle world, so you have money in their currency. It's not much, but there's enough to invest. Sadly, we have no idea how it works, but Miss Blair has been taking care of it,” the goblin told him.

“I will pretend I saw nothing,” Harry grumbled, life was indeed easier when people still asked his opinion.

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Eleadora was one of the most renown hags in Britain. She worked hard for years to learn all the abilities she could flaunt today. However, she believed today she would make her major contribution to the magical world.

The group she organized was near the cave that Greyback and his pack inhabited, ready to attack when she gave the order. The new moon gave the faintest wisps of light and she was drawing the runes to protect her allies with her blood. Unlike what many believed, blood magic was almost sacred. The moment the blood of an unwilling or innocent victim was used, a curse befell on the perpetrator.

She finished drawing the array and it gleamed silver for brief seconds, then she gave the signal. The main attack group marched forwards, wands ready.

Fenrir Greyback was resting, that night was the one where cursed werewolves were most vulnerable. He almost chuckled in glee, remembering what he had done to earn his curse. Magic was vengeful when used in the wrong way; she cursed the ones who dared to misuse her, especially when her precious children were harmed. He would be lying if he said he regretted something because he didn't. If he was forced to live with the curse, then so would others and what better way to make sure they suffer than turning them when their lives were still beginning?

He settled in with those pleasant thoughts until a shout raised him out of his musings. Fenrir heard many steps that signalled someone managed to find them... That should have been impossible! The cave was under the Fidelius and he was the secret keeper.

Realization hit him, and he growled in frustration. He knew hags didn't like him, but he never imagined they would turn on him. Only potent blood magic was able to break the Fidelius and that was knowledge no wizard or witch possessed. He crept out of his nook, ready to attack, and his eyes widened. There were dozens of people fighting against his pack, killing them one by one.

With a howl, he jumped into battle.

Eleadora saw Greyback about to attack one of hers and she sent a curse that he avoided by the skin of his teeth. The man growled at her and the battle began. She admitted being a decent duellist, but the man was giving her a hard time. However, no matter how skilled he was, he relied on brute force and his fast reflexes. He lacked her knowledge of curses and her ability to cast several spells per second. The battle around them was dying out and, if the dead enemy werewolves were any proof, her side would win the confrontation.

Greyback observed his comrades falling and growled in frustration. He needed to get away or he would be the next to die. In a moment of inspiration, he sent a curse towards one of the people that surrounded them, used that brief moment of distraction to send a blasting spell into the roof of the cave and ran away using their brief seconds of surprise. He almost smiled when he heard them panic, but there was no time.

He ran until he reached a clearing where an ancient-looking hag was looking at a white cauldron bubbling on a bright fire. She was blocking his path. Fenrir stopped and looked for another route of escape because he had no intentions of confronting that hag. Anyone who visited Knockturn Alley knew about her - she was known as Bedwyr, the knower of graves. During the last war, the Death Eaters that tried to force her to join Voldemort ended as grotesque decorations in the Alley. That was the last time Voldemort tried to recruit her.

The woman looked at him and Greyback felt her invading his mind but he was unable to expel her. Her white eyes narrowed, and she broke the connection after what felt like an eternity. It was enough for the woman to know him more than he knew himself, Greyback was sure.

“Mother Magic is judging you for your crimes. It is time for you to die and pay in blood for all the innocents you have harmed,” she stated with no inflexion.

Greyback growled at her and tried to attack, his desire to survive overwhelming his rational side... However, his body didn't respond. He looked at the ground and noticed he was standing in the middle of a strange array. The woman took out a silver dagger that sparkled in her wrinkled hands.

“Your blood will be used to heal and you will feel the pain of the ones you have wronged - that is your punishment.”

Instead of stabbing him as he was expecting, she stabbed her left hand and allowed her blood to fall into the white cauldron. The most acute pain Greyback ever experienced lit his body on fire with pure agony. He howled and screamed but it didn't stop.

People started arriving in the clearing, the gruesome screams from the man alerting them. At last, Fenrir Greyback fell to the ground, his body was nothing but a dehydrated carcass and his face was etched into an eternal expression of pain.

“I have lived a long life, this was Mother Magic's last wish for me. It is time to rest at last,” the old woman said with a small smile. “Eleadora Pittsum, you will be the next Bedwyr. Hold that title with pride and follow Mother Magic's desires. She will guide you on the right path... This will be able to heal even the ones that stepped on the doors of death, one drop will be enough. Maintain the balance and let Mother Magic guide you,” she announced and walked out of the clearing, disappearing to never be seen again.

Eleadora observed the white cauldron and approached it. The liquid inside was an iridescent white. Somehow, her life changed in less than a minute, but she swore to assume her responsibilities with pride. That night, the new Bedwyr was established and, along with her, a new hope for the future was born.

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In a forest clearing, a large group of people appeared out of nothing. Harry Potter looked around and nodded in approval. Elizabeth and Hwasa ran inside the large tent without waiting for any instruction and he sighed - it would be hard to deal with them wreaking havoc in such a limited space.

“This place looks amazing,” Sirius commented while looking around.

“Of course it is. I enchanted it myself and Nile decorated it,” Eleadora sneered at the bane of her existence.

“I was not talking to you,” Sirius snapped at his arch-nemesis.

“I believe we will be more than comfortable in here,” Blaise muttered.

“There are enough rooms for sir's friends and we also placed our wards around the outside,” Rome told Harry.

"Thank you, Rome. You can go back to the castle now, unless you want to stay."

"No thanks, people act like uncivilized chimpanzees when sports fanaticism is involved. Enjoy your stay," the elf said as a farewell and left with a pop.

"I will never get over your house-elves having more class than we do," Draco whined.

"Anyways, we need to find ways of spending our free time," Marcus said before anyone else could continue complaining.

"We can still exercise in the morning and train in the evenings - there's no reason to change our whole schedule," Daphne announced.

"True, we still have a few spells to learn before classes begin. Sirius can ask Madam Bones to lend us a few of her Aurors to help with practice," little Luna said with a dreamy smile directed at Sirius.

"She won't mind at all. She would even use it as an excuse to motivate them," Sirius told the others.

Since his godfather started dating Amelia Bones, he changed for the better. It was astounding to see how much the man matured in such a short time. He understood at last that jokes were not meant to be played at every moment and that there were people who did not enjoy them at all. Sirius learnt to be more tolerant of different ideas and Amelia had forced him to expand his perceptions of right and wrong. He began taking his role as a Lord seriously, understanding that a simple vote could make a difference. Apparently, the indomitable man only needed a gentle push towards the right direction in order to start thinking for himself instead of following what the populace believed.

Remus followed Sirius when he noticed an immature man becoming a responsible adult. Realizing he was living in the past was the catharsis for his change. Remus began taking an active role in the education of the children who were under Harry's protection. Seeing as the man was dismissed from Hogwarts even after being one of the best defence teachers in decades and having no incident with his monthly problem, Remus severed his last ties with Dumbledore.

Everything was going well, but Harry still had that strange feeling of foreboding for the coming school term. He decided to ignore it and began searching for a suitable reading spot.

The next day was calm until the evening, when three Aurors arrived to help them train. The princess also joined and Harry would be lying if he said he was not curious about how capable the girl was. They paired at random and, for some reason, he ended up with Hwasa. He sighed but helped her raise the barriers to prevent spells from getting out of their space and harming others. The princess had a smirk playing on her lips and he raised an eyebrow at her. She did not answer but her smirk widened. Harry gave up in trying to understand what went through her strange mind and bowed - their duel began.

When he thought about it, he noticed that he never attacked someone in mock duels the way he attacked Hwasa. Harry guessed he had high expectations from the beginning. She was not

afraid of sending curses and her shields were stronger than expected. Hwasa was fast and precise, but extremely chaotic. Harry remembered why she reminded him of an indomitable force of nature when they battled. For the first time, he allowed himself to let loose and enjoy the duel without fear of harming his opponent.

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Kingsley Shacklebolt was sulking. Madam Bones ordered him and two others to help some kids with their duelling skills. He was sure Moody had something to do with it as revenge for winning the bet they had on whether Sirius would ask Amelia out, he won ten Galleons and lost his pride.

While Kingsley admitted being impressed with the kids (all belonging to notable families and the last Potter himself), he thought the most he could expect was a couple of charms and jinxes.

How wrong he was. Kingsley was not expecting for them to be so organized while getting divided, nor for them to place safety barriers around their spaces. It seemed that they wouldn't be hopeless brats.

His mouth fell open when a caramel-skinned girl and Potter began duelling, which was something he didn't expect out of the professional circuits. The other two Aurors wore astonished expressions that he would laugh at were he not emulating them. The duel seemed to pick up in intensity and, for a few minutes, the only thing he could do was watch. The duel ended abruptly and both teens bowed to one another. He had no idea why they stopped but something told him he would rather not know.

Kingsley realized everyone was looking at the pair of teenagers who no longer looked so young. Perhaps it was good for him to be sent here. He was sure Moody would throw a fit when he learnt what he missed. A small girl with a dreamy expression approached the famous boy and hugged him.

“Now that everyone knows how much you are holding back, they will work harder to keep up so don't worry,” the dreamy girl whispered and the Potter smiled at the girl.

“Moron!” the Greengrass' eldest hissed, crossed her arms and glared at the boy.

“So that's why Flitwick keeps giving you one on one lessons,” one of Arthur's kids said and then shrugged.

“You do know that now I'll be forced to work even harder? I didn't sign up for daily torture,” the Nott spawn complained and Frank's boy smiled at his dilemma.

“You mean Master Flitwick is teaching you?” an Auror asked and the group nodded.

“Smarter than we were at their age. So now that you are here, does anyone volunteer to help them?” Sirius asked with a gleeful smile.

It was a humbling evening for Kingsley. Even though he was experienced than the kids, they were far better than he was at that age. They teamed up when one of them was getting

overwhelmed and managed to jinx him multiple times, something he wasn't proud of. Their teamwork was flawless and they complimented each other. The eldest teens were a decent match alone, but when they paired up they were dangerous. Kingsley was sure they would cause problems for most of the actual Aurors.

Count him positively impressed.

“So how was your day?” a smiling Alastor asked.

“It wasn't what I'd expected...”

“That's a formidable group, isn't it? I offered the Pucey boy an apprenticeship - he's training with me twice a week.”

“So you knew... I think I hate you. It would be good to reassure the other two that they are worth something as Aurors because our collective pride took a beating today,” Kingsley complained.

“Cocky bastards! That is what they are. It will do them good. I'm planning on sending Dawlish tomorrow. Ten galleons on him having a breakdown,” Alastor betted.

“That is a losing bet. By the way, do you know the tan girl? The one with long hair and monolid eyes? She's a great duellist but I was unable to recognize her.”

“I have no idea who you're talking about, so how did The Boy Who Lived do?”

“He's definitely Lily's son. The boy was able to force a stalemate, but I think that if Sirius hadn't interrupted he would have gained the upper hand. His charms are too powerful for his age and the boy is too damn fast. He uses the same strategy that James did, avoids instead of blocking and leave your opponent apoplectic in the process,” Kingsley groaned.

“He oozes potential then. It takes years for Aurors to learn that the most intelligent strategy is to dodge and save energy. A shame he seems to have more of Evans. He could be an excellent Auror but, just like his mother, he prefers duels. Sirius is going to sign him for some competition next year. Such a shame he's not interested in following James' steps,” Moody complained, but Kingsley ignored the man in favour of his own thoughts.

He was sure that those kids would be deadly in a real battle because they didn't once hesitate to send a curse when they saw an opening, something that only the most successful (name experienced) Aurors did. Understanding that a battle was to kill or be killed at such a young age was a disturbing thought to dwell on.

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Harry Potter was taking a walk in the forest while the others were resting after an arduous duelling practise. The past days were entertaining enough, though he needed a break from human interaction.

On a strange note, Aunt Eleadora forced him and Elizabeth to carry a tiny vial masked as a pendant upon their communication necklaces. After a few days, she gave one to his entire

group of friends with one single instruction: only use it in case one of them was at death's door. If that cryptic message was not enough to put him on edge, his thoughts certainly were.

Since Harry visited Ragnok at the beginning of the summer, he could not get Tom Riddle out of his mind. There were too many similarities to be ignored and wondered if he would have ended up as Tom was it not for Elizabeth.

He wondered what made Riddle believe in blood superiority if he was a half-blood? Did he really believe in it? Harry could only guess. However, there was no doubt that Tom Riddle had once been a promising young man, what pushed him on the path he was now following?

There were so many questions plaguing Harry's mind, but one, in particular, disturbed him the most. Would he lose his sight and somehow end up like Voldemort? He stared into a creek that flowed with gentleness, creating a peaceful murmur. He heard some familiar footsteps and sighed. He really was not in the mood of dealing with people.

"You're brooding again," Hwasa stated and sat beside him.

"I beg your pardon?" Harry asked, a bit offended by the idea of him brooding.

"You've been doing that since I arrived. I know you won't tell your family or friends what is bothering you because you don't want to worry them, but I am neither, so what happened?" she asked, looking at him.

Harry considered remaining silent but the questions were eating him away and needed to share the burden.

"You know about Lord Voldemort. I learnt about who he was before he became that," he said in a low voice, Hwasa remained silent. "He was raised in an orphanage, talented in magic, excellent student..."

"You are afraid to be like him," she concluded. Harry could feel her eyes on him but kept looking at the creek.

"I'm not afraid, but I do wonder what made him that way."

"In order not to commit the same mistakes. There is a major difference between the both of you," she said after a brief pause and he looked at her. "You have a family that loves you, a sister that adores you, and friends who will always support you. He wouldn't have changed his name and sacrificed his identity if there was something worth living for," Hwasa told him with a slight smile. "I bet his name is something as simple as Tom or John. Besides, I saw the pictures of the thing he became, you are too vain to lose your looks," she said with a smile and Harry gaped at her for a second before composing himself.

"Does that mean that you think I am handsome?" he asked with a smirk.

"You are pretty and that is better," she answered with a satisfied grin.

"Since when you are a counsellor?"



"Since you decided to brood. It feels good."

"I am glad my existential crises please you."

"I get to feel like the mature one for once; you are always taking care of Elizabeth and me. I like reminding you that I'm older."

"A year is not much," Harry muttered.

"But it's something... Have I ever told you the story of The Monkey King?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" he asked, bewildered at the random question.

"So that's a no... The monkey was rebellious. He was, according to the story, born out of a rock, fertilized by the grace of Heaven and Earth. Being extremely intelligent, he learnt all the magic tricks and gongfu from an immortal Taoist master. He could transform himself into seventy-two different images, such as a tree, a bird, a beast of prey, or an insect that can sneak into an enemy's body to fight them from the inside. Using clouds as a vehicle, he travelled miles at a single somersault. He claimed to be The King in defiance of the only authority over the heaven, the seas, the earth and the subterranean world.

"The Emperor of Jade considered that an act of high treason, and so he incurred the relentless scourge of the heavenly army. In fact, the monkey had fought into the ocean and seized the Dragon King's treasure: a huge gold-banded iron rod used as a ballast of the waters. Able to expand or shrink at his command, the iron rod became the monkey's favourite weapon in his later feats. The first test of its power came when the monkey stormed into hell and threatened the Hadean king into sparing his and his followers' mortal lives so that they all could enjoy eternity. Even though he was so powerful, he suffered much humiliation because of his pride. During his journey to the West, he learnt to be humble and how important is to have someone to lean on... He discovered that his greatest enemy was not someone he could fight with. In the end, his friends were the ones who ensured his victory over the jade emperor," she narrated and he allowed himself to get lost in the cadence of her voice.

"So you're comparing me to a monkey now," Harry snorted, not really offended but a bit confused.

"Nope, the Monkey King is an amazing character," she said with a smile and he rolled his eyes at her indirect. "It's my favourite story and I wanted to share it; you should read it sometime."

"Let's go, it's getting cold," he muttered but she did not move.

"I will stay for a bit. Sirius is arguing with Flora about who has the best hair and the others are causing a ruckus."

"It is safe to assume she's winning then... I thought you enjoyed that, the chaos," he said and closed his eyes. Her velvety chuckle made him look at her, questioning her mental health.

"I do, but I also enjoy the silence...Do you know that we are both Leo? In the zodiac, I mean," she inquired and he just stared at her, lost at how her brain worked.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"We are meant to be ruled by the sun, but you act more like a cursed vampire."

"And you act like a whimsical cat in the mornings," he deadpanned and she scowled at him.

"Mornings are evil," Hwasa muttered.

"So is sunlight," Harry commented and she stuck her tongue out at him. "And you are childish."

"I'm older," she goaded.

"You're not even a year older, just eleven months and twenty-three days."

"Still older," she said with a wide smile and he sighed in defeat. Sometimes it was impossible to win.

They walked back to the tent after a few hours of talking. They entered a silent tent and he realized they might have stayed out longer than expected... It seemed he would have to stick with Daphne if he wanted to avoid all the annoying things Sirius would suggest.

That night Harry was woken by someone entering his room and placing something on his night table, then leaving. Once the familiar steps were gone, he cast a silent Lumos. A book and a glass of tea rested on the table. If the book was anything to go by, it seemed the princess would not give up on the idea of him being a rebellious monkey.

The next days went by in a blur with few incidents. The Weasley incident was particularly strange if someone asked Harry.

That day, Harry and his friends visited the Weasley tent. The twins' mother almost smothered him with an unwanted hug the moment she recognized him, but ignored her children and the other newcomers. With precise, if somewhat brusque movements, Harry extricated himself from the woman's grip and looked at her with almost palpable disapproval that the woman seemed to be either unaware of or ignoring. A short but muscled red-haired young man was grimacing in his direction and Harry felt even more annoyed.

"Hello, dear. It's good to meet you at last. Sirius never allows us to see you and I was getting worried about your health," the woman gushed.

"Good evening. I don't know you, but it seems you know about me. Have I introduced you to my friends, Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood? Of course, there are also your children, but I doubt they need any presentation," Harry said in a honeyed tone that dripped poison.

"Yes, good to meet you, dears. Anyway, have you eaten? I can cook something. You're far too skinny for your own good," the woman said and left without waiting for them to agree.

"I suddenly wish I'd stayed with the others," Neville muttered.

"Welcome to our lives," the twins said in unison.

"Sorry about that. Mum can be... intense. I'm Charlie, almost the eldest one," the stocky young man introduced himself.

"He's a dragon handler in Romania," Fred told them. "Where's Bill?"

"He went out for a bit with Ginny and Ron, but their friends are here if you want to talk with them," the man offered.

"Who did they bring?" George asked in curiosity.

"Ron brought two of his roommates, Dean and Seamus. Ginny brought a girl in Ron's year, Hermione something. The girl is... ehm... spirited."

"We know her. She hates Harry," Neville shrugged.

"Yeah, never mind. I didn't catch your full name. Don't tell me they named you after Harry Potter," Charlie joked and no one laughed.

"Excuse the idiot, it seems the brains skipped two children," George sighed.

"Dear idiotic brother of mine, he is Harry Potter," Fred announced and the man's eyes widened in surprise.

"Why does this always happen to me? I thought Bill was joking," the man muttered. "I'm sorry about that, ehm, yeah. Please don't fire me," the man almost begged and Harry had to smile at the twins' brother comical dilemma.

"Don't worry about it, though I would appreciate if you kept that information to yourself. How is Hagrid adapting to the reserve?"

"He's doing great dragons love him. He really feels at home."

"Let's sit; they will arrive soon," Luna said and Charlie blinked at the strange girl but followed the others.

"So how did our dear mother take the idea that we aren't staying here?" Fred asked with an impish smile.

"You can already imagine, but she calmed down when Ginny asked her if she could bring a friend... I wanted to speak with both of you about your careers. I know you enjoy a good laugh and I'm willing to help you open that joke shop, but I want both of you to get good grades in your NEWTs. I know that-"

"We aren't opening the shop," Fred interrupted before his brother got worked up.

“Yeah, a Healer in St. Mungo's offered me an apprenticeship and, in my free time, I will pursue a mastery in Runes,” George shrugged and his brother gaped at him.

“I decided to become an enchanter and perhaps there is Potion’s mastery in my future,” Fred commented.

“That's great! Mum was complaining about your grades and she had a big fight with Bill, so I was getting worried. Don't take this the wrong way, but how you managed that with your grades?” Charlie asked, and Neville clenched his fists.

“I don't think she looked at our results. Both of us got twelve O's plus extra credits. That's why we got the apprenticeships,” Fred answered and sagged in his place.

“I can't believe she didn't take the time to even look at our grades,” George muttered.

An uncomfortable silence descended on the group.

Harry was trying to control himself. He did not know what the woman was thinking, pushing aside her own children because they brought back memories? It was not only ridiculous but also childish. He took deep breaths while Luna held the twins' hands in tacit support. Gentle Neville had a dangerous glint in his eyes and he remembered why it was not a good idea to anger a kind person. He watched Bill approach them, along with two other redheads: a girl that blushed a deep red when she saw them and a tall boy that scowled at them.

“Sorry for being late, I needed to speak with my little siblings. She is Ginny and he is Ron. I'm sure you know each other,” Bill said.

“I do, but I guess he doesn't. I'm going to see my friends,” the tall boy muttered and left. The girl followed him with a pronounced blush.

“What was that?” Neville asked.

“My complicated family dynamic. Ron is having problems in school and these last months have been hard for him. Ginny is shy - she has a crush on Harry since she was a toddler,” Bill said with a smile.

“She still does? I thought she had got over it already. It won't be good if she keeps up her fixation,” Luna commented.

“So, when were you going to tell us what dear mother thinks about our grades?” Fred asked in order to distract his brothers, who were looking at Luna with curious expressions.

“I wasn't planning to do so, but I guess this idiot opened his big mouth,” Billy said scowling at Charlie, who was looking at his hands with unwarranted intensity. “Don't worry about it. She's too focused on Ron to bother you. His grades were so bad that McGonagall requested a meeting with our parents - if he doesn't improve, he'll be the first student in a century to fail a year.”

“Let me guess. She's blaming us for it,” George sighed.

“Sort of. I'm not saying it's okay or that it's rational, but give her some time to calm down,” Bill almost begged.

“That's not the problem, but now isn't the time to talk about it,” Luna said with a gentle smile. “Who do you think will win the game?” she asked with her usual dreamy expression.

“Do you have any feeling, dear Luna?” Harry asked and the girl's smile widened.

“I do, but I'm not telling,” she said in a singsong tone.

“What are you doing here?” someone demanded to know. They turned to see a girl with bushy hair and prominent scowl.

“Excuse me, do I know you?” Harry asked with a velvety voice and warm expression, trying to annoy the rude girl. But he was being honest, he didn't think he met her girl before.

“We're in the same year. I am Hermione Granger and we met on the train during our first year,” she snapped, her face turning red in anger.

“Ah, I see,” Harry said noncommittally.

“Let's go,” Neville said with a fake charming smile. “It seems we're disturbing your guests. Bill, Charlie, if either of you wants to visit, you can find us in the reserved spaces.”

“Come on. Lea was going to make desserts for tea. A pleasure to meet you, Hermione Granger. I hope you get rid of the green wrackspurts - they are clouding your vision,” Luna announced and the small group left the tent with satisfied smiles.

---

“I told you he was a git! He was showing off,” Ron complained once the group left, much to Bill's annoyance.

“He's so arrogant!” Hermione huffed.

“I think you overreacted,” Ginny said in a small voice, her blush still dominating her face.

“So why don't you like them?” Charlie asked his youngest brother.

“Isn't it obvious? He has everything: money, fame, he's a pretty boy, and the teachers always give him good grades,” Ron complained.

“You seem to forget you have something he will never be able to: you have a family, Ron. Do remember that,” Bill told his brother and saw how wide his eyes opened at the realization.

“I'm sorry. I guess I'm jealous,” Ron muttered and fled the room.

Bill watched his brother leave with a sigh. Ron always acted without thinking. It seemed the same applied when judging someone. He noticed the bushy-haired girl was trying to find an argument and he sighed once again. The girl was indeed intelligent, but he began to

understand how much jealousy could blind someone to the point of obsession. He looked at Charlie, who shrugged in response.

"Perhaps we can ask Harry to help Ron," Bill told his brother and winked at him.

"Who knows? We can ask. After all, he managed to force Fred and George to study."

"Yeah, they told me he works really hard all the time. He's really kind to his friends too. I heard Luna was always alone when they took her in."

"I had no idea, but she's a sweet girl, though I admit the boy tends to be aloof," Charlie sighed, trying to hide his smile at the witnesses of their conversation.

"He grew up fending for himself. I guess growing up with no family or friends can do that to you, but he's a good kid," Bill commented. "Well, we have an invitation. Want to go out with me tomorrow, brother of mine?"

"Sure. After all, they have the best camping space in the entire place," Charlie shrugged and Bill heard the girl leaving. "Was that necessary?" Charlie asked in a whisper after a few moments.

"It was. She is wasting herself trying to compete with someone who doesn't even see her as a possible rival. She's Ginny's friend, so I want to help her somehow."

"By reminding her how much better the boy is?"

"In a way, but also reminding her that Harry is a person. I hope Ginny talks about it with Ron."

"Yeah, he's not taking what happened well. It will be a hard year for him. It's time he grows up and realizes that his decisions have consequences," Charlie said with a tired sigh.

"Or we will end up with two Percys, and I don't think I'll be able to survive that," Bill said and both siblings winced at the possibility.

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The Guild was in the lounge the day before the game, waiting for George and Fred to come back from visiting their eldest brothers. Bill and Charlie visited a couple of times but began avoiding the place when they saw Draco's parents, so the twins decided, much to their displeasure, to go and visit instead. Thanks to his previous experience, Harry decided not to accompany them, but Luna and Daphne went with them. They were relaxing after a delicious lunch when Ares popped in looking grave. Everyone was on immediate alert at his unexpected arrival.

"Sir, Mister Ragnok has important news and asked me to pop you into the bank," the little elf informed.

"Let's go then. I will tell you all what happened when I come back," he told the others and held the hand the elf was offering.

The next second, Harry looked around and noticed he was inside Ragnok's office instead of the security area, which meant that whatever happened was urgent. He looked around the room and spotted the goblin talking with a woman. A deep frown was set into his face.

“Evening, Ragnok. What happened?” Harry interrupted the conversation and announced himself.

“It's good you arrived so soon, Harry. Let me introduce you to Evgenia Adams, she's in charge of the Analysis Department. Evgenia, Harry Potter is one of our best clients and friend of my people. Let's take a seat before starting,” the goblin said and gestured towards the couches.

“So, I guess this has to do with the Dark Mark,” the boy commented after nodding at the woman.

“Indeed. We managed to break it down to its basic composition and the results are interesting,” the woman began and looked at Ragnok for approval to continue. “You were right with your idea of it being based on the Asian Empire Royal Family seal. Through exhaustive investigation, we discovered that Voldemort tried to recruit in the country; however, the emperor was not pleased. His Death Eaters were used as a public example of why no one messed with the Empire. Somehow, he discovered the guards were able to communicate without words or signals and kidnapped one to discover the reason. The guard committed suicide before they could even try to torture him, but he discovered the Mark on his body and, ever since, tried to re-create it. We believe he got the basic information on the black market in Russia and Slovenia because the basic rune array has their typical runes,” the woman explained and handed him a folder with multiple diagrams and information.

“That's what they managed to discover, but there is one key factor that he believed was the Mark's strength which, in reality, is its biggest weakness,” Ragnok said, allowing the woman to organize her ideas.

“The Mark is based on parselmagic, which means that the only thing a person needs to remove it or even manipulate it is the talent and a residue from Voldemort's magic signature,” she said with a satisfied smirk at his surprised expression.

“In essence, the only thing we need is a parselmouth,” Harry concluded and the woman nodded. “Is it possible to track him using the Dark Mark?”

“We are working on it, but the problem is that we would track all the hints of where he had used magic, not where his actual body is,” she denied and he sighed. It was worth a try.

“Nevertheless, this is great news. I can hire an expert to aid you,” Harry offered and the woman stared at him with an unreadable expression.

“I guess that is all for today. Now, I believe you must go back before Miss Elizabeth gets too inquisitive,” Ragnok suggested after a few moments of uncomfortable silence and Harry huffed.

"Of course. Miss Adams, it was a pleasure to meet you. It's always good to see you, Ragnok. Thank you for telling me so soon. Mars!" he called, and an elf popped in within a second. "Thank you for coming. First, I wanted to ask you to take me to the tent, then, if you are willing, to deliver an important letter to the Emperor."

"I have no problems doing so."

"Thank you. Now, let's go," Harry said and nodded to the other two people in the room as farewell.

When he arrived at the tent, he walked towards his room, ignoring all the concerned people that were following behind. Harry got parchment, his fountain pen, and began writing. Once he finished the letter, he dripped the wax on the envelope, and imprinted his family coat of arms, he handed it to Mars, who left with a pop.

"What happened?" asked his sister. Harry was surprised at how much self-control she had.

"Remember that I hired Gringotts analysts to examine the Dark Mark? They had some results. It was indeed based on the royal family's Mark," he announced and Hwasa's eyes narrowed. "However, he does not have the original version and committed many mistakes while creating it. The Mark was made for a parselmouth to use, any parselmouth," he commented and everyone in the room understood the implication.

"So you will be able to remove it and even manipulate it," Daphne concluded with a smirk.

"Not me, but an experienced parselmouth certainly will. I sent to your grandfather to see if he recommends someone," he told the Asian girl and she nodded.

"In comparison, our day was tame," Fred commented, chuckling.

"Did your mother give you any troubles?"

"She tried to, but our little Ronnikins exploded at last. She was trying to blame us for his grades and he was there. He started yelling at her about how it was 'his own damn fault'," George told them with a wide smile.

"It seems that our little brother is growing up," Fred said, wiping an unexisting tear. "Bill and Charlie spoke with ickle Ronnikins after he gave you an attitude the day we visited. He wants to be an Auror or a professional Quidditch player. They told us he almost had a heart attack when he discovered you have to actually study," Fred laughed and leaned on Daphne, who elbowed him none too gently and he retreated, looking offended.

"Charlie told us how horrified Ronnikins was when they told him that, to be an Auror, you need O's in Potions, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Charms, and Transfiguration. After hearing that, he decided to be a professional Quidditch player. Too bad Bill popped his bubble."

"He told him that you need eight O's in your NEWTs to be accepted in a professional team, and that most players hold other jobs unless their team was among the best."



"So, our dear brother had a breakdown. He decided that, if that is the case, then he would do both because either way, he needs to study."

"I don't know whether he's motivated or utterly defeated," Hwasa commented.

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The next day, Harry woke up earlier than usual and decided to take a walk as a warm-up before exercising. He almost groaned when he got out of bed, but knew there was no way for him to fall asleep again. Then he got ready to go out. He enjoyed the peaceful silence that suffused the tent. He was walking towards the end of the hall when he heard something crashing inside a room. He reacted instinctively and opened the door with his wand ready. The sight that greeted him was not what he expected and he sighed in exasperation. Of course, it had to be the room belonging to one of the most rambunctious human beings on Earth. Hwasa was in bed, petting her tiger and looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

"I apologize for barging in the way I did. I heard something crashing and thought someone had managed to break in," he explained, feeling utterly frustrated and perhaps a bit embarrassed.

"Did someone ever tell you that you're a bit too paranoid?"

"I will pretend you didn't ask that. What happened?"

"Yoko thought my reading lamp would make an excellent toy," she sighed and pointed at the broken lamp in the floor.

"I cannot believe you're awake so early. Were you unable to sleep?" Harry asked in curiosity. So far, he had never seen the girl out of her room before ten.

"Nope, I tend to wake up early, but I like staying in bed and reading," she shrugged. "You seem ready to go out. Did something happen or do you just want to clear your head?"

"The latter - this forest is peaceful and I want to see the sunrise."

"And here I thought you were allergic to it," she joked with an impish grin. "Mind if I join you?"

"I'm eager to see the princess out of her room early for a change," he said and avoided the pillow she threw at him.

"Wait for me in the living room," she ordered and he left before being kicked out.

Harry sat down and prepared himself for a long wait. His experience with Elizabeth was enough to know that he would miss the sunrise; perhaps he could try and see it tomorrow... Much to his surprise, not even five minutes later the girl arrived and he had to contain a smile at her appearance. Harry was used to seeing her with immaculate makeup and perfect clothing, thus the sight of her wearing colourful sweat pants that seemed to be made of fluffy material and an oversized sweater while she dragged a thick, multicolour blanket amused him. Her hair was loose, for a change, and he was surprised by how long it was. If he

complained about his hair, and it only reached his chin, he had no idea how she managed to survive with hers.

“So this is why you don't get out of bed before ten?” he asked, unable to resist the temptation to tease her.

“It's because I get cold,” she muttered and wrapped her blanket around her.

He smiled at the amusing sight and began walking. They did not speak and he enjoyed the comfortable silence. He used his wand as torch until they arrived at a high place, perfect for seeing the first light of the day. Hwasa plopped down on the ground and he followed her example with a little more grace. Both of them waited to speak until the sun began to appear on the horizon.

“I think a bit of sun exposure is worth the sight,” he commented in a soft voice.

“Will you tell me the real reason why you allowed me to join you?”

“I would ask how you knew, but I'm just going to assume you're a seer,” Harry deadpanned, containing his frustration at the perceptive girl.

“Seeing me out of my room before ten is not a decent motivation for you to do something,” she shrugged. Her logic was on point, so he stayed silent.

“You know I have been researching about the Dark Mark... For a while I have been wondering about the one that belongs to the royal family,” he explained. She turned to look at him, her intense dark eyes meeting his own, but he refused to look down.

“You want to make your own,” she concluded. Her gaze did not falter and he believed his theory of her being a seer was perhaps right.

“You're too perceptive,” Harry muttered and gave up, looking back at the horizon.

“For your own good,” she retorted and silence descended once again. “It's not simple to create one and the intent while applying it is essential. I'm not allowed to reveal information about ours, but I can tell you this: although they are based on runes, the design is pivotal and only the ones who are willing are able to receive it.”

“I will keep it in mind, though I'm surprised you haven't murdered me yet.”

“Why should I? I know that you would give your life for your friends and are trying to find ways of protecting them. Someday, you will realize that it isn't possible to be Atlas all the time, but at the moment you're doing your best,” Hwasa said, Harry had no answer to give her.

He realized with sardonic amusement that he always ended up having this kind of conversation with the girl. His thoughts were turning in a gloomy direction until something ice-cold was placed on his neck, making him react with a startled jump.

"You weren't listening to me," the girl shrugged when an accusatory glance was directed at her.

"What did you put on my neck?" he asked with weariness.

"I told you I tend to get cold," she answered and his eyes widened.

Overwhelmed with curiosity and perhaps a bit worried, he took one of her hands. He blinked when he noticed that they were indeed gelid. How someone could manage that, he had no idea, although it seemed the mental health of the girl was not the only thing he should worry about. He began casting heating charms on her blanket for her to regain a normal temperature. Harry was sure that if the princess managed to get sick Elizabeth was going to kill him.

"Why didn't you cast heating charms before going out?" he demanded to know.

"I did, but I still manage to get cold," she pouted.

"Pouting won't make you any less guilty."

"But it will make you less grumpy. You're worse than a grandmother."

"Excuse me if I don't consider hypothermia the best way of starting a day. Let's get going before you catch a cold," Harry retorted and helped her to stand up for them to go back.

"I would like to say how thankful I am for your concern regarding my health, but I know better," she retorted and he grinned.

They walked back and Harry was feeling exasperated at the girl, hoping she really did not catch a cold. Elizabeth would be insufferable if she did and he did not even want to think about what Aunt Eleadora would say. He observed her steps with attention, in case she managed to trip; he was not willing to risk his integrity because of her clumsiness. When they arrived at the clearing they were camping in, he let out a breath of relief. Somehow they arrived with no further incidents and he thanked whatever deity had taken pity on him. Most of the Guild was already outside, stretching. He noted with amusement Theo's blush and Adrian's intense gaze at the sight of the girl beside him. Apparently, she captured the attention of more than one.

"Do you wish to join us?" Harry asked Hwasa, but his frown showed that even if she agreed he would not allow her to.

"Nope, I will go back to bed. Enjoy yourselves!" she exclaimed and went inside the tent.

"Ella!" Harry called his personal elf and ignored the curious eyes.

"Master calls," the little one said with a toothy grin.

"I did. Thank you for coming so soon. Hwasa just went inside; she was cold so offer to make her something warm. If you could examine her subtly to detect if she managed to get sick, I would be really thankful," he told his elf and she nodded.

"I will!" she nodded and left with a pop.

Harry looked at Daphne, who was raising an eyebrow at him and he shrugged. There was only so much he could take during the day and the previous hour had been far too eventful for his liking. He started jogging and the others copied his example.

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Lucius Malfoy woke up feeling rested. He watched his wife sleeping beside him and smiled. The day he decided to put his family before the Dark Lord was the moment his life had improved. Narcissa and he recovered the deep bond they once had and, although it was hard to get close to his son, now they shared a better relationship now. There was no doubt in his mind that he made the right decision. He walked towards the lounge after getting ready for the day. Sirius was at the entrance and he approached him.

"It's good to see you up so early, for a change," Lucius greeted, but the man ignored him and kept looking outside. Allowing his curiosity to rule, he did the same and controlled his expression at the sight in front of him.

Draco and his friends were exercising. He had heard about their routine but had dismissed it until now. Magical people seldom exercised, if ever. He considered it a waste of time that only masochists took pleasure in, but it was a recreational activity nonetheless. It seemed he would need to re-evaluate his ideas. The teenagers were all red in the face and sweating, but kept pushing themselves to continue doing painful-looking movements.

"They're nuts," Sirius hissed under his breath and he found himself agreeing.

"I didn't imagine them doing this every day."

"They said they would take it easy... I hope Amelia or Moody never see this, otherwise, they will find an excuse to up the Auror training," he groaned.

"I am glad not to be in your shoes," Lucius commented, "Anyway, did Moody accept the job as the new Defence teacher?"

"Nah, he's happy to train the recruits. According to him, they are the best bunch he's seen in his life," the man huffed in indignation. "Who were the other candidates?"

"There was this Bulgarian, but I vetoed him. The man was a blood purist and there were possibilities of him joining the Dark Lord. The other option is taking Aurors on medical leave, but I know Dumbledore won't agree to have an Auror in the school. The last option is finding one of his allies hire them," Lucius explained.

"So Dumbledore will hire someone he believes he can trust. Another year with an incompetent teacher awaits the kids... I wish this one would be at least useful; the Tournament will be harsh and they need to learn if they want to survive."

"I tried my best to try to prevent it, but the idiot of Fudge is set on gaining popularity."

"Yeah, he invited us to sit with him, but we declined. He's panicking about losing support, especially now that Rita Skeeter turned into a reliable reporter and is exposing every dirty deed she finds out about."

"She is, though I admit that the new newspaper is on another level. I enjoy it more than the Prophet."

"Who doesn't?" Sirius asked and kept watching the teens exercise.

---

The Guild followed their usual schedule until the early hours of the evening, where they rested instead of duelling. Because of Luna's premonition, Harry decided to take a few personal precautions to protect his people. Taking advantage of the excess of acromantula silk, he asked the elves to create battle robes for them, enchanting the clothes with all the protective spells they could manage. It took them more than half a year to have the final product ready, but he admitted being pleased with the results. They were his favourite shade of green, a dark emerald, which was lined with Dyneema on the inside. They had many inside pockets, each one of them for a defined reason: storage, different kind of potions, balms, an extra wand, and a long knife.

However, his favourite features were the basilisk hide body armour and a featureless mask made with graphene and covered in bucky paper. The body armour would offer them extra protection and contained its own pockets in case the robe was somehow ripped. The mask was a last-minute addition - he forgot that the face was one of the most vulnerable parts of the body - and was inspired by modern Muggle armour. On the outside, it looked a dark grey blank slate, with no orifices or marks that differentiated one from the other. On the inside, it resembled crystal and did not impair the one wearing it. Besides, it contained charms that simply stuck it and prevented it from moving or falling. He ordered his security elves to have their own made by the experts, using the same materials, and sent Ragnok the specifications of his protection gear for him to implement it with his people. He obtained the most resistant materials from the Muggle and magical worlds for this project and hoped it was enough in case the worst-case scenario occurred.

They were talking in the entrance lounge when Amelia Bones arrived, followed by three Aurors. Sirius went to greet his girlfriend like the besotted mutt he was, embracing her in a hug that she reciprocated for a brief moment, before pushing him away. Harry had no idea why the woman was here, but he worried when Luna's dreamy expression turned to a blank one. The boy signalled for Blaise to watch over Luna.

"Excuse our sudden arrival, but we were ordered to escort you," Amelia announced, looking apologetic.

"Let me guess: the Minister is trying to impress me because I rejected his offer," Harry guessed. A scarred man laughed at his statement.

"Good lad! That's exactly what the idiot is trying. Alastor Moody," the man introduced himself.

“It's a pleasure. Sirius complains about you so much that I have wanted to meet you for a long time. Thank you for torturing my godfather,” he said and the man laughed while the other adults tried to hide their own amusement.

“See what I told you? Evil: that's what he is. He got too much of Lily,” Sirius complained to his girlfriend, who was smirking.

“Whatever. Let's get going. The Minister wants us to distract you so he has time to speak with you before the game, so we want to arrive as soon as possible because we all know that the coward won't approach your box,” Amelia ordered with a bright smile.

The whole group followed her, except for Eleadora and Narcissa, who decided to stay behind because neither of them enjoyed the game. Harry watched both women in envy because he would have stayed if he was not so worried about a possible attack.

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### **Number Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey**

Petunia Dursley was making breakfast in the kitchen, thinking about how much she hated her actual situation. The day the freaks came back to her life was when everything began coming down in her perfect world. Vernon was freed sooner because of good conduct, but that didn't improve their lifestyle. Her husband lost weight along with his will to continue living. Grunnings rejected his appliance and he was unable to find any job. If this continued, she knew that they would have to leave her house and find a cheaper place, but it wouldn't be so bad because the neighbours used their hard times as main conversation topic and she was getting tired of it. While she once enjoyed gossiping, now she understood what it felt to be the victim of it and she didn't like it.

The other problem was her son.

Dudley was forced to attend therapy for his behaviour and many things changed. Her son began being distant with her when he learnt what violence was, understanding that his family had been abusive towards a cousin that he barely remembered, but decided that he was family nonetheless. Dudley never spoke with her, but she wasn't blind. Petunia noticed that he became an excellent student that also had an outstanding performance in different sports. She saw how much mail from boarding schools he had been receiving... Her son was planning to leave and there was nothing she could do to keep him close. When Vernon came back home the situation got even worse, if that was possible.

“Good morning,” her soon greeted in a robotic voice and began looking in the freezer.

“I am making breakfast, dear, it will be ready soon,” Petunia said with as much gentleness as she could put in her voice.

“I have football practise and I need real food. We are going to have lunch with the team and then I have wrestling practise,” he said without looking at her and began putting different vegetables and fruits in the blender.

“At what hour will you be back?” she sighed, hurt by his indifference.

“I don’t know, seven at most. If you want, you can speak to my coach,” Dudley shrugged.

“I don’t think it will be necessary, you have become into a responsible young man,” she gushed.

“Not thanks to you,” her son muttered and she pretended not to hear.

“Good morning,” Vernon said looking tired. “I see you are up early Dudley, I have been planning to go and visit Marge one of these days, what do you say?” her husband offered but Dudley remained stoic.

“No, thanks. I’m entering a competition and don’t have time,” he answered and Vernon deflated. “I’ll get the mail.”

“He has changed so much,” Vernon muttered when their son left.

Dudley came back a few minutes later, carrying his backpack and the mail, which he left on the table and finished his drink. He washed the blender and left the kitchen, they heard the door closing and Petunia sighed. The indifference from her son hurt more than she ever imagined. The sound of Vernon throwing the newspaper away caught her attention and she picked it up. Her face went white at the sight of the headlines, Harry Potter: Rich Young Genius.

Her blood began boiling as she read that ridiculous thing and she ended up ripping it. How dare he?! How did the freak manage to graduate so early, especial university and important research, as if! She knew the brat was a freak, just like her sister before him; it had to be false... She tried to hide her resentment, that brat somehow managed what she always wished and it seemed Lily enjoyed to see her suffer even after death. She was not even alive and yet she continued being better! Petunia submerged herself in anger. It seemed that she would never be free from the shade from her freak of a sister!

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### **Omake: The Struggles of Being the Best Friend of an Idiot**

Amelia Bones was a pragmatic woman who believed in equity above anything else. In her opinion, a person's worth depended on their actions. That was why she was so gentle with Sirius Black when he joined her department and began speaking with her. At first, she thought it was a way for him to show his gratitude at the support she had provided in ensuring he had a fair trial but, as they got closer, she realized it was another very different thing. He was searching for approval.

She did not miss the way he spoke about that best friend of his, Remus Lupin. For a long time, they were at odds, but she would never forget his goofy grin when they met after the two had reconciled. She would never forget how enthusiastic he was when he told her the two of them were going to move into a small house. He was so happy when she helped him pick the furniture and choose the colours and decorations. She would never forget the time he limped for a whole week, blaming sadistic elves, but that didn't fool her. Amelia knew the truth about the man who became her best friend.

Sirius Black was in love with Remus Lupin. She understood why they did not want to make the relationship public, and the fact that both of them were males had nothing to do with it. Sirius' partner was a werewolf and he was a Black; any child they decided to adopt in the future would become a target for public disapproval.

She scowled at this thought; both of them looked so happy together and had experienced such hardships that they deserved a peaceful future. A firm knock on the door shook her out of her musings. The dark-haired man she had been thinking about opened the door and walked in, showing how close they were by entering without waiting for authorization. He was looking nervous and an amused Remus Lupin was following the man.

"Ehm, morning. This is Remus Lupin, though you already know him..." the man blurted and she smiled. It seemed her friend decided to finally tell her about his boyfriend.

"Hello, Remus. Please take a seat. You are about to have a heart attack, so calm down Sirius," she ordered the anxious man.

"I have to tell you something... Well, you know... We're good friends; we spend all of our time together and... Moony is also my friend, and that is why... But you... I," the man blabbered and she chuckled in amusement, deciding to help him.

"I know what you're trying to say. I'm happy you told me at last; you aren't as subtle as you think you are," Amelia smiled at both men, who looked surprised.

"You know? But I didn't... You agree?" Sirius asked, fidgeting on his chair.

"Of course I do!" she exclaimed with a wide smile that he reciprocated. "I'm so happy you finally told me you're dating Remus!" she said. Sirius' smile faltered, and his expression turned into a grimace.

"I beg your pardon, but you think I'm dating him?" a bewildered Remus asked, not knowing whether he should be amused or offended, while Sirius was frozen in his place.

"Of course you are. Don't you try to fool me, you live together," she deadpanned.

"He's my best friend," Remus stated with a raised eyebrow.

"Remember the time I went to visit you? Don't tell me you were exercising," Amelia puffed.

"We were! I swear we were! I was using the Muggle running thing that Lily enchanted. I swear it was nothing else!" Sirius exclaimed, breaking out of his shock.

"Of course you were, and what about the time you limped for a whole week but had the widest smile on the world?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You think him and me... No! We didn't! I managed to prank Eleadora for the first time, but she handed me to the elves for target practice! Nothing happened between us!" Sirius exclaimed while Remus chortled in pure amusement.



“You were the one who told me about your school days and how you played around. Attractive, defined muscles, sexy scars... Not hard to know who it was,” she puffed with a smile.

“It was school! Everyone experiments in school! It was only a few times!” the man moaned with his face turning a hot pink.

“Sexy scars... I need therapy,” Remus muttered, his amusement forgotten.

“Please! You were so happy when I was helping you get your new house ready for both of you to live in,” Amelia said, no longer amused by her friend's antics.

“That's because I'm in love with you!” Sirius exclaimed in frustration and proceeded to bury his face in his arms.

“What did you do to him?” she asked Remus after a brief moment, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“I did nothing to the idiot. For your information, we are not together, heaven forbid that ever happens, and everything he said is true. He really is in love with you; he realized it a few weeks ago and has been trying to confess. He was driving me crazy, so I came here to tell you... Did you really think we were a couple or are you an excellent prankster?” Remus asked and she raised an eyebrow.

“Do you really need to ask?”

“I guess not, but please accept him. He is really in love with you.”

“Perhaps I will give him a chance... That is if he isn't broken,” Amelia sighed and gestured to Sirius, who was muttering to himself.

That was the day Remus Lupin obtained loads of blackmail material against Sirius Black, but he admitted being perturbed by the idea Amelia had about his relationship with his best friend... After a brief moment, a sudden realization hit him and he groaned in utter frustration. So that was why Eleadora gave them that 'special oil' and why Harry kept giving them matching clothing. He sighed. Being the best friend of an idiot was not as easy as most people thought.

# New Rules

## Chapter Notes

Due to the Coronavirus outbreak, my schedule is really irregular right now. I will post whenever I have free time and don't resemble a dying zombie.

The complete Guild plus companions walked towards their box while trying to ignore the tumultuous noise that dominated the arena. Harry Potter ignored all the stares his group was drawing until Sirius stopped to speak with Arthur Weasley. The boy did his best to ignore the bushy-haired girl that was staring intently at him and the young Weasley girl that made him feel uneasy with her intense gaze. After nodding at the twins' eldest brothers, Harry left towards their box, saving himself the scrutiny.

Harry claimed the closest seat to the door of his box, distracting himself with a book while the others arrived. He would have lost himself in his book but fate had other plans. Hwasa took his book away and smiled innocently at him. Harry raised an unimpressed eyebrow at her antics.

"What is your problem?" Harry asked bluntly, not having the patience for politeness today.

"You're here to enjoy the game, not the book."

"It just happens that I don't enjoy this particular game."

"Then enjoy the introductions at least, I'll give it back after they're over," Hwasa promised, earning a scowl.

Harry ignored the opening speech someone gave but was instantly focused on the Veelas entrance. He could feel their allure brushing against his occlumency shields and wondered how their talents worked. However, his interest turned to disgust when he noticed the number of males that were affected by the Veela. Much to his relief, no one in his box reacted in such a shameful way.

When the leprechauns' gold reached the stands and people started fighting over it, Harry had the urge to facepalm at their stupidity. Had they not attended Hogwarts? Were they so ignorant that they did not know that leprechaun gold disappeared after a few hours? He closed his eyes and decided to avoid the international embarrassment those morons were subjecting Britain to.

"Not the brightest people I've ever seen," Hwasa muttered, Harry was forced to agree.

"Please, pretend you saw nothing and let's forget this ever happened," Harry almost begged the girl.

Hwasa's amusement was quickly replaced by a stoic mask. "Did you enjoy the show?"

"Not really."

What else could he say? Harry was not a Veela or a Leprechaun, he didn't know why they allowed humans to treat them as pets for entertainment. Perhaps they were offered something or maybe they enjoyed the game, he was in no position to judge or make assumptions. Obviously, the opinionated princess didn't share his perspective as she was silently seething, losing control of her magic.

Harry placed a firm hand on her forearm, breaking her anger-induced trance. Hwasa closed her eyes and remained silent. After a minute, she mouthed a thank you and returned his book, leaving her seat to go to the front rows, where Elizabeth and Draco were causing mayhem.

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The Guild was in their tent, some celebrating and others complaining about the results of the game. Harry observed with amusement how Luna collected Galleons from all the idiots who betted against her. Two particular heavy pouches were placed into her hands by a grumbling Sirius and a defeated-looking Lucius.

"How was I supposed to believe that Ireland would win but Bulgaria would catch the Snitch," Sirius complained when he noticed his godson's taunting smile.

"We've learned to never bet against her," Lucius sighed.

"So how much did you win?" Blaise asked Luna.

"From Sirius, I got a hundred Galleons and his promise to stop competing with Flora about who has the best hair. From Draco's dad, I got three hundred Galleons and the secrets to keep his hair so perfect," she explained with a dreamy smile and Lucius left the lounge with a slight pink tint to his cheeks.

"So you got our family secrets," Draco joked.

"Yeah, but I'm never going to use them. The Malfoys spend far too much time on their appearances," the girl explained, Draco feigned a hurt expression.

"Whatever, I'm going with Amelia to help her with her rounds," Sirius grumbled.

"Are you expecting any trouble?" Harry asked the man.

"Only overenthusiastic celebrations and drunkards," he muttered and left the tent.

The group talked and relaxed for an hour, deciding whether or not they should exercise to burn away the extra energy. Everything was calm, but they could hear all the loud celebrations and were beginning to get annoyed. Harry was starting to think Luna was tranquil because Voldemort decided not to attack. That positive thought did not last long, however. Sirius barged into the tent, stony expression and wand drawn. Luna was right.

"Call the elves to pop you back to the castle! Eleadora! We need help, the bastard raised Inferi!" his godfather exclaimed. Eleadora paled, but stood up, looking determined.

"I will also go," Lucius announced.

"Me too," Narcissa offered herself and Sirius nodded.

"Call the elves and don't leave the tent for any reason. We'll meet you at the castle when everything is over!" Sirius ordered them and all the adults left.

Harry looked at all his friends. They were people who trained for a long time, but they could all still fall against a seasoned opponent. He did not even want to think of that possibility but knew he could not force them to stay if he joined. Ares and Mars popped in, followed by ten elves that looked ready for battle, carrying different bags with names.

"I won't ask you to fight and, if I'm honest, I would like you to stay back, but I won't force you. Who will go with me?" Harry asked, feeling his chest constricting when he saw all of them standing up. He was not ready to see his sister fight, but that was not his decision to take. "You all have the communication necklaces and we trained with the armour. Let's get ready," he announced and they all neared an elf that handed each of them a bag that contained the special equipment.

"Don't think you'll be able to force me to stay," Hwasa said with narrowed eyes.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Elizabeth made sure you had your own," Harry said and signalled one of the two bags that were left.

In less than five minutes, they were ready. Harry noticed in a moment of cynic amusement that they looked like trained soldiers and not the inexperienced, yet motivated, teenagers they were. Harry, Marcus, George, Hwasa, Fred, Adrian, and Terrence were the ones who were able to apparate, so an elf took the hand of the people that were left and the tent was empty in less than a second.

Harry was not sure what he was expecting, but the amount of chaos that ruled the place was not what he had in mind. Tents were burning and Aurors were doing their best to distract the enemies. Noticing their struggle, Harry cast the most potent patronus he could muster - a gigantic basilisk left his wand and the Dementors fled in terror. His patronus served as a momentary distraction, and that was the moment the Guild attacked.

Neville and Blaise paired up against a group of five Death Eaters that were surrounding two Aurors. Defeating them was easier than expected. Blaise negated their curses and Neville cast an intra perdere, a spell based on destruction magic that obliterated the internal organs of a person. The Death Eaters were dead before they hit the ground. The pair left the two Aurors and searched for more adversaries when they saw the giants. Nodding at each other, they began their attack. Neville cast illusions at them. They began thrashing in fear and fighting invisible objects so Blaise took the opportunity to use his black magic. Deep cuts began to appear on their skin, but it was not enough. Both boys looked at each other and nodded - they called the security elves. Neville increased the power of his illusions and the giants were paralyzed, but their muscles quivered in an effort to be free. Blaise centred himself and

created a flagellum tenebris. A rope appeared and began snaking around the giants, leaving deep wounds on its path. The elves began attacking while the boys concentrated on keeping the creatures immobile and defenceless.

Draco and Luna saw two Aurors on the verge of losing and they joined the battle. Draco helped a tall man and didn't play around. He killed the Death Eater as soon as possible and then proceeded to heal the injured Auror, who looked ready to collapse in exhaustion. Little Luna helped a scarred man and, while she enjoyed her duel, she got bored at the end. With a simple sanguinem judex, his opponent began screaming, experiencing the same pain he had caused to his victims. A moment later, the enemy lay dead before her. She saw the injured Auror and called Draco to heal the man. When he arrived, she left in search of more opponents.

Daphne, Flora, and Hestia were surrounded by Inferi the moment they arrived. The oldest girl created a whip with Fiendfyre and the creatures met a gruesome demise. They nodded at each other and began hunting down the inferi.

Marcus, Fred, and George arrived in the middle of an almost-finished battle. Seven Death Eaters were closing in on a group of three Aurors that looked too injured to be fighting but kept on going nonetheless. Immediately they recognized the amber eyes and chalky skin. They were under Harry's protection, which meant that they were under the Guild's protection. Marcus cast a barrier around them and they attacked. The twins were vicious and worked in perfect synchrony while he covered them from any possible attack. In the end, there were seven bodies around them. George took care of the injured while they searched for their next target.

Adrian, Terrence, and Theo were in charge of placing the barrier against Dementors. Everyone knew those creatures needed to be repelled constantly during a battle because they never seemed to give up on their endeavour of kissing someone. Adrian cast constant patronuses while the other two boys drew a simple yet effective array based on white magic. They watched in satisfaction as the Dementors failed to enter the battle, then they proceeded to attack the beasts with Fiendfyre and white magic. It was gratifying to see Dementors burning.

Hwasa and Elizabeth were the only ones to notice the Muggle family that was being tortured by a woman with psychotic laughter. Hwasa sent a senbon to the neck of one of the men that was observing and he fell down. The deranged woman looked surprised while the other man immediately tried to aid his fallen comrade. Noticing his fellow Death Eater had no pulse, the man began attacking Elizabeth, who deflected his curses as if they were simple jinxes. Hwasa and the woman, on the other hand, analyzed each other, both ready to attack.

"You just killed my husband," the woman said with a wide smile.

"You can thank me later," she answered and the woman chortled shrilly.

Hwasa avoided the curses the woman was sending and hoped she didn't kill her so-called husband by accident because they would need the paralysed man for information. The girl admitted the woman was an excellent duellist and promised to never again complain about the extra lessons she had to take. Hwasa managed to stab the Death Eater in critical places

that would go unnoticed until it was too late. They continued duelling and she called two elves to retrieve the family. The princess looked to the side and her chest swelled with pride. While Elizabeth was indeed young, the girl was lethal. Her training under Eleadora was obviously effective. The Death Eater seemed to be getting frustrated, but the man was an experienced fighter and didn't allow himself to be defeated.

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Severus Snape was in a constant state of stress since the Dark Lord returned, but it reached its peak when the attack was announced. He was sure people would fight back, that was until they were getting ready and he noticed the hundreds of Inferi and the two giants joining them. Too much fear and death during last war were caused by them and, if you added the Dementors and Death Eaters, he was sure people would run away because they were intelligent enough to know when they were bested.

When they arrived, the Dark Lord cast the Dark Mark into the sky, the poisonous green illuminating the night with an eerie glow. Bellatrix and her husband captured a family of Muggles and their fun started. They began setting fire to the tents and torturing the Muggles, their screams alerting the people that it was not a celebration getting out of hand. As Severus predicted, people ran away, though a few joined the battle. Even though he was not expecting to see so many Aurors, they were nothing compared to the hundreds of Inferi. His blood went cold when he saw Lucius and Narcissa battling Nott and Travers. It was the last straw, the Dark Lord would kill the Malfoy family for opposing him and there was nothing Severus could do to protect them.

Severus entered a state of raw desperation and confusion, trying to stun as many people as possible in his efforts to do something to help... A gigantic silvery snake illuminated the sky, scaring the Dementors away. He looked in the direction from where it was cast and his eyes widened. The large group of newcomers were all wearing identical dark robes and a grey mask that, unlike the one belonging to the Death Eaters, was a plain slate that hid their identities. For a moment, he believed the newcomers were part of the attackers. That notion did not live long because they began attacking Death Eaters with unexpected viciousness.

As he saw them destroying the lines, there was no doubt left in his mind about them being demons. What else could they be if curses didn't affect them? Two of them were engaging the Lestranges as equals, managing to rescue the Muggle family, which somehow disappeared in less than a second, but he had no time to wonder about it because something he would have believed impossible happened. The two giants stopped wreaking havoc and seemed to be fighting against something invisible - something invisible that was defeating them. An enormous snake made of fire began attacking the Inferi. His heart almost stopped when he noticed the reason for its success - Fiendfyre. Someone managed to control the curse and, if he was not sure before, he was now. Whoever those people were, they were demons.

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Until now, Nymphadora Tonks believed the night shift was the worst because of how boring it was. Now she wished she could be bored instead of fighting for her life. She couldn't die, damn it! Her mum would kill her if she died and didn't even want to imagine what her sweet, ever-loving dad would do. Tears began blurring her vision, but she had no time to wipe them.

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Kingsley was fighting with all his might. However he was tired and his magic was been drained but, if he died, he was going to drag this bastard with him. Someone he did not recognize joined the battle. Luckily, it was to help him. He stole a brief glimpse of the newcomers. Small size and no identifiable features. At last, a curse hit the Death Eater, who fell to the ground with a grunt never to rise again. The person began approaching him and he pointed his wand reflexively.

"I won't hurt you," a gentle voice came out and a chill went down Kingsley's back. It was the voice of a young person - a young person that was able to kill without a second thought. "This is a Blood-Replenishing pill and Pepper-Up. Let me cast a few healing spells," the person offered, taking both things out of somewhere.

Kingsley was not sure who they were or how were they trained, but those devils were not so bad.

Alastor Moody was pumped with adrenaline but maybe not even that would be enough to get out of this one. He was fighting Rowle and, any other day, he might have enjoyed the challenge but at the moment his right leg was splintered and couldn't feel his left arm. A petite person joined the duel and began attacking the bastard. He would have been impressed if the person had not let out a childish giggle when she hit Rowle with a spell that made him thrash in pain, and then used the chance to send a blood-boiling curse to kill him with no hesitation. He was a man that followed his instincts but, at the moment, they were telling him to avoid a confrontation with the deranged female and he was not sure how to feel about that. A person wearing the same outfit appeared beside her. They seemed to communicate somehow and she left.

"If you allow me, I can heal you," the male said and Moody nodded, but kept his wand ready just in case. He was sure that the healer was as vicious as the childish woman was.

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Amelia Bones didn't know how to feel. Months ago, she received an anonymous letter, warning her of a possible attack at the Cup. Even while feeling sceptical, she placed more Aurors on duty and didn't regret her decision. Inferi were hard to fight against and Dementors were wreaking havoc with her people's fighting ability. If that was not enough, bloody giants were also attacking them! Sirius and she were back to back, fighting five Death Eaters. They made an excellent team, but she knew that it did not matter how good they were; numbers overwhelmed power.

She was ready to die, but that didn't mean she was willing. She couldn't leave Susan alone! Only thinking about her niece gave Amelia the strength to keep fighting.

From one second to another, her opponents collapsed on the floor, but a greater threat replaced them. Two people were wearing dark robes and empty masks. Much to her relief, they left and for some reason, they were aiding her side so she decided not to complain. However, Amelia would never be able to forget the strangers' disturbing aura.

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Bellatrix glared at the Death Eater wannabe she was duelling. That scoundrel used curses she never saw before and kept stabbing her with something that looked like a needle but lit her

nerves on fire. She was getting desperate and began sending killing curses. Much to Bellatrix's surprise, her opponent responded in the same way.

She searched for her Lord and what she saw left her speechless. Someone had the nerve to duel with him!

Any other time Bellatrix would have laughed at the disgusting vermin that would meet its eventual demise. Not today though. Her Lord was not at his best and fear for his health gripped her heart.

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Voldemort laughed at the havoc his Inferi were causing - soon his reign would begin again. The giants were having fun destroying tents and rocks, so he decided to ignore them. Everything was perfect until he saw a snake made from Fiendfyre consuming his soldiers. It shouldn't be possible!

The last war, his Inferi were rendered useless by certain magicals that he was pretty sure were dead, so who was controlling the curse? Voldemort began the ritual to raise more when he saw someone approaching him, dressed in a cloak and wearing a blank mask. The imbecilic brat cast a blasting charm on the floor, forcing him to dodge and destroying his ritual array. He was annoyed, but the potential that this person oozed was undeniable.

"What do we have here? Power... I can feel it in you. I don't know who you are, but I will be lenient. Join my side. The simpletons around you will only drag you down while I can take you places you have never dreamt of. Join me and you will enjoy the freedom you never imagined having," he offered. The person was powerful and that was what he needed in his ranks.

"Even if I was a Muggleborn?" the boy asked.

"Your magic is powerful and that is all that matters... Last time I offered an unclean witch the same opportunity, she rejected it and now she's dead. Unlike her, you seem to be smart," Voldemort whispered, using his charm to entice the boy.

"Unclean, you said. What does that make you then? Born from a disgusting Muggle and a weak witch."

Voldemort had no idea how he knew that or if he was guessing, but began attacking the insolent brat nonetheless. He wasn't expecting to find a challenge in the battle. The boy was unpredictable, never using the same attack twice and moving his wand from one hand to the other. He trained for a long time to be ambidextrous, but it seemed he was not the only one. In less than a second, his left arm was chopped off by a cutting charm and he growled in frustration. This body was not powerful enough and he was pushing its limits. He decided that, whoever he was, the brat earned himself a painful death. But now was not the time - his followers were overpowered and if the situation was allowed to continue, all the recruiting would be in vain. With a final killing curse directed at his opponent, Voldemort flew away in a cloud of dark smoke and the Death Eaters followed.

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The battleground settled in eerie silence until the Aurors began celebrating because they had, against all odds, survived the battle. Amelia Bones observed the strange group, wand ready in case they began attacking them. She was not expecting them to disappear into thin air - as if they were never present in the first place.

"Who were they?" asked one of her Aurors.

"I have no idea, but I owe them one," Moody announced.

A unanimous agreement followed that announcement. Amelia didn't know who they were, or even what they were, but she was thankful. They survived the encounter, but she noticed that they were not ready to react in situations where they were outnumbered and she swore to change that. Sirius encased her in a hug that she returned. They won indeed, but at what cost?

She mourned the first casualties of this new war.

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The Guild arrived at the castle and many collapsed in exhaustion. House-elves swarmed them and began healing the ones who were injured. Harry Potter observed his friends with a heavy heart. Blaise had two broken ribs, Daphne had a fractured arm, and Neville had an open gash on his leg. Pride swelled in his chest despite the pain of seeing them hurt - the made a difference.

"I almost had the bitch!" Hwasa exclaimed, throwing an uncharacteristic tantrum.

"Who were you fighting with?" Marcus asked the scowling girl.

"Don't know her name. Wild hair, toad eyes, totally nuts, and worships your mouldy thing. I managed to inject enough Acromantula delta atracotoxin to ensure she's out of commission for a few months, that is if the coward manages to survive," she muttered, clearly annoyed.

"That must be Bellatrix. I have no idea who we were fighting, but they were about to take out Bill," Fred explained with a tired sigh.

"Hwasa and I were against the Lestranges. I hate those bastards," Elizabeth said.

"I helped Auror Moody. He will be important in the future," Luna said with a brief smile.

"We should name ourselves something!" Draco exclaimed, still full of adrenaline.

"Stop being childish," Hestia muttered but did not move otherwise.

"I saw you against Voldemort," Neville told Harry while leaning on Theo. "You were great."

"He's not in peak condition, and I thank the heavens for that. I managed to cut off his arm, though I would have preferred his head instead... He will need a new body soon," Harry sighed.

"We already took every precaution we were able to, but we are not omnipotent and there are many rituals to recreate a body. The best we can do is being ready," Elizabeth said while

encasing him in a gentle hug.

Harry sighed and accepted the comfort his sister was offering. Perhaps he would not be able to protect them forever and, as Hwasa said, he could not be Atlas all the time.

The next morning was marked by chaos. Aunt Eleadora wanted to examine all of them to ensure they were safe while Narcissa did not stop hugging Draco. Lucius was in St. Mungo's - Eleadora was able to heal most of the damage but he still needed to be hospitalized for a few days. Sirius was with Amelia, sorting out the mess, including counting the number of people that had died during the attack. Remus arrived as soon as he could. Marcus, on the other hand, needed to leave early because of an emergency summons from the Minister, who seemed unable to breathe without the boy's help. The group concealed their exhaustion from the adults and pretended they wanted to spend a tranquil day between themselves.

"Master, your reporter is asking permission to speak with you," Ella informed Harry while the group was resting in the gazebo of the garden.

"Please let her in, with the usual checks, of course," Harry told the little one and she nodded. Less than five minutes later Rita was popped in.

"Good morning. I'm sorry to come without announcing it earlier, but we have an emergency," the woman said looking agitated.

"We don't mind. Please take a seat, Rita. Now tell us what happened," Elizabeth said with a gentle smile.

"The Prophet wants to write about a group of people who appeared yesterday as a special unit of the DMLE and Fudge agreed with this until Mister Travers suggested it was a terrible idea because Madam Bones could give a different version to The Magic Times Herald. But now he's deciding between declaring them to be enemies or a personal guard he trained. I have no idea what I should write for this situation," she explained.

"Your Minister is a deluded fool," Hwasa stated, there was no way of contradicting her.

"Write nothing about them," Harry ordered after a moment. "I know Madam Bones wants to keep them quiet until she's sure where their allegiances lie. Make it look as if they were part of the Aurors and ensure the Prophet receives ridicule for singling out powerful individuals that could become a target. I will get you an interview with a few Aurors and Madam Bones. Give details of what happened and don't forget to mention the fallen heroes and the attackers," Harry ordered and the woman took notes.

"I'll have it done as soon as possible so we can send it this evening."

"There's no hurry. We will publish it tomorrow. Make sure to add that we searched for reliable sources of information instead of publishing rumours - that will be enough to discredit whatever the others try to publish," Elizabeth said and he nodded in approval.

"Very well, I will be on my way."

"I will send one of my elves to take you to the DMLE for the interviews," Harry told the woman before she left.

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The next morning, the whole group was having breakfast along with Narcissa and Eleadora. It was tranquil enough and Harry was waiting for Hedwig to arrive. However, a fuming Remus barged in the dining room and handed the older females a newspaper. They read in silence and they were all shocked when the prim and proper Narcissa Malfoy cursed. Harry stood up and took the newspaper from the woman's hands.

### ***ATTACK AT THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP!***

***By Philip Anderson***

*Yesterday night, at the Quidditch World Cup, a group of miscreants attacked during the celebration. Thanks to the efforts of our Minister, Cornelius Fudge, the security was high and they were unable to do much damage. And that is not all. A group of masked individuals appeared during the battle, but it is unclear if they joined a side or attacked everyone they could in order to create more chaos. This group wore attire that resembled that which the Death Eaters wore during the last war, so we conclude they are trying to emulate them.*

*Taking this into consideration, Minister Fudge decided to name them as enemies of the country. He does this in order to ensure our safety. However, he is being lenient by offering them an opportunity to surrender themselves at the Ministry.*

Harry could not keep reading, the article was utterly ridiculous. It seemed like a delusional moron with low IQ wrote it. He gave the newspaper to the others and proceeded to continue eating his breakfast.

"What's so funny?" Remus demanded, "this was published yesterday evening, by now everyone will believe those lies. Those idiots are making Fudge look like a hero and didn't even mention that Death Eaters and Voldemort himself attacked!" the man almost growled in frustration.

"Perhaps, but that's what makes it even more amusing. I bet the other newspaper will give another report, with reliable sources and real interviews. This article was written by idiots who need to stop being seen as a serious publication," Harry commented and Narcissa's eyes grew wide in realization.

"I didn't think about it that way. It's easy to forget that we have more than one newspaper now," Remus muttered in a small voice.

Hedwig and Apollo flew in, each carrying two newspapers. Harry petted his beautiful owl and handed her some bacon while she got comfortable on his lap. He untied the newspapers and handed a copy to Elizabeth.

### ***DEATH EATERS ATTACK THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My dear readers, this is not a joke or a misunderstanding! As you read, the Cup was attacked by the monstrosity that keeps calling itself the Dark Lord. This man led Death Eaters, Inferi, and Dementors to interrupt the celebrations after the game.*

*No one was expecting an attack and the destruction devastated the campsite, claiming many lives in the process. However, Madam Bones was ready in case of any eventuality and the Aurors reacted in a prompt and efficient manner. But no matter how hard they tried, our protectors were outnumbered and all seemed to be lost.*

*A particularly talented group of heroes decided to act. Potent patronuses were cast and Dementors were repelled. One of our heroes noticed how dangerous the Inferi were and decided to use a firestorm charm, a complicated piece of magic that has devastating effects if it is not controlled. However, it was cast by an experienced Auror who did not lose control for a second. That way, without the Inferi and Dementors interfering, the other Aurors were able to push the attackers back.*

*I managed to get an interview with a few of the people who participated in the battle for a more accurate description: Amelia Bones, Alastor Moody, and Kingsley Shacklebolt.*

**RS:** *Good evening. I thank you for agreeing to speak with me.*

**AM:** *No problem. We only want people to know the truth.*

**RS:** *Very well. Can someone tell me what happened during the Cup?*

**AB:** *That night, people were celebrating and, at first, we believed the disturbance was caused by drunken enthusiasts who took their celebration too far. Nevertheless, we went to check what was happening. The moment we arrived, we were attacked by Death Eaters. The Lestranges were torturing two Muggle adults and had children as hostages, so we were unable to attack them. Reinforcements arrived, but so did Dementors and Inferi began rising from the ground. That's without counting the giants that were destroying the camping site. Suddenly, we were outnumbered and we began to lose hope.*

*A group of citizens and a few retired Aurors that we assume are capable duellists joined the battle and turned the tables. They began casting patronuses and aiding the Aurors in their battles - the most notable feat was the firestorm charm that took care of the Inferi. The Dark Lord (note that she called him by his name) made a new appearance but was unable to defeat one of the citizens who began duelling with him.*

*The attack was unexpected and we did our best to push them back. We won the confrontation, but there was a high price to pay. (By this moment, the severe head of the DMLE looked devastated by the losses and I agree; far too many lives were lost in less than an hour).*

**KS:** *We lost many brave people who died with honour. I owe my life to a civilian who helped me in my battle - if he had not stepped in, I have no doubt that I would not be here at the moment... I also thank Sirius Black and Harry Potter, their generous donations ensured that no more innocent lives were taken.*

**AM:** *It was a hard fight, and we thank the people who decided to step in - they made all the difference.*

**RS:** *Did you apprehend any of the perpetrators?*

**AM:** *Most of the cowards escaped when they noticed they were outmatched, but two were left behind. At the moment, they are in intensive care and we will be unable to question them until they wake up.*

**RS:** *That was unexpected... I heard disquieting rumours of a vigilante group that joined the duel and attacked everyone. How much of this is true?*

**KS:** *None of it. The only ones that joined were the citizens, and they helped us. Those are ridiculous and unfounded rumours.*

**RS:** *That's good to know; it's more than enough having rogue criminals. Is the DMLE closer to capturing those fugitives?*

**AB:** *We are doing our best, but we concluded that they are hiding under the Fidelius, so that makes it harder to track them. We are trying to pass a law for the forced use of Veritaserum on any captured criminal that carries the Dark Mark. Unfortunately, we don't have enough votes in the Wizengamot.*

**RS:** *And what does this law entail?*

**KS:** *It will be easy for us to know which people were victims of the Imperius and which were willing followers. If we used Veritaserum during the last war, we would have obtained precise information from Bellatrix Lestrange about who were Death Eaters, how many crimes she was guilty of, and how many people they had in their ranks. Now we can try to correct our mistakes and ensure this does not happen again.*

**RS:** *This seems a sensible proposal that I fully support. Is there anything else you wish to say to the magical people?*

**AM:** *Yes, there is. The Dark Lord (note that he used his real name) is back, or at least he is trying to return. He no longer is as powerful as he once was and there is no reason to fear something as ridiculous as his name. The man is nothing but a shadow of his former self. On the other hand, we changed for the better. We became sceptics and are now ready to fight. Don't forget that he doesn't control us, we are the ones who decide who is in power.*

**RS:** *(With these inspiring words, my morale returned and I admit my readers, that it was pretty low) I thank you for your time and the information you provided.*

*My fellow citizens, this happened a day ago, but we were unwilling to publish any article until we were able to get reliable information. This newspaper prides itself on its honesty and we will never base our articles on rumours, so we apologize for our tardiness. However, according to our information, we can conclude that our Aurors are dedicated fighters who will give their lives with no hesitation. We also apologize for not publishing the names of our heroes, but we refuse to put them in the spotlight and make them possible targets. I know*

*these are hard times, but let's remember what Auror Moody said, we are the ones in power! No matter what happens, we will come out on top as long as we are willing to fight! May Mother Magic lead us through the right path!*

"Now this is better," Elizabeth announced.

"So why didn't they talk about the masked group?" Terrence asked, looking at Narcissa.

"They were thinking about it, but they helped us and Amelia wants to know more about them before taking any action," the woman answered.

"So what will happen with the article about your Minister?" Hwasa asked.

"Who knows? Maybe the idiot will try to ban the new newspaper or declare them rebels. But he would need the full support from the Wizengamot and we all know that Lucius, Sirius, and Amelia will block him," Eleadora answered.

"How is Lucius?" Remus asked Narcissa.

"Resting. If it wasn't for one of them, he would have died. The curse punctured many of his internal organs but, somehow, they managed to heal him and Eleadora stabilized him," she whispered.

"He will be as good as new by the end of the week, so there's no need to worry," aunt Eleadora beside Narcissa said in a reassuring tone.

When breakfast was almost finished, Sirius arrived, emulating a dying zombie with his unsteady steps. A plate of food appeared in front of him and he began devouring it. The people at the table were considerate enough to give some space to the overworked man, at least until he finished eating.

"So what's going on at the Ministry?" Narcissa asked her cousin.

"Everything sucks! Fudge is being the usual idiot and the Wizengamot is in crisis. Yesterday, we had an emergency session. Augusta was furious and now the light faction is divided into two sides - the intelligent ones and the ones who are pretending nothing happened. The dark faction was hard to deal with without Lucius present, but Adrian's father took control and it went better than expected. Fudge isn't willing to declare that Voldemort is back, but he has almost no options now. I'm sure he'll try to distract people with the Tournament," Sirius muttered, his eyes almost closing in exhaustion.

"What tournament?" Hestia asked with an innocent face.

"It doesn't matter. The idiot needs to sleep," Eleadora announced and levitated the protesting man out of the room.

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The weeks before going back to school were the busiest the Guild ever experienced. Luna said they needed to up their practice, so practice they did. It was extremely hard but, at the

same time, it was rewarding. Aunt Eleadora was ruthless while teaching them and their other teachers were not any kinder, but they improved in leaps and bounds.

Hwasa used the last weeks of summer to teach them how to use senbon and Harry admitted it was not his forte - you needed to have advanced knowledge of anatomy and poisons. He pretended that Elizabeth did not see it as the most fascinating thing and ignored the fact his sister seemed to have more knowledge than the others. Harry had practised parselmagic as much as possible and, although he progressed, he knew that it would take years to master the ability.

Their duelling classes were doing great. Professor Flitwick recommended them to participate in the professional duelling circuits, stating that fighting against people who used different styles was the best way to learn. Harry was going to begin competing the next year, though none of the others was so keen on the idea. However, Neville was willing to try and his grandmother supported him. Thinking about it, Augusta Longbottom also changed. She no longer demanded her grandson be a copy of her son, but instead began encouraging him to be his own person. Harry did not know whether it was because of the battle in Hogsmeade or something else but was satisfied with the outcome nonetheless.

On a less positive note, the situation with Daphne's family had worsened. Her father was beginning to consider the idea of betrothing her. It was unfortunate that the man fell ill at such a young age, forcing her mother to hire a solicitor to manage the family. It was good; however, that Miss Blair was available at the time and was more than willing to include Daphne in her family's businesses.

Fred and George were also having a hard time at home. After Percy got a job as the secretary of Leonard Fawley, Head of the Ministry of Magic's Department of International Magical Cooperation, their mother was unbearable. She complained about their lack of motivation to triumph in life, unlike her beloved son Percy. Harry didn't understand how they had the patience to remain quiet about their apprenticeships, but he guessed they were waiting for the right moment to reveal how hard they had worked. Bill and Charlie were a constant support and Harry felt indebted with them for protecting the people he considered family.

Marcus was also having a hard time. He was tired of the Minister and was the one who looked forwards the most to the article that soon would be published about Fudge. Marcus was certainly working hard to cement his image as a hard worker with a good head on his shoulders and, if the praise Sirius gave him every day was anything to go by, he was succeeding at that. Marcus was also taking advantage of his position to learn everything about the Triwizard Tournament while Miss Blair prepared the case against Albus Dumbledore and the Ministry for suggesting the use of dragons. Harry was eager to see what would happen.

"Everything hurts and I'm dying," Theo commented, lying on a large beanbag.

"I know," Draco whined.

"Aunt Eleadora and Professor Flitwick make an awesome team. When they're not against us, of course," Neville said, not moving from his position near the window.

"Harry, are you sure you needed to donate so much money?" George asked him after a brief silence.

"Perhaps not, but it will accelerate our plans. Besides, Mirror Summons made more money in a few months than I will be able to spend in years," he said with a dismissive tone.

"So the branch offices are going well," Blaise concluded.

"You can say that, the mirrors were sold out before the first week the stores were open."

"If I ever need business advice, I'm stealing Ragnok," Draco muttered.

"Who will give the talk this year?" Flora asked to no one in particular.

"Harry, Daphne, and Terrence did an excellent job last year," Luna commented. She was leaning on Harry's side. The girl reminded him of an overgrown, yet adorable kitten. "What we have to think about is how we will tell the rules to the Durmstrang students, they will be a hard bunch to deal with," she muttered half-asleep.

"So now we have to plan a different method for the visitors," Adrian grumbled.

"We'll find a way later. We need to plan the House improvements," Daphne announced, "there were a few students that suggested having more illumination in the corridors and one who wanted to have our entrance decorated instead of being a plain wall."

"I agree with the idea of increasing the illumination, though we need to put more thought into our entrance. I would suggest placing a portrait, but they are loyal to the headmaster, so that's a no... We can animate any decoration on the door and have wards placed against any evil intent but, as I said, we need to think carefully about this," Harry answered.

"True, but we can perhaps animate a few stone snakes to guide the first years through the dungeons," Fred suggested and Daphne nodded.

"Perhaps we can leave our signature in Slytherin," Flora whispered after a moment. "Let's make something permanent that will teach our rules to future generations!"

"I guess that's our pet project for this year," Harry said with a diminutive smile. They would have a busy year indeed.

The group was enjoying the tranquillity silence brought; half of them were already sleeping and many more were about to join. Suddenly the door was kicked open and the soporific atmosphere was broken. In less than a second, every member of the Guild was alert, pointing their wands at their unwelcome visitor.

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Justin Finch-Fletchley almost jumped in fright at the sight that welcomed him in the compartment. Maybe he was safer outside. It was just his luck, barging in the cool kids' compartment and being threatened by a dozen or so wands.



He still remembered their first year. He entered Hogwarts instead of attending Eton, something he didn't regret. However, he would never be able to forget his surprise the moment he heard the name Harry Potter being called for the sorting. When he visited Eton, every single professor praised the most brilliant student in the institution: Harry Potter. In the trophy hallway, there were many trophies and titles under that boy's name, along with a picture. Justin remembered his surprise when he realized that the boy had the looks and the brains. In a way, he was jealous that a person the same age as him was about to graduate, but the admiration he felt dimmed the feeling.

When he saw the boy in person, it felt unrealistic. Harry Potter was too perfect and Justin was intimidated by him. That feeling only increased when the famous boy showed magical prowess that had the teachers singing his praises once again and, throughout the years, Justin saw him more like an unreachable idol than a fellow student. Hence, he never even tried to approach him. Now, though, he had no other choice.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to barge in," Justin apologized and felt his cheeks heating up.

"Don't worry, you belong here," a dirty-blond girl announced and he tilted his head in confusion. Unlike him, the other people seemed to understand something he was unable to even fathom. They returned to their original positions, lounging in the couches, and some even fell asleep.

"Are you sure?" Harry Potter asked the girl, who nodded and cuddled to his side. "Why did I even ask?" the boy muttered and looked at him. Justin was on the edge of a panic attack with the confusing situation. "Take a seat and don't worry. I doubt you barged in without reason. Would you tell me what happened?" the boy asked with a candid smile. Justin took wary steps and sat in front of the intimidating teen, close to the stunning Daphne Greengrass, who was leaning on Zabini.

"I apologize once again," Justin muttered. Green eyes examined him and he gave in. "There were a few older students who were trying to curse me. Ernie and Hannah were talking with Susan Bones and I don't know her that well. I was feeling uncomfortable and left," he blabbered and winced at the unnecessary information he provided.

"What students?" an older boy he didn't recognize asked.

"I don't know any of them, but they were two Ravenclaws, two Gryffindors, and one Hufflepuff," he explained and the unknown boy seemed to relax.

"It's good to know that no Slytherin was involved, but I must ask why they tried to curse you," asked a pretty girl with long hair, Justin thought she was a year below him.

"For being a muggle-born, of course. Not everyone is as accepting as the Slytherins and they tend to discriminate against us. Others just hate us," Justin shrugged, containing a sigh.

"No need to worry now," the strange girl said. Justin had no idea how he should respond, so he remained silent and his anxiety levels rose with all the attention he was receiving.

"Wanna stay longer? We have real food," one of the Weasley twins offered.

"Besides, we actually have brains, unlike the morons that seem to abound in this school," Daphne said, but her eyes remained closed. Needing no further encouragement, Justin nodded enthusiastically.

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Harry Potter analyzed the boy in front of him. Justin Finch-Fletchley was almost a prodigy in Potions and, if this was not enough, the boy was in the top ten of the year, something that claimed his interest in a possible new member, but he forgot about him... Now though, Luna spoke, and what she suggested was almost law in the Guild.

The boy was amicable and candid, somehow managing to make Daphne laugh. Justin talked with Blaise about their favourite dishes, both boys talking in fast-paced Italian that had George observing them in confusion. Overall, he seemed good enough and got along remarkably well with two of the most closed-off members of the Guild. The murmur of conversation lulled most to sleep and the atmosphere was calm, something that everyone enjoyed. Harry signalled the few that were conscious to awake the others because they were close to the station and needed to get changed. He awakened Luna with a gentle shake and smiled at her sleepy face.

"You should hang out with us more," Harry offered the freckled boy, who looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

"You can also join us during meals. The elves make the best food you can imagine, just for us," Blaise said with a large smile. "Don't ever mention this to my mother or she will kill me, but they make the most delicious pasta al pomodoro I have ever tried," he whispered, winking at Justin.

"I'll have to see that for myself," Justin said with a wide smile and left the compartment, looking for his Hufflepuff friends.

The large group walked towards the carriages, paying no mind to all the stares. They divided themselves and took the last ones towards the school. Much to Harry's disappointment, it seemed that the only change in the school was the larger amount of teaching staff, which he appreciated but felt that it was not enough. Nonetheless, he felt pity for the overworked teachers most of the time. They sat down in their usual place in the middle of the Slytherin table and waited for the first years to arrive. It was always amusing to watch the reactions of the new students; their wide eyes and incredulous expressions made the members of the Guild smile at their innocence.

Yes, the new term officially began.

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Albus Dumbledore looked at the staff table, feeling defeated. Madam Marchbanks hired seven new teachers for the two first years, and one assistant for each of the professors in charge of the other students. She also got three healer apprentices to learn under Poppy, another two people to work in the library, and Rolanda now had two assistants. Thanks to an overly generous donation, the school now had new brooms, new equipment, new books, new rooms, and new rules. The last one bothered him more than he was willing to express. They

were too strict and Albus doubted the students would adapt, but of course, neither Minerva nor Filius listened to him and his hands were tied on the matter.

Albus admitted the school always had the money, but he considered hiring so many teachers an unnecessary risk for the children. However, he knew that his authority would be challenged the moment he tried to interfere. Minerva turned hostile and distant with him. The woman once was his student and Albus knew her from a young age. The fact that he had somehow lost her loyalty planted doubts about his decisions, doubts he would rather ignore, whether he had made the wrong decisions during these last years... He really didn't want to think about it.

Filius also turned into a problem. While the older man was never loyal to him, he didn't oppose him as much as he did now. Albus knew that Madam Marchbanks and Filius were working together to change the school, but he had no solid reasons to dismiss the man. If he tried, the one to be dismissed from the school would be him instead. Filius was the one to suggest adding martial magic into the curriculum and, while it was an important branch when taught by the right people, the new professor for the subject put Albus on edge. Benedict Munter was an accomplished man who was seen by the magical community as one of the best spell crafters of the century and a talented duellist. The problem with the man was his dark views about magic. Munter practised any spell that caught his fancy, no matter their nature. Albus didn't want to have those ideals passed onto the new generations, but he was unable to find anyone else able to take the place.

Now that the DMLE had the necessary funding and more Aurors than Albus felt comfortable with, Moody would only leave the Auror force if they dragged his dead body out and, even then, he would put up a fight. There was no other person that was qualified enough and Minerva would raise hell if he dared to try to hire an unqualified postulant. When Albus thought about it, he regretted dismissing Remus. The young man cut all ties with him for being fired with no justification so Albus was forced to contact one of his old acquaintances, Jacob Kowalski Jr. The man had refused his offer, but his daughter, Isabelle Kowalski, was interested and he hired her in a moment of raw desperation.

The problem with the young woman was her grandmother. Queenie was, without doubt, an exceptional witch but after she left Grindelwald, her views changed. Albus had no idea how much because they were never close, but it was enough for Jacob to marry her at last. She belonged to the faction he liked to call dark grey. Queenie believed that no magic was evil, the intent behind it was. Albus feared her descendants learnt that dangerous philosophy. However, he had no choice. It was either the girl or the Aurors and he was not willing to have Aurors in the school.

He watched Harry Potter and his friends enter the great hall and sighed. The tournament was his last desperate gambit to help the boy to find the right path. Perhaps it was not the best decision he took, but it was the right one.

Severus told him about the attack at the Cup and Albus knew there was nothing he could do about it. He had tried to organize the Order, but it didn't have enough members. Molly, Arthur, William, and Sirius were half of it and they would be at the game either way so he saw no reason to alert them. Minerva was not in the country during the summer and, if he

joined, he knew he would be unable to defeat Tom, so he stayed back with regret constricting his heart.

Now, he regretted not going. The number of deaths was disheartening. It didn't matter the side they were fighting on, Albus didn't believe in taking lives. At first, he blamed the brutal methods Madam Bones implemented, but then Severus reported and Albus remembered wishing that it had been Madam Bones' fault.

Severus almost had a hysteric breakdown, something Dumbledore wasn't expecting. Never before had he seen Severus Snape so distressed, not even after Lily's death. All the information Albus managed to obtain about the attack on the cup only left him more worried. A mysterious group joined the battle. No one knew their ages or talents. No one was able to identify either them or their wands. It was almost as if they didn't exist.

Albus was worried because, although they helped the Aurors, he had no idea where their loyalties lay. He would wait and see - perhaps they could turn into valuable allies instead of dangerous enemies.

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Harry was hoping the headmaster would give his big announcement soon because the sooner the old man did so, the sooner he would be resting. He closed his eyes and tried to block out all the noises. Perhaps he fell asleep because Daphne poked his particularly tender hip under the table. No matter how gently she did it, the bruise on his hip was still fresh and the bloody woman knew that. He accused her with a glare, but she was looking at the front, where the headmaster was giving his speech.

"Now that you are fed and watered, I have a few announcements to make. First, the Forbidden Forest is forbidden - there are wards around it to prevent you from entering, so please don't even try. Mister Filch, our caretaker, wants to announce that his cat had two kittens so if there is anyone interested in adopting don't hesitate to approach him," he announced. Mister Filch looked so happy while holding two little fluffs of hair that Harry had to smile.

"I want one," Flora decided.

"It is also my painful duty to inform you that the inter-house Quidditch Cup will not take place this year-" the man was interrupted by most of the hall complaining, so he was forced to raise his voice. "If you'll allow me to finish speaking, this is due to an event that will be starting in October and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much of the teachers' time and energy, but I'm sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts the Triwizard Tournament will take place! There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the Tournament," Dumbledore continued, "none of which have been very successful. However, our own Departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to ensure that, this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger. The Heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, along with their delegations, will arrive in two weeks and, on Halloween; we will have the Champion Selections. An impartial judge will decide which students are worthy to compete in the Triwizard Cup."

"We need to talk with our House about how we expect them to behave with the visitors," Daphne whispered to Harry.

"The heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age – that is to say, seventeen years or older – will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. This-" Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people had made noises of outrage at these words, "-is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the Tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous regardless of the precautions we take and it is highly unlikely that students below Sixth and Seventh Year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them Hogwarts champion. Therefore, I beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen. You may be asking yourselves what you will win entering this competition when it sounds so all-consuming. Eternal glory! That's what awaits the student who wins the Triwizard Tournament, along with a thousand Galleons of personal money! But, to do this, that student must survive three tasks - three extremely dangerous tasks."

"And he makes it sound as if they will be menial compared to the prize," Draco scowled.

"The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be staying with us for the greater part of this year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us and will give your whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion when he or she is selected. And now, it is late-"

"But before you go to bed, let me make a few announcements and a small correction," a severe-looking Minerva McGonagall interrupted the headmaster. "The Quidditch games still stand because of the new staff, but our headmaster has been busy with the Tournament. Anyway, Madam Marchbanks, the head of the Education Regulation Department and Governor of the Wizarding Examinations Authority, has been working hard to improve the education Hogwarts offers. First of all, the oldest students may have noticed that we have many additions to the staff. The ones on the right side of the table are the new professors. Their role is to teach the first two years, please welcome them: Professor Holmes for Charms, Professor Aldington for Transfiguration, Professor Ramsey for Potions, Professor Bane for Defence Against the Dark Arts, Professor Kent for Herbology, Professor Dayton for Astronomy, and Professor Brent for History," she introduced and the seven people stood up while the hall applauded.

"I'm glad the teachers won't be so overworked now," Blaise commented while taking away the pudding bowl from a complaining Luna.

"You may also notice that each of the professors has a person sitting beside them. They are our assistants, their role is to help us during classes. They have the same authority as any professor, so I don't want to hear about any lack of respect. Let me introduce you to Madam Bentham for Transfiguration, Miss Axton for Charms, Mister Fulmer for Potions, Mister Albee for Defence Against the Dark Arts, Mister Kenly for Herbology, Mrs Dayton for Astronomy, Miss Lester for Runes, Mister Johnson for Arithmancy, Miss Lindsey for Care of Magical Creatures, Mister Smith for Divination, Miss Goldstein for Theory of Magic, Mister Nix for Muggle Studies and Miss Landon for History. The sorting hat himself decided you

could benefit from all his knowledge and experience and he will help Professor Cumberbatch and Professor Brent to dictate many classes." The hall exploded in polite applause.

"I was not expecting that. Perhaps we can have a talk with the hat about the founders," Harry muttered, wondering how much the hat would remember.

"I also have to announce the new professor for the older years for Defence against the Dark Arts. Please welcome Isabelle Kowalski!" McGonagall announced and the hall roared in applause. The blonde woman was young and attractive, but there was something about her that told Harry she was not someone to be messed with. "I know you may be overwhelmed, but I am sure this news will raise your spirits: We also added a few subjects to our curriculum. For the moment, they will stay as electives, but we are planning to add them to be core subjects in the future. Martial Magic, a subject that will be taught by Professor Benedict Munter and his assistant, Mrs Jessica Munter. Spellcasting will be taught by Professor Dahlia Jackson and her assistant, Mister Stephen Law. Finally, we have inscription casting that will be taught by Professor Nina Somerhalder and her assistant, Mister Joseph Somerhalder. You will be allowed to attend the first two weeks to see which ones you like, afterwards, you will need to register for one of them. For the upper two years, it ain't compulsory, but it's highly recommended. That is all I have to say for now. I know this year will be full of big changes and gratifying rewards!" McGonagall announced and the students in the hall applauded at her words.

"Thanks for that enlightening information, Professor McGonagall. I know how important it is for you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Have a restful night!" Dumbledore said and conversations exploded around them.

Harry walked out of the hall, wasting no time. The group walked in silence until they arrived at the Slytherin common room, where they sat in their usual place. Adrian stood up and silence descended over the room.

"Before the new students join us, is there anyone who wishes to challenge the Guild?" the boy asked.

Unlike in previous years, there were no challenging eyes or rebellious demeanours. The Slytherins stayed silent in meek compliance. Harry wondered if the punishments imparted on the group of older students was the reason, or perhaps it was because, after four years, they noticed at last that no one defied the Guild. The group of first-years entered the room, guided by the prefects. Terrence nodded at Theo and walked towards their seating place.

"Thank you for escorting them," Theo thanked the prefects, dismissing them. "First, I wish to welcome you all to the noble house of Slytherin. The prefects already informed you how this house works and who rules it. As a noble House, we pride ourselves on our impeccable conduct and the excellent reputation we worked hard to earn. Therefore, we have rules to protect our status. We don't give second chances so, please, don't try our patience," he said almost playfully. "First, blood purity has no place in this house. Hence, any term derogatory expressions are forbidden. Second, no bullying is allowed. Third, always be polite, no matter whether they are house-elves or crass first-generation magicals. We will know if someone is even thinking of breaking the rules, and let me tell you this: you won't enjoy the consequences.

"While these rules are essential, but we have a new one that was implemented thanks to some students. The Dark Mark is forbidden. If any of you decides to follow that disgusting thing called Voldemort, you'd better keep it quiet and not allow us to discover your alliances. If this rule is broken, the guilty ones will be excommunicated from the House. Any questions?" Theo asked the new students and no one moved.

It was obvious that no one was expecting the rules to be stricter this year and the last announcement left them paralyzed. No one was excommunicated in more than half a millennia and there was no way the teachers would help the students that bore the Dark Mark. The message was clear - join the Dark Lord and you would lose more than you could ever hope to gain.

"We will have visitors," Theo began, "I hope you are on your best behaviour. They are foreigners, so they might have accents and their customs will be different. Be patient with them and teach them about our customs, don't forget to use the opportunity to learn more about other countries and their traditions. We will be the perfect hosts. Therefore, I want no misbehaviour. Many students in Beauxbatons have Veela ancestry - be nothing but polite to them and don't you dare to sully our good name with your lack of control. While they are beautiful, they are people and deserve respect. The new students may have a hard time adjusting to our climate and food - be considerate and offer them other alternatives if possible. If you notice any of them feeling lonely or being isolated for any reason, you inform us and we will take care of them. However, the same rules apply to our visitors. If any of them commits an infraction of any kind, you are to tell us and we will take care of it."

"As you were told, we are the Slytherin Guild. It is our duty is to guide and protect the House, which includes making the rules and, unfortunately, punishing you when necessary," Daphne announced in a clear voice that commanded the attention of the first years. "Slytherin changed over the years and we will continue improving. You may notice that the corridors are dim and it's easy to get lost. That will change tomorrow; we will be placing the same lights that we have in our common room and our entrance will also change in a few weeks. We accept any suggestions and are open to requests, as long as they are reasonable. So please, don't be afraid to approach us. Don't forget the rules and you will enjoy all of the benefits the Guild has to offer," she said, a charming smile adorning her features. "It's time for bed now, have a restful night."

"What should we add to give a better impression to the Durmstrang students?" Draco asked Luna once all the students left.

"How am I supposed to know?" the girl shrugged, her eyes almost closed in exhaustion.

"So we are taking Justin in?" Daphne asked.

"Of course we are. Luna said he belonged with us," Fred shrugged.

"Rome?" Harry called his elf before they fell asleep.

"Master calls," the elf said, popping in.

"Thanks for coming. I wanted to ask you a favour. Please organize a team of elves to install the lamps in the hallways," the sleepy boy asked.

"It was about time, sir! It will be ready before morning."

"Thank you, Rome. You can go back to the castle, now. Goodnight," Harry said and the elf left after bowing to him.

"Let's go to bed before someone falls asleep," George muttered.

"Too late, Luna already has," Daphne pointed the sleeping girl.

"Perhaps it would be better if we called the elves. At this rate, someone will fall asleep on their way to bed," Adrian murmured, his eyes barely open.

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Justin arrived at the Hufflepuff common room but, before he could go to his room, he was grabbed by a worried Cedric Diggory. Seeing the older boy so anxious, made him feel guilty. Perhaps Hannah and Ernie didn't notice he was gone for most of the trip, but Cedric did. Justin still remembers being a frightened first year and how the older boy helped him to integrate. He was one of the few people who didn't belong to Slytherin that accepted Muggleborns as equals.

"Where were you? I was really worried because Nicholson and his gang were prowling the train looking for victims and you weren't with your friends!" Cedric hissed, examining Justin in search of any injury he might sustain.

"I found them alright, but I was able to escape," he told the older boy and looked around for any eavesdroppers. "You know about Harry Potter's group, right?"

"Of course I do. The Slytherins and Ravenclaws call them the Guild. Never mind that, where were you?" he demanded with a prominent scowl.

"With them," Justin stated. Cedric scowled at him until he noticed he was not joking, and then the older boy's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Did they hurt you?"

"No, they were really kind. I met a bloke that also speaks Italian and the desserts they had were delicious. You wouldn't believe how amazing their compartment is - better than our common room for sure," Justin commented and Cedric rubbed his face.

"I swear that these kinds of things only happen to you."

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, they invited me to join them for meals."

"You will join them," the older boy sighed at his wayward friend.

"I will. You are my only friend and you're graduating this year, I think it will be good to make new ones," the boy whispered and Cedric's expression softened.



"Okay, then. If you're joining them, I will join you for a while and see how they treat you myself," the older boy sighed, but the all the troubles he was subjected to were forgotten when Justin shot him the brightest smile he had seen.

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The next day, the Guild was sitting in their usual place at the Slytherin table. Last night, everyone fell asleep a few seconds after lying on their beds. Most of them were sore, but the potions they drank early in the morning were ensuring that breathing was no longer painful. Luna was eating like a famished animal while Blaise and Draco tried to match her pace, losing the unilateral battle. Owls flew in, interrupting the background murmur that different conversations caused. Hedwig settled on Harry's shoulder and preened his hair while the boy untied the newspaper and handed her a plate of bacon. A diminutive smile escaped when he saw the headlines.

## ***TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT REINSTATED:***

### ***COMPETITION OR DEATH SENTENCE?***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*Good morning, my fellow magical citizens. I am sorry to greet you with such glum news, but it's my duty to inform you of the truth behind this competition. Rumours of the Triwizard Tournament being reinstated floated around the Ministry for a few months, yet I refused to believe the authorities could be so negligent. They proved me wrong.*

*For those who don't know, the Triwizard Tournament was created in the thirteenth century as a way of promoting international cooperation between the top schools at the time: Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and Hogwarts. The Goblet of Fire, an old magical artefact, acts as an impartial judge and chooses one student from each school. It is composed of three tasks that are spread throughout the year: retrieving an object from a creature, rescuing their respective hostages from an inhospitable environment (which normally includes some kind of guards), and a race towards the cup under various conditions. I know that, so far, it sounds interesting enough, but there is a reason why it was ended.*

*The reason it was cancelled is because of the high number of contestants that perished! You read it right, it's because the teenagers that competed died during the tasks. That is without counting the number of viewers that got injured or the many judges that died because the contestants were unable to handle the tasks. This is understandable, considering that most were inexperienced children! I hope that now you are able to understand my horror at the news.*

*The Minister and the Hogwarts Headmaster, Cornelius Fudge and Albus Dumbledore respectively, were pushing for this competition to be reinstated. Both men promised to take the necessary security measures, which include: only students who have turned seventeen will be able to enter (the headmaster himself promised to secure the Goblet of Fire so that no one will be able to circumvent its security), all the tasks will be safe, and there will be professionals near in case one of the contestants is endangered. However, these measures do nothing to reassure me when the head of the DMLE, Madam Bones, and the head of the Education Regulation Department, Madam Marchbanks, are actively opposing this*

competition. I managed to get an interview with both women. However, I was unable to obtain an interview with Minister Fudge and Headmaster Dumbledore. Due to their busy schedules during the months of June, July, and August, they were not available. Therefore, I am unable to portray their perspective on the matter, something I apologize for, my dear witches and wizards.

**RS:** Good evening. Thank you for your time, especially since you both are busy people. Before we begin, I would like to ask you, Madam Marchbanks about the changes that were implemented in Hogwarts and what other improvements can we expect.

**GM:** Good evening, Rita. It is good to see you. There is nothing to thank us for - you arranged the interview weeks in advance. Anyway, thanks to the article you published a few months ago, we discovered how deficient our education system is. The first measure was to hire more teachers. Honestly, the professors are overworked almost to the point of exploitation. We have new teachers for each subject for the two lower years, and each of the professors for the older years now has an assistant. We have also added three new subjects that other countries consider core material: martial magic, spell casting, and inscription casting.

**RS:** These changes sound marvellous! Though I have to ask, what is the difference between spell casting and inscription casting?

**GM:** Simple, dear. Spells are taught in Latin, but that is not the only magical language. We also have Greek, Norse, Mayan, Quechua, and many others. The purpose of the class is to teach the students about the diverse language-based spells.

Inscription casting is a variation of this subject, but it is tightly knit with Runes. It will teach how to cast spells by using magical writing, symbols or arrays, essential knowledge for any aspiring runemaster or curse-breaker. Both of these subjects are related to martial magic or combative magic, which teaches the essentials for any duel.

**RS:** Those subjects sound fascinating, though I have a question. Will the children be able to adapt?

**GM:** At the moment, they are not core subjects, but they will be from next year. This year, the students will be able to see if they wish to sign up for any class and, although the workload will be heavy, there are motivated students that are more than willing to work those extra hours.

**RS:** That's good to know. Madam Bones, how do you feel about these changes?

**AB:** Well, what can I tell you? Many things will change and I couldn't be happier. Aurors are required to face a three-year training program before they join the force because of their lack of combative skills and general knowledge. These classes will cut the amount of time they remain as trainees to a year at most. I'm glad that my niece will be able to experience a superior education to the one we received.

**RS:** I'm glad to know 'Hogwarts is improving. Now, though, it is time to move onto less pleasing topics. The rumours of the Triwizard Tournament being reinstated have been going

*on for more than a year but, in June, they were confirmed. I know that both of you oppose the competition despite the security measures, may I enquire the reason?*

**AB:** *We both have been working hard to ensure the safety of the students and no reassurance will be enough. The reason I deem the competition dangerous is because it's ill-planned. The tasks that are being proposed are dangerous despite the extra security measures. The protections will not be able to be installed until March, which means that during the first two tasks the spectators won't have that extra shield that ensures their safety. And the reason they will need protection in the first place is because they are planning the tasks to be interesting, not safe.*

*However, one of the things I oppose the most is the use of the Goblet of Fire. Even though it's a tradition, most forget to mention that it's lethal. When a student puts their name in, they are entering a magical agreement. As we know, those are dangerous because they damaging the core if broken. The moment the goblet chooses the champions, they are unable to leave the competition under any circumstance. This means that, if they don't compete in one of the tasks for whatever reason, they will lose their magic in the best of the cases.*

**RS:** *(My dear readers, I am sure that you feel the same horror I felt with this disturbing revelation) I can't believe they are using such a dangerous object!*

**AB:** *I felt the same way, but we were overruled and they will use the artefact.*

**GM:** *Amelia and I did our best, but they refused to hear our reasons. This kind of event needs time to be crafted and two months are not enough to have decent plans or organization. Another thing that bothers me is that Fudge and Dumbledore want to exempt the competitors from their exams. A preposterous thing when you consider they need to take their NEWTs and, if they don't take them, they will have to wait a year. No matter how much fame the Tournaments offers, no person or institution is going to hire someone who doesn't have the qualifications. To work at the Ministry a minimum of four O's is needed, but that is for a low position. Most specialized careers request more than seven, and that's without mentioning that Masters search for apprentices with high grades in their subjects through the NEWTs results.*

**RS:** *So we can conclude that not taking the exams will hamper their careers. I wasn't expecting that, but it's logical. It's unbelievable that, despite your solid arguments, they still decided to go on with their plans.*

**AB:** *We feel the same way. Madam Longbottom, Sirius Black, and Lucius Malfoy have been overexerting themselves in an attempt to gain more supporting votes in the Wizengamot. Still, it's unfortunate to have so little support. The most we can do now is to hope for the best but to be ready if things were to go dire.*

**RS:** *It's a shame that the authorities have been so negligent, but I'm glad that people like you continue fighting for our safety. Is there something you wish to tell the people?*

**GM:** *Yes, there is. Even though Amelia and I were ignored, you prove how powerful the people are when they fight back. This has nothing to do with politics or pride, this is about*

*the safety of our children, who may be adults in the eyes of the law, but will always remain children in the heart of every parent.*

*With this inspiring message, the interview finished. I hope you are able to understand the reason why I oppose this competition now. My fellow citizens, there is no way to ignore it any more. Cornelius Fudge and Albus Dumbledore are no longer fit to continue holding their positions. We ignored the many scandals related to Dumbledore's neglect of his students. We ignored the inactivity and poor decisions of the actual Minister. I'm ashamed because it took a competition that may cost our children their lives, or even their magic, to open my eyes. I won't rest until our beloved offspring are safe and I commend you to do the same. Let's never forget that we hold the power to protect the ones we love! May Mother Magic guide our steps through this perilous journey!*

Harry finished reading the article with a satisfied twinkle playing across his eyes. The pale faces and indignant expressions of most of the students after reading the article were enough to know that many of the ones who wanted to enter the competition decided it was not worth it. At the staff table, anger was almost palpable and the headmaster left the hall in a hurry. Daphne finished reading the article with an uncharacteristic and slightly unnerving giggle. Adrian and Fred, who were sitting beside her, tried to move away in a subtle manner.

"Good morning, students," professor McGonagall spoke. Silence descended on the hall and the woman nodded in approval. "Yesterday night I decided to wait before telling you about all the changes that will take place. I was going to explain what the new subjects consist of, but most of you read an accurate description in the newspaper so we will be skipping that. As you know, we have more personnel in the school. This includes Mister Günter and Madam Roseburg, who will be working in the library along with Madam Pince. Madam Pomfrey accepted three apprentices to help in the infirmary: Mister Rook, Mister Jones, and Miss Tier. The school received a generous donation, which will be implemented in many things, according to our benefactor's requests. Filius, if you would," she asked and the man nodded with obvious excitement

"Of course. Mirror Summons donated the money with the simple instruction of improving Hogwarts!" Flitwick exclaimed with a jovial smile. "First, we improved our library and bought hundreds of new books. However, we also added study areas designated for study groups. Although there are dozens available, you need to reserve a room if you wish to use it. Everyone is allowed, so I am expecting more inter-house cooperation. Professor McGonagall and I decided that if anyone damages these facilities on purpose they will be subjected to severe punishments," the man stated. Everyone saw him angry that one time and Harry doubted there was someone stupid enough to provoke him. "Second, a new room was established. It's named the Hogwarts Hall. Everyone is allowed in. There are comfortable spaces and different games. However, any kind of fight, bullying, discrimination, or calculated damage to the room will be punished."

"We also changed our punishment and reward method. House points are still important but, for excellent behaviour, we will award different individuals with benefits such as visits to Hogsmeade once a week and a later curfew. The punishments also changed. For a first-degree infraction, which consists of missing curfew, arriving late to classes or not doing homework, you will work under the supervision of Madam Pince in the library. For a second-degree

infraction, which consists of bullying of any kind, damaging the school facilities, and blatant disrespect towards any authority, you will face punishment with Professor Binns. After he stopped being a teacher, he dedicated himself to study history and refused to pass. Therefore, you will write a three-foot-long essay about the infraction you committed and it will be graded by him. If it is not satisfactory, you will have to do it again, plus an exam that Professor Binns will prepare. A third-degree sanction includes premeditated physical damage to any resident of the castle. You will be expelled with no second chances if this happens unless there are extreme extenuating circumstances.

"Seven first-degree infractions will earn you a second-degree punishment. Three second-degree punishments will earn you a temporary suspension. If you obtain more than three suspensions, you will be expelled. If any prefect incurs a second-degree infraction, he or she will lose their badge with no second chances and an immediate temporary suspension. If they incur five first-degree infractions, they will also lose their badge but will not face suspension. Prefects are meant to be examples of good conduct, therefore, the rules will be stricter with them," the woman said. She could see many students paling at these announcements."

"On a brighter note, we opened a school store. It will sell snacks from *Dulcis Magicae* and a few desserts from the café *Claire de Lune*. I hope you enjoy them. It will be open from nine to eleven in the morning and from three to five in the evening. However, there is a special payment method. For every *Exceeds Expectations*, you will be able to choose one type of sweet and, for every *Outstanding* you earn, you will be able to choose one dessert or two types of sweets. I hope this motivates you to improve your grades. Thanks to the donation, we were also able to buy new brooms for the school. Madam Hooch and her two new assistants, Madam Mont and Miss Bristle, established new rules. If you would," McGonagall said, inviting the professor to talk. Most of the students seemed to almost be vibrating in excitement at the news.

"Good morning, students," Madam Hooch greeted with her usual serious tone. "As you heard, we have new equipment for Quidditch. We changed a couple of things to fit the requirements that our donor included, but we believe that they are long overdue. More Quidditch teams will be formed, no longer will a house have only one team. The groups will be divided according to the following categories: first and second years, third to fifth years, and the last two years together. The only limit of the number of teams that will be created is the number in the respective age group. We also decided that there will be an extra cup in which teams will be able to participate. The 'Hogwarts Quidditch Cup' was created in an effort to increase inter-house unity. The only teams that will be able to participate are ones which have members from at least three houses. The prizes for this cup will not only include a trophy, but also exclusive tickets to professional Quidditch games, gift cards to different stores in the Alley, and a meal in the restaurant of your choice, where you will be able to take three people with you. I see you are excited by this news and I hope you will train hard to earn the prizes. Also, personal brooms are no longer allowed in the school - we have more than enough equipment and it will be fairer this way. Approach either me or one of my assistants for more information if you are interested in forming a team," she said and sat down.

"We know that you have a lot of free time despite the homework, so we will try to give you more means of entertainment. Therefore, we created more clubs. Potions Club will be under

the guidance of Professor Ramsey, Duelling Club under Professors Flitwick, Kowalski, and Munter. Literature is under Mister Nix, Gardening under Mister Kenly, and Rune Inscription under Professor Somerhalder. If any of you wish to start a club, approach any professor and, as long as it is feasible, it will be established. I believe that's enough information for now. I hope that you adapt to these new changes because I'm sure that this school will be improving thanks to them," Professor McGonagall announced and the hall exploded in a roaring applause.

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Albus Dumbledore rubbed his temples. How didn't he see this coming? While Fudge assured him that the Prophet would only have positive things to say about the competition, Albus forgot that it was no longer the only newspaper around. The Magic Times Herald was a thorn on his side and, if that wasn't enough, Rita Skeeter seemed to have a personal vendetta against him and the Minister.

They unveiled diminutive details he would prefer hidden. There was no doubt that an emergency session would be called because Albus was sure people would rebel against the Tournament. He didn't even want to imagine the amount of Howlers he would receive, the lecture a furious Minerva would give him, or how much his reputation would suffer... Even though it was eight in the morning, he took the ever-present bottle of Firewhisky, which earned a home in his right drawer four years ago. Before he could take a swig, the fireplace lit and an irate Cornelius Fudge arrived.

"Did you read that news? People are going crazy - they're flooding the Ministry and demanding the tournament be cancelled! What will we do?" the man whimpered, his anger vanishing.

"How bad is the situation?" Albus asked.

"I told you already! They're flooding the Ministry! Mothers are yelling and the workers themselves are rebelling... What if I force Amelia to say she lied? I think that would be good enough to appease the people," the moronic man suggested with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Will she agree? She isn't someone you can intimidate and, if you threaten to fire her, she will leave and raise hell. Besides, Amelia has allies," Albus sighed.

"What will we do then? If we cancel the competition, we'll be the laughing stock for years," Cornelius whined. "What's worse, I'm about to be sacked from the position!"

"We can try to explain ourselves, perhaps we need to accept the interview with Miss Skeeter," the old man suggested, feeling defeated at the idea of that being the only option left.

"She's Rita Skeeter! That vile woman won't give up the opportunity to make us look like trash. No, we will give an interview to the Prophet."

"The question is who will read it? Let's be honest with ourselves, Cornelius. Few read that newspaper and even fewer believe in it," Albus murmured, feeling exhausted.

An owl decided to interrupt his existential breakdown, carrying an official envelope he knew too well. The bird handed him his package and left without waiting for a treat. Cornelius paled when he recognized the thick parchment. Albus stood up without a word and took the Floo towards the Ministry with the Minister hot on his heels. When he arrived, his eyes widened in surprise and slight fear. Cornelius wasn't exaggerating when he said the Ministry was flooding with people, there was no space to even walk towards the elevators. With a resigned sigh, the old man took the Floo towards his office in the Ministry. It was good it had some use every once in a while. Albus dragged himself from his office towards the Wizengamot meeting room.

He entered the room and a raucous cacophony of multiple discussions invaded his senses. Most of the members looked worried and anxious, with a few notable exceptions. Madam Bones and Madam Marchbanks were chatting with the junior undersecretary, something he considered odd, but decided to ignore. Lucius Malfoy, Sirius Black, and attorney Blair were engaged in a discussion that appeared to be fascinating, though Albus didn't know what to think about that unexpected group together. Augusta Longbottom was watching everything with a grin so wide that the Cheshire cat would be put to shame. All of the ones who had opposed the Tournament being reinstated seemed tranquil and that annoyed him more than a little. Albus walked towards his podium and, putting on the best calm facade he could muster, he banged his gavel to call the room's attention.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen! Now that all of us are present, let's begin this emergency session," he announced, many glares were directed his way. "I know most of you read the newspaper already. Miss Skeeter painted us in a terrible light, with help of a few others, but it's time to discuss what we will do to remedy that situation," he said in an amicable tone. Miss Blair raised her wand and he sighed but signalled her to speak.

"This event is ill-prepared, there is not enough security, and the fact that you decided that dragons would be part of the first task will do us no favours. I suggest we cancel this preposterous competition and save ourselves the international ridicule," she suggested. Much to his relief, Elphias raised his wand.

"That's not an option! If we cancel, we'll be the laughing stock of the entire magical world. We can try to improve our security and perhaps change a few details, such as the nesting dragons," the man commented, looking at him.

"I am afraid that's not an option," Albus began explaining, "we already sent the request to the dragon reserve and any other creature will be too dangerous or not offer much of a challenge," he said with an appeasing smile. Much to his annoyance, Sirius raised his wand.

"I still am unable to understand why cancelling is not an option. We will explain that we are not prepared, and I offer my own money to pay for any compensation we may need to pay. It's better to try again next year, with real security measures and not hoping everything ends well with foolish enthusiasm," the man said, his voice travelling through the room and many people seemed to agree, a fact that worried the headmaster.

"Cancelling is unacceptable!" Fudge yelled, his face turning puce. "This is about our honour! We have already been subjected to many humiliations," he complained. The irritable sound of

someone clearing their voice almost made Albus groan; he enjoyed the time that Umbridge was silent.

"If you'll excuse me, I have a suggestion. Rita Skeeter and that newspaper, along with all their reporters, have turned into a dangerous enemy. I suggest we treat them as such. Let's declare them enemies of the government and arrest them; that way we will regain control. I also suggest dismissing certain people that seem to ally themselves with those criminals," the woman said in a high-pitched voice that grated on his nerves.

Dumbledore could see Cornelius already agreeing with the idea, along with at least half the room... Perhaps this could work. If they got rid of the newspaper, he could turn a blind eye to how illegal it was. Of course, Lucius Malfoy had to choose that moment to speak.

"On what basis will you declare them enemies of the government, undersecretary Umbridge? As far as I was concerned, telling the truth is not illegal. For the stunt you're trying to pull, we could be brought before the ICW. Magical Britain would be placed under heavy fines at best and war at worst. Violating basic human rights is not only ridiculous but also utterly stupid. Besides, Miss Skeeter presented solid arguments. I never agreed with this competition in the first place, and I have to ask: is our pride worth more than the lives of our children? If that isn't enough, I will remind you that, if any international champions are harmed, the possibilities of facing a war are also high," the man announced. Albus could already see the resolve of many people falter. Elmo Humpty raised his wand, and he gave the signal for him to speak.

"It's a competition that will bring honour to our country. I agree with the idea of going forward with it, with a few extra precautions. Let's hire Gringotts to establish the protective barriers," the man suggested and the hall exploded in conversations.

"I'll remind you that the bank's services are extremely expensive, and for a good reason. While they have the best of the best working there and will be able to establish the barriers on time, I doubt this competition has enough funding to afford it," Augusta Longbottom announced. The disgusting sound of the pink-clad woman clearing her throat sounded once again.

"Mister Black offered to pay for any eventuality," the pink atrocity giggled in a repulsive way.

"I offered to pay for compensation in the event that the contest was cancelled and we were fined. I will pretend you didn't suggest that I pay for the extra costs of this ridiculous event, but do remember your place, undersecretary Umbridge," Sirius said, his severe expression brightening when the woman turned red.

"I offer, myself, to cover the costs of the Tournament, and I believe many more will. The safety of our children is vital. I have two daughters, after all, but our honour is also important," Amycus Carrow announced and, while normally Albus would try to go against the man, this time he agreed.

"I believe that Mister Carrow's suggestion is more than acceptable. Those in favour of following this course of action raise their hands," the old man suggested before anyone else



tried to give another opinion that swayed the people, and his heart almost stopped beating while counting the votes.

They won by two votes - much less than he felt comfortable with, but it was better than the other option.

Albus Dumbledore had no idea how he would deal with another scandal and he hoped that nothing too terrible happened. This was the trap that Tom needed to get out of his hiding place. He was sure that all the troubles would be worth it when Voldemort was defeated.

## Two Badgers and a Star

### Monday 5th of September, Albus Dumbledore's Personal Office, Hogwarts

Albus Dumbledore was having the mother of all migraines. The emergency meeting wasn't terrible, but regulations he didn't feel comfortable with were placed on the Tournament. Unfortunately, his hands were tied on the matter.

He waited for Severus to deliver the bad news while nursing a bottle of firewhisky.

"What's so important to interrupt my brewing?" the younger man demanded, barging in.

"I apologize, Severus, but there were changes in the Tournament," Albus muttered after taking a swig of the reliable alcoholic beverage. He was so tired and the day was just beginning. "The foreign students will stay inside the castle."

"I guess that includes the headmasters," Severus concluded, his scowl deepening. "I don't really care. Karkaroff was murdered years ago and, as far as I'm concerned, his replacement is not a Death Eater."

"He may not be a Death Eater, but he's an unknown element. He and Olympe will be staying in empty teacher rooms. My concerns lay in the Durmstrang students - they'll stay with the Slytherins for the rest of the year and before you tell me something, I did my best to prevent it."

Severus only sighed, looking defeated. "...I fail to see the problem, Albus. You should be worrying about the ones that will house Beauxbatons so that they don't embarrass the school."

"Slytherin changed, but many of your students are marked Death Eaters. I'm afraid they will lure people to Voldemort," Dumbledore explained, ignoring the teacher's last sentence.

"What do you want me to do? Isolate them and forbid them any kind of contact? I'm not even allowed in the common room," Severus retorted with obvious contempt.

"I know."

"What then?"

"Tell your prefects to keep an eye on the Durmstrang students," Albus ordered, ignoring the teacher's blatant reluctance.

"I will try, but I promise nothing. I have long lost any semblance of authority in my House," the man snapped and left.

Albus sighed once the young man left. Severus was becoming more difficult to deal with - he was not taking losing the trust of his House well. Not that anyone could blame the man.

After all, Severus hardly was the first one to deal with the consequences of his decisions, as unpleasant as they are.

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Harry Potter walked towards his first class of the year: Defence Against the Dark Arts. The boy admitted being curious about the new professor.

He along with his friends entered the classroom, where the professor nodded at them and continued writing on some parchment. Her assistant was nowhere to be seen. At nine o'clock on the dot, the door was closed with a loud bang, even though a third of the class was missing. Much to Harry's shame, he noticed that two Slytherin girls were among the late students and decided he would have a chat with them later that day. The professor stood up and silence descended on the room.

"Good morning. My name is Isabelle Kowalski and you will call me Professor Kowalski. Before we begin, I will establish the rules and I expect them to be followed," she announced in a silvery voice and, while it was pleasant, her message was delivered. "I expect you to be here on time - at nine the doors will be closed and no one will be allowed in unless you have an excellent excuse. I tolerate no indiscipline. If you wish to have fun, instead of learning you may leave this room now.

"The way we will advance is simple: read the chapters I tell you to before the class, then we will clear up any doubts and I will explain the lesson, but our focus is on the practical element of the course. I reviewed who your last teachers were and the only decent one was Remus Lupin, with whom I had an in-depth chat about your education," she said, looking around. "Your knowledge is basic at best and memorizing the theory will do nothing to protect you. I will pass these parchments around, they contain a list of spells. I want you to check off the ones you know. After this, I will put you into pairs for the practical part. Mister Albee, please come in," she ordered and a tall man with bright blue eyes and brown hair entered, followed by the missing students.

"I already explained the rules and they'll be serving their first detention with Madam Pince during their free period," the man announced. Harry noticed with some degree of amusement that, while the woman looked delicate, she was nothing of the sort, and although the man looked quite gruff, he possessed a gentle disposition.

"Thank you. I hope we won't repeat this shameful incident," Kowalski said and the newcomers nodded. Parchments flew to every student with a wave of the professor's wand.

Harry examined the paper in front of him, impressed. It contained a range of spells from the most basic to complex ones that only skilled duellists used - even the Unforgivables were listed. Yes, he was indeed impressed. He began marking the paper absentmindedly. After everyone was done, the two adults avidly examined a different parchment.

"The results, while expected, are still disappointing. Although there are some surprises," the woman announced and Harry did not miss the look she gave his group. "Now, we will call the names alphabetically. Follow Mister Albee, through that door," she said, signalling a door that was not there last year. "It's the practice room and you will rotate between tasks: aiming practice, spell dodging, individual and group duels."

Daphne was paired with a giggling Gryffindor girl that had little to no idea of how to duel. During the match, Daphne destroyed her opponent in the most humiliating way. Instead of dodging, she deflected and when she attacked she only used overpowered stinging hexes that left the Gryffindor girl in the border of tears. Harry was forced to stop Daphne in a not so pleasant way for the girl, but it was necessary for her to stop before her opponent was harmed. Despite Harry's displeasure on the matter, professor Kowalski seemed quite pleased with Daphne.

"I apologize for pairing you with someone who still has to learn, Miss Greengrass. You can join Mister Longbottom. Listen now," the professor raised her voice and every student paid attention. "I realize that this class will be hard for many of you. I will offer extra assistance to the ones who are willing to improve. I'm not saying it will be easy, but I will turn you into capable mages. Raise your hands if you wish to join and I will accommodate my schedule," she promised and, although there were a few who were glaring at the ground, most of the students raised their hands.

Harry admitted the class was one of the best he ever experienced for the subject, beating Remus by a wide margin. Professor Kowalski noticed even the most diminutive details that prevented a student from performing a spell, correcting them and ensuring most of the class was able to master at least two new spells. Mister Albee was excellent at explaining different methods of casting the same spell, making it easier for the students to learn. Both worked in perfect synchrony and devised a study plan that, while not all the students would enjoy, everyone would benefit from.

"Everything hurts and I'm dying," Theo whimpered what became his new catchphrase ever since they began training.

"She's just as sadistic as Flitwick," Draco agreed, earning a glare from Daphne.

"At least now we won't be the only ones in the school to suffer," Blaise chirped, his mischievous smile directed at the Gryffindor table, where most of the fourth years seemed to have lost their souls.

"I wasn't expecting her to be so good," Neville complimented the woman, "I guess that's why lunch is after this class - they knew we would starve otherwise."

"I see your class went well," Luna said, surprising them when she appeared behind Draco. The boy let out an undignified high-pitched yelp. "I had Transfiguration, it was great. Professor McGonagall now pays more attention to the ones who finish their transformations first while her assistant helps the others," she explained, petting a disgruntled Draco.

"About time for the money we pay to be used, it's ridiculous how cheap Dumbledore is," Daphne said and, for some reason, her face softened when she looked at the front.

Harry looked in the same direction and saw an anxious Justin Finch-Fletchley approaching them. The person beside him was trying to calm the boy. Harry immediately recognized the older student. Cedric Diggory, the golden boy of Hogwarts before he arrived. He remembered considering the older boy to form part of the Guild, but there was no reliable way of

approaching him. Diggory was popular among the students and, if they clashed, it would cause more problems than necessary. So, Harry dismissed that idea.

"We are almost complete," Luna whispered, a wide smile adorning her face. The present members of the Guild looked at each other.

"Um, hello," Justin greeted with a shaky voice. The boy appeared to be on the border of a panic attack.

"It's good you've decided to join us, come here," Blaise said, patting the space beside him. "We asked for a special meal today. My mother will kill me if she ever discovers I'm eating something raw, so if both of you would keep this secret, I would appreciate it."

"You have sushi!" the youngest newcomer exclaimed while Diggory eyed the variety of food with apprehension. Aside from that, it was obvious the prefect was uncomfortable and unsure about whether he should stay or not. The curious stares the group was receiving from most of the students in the hall did not help.

"Any favourite?" Harry asked, getting Cedric out of his surprised state.

"Ehm, not really. Though I remember seeing similar food in the restaurant that my father and I visited," the boy explained with a sheepish smile.

"You can join us then. I'm sure you won't regret it."

Diggory did not accept immediately. First, he looked at Justin and, after a few seconds, he nodded at last. The prefect looked wary, being surrounded by so many strangers. Harry was about to signal to Luna for her to do something, but the arrival of the last six members interrupted him. Adrian collapsed beside Daphne and Fred followed, both panting heavily. Terrence and George did the same thing, though with a bit more decorum, and the youngest twins looked exasperated at their antics.

"What happened to them?" Theo asked the girls.

"Idiocy. That's what happened," Flora huffed and sat beside Neville.

"They decided to pick us up from our class and they started racing each other to see who could run the most laps around the inner courtyard. They all lost. Mister Filch's kittens thought they were playing and started following them," Hestia explained.

"They're beasts! Those little devils' scratches will leave scars," Adrian complained.

"Flora and I talked with Mister Filch about adopting them. He says that they will stay one more month with their mother, but we can visit them!" Flora gushed, almost vibrating in excitement and ignoring the four boys' horrified expressions.

"Elizabeth will also want one," Harry sighed, then grimaced when he remembered they had company. "Please, ignore this. I promise we are normal," Harry told the two newcomers, ignoring the indignant complaints.

It seemed the unusual event, plus their simple relationship, eased both boys until they allowed themselves to relax. Daphne, in an unusual moment of kindness, took pity on Diggory and taught him how to eat with chopsticks, showing more patience than the others knew she possessed. Even with her help, Diggory still had problems with the utensils and the food, trying only the broth of the soup. On the other hand, Justin tried every plate with no hesitation and poise that screamed of practice.

"Open your mouth," Flora ordered Diggory, apparently tired of his indecision. The prefect eyed her with distrust, but in a duel of wills the girl had yet to lose and the older boy gave in. You could almost feel his amazement when he realized the food would not eat him instead. After that, he started trying different things.

"So what happened during Defence with the new teacher? The Gryffindors are almost dead and two girls were complaining," Justin inquired.

"The new professor is great," Daphne explained with an uncharacteristic smile. "The problem is that those wussy wimps are unable to take a real lesson," she huffed, and Cedric almost choked on his tea when he heard the prim girl use language he was not expecting. It was something the boy would need to get used to and never dare to reprimand her for it, unless he had a masochistic death wish, of course.

"Yeah, she's not bad. Compared to professor Flitwick, she's even kind. I would even enjoy the class if moving didn't hurt," Blaise sighed.

"Flitwick is... well, you know, Flitwick," Cedric argued with an incredulous expression.

"I don't know whether I should envy your innocence or pity it," Theo muttered. "You know he was a duelling champion, right?" he asked and both Hufflepuffs nodded. "Harry was taking extra lessons and somehow we got dragged in. I discovered he's a sadistic man who enjoys using us as target practice."

"Ignore him. Professor Flitwick is great, though a tad strict," Hestia shrugged.

"I think we should go to our room, now. Wanna come with us?" Luna asked. Her innocent blue eyes and soft expression was impossible to say no to.

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Cedric Diggory always considered himself clever and charming, able to get out of any situation with the silver tongue no one knew he possessed. At least that is what he believed until a few minutes ago. Somehow, he ended up sitting with a group of people he didn't feel comfortable with but discovered they weren't so bad after all.

Like many others, he fell for the illusion of Harry Potter being the story-book hero and was confused when the boy was anything but. If that wasn't enough, Cedric knew Slytherin changed since Potter arrived. It wasn't immediate, but the signs were there for anyone who wanted to see them. They never insulted Muggleborns, they became polite and, dare he say, gentle... But there was something unsettling about the change, something subtler, but almost impossible to miss. Over the years, Cedric observed how Potter's group expanded, along with their control over Slytherin. It was quite intimidating.

Therefore, Cedric considered it quite ironic that one of the few friends he had somehow managed to be accepted into Potter's group. A group that enjoyed special privileges, such as a personalized meal and a room for their personal use. Cedric didn't know how to feel about the situation. It was so unrealistic he wouldn't be surprised if he woke up.

They were led to the dungeons. Cedric was expecting the usual dim corridors and was surprised when he saw the hallways had better light than the main hall. He eyed with curiosity the flat, round things that emitted the light but, no matter how hard he tried, he was unable to decipher what they were. Justin seemed to recognize them immediately, which only increased his curiosity.

"I was told electricity doesn't work at Hogwarts!" Justin exclaimed in wonder.

"They aren't based on electricity, they're enchanted," George explained to the boy.

Cedric had no idea what 'Elek-ty-city' was, but it sounded like a powerful kind of magic. He didn't know how Justin knew about it, but the boy would be interrogated when they arrived at their common room. Walking through a maze of hallways, they arrived at a stone wall and, while Cedric never considered himself an art connoisseur, he knew that the detailed Hogwarts insignia was a work of art. The wall moved, and a place he would never believe existed in Hogwarts was revealed.

It was separated into different areas: a rocky place, a large place with many dummies, a potions area that seemed equipped to handle even the most complicated alchemical creations, a large area that contained torture devices, and a seating area. And, while the seating place would be considered the most normal place in the room, the lavish decorations, expensive-looking carpets and furniture, and rich colours were enough to steal all the attention.

"What is this place?" Justin asked.

"Our room. We train, study, and rest here," Blaise explained, not taking his eyes off his book.

"I think the Ravenclaws would be jealous," Cedric muttered, eyeing walls brimming with books.

"Of course they would," Theo almost gloated.

"So, now that you have seen how our group works, will you join?" Harry asked the two Hufflepuffs. Justin didn't even think about it and nodded, taking a seat beside Blaise and looking at Cedric with an expectant expression.

Cedric Diggory had no idea how to answer and, while he admitted being tempted, he knew this group wasn't a simple school club. The Guild, as it was called, wasn't a group you could join on a whim and leave if you got tired. He heard his father singing praises about Marcus Travers regarding the excellent job he was doing as undersecretary. During the Cup, he saw the man with these people. It was easy to deduce that, even when after graduation, Travers was still part of it.

It was a lifetime commitment and that fact unnerved Cedric. However, at the same time, he envied the simple camaraderie and friendship they shared.

Being the son his father wanted to have instead of being just Cedric left a deep mark on him. He loved his father but, at the same time, he resented the man for enslaving him the way he did. Cedric was unable to cultivate any friendship while growing up. People approached him because they wanted something from him or because they enjoyed the persona he was forced to craft. He felt like the loneliest person in the world until he met Justin, someone who looked behind his mask and offered him an opportunity to be himself.

These people offered friendship. What did they want in return? Cedric had no idea, but he wasn't going to make a rash decision.

"Why do you want me to join?" Cedric asked with a guarded look.

"You're intelligent, a talented wizard, and because Luna said so," Potter answered. The older boy was expecting many things, but that simple answer was not one of them.

"It's hard to find people who see the world the same way we do," Luna announced, her pretty face carved in a serious expression. "I know how you feel, I was also lonely once. We're family and we support each other, no matter what happens. I know you don't want to feel lonely anymore," the girl whispered and offered him the warmest smile.

It was confusing. How this girl knew something so personal, Cedric had no idea, but it didn't make her statement less real. His resolve was solidified but, before he could answer, the small girl encased him in a gentle hug.

"Welcome to the Guild."

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Days went by in a tranquil flow. Justin and Cedric adapted faster than anyone expected. Justin and Blaise shared their love for food and did not waste a moment in introducing each other to different plates. To almost everyone's surprise, Cedric and Daphne possessed the same dry humour and sarcastic nature, managing to establish a close friendship in a short time. Harry wondered if perhaps their new members were what they needed to finish pulling Blaise and Daphne out of their warded shells.

The only thing that interrupted their calm days was the chat they had to give Parkinson and Davies for their dishonourable conduct. That was also the day their new members were introduced to the Slytherin common room, a feature that Harry was proud of and, in his humble opinion, was the jewel of the House. The boy was pleased with their wide eyes admiring the room. Although they did not comment, they examined the room with appreciation. At last, the two girls entered, being the last ones to arrive at the meeting.

"Good evening. I hope you are enjoying your new classes. If you have any suggestions, please come to us. However, that is not the reason why we have called you today," Harry said and a sepulchral silence took hold of the room. "On Monday, we were shamed by the lateness of two students in this house. Pansy Parkinson and Tracey Davis, would you mind explaining why you were late?" Neither girl answered for a while, but they gave in under the pressure.



"I apologize, we lost track of time," Davies whispered, but she could be heard across the room.

"Is that it?" Daphne asked, looking at the surprised girl in the eyes. "Or perhaps there is another reason?"

"We didn't think the professor would be so strict," Parkinson muttered.

"I hope there is no second incident and I expect you to apologize in person to Professor Kowalski. I will not punish you for this but don't forget our rules. Don't endanger our hard work with foolish actions," Harry announced. Many students swelled with pride and others glared at the girls.

"We also have a few announcements to make. Cedric Diggory and Justin Finch-Fletchley are official members of the Guild," Daphne said, her clear voice sounding throughout the room. "Also, from tomorrow onwards, there will be small snakes engraved on the walls beside our entrance and in different parts of the castle. Their purpose is to guide the first years through the school. Just think of the destination and one will guide you. We expect the prefects to explain this detail to the newcomers so that they won't get lost. You may go now," she said, and the students went to different areas of the room, while a few others left for their bedrooms. However, two seventh year prefects remained in the same place in a tacit request to speak with them. Daphne looked at the older students and nodded.

"Professor Snape informed us of a few changes. The Durmstrang students will stay here. He said the castle would create rooms for them," the girl informed.

"He also ordered us to ensure none of them approaches people he believes to have the Dark Mark or are part of the Guild," the boy said, obvious anger blazing in his eyes.

"How many are coming? We need to divide them between genders," Theo commented.

"Twelve males, we have no idea why no female students are coming," the female prefect told them.

"I see. We will prepare the rooms and ensure that none is marked. When they arrive, you will guide them and explain our rules and punishments. We will not tolerate any kind of disrespect towards anyone in this castle," Harry assured the prefects, who relaxed visibly. "Thank you for the information. We will take care of everything," he promised and they left after expressing their gratitude.

"That was harsh," Cedric commented.

"It was necessary; you know how the school saw us before. We will make sure it does not happen again," Harry said.

Cedric sighed but ended up agreeing to a certain point. Slytherin was viewed as less than scum and future evil Death Eaters for a long time, discriminated by students and teachers alike. Cedric knew Harry had solid reasons for his actions.

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The new Hufflepuff members were surprised when they were informed about their new training regime and, while none looked particularly excited, they were curious to try. Harry realized Cedric had a strange talent to combine Charms and Transfiguration, something that could turn him into a successful spell crafter. Justin favoured Potions, the ingredients, to be precise. He knew all the uses and properties of animal and plant-based ingredients. It was obvious they possessed talent in spades and Harry was more than willing to give them the tools to refine them. The Guild was already motivating them to work hard and they were not Hufflepuffs for nothing.

Aside from the magical and physical aspects of their training, the group had specific goals to fulfil. Between becoming decent Occlumens and Legilimens, and, of course, becoming Animagi, there was little free time for them to enjoy. They were tutoring their new members, but it would take a few months for them to reach their level. However, they kept working on their own abilities and discovered that the ones with a natural inclination towards Legilimency were: Harry, Daphne, Draco, Hestia, Fred, and Neville. The others had an inclination for Occlumency, being able to manipulate memories to the point aunt Eleadora considered them passable - considering how strict the woman was, it was a compliment of the highest kind. Their Animagus training was the one thing advancing in leaps and bounds. Harry thanked his mother's exhaustive research because he shuddered at the idea of trying Sirius' methods. So far, they all knew what their inner animals were, but were still unable to fully complete the transformation.

Gentle Neville was a Gryffindor at heart; his inner animal was a powerful, golden lion. Luna was a stunning, silvery owl. Adrian was a black bear, one that looked powerful enough to challenge a rhino. Terrence was a slow loris and Luna enjoyed petting him whenever he practised, much to the boy's chagrin. George, much to his brother's amusement, was a ferret with the same shade of fur as his hair. Fred ended up being a raccoon and was angsty to finish his full transformation and bother as many people as humanly possible in his new shape. Hestia became a cute wolverine with claws so sharp and long no one dared to even try to tease her. In a similar fashion, Flora's inner animal was a Tasmanian devil, which no one doubted fitted the girl.

Much to Harry's exasperation and slight apprehension, sweet Elizabeth was a spider, though not a common one. Harry had searched high and low, looking for the one she described: rearward-facing fangs, a shiny black body, and larger than average. The moment he had found out what spider his sister was, he was torn between consternation and amazement. His sweet, little Elizabeth was a Sydney funnel-web spider, one of the most venomous in existence. After he informed her, he decided to ignore that information and pretended not to notice Hwasa's amused expression.

Marcus was a red fox with bright auburn fur and intelligent eyes. Blaise's inner animal was a boomslang snake, with attractive green scales and enticing black patterns. Draco, much to his chagrin and the Guild's amusement, was a fluffy white cat with wide, silver eyes. Adorable indeed, and Harry thought it fitted the narcissistic nature of the boy. Daphne's animal surprised no one, but perhaps they were expecting something more along the lines of a lethal and venomous creature. Her inner animal was a large wolf with a silky bronze-gold fur and sharp teeth. Theo became a particular type of animal: a large bat with a fox-like face and enormous wings.

Harry was expecting many things, from a dog to a snake. Being honest, he hoped it was a snake, similar to the one his mother was. He would not be so pleased if he ended up being a stag or a dog, but he would accept it. However, nothing could have ever prepared him for what his animal shape was. When Harry glimpsed his inner animal while meditating, he was shocked when he saw a large Siberian tiger. Its white fur and charcoal stripes made it particularly attractive, but his vivid green eyes were enough to classify it as magnificent. He was indeed surprised but once he got over the shock, he accepted his animal with glee... Apparently, narcissism was not uncommon among the members of the Guild.

During that week, Cedric and Justin received their first lesson of the school term with Professor Flitwick, and they understood at last why Theo described him that way. While the man was the most amiable of the teachers, he was brutal during a duel and they discovered it the hard way. Daphne had to almost carry a barely-conscious Cedric, but Justin was looking well enough, if not a little more sluggish. When he noticed the curious, and perhaps envious, stares from Theo at his excellent physical condition, Justin cracked a small smile and began explaining.

"I've played football since I'm able to remember. I got used to jogging every morning, so I still do that. Besides, I also enjoy rugby and was a competitive swimmer before I came here, though I still train every summer... Mum forced me to try yoga, which I like, but I would rather not tell her," the boy explained looking abashed. Harry smiled at him in approval. It was good he already had the discipline to be committed to his training.

"You were so cool," Theo whined. "But in reality, you're one of them!" he accused, indicating Harry and Neville.

"I agree," Cedric muttered.

"It's not my fault that Quidditch isn't based on decent physical condition," Justin retorted.

"Not anymore," Terrence commented. "Madam Hooch established new training programs and either the players follow them or they're out."

"It's good we were tortured for so long - her training is almost fun compared to what we have to go through every day," Fred stated.

"Have you thought about teams already?" Draco asked the older boys, perking up.

"Yeah, we'll leave the Gryffindor team and will form a Hogwarts team with Terrence and Adrian," George explained.

"But we still need three more players. It's a shame we can't include our beautiful Daphne - she would have half of our adversaries out of commission in less than five minutes," Adrian said and earned a glare from the girl.

"I can join," Cedric offered himself, looking a bit more composed but still leaning on Daphne.

"Are you sure? Hufflepuff will go nuts," Justin tried to joke, unable to conceal his worry.

"For the first time in my life, I don't really care. I don't even like being Seeker... I already want to see their faces," Cedric announced, a wide smile on his face.

"Oh my, it seems we're corrupting you," Daphne said with a satisfied smirk.

"Well, we'll only have the Hufflepuffs hating us," Fred commented, patting Cedric in the back.

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Friday arrived with no incident and Harry was excited to begin their first Martial Magic class. The group walked until they arrived at a classroom that had the door open. The room itself was nothing impressive - a regular classroom where the professor was speaking with his assistant. What caught Harry's attention was the wide door at the side of the room and the many framed newspaper headlines containing information about dozens of duellists. They were the first ones to arrive, so they chose a table in the front row and greeted the teachers, who greeted them back.

Few people were present when the class began. Aside from Justin, there was another Hufflepuff girl with red hair who reminded Harry of Madam Bones. A few Ravenclaws he did not recognize and did not care enough to find out. What surprised him was the eldest twins' youngest brother, who was sitting beside the bushy-haired girl and a dark-skinned boy who was wearing the Gryffindor colours.

"Good evening. Let me introduce myself. My name is Benedict Munter and this is my wife, Jessica Munter. The reason I decided to teach at this school is that Professor Flitwick is a good friend of mine and asked me to come," he explained, his neutral expression giving him a serious aura. "Martial Magic isn't designed to make you look good. It was created for battle, so if there's anyone who's unwilling to work hard, leave this classroom," the man said, but no one moved.

"Excellent. Martial Magic involves combat spells and everything related," the witch began explaining. "It involves hexes, lethal curses, charms, and potions. The general principle is to combine combat or combat manoeuvres with magical spells. It will also include some knowledge of psychology and human behaviour; therefore, the amount of studying this class requires is heavy. There won't be repercussions if you're unwilling to stay because we know how hard it will be," she said, her soothing tone enhancing her last sentence.

"Anyway, I will explain how this class works. It will involve heavy physical training, which is the reason why I'll ask you to come with clothing designed for exercise. However, if you have none, our donor provided the school with the funds to get every student a uniform. In two weeks we will visit Hogsmeade to have them made so if you need one be at the main door at eight in the morning, sharp. As I said, they're part of the donation, so none of you has to worry about the money."

"We'll also have a different format for our classes. There will be three categories and, regardless of your age, you will be able to be in any of them depending on your abilities. The levels are beginner, intermediate, and advanced. We know you tried to learn during your previous years, but there are a few students who have much more experience and it wouldn't

be fair for either of you to be placed in the same class," the woman explained with a kind smile.

"Indeed, that's the reason why, today, we will have a circuit that you need to complete. Mrs Munter will call one of you at the time and you'll follow her through that door. As well as the circuit, we also have a simple written test. Neither will affect your grade in any way, but the test will give us an idea of whether you are a strategist, heavy hitter, direct combatant, shield support, or combat healer. These categories will help me to personalize your teaching. However, if anyone wishes to broaden their horizons, you are more than welcome. One more thing before we start: once a month, Professor Flitwick, Professor Kowalski and I will offer workshops on wilderness exposure and defensive magic. If any of you wish to join the duelling club, don't forget it is thrice a week, so you have to be careful managing your time," their professor suggested.

"Now, then, we'll distribute these papers and I'll be calling you to follow me," the woman said.

The test was fascinating; it had questions that placed Harry in scenarios he never imagined being. Harry was halfway through when Mrs Munter called him. With no hesitation, he entered the room and examined the area with critical eyes. While it was not as elegant or well-equipped as the one the Guild owned, it was far better than he could have imagined.

"Very well. You have to do a couple of things. First, target practice; throw any kind of weak spell at that dummy and we'll see how accurate your aim is. Then, we will do spell dodging; as the name implies, you'll have to dodge the spells I throw at you. Afterwards, we will have a five-minute duel and, then, you have to complete an exercise circuit that I'll give you in a predetermined time. Professor Flitwick told us how advanced you are, so don't be afraid of going all out, I'm no weakling," the woman told him and he nodded.

Harry already knew his aim was nothing if not perfect, so no surprises there. He had fast reflexes and high stamina, so he had no problems dodging. What was a humbling experience was the duel with the woman. She was a warrior of the most lethal kind - the ones who were creative, assertive, and experienced. While Harry was still defeated on a constant basis by Flitwick and Aunt Eleadora, it was a novel experience to have yet another person better than him. It seemed that his victories over the Death Eaters were getting to his head and he thanked the woman for the humbling lesson. Even though he was not overwhelmed and the duel resulted in a stalemate, a particularly painful stinging hex reached his bum. However, he was too prideful to admit it. Thankfully, the circuit was nothing new or hard - a simple obstacle course that was more entertaining than physically demanding.

At the end of the class, the group of teenagers exited the classroom with satisfied smirks. Harry did not know what he was expecting, but the class was beyond what he imagined and there was no doubt that he had much to learn from the experienced adults. In a way, it also lightened their own schedules because, now, they were training during classes so there was no need to rise so early to exercise or stay late in order to practice. They would still work hard but, now that the teachers were actually doing their jobs, their workload was reduced by a significant amount.

"I believe that this year we'll actually learn something," Justin said, still amazed at how fascinating the class had been.

"Indeed. I almost felt guilty because only Professor Flitwick taught us and the man had little free time as it was," Daphne commented.

"You? Guilty?" Theo teased and somehow ended up tripping. The girl watched him with an innocent smirk and he pouted.

"It was a great idea that you offered to pay for the equipment. Many students wouldn't be able to afford it otherwise," Neville told Harry.

"Wait, pay for the equipment? I thought it all came from a donation!" Justin exclaimed, confused.

"I guess we forgot to tell you. Wait until we get to the hall, Cedric should also know and I don't wish to explain it twice," Harry sighed.

They entered the great hall with their typical regal grace, ignoring all the stares. Since the day Cedric and Justin began sitting with them, they were subjected to the curious and admiring stares from most students, mixed with the seldom jealous glare. While Justin felt somewhat uncomfortable, Cedric's eyes had a constantly amused twinkle and his face was almost always adorned with a satisfied smirk. It seemed that having little to no contact with his house rekindled his rebellious nature and subversive spirit. They sat at their usual place and delicious food appeared in front of them.

"So, how are the Puffs taking the fact that you've left them?" Daphne asked, smirking at a pink-faced blonde who was glaring at them, making her go even redder.

"Not very well. Ernie and Hannah had a sudden interest in me and have been trying to pester me to include them. I would have tried if they weren't so interested in it, so I cut my ties with them. Now they've been glaring at me all the time, but I'm always with Cedric, so I don't care," he shrugged. "However, Cedric has it hard. The whole house has been trying to pressure him into rejoining the Quidditch team and they're trying to use peer pressure to make sure he goes back."

"So they're ignoring him," Blaise concluded with a pronounced sneer.

"Yeah, me too, by extension. But he isn't the golden boy for nothing. Many students are feeling guilty already. Professor Sprout noticed and, if they keep going, she's going to be angry... Not everyone is bad, though. Susan Bones has always been fair and no one is stupid enough to try and mess with her. She speaks with us and tries to include us, though she's pretty irritated by their attitude. One of these days she's going to explode."

"She sounds interesting. What can you tell us about her?" Daphne asked him.

"I don't know her that well, but she's always polite. Her aunt is the Head of the DMLE, so she learnt quite a lot about Defence. Susan is one of the few that hates gossip and is always fair.

Her best friend is one year older and they both tend to hang out helping the first years," Justin explained, filling his plate with the mouth-watering food.

"It's not a good idea," Luna said, sitting next to Blaise. The youngest twins sat on the opposite side and Draco was gripping his chest, as the sudden appearance of the girl had surprised him. "While she's fair and loyal, many of her ideals clash with ours. She believes in justice, but fails to notice that balance has nothing to do with it," she explained, looking at Harry.

"How was your class?" Harry asked the girls after nodding at Luna and ignoring Justin's confused expression.

"We're going to drop spell casting," Flora announced.

"Yeah, Aunt Eleadora taught us too well," Hestia agreed.

"Told you so," Theo grumbled.

"So we will take inscription casting and Martial Magic," Neville concluded.

"Yup, the others will arrive soon. They were talking with Professor Somerhalder about warding," Luna informed them. True to her word, five people were walking up to them, looking immersed in an interesting conversation.

"Sorry, we were talking with Professor Somerhalder. She's a genius!" George exclaimed. His eyes were twinkling in a disturbing way.

"We know," Neville told them and gestured to Luna, who was eating her dumplings like a rabbit.

"We aren't complete yet, but we should talk to Marcus about the Hogwarts Court," the dreamy girl suggested.

"We're complete now," Adrian nodded.

"We aren't, but we need to have everything ready. Besides, I want to see him," Luna shrugged.

"Perhaps he can spend the weekend with us," Daphne said.

"What's the Hogwarts Court?" asked a confused Cedric, interrupting the conversation. Harry looked at Theo, Adrian, and Terrence, who nodded and waved their wands, ensuring no one eavesdropped on their conversation.

"Sorry for that, but I would like to keep the information between people I trust," Harry explained.

"We forgot," Daphne sighed. "You know that we're called the Guild. A Slytherin Guild is a tradition of the House, but it isn't a common occurrence. The Guild rules Slytherin, the

prefects, and even the head of the House obeys. We make the rules and Slytherin follows," she explained.

"That is how we control our house. Our duty is to ensure their safety and punish them if necessary. It isn't an easy job and it's rare for more than one to be formed in a century," Draco added.

"So that's how you changed Slytherin," Cedric muttered.

"Indeed. Now, a Hogwarts Court is a Slytherin Guild applied to school, but with a defined leader or a king," Daphne said. "To form a Court, you need to have every House respect the leader, have at least ten members and at least one of them representing each House. We now fulfil all the requirements, so we are ready to form one."

"So what does the Court do?" Justin asked, processing the information rather fast.

"They protect the school and the students," Daphne announce, a soft smile adorning her face. "The Court is in charge of protecting the castle and its inhabitants. We already began changing the school. The castle enjoys it, that's why the stairs never move when we use them and no matter what path we take, we always arrive at our destination. Marcus told us the leader of the Court also has influence over the castle that rivals that of the headmaster."

Daphne's solemn face and prideful demeanour was emulated by most of the people who surrounded her. Justin and Cedric looked at each other. It was not a simple club. Indeed, it went far beyond what either had imagined... But they wanted to take part in it. Cedric witnessed how much the school improved in such a short time and he decided he would play his part. They nodded at each other. They were members of the Guild and they would become members of the Hogwarts Court.

"Anyway, now that we're all here, mind explaining the thing with the donations?" Justin asked Harry after a few minutes.

"You know that I'm the last Potter and that the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter accumulated quite the fortune throughout its existence."

"The Potters had enough money to buy England," Cedric nodded.

"I'm not sure about that, but anyway, when I entered the magical world I was beyond disappointed. Their lack of technology and options left me quite frustrated, so I decided to change that. My friend, Ragnok, helped me to begin a few businesses in the Alley," he said and the Hufflepuff boy's eyes widened with understanding.

"Wow, I wasn't expecting that," Justin muttered.

"How many of the new businesses are yours?" Cedric asked him.

"All belong to him, from the first clothing shop to Mirror Summons," Terrence said with pride.



"The Magic Times Herald also belongs to him," Hestia chirped in, not allowing the boys to get over their surprise.

"That's incredible! My mom is a business enthusiast. I'm sure you'd get along with her," Justin exclaimed, looking excited.

"He just gives the ideas, otherwise he's almost useless. Ragnok and Ploutos are the ones that make sure the businesses are looked for," Flora said in a singsong voice.

"Thank you for that unnecessary clarification, dear Flora," Harry muttered, Luna kept eating without worries, so he guessed everything was going to be fine and they would adapt soon enough.

The next day, the group of friends headed towards their headquarters after breakfast. For some strange reason, Luna ran ahead of them and entered the room. When they arrived, the sight that greeted them was a man being hugged to death by the girl. Harry smirked at Marcus, who was trying to ensure the slight girl stopped hugging him without hurting her feelings.

"If Luna doesn't kill him, that's Marcus," Adrian sighed.

"Hello. You must be Cedric and Justin," Marcus greeted, and shook their hands, taking the opportunity to free himself from Luna.

"We're getting two cats!" Flora exclaimed with a wide smile.

"Elizabeth will also want one," Marcus told Harry.

"I know. I'm planning on opening a refuge or something similar. Mister Filch looks so happy when he's with them that I'll offer him a job there. Besides, that's the only way the castle won't be flooded with cats," Harry explained. "But I think it will be good to get a few for the castle, Sirius will have a heart attack."

"Let's talk about important matters," Daphne interrupted their conversation, sitting beside Marcus. "What do we need to establish the Court?"

"Already?" the man asked with wide eyes. "I wasn't expecting that... I'm not sure, but I remember reading something about announcing it to the castle."

"So, we have to make some kind of public announcement," Adrian muttered.

"No, I mean announce it to the castle herself. Hogwarts is a feeling entity and we have to ask her permission to form a Court. If she approves - I'm not really sure what happens. I'll read about it and tell you later," Marcus shrugged.

"Well, we need to find a way of teaching our rules to the school," Draco said.

"That's easy; we'll leave our imprints in every house," Luna commented.

"Can you explain that?" George asked the girl.

"I'm not sure how, but I know that we'll leave part of ourselves in the castle," Luna muttered, playing with the hem of Marcus' sweater.

"So we have a long term idea, but we need something immediate," Fred announced.

"We use our House, Slytherins are accepted and it's time that they start to mingle with the other students. What better tool to teach than using them?" Hestia suggested.

"I agree, that way we'll also know who's inclined towards blood supremacy and we can single them out. Social pressure is one of our best tools," Blaise added lost in thought.

"We can use the tournament as an excuse to start the House socializing. Our focus is the first years because they will be the ones who teach the future students once we leave," Harry agreed and a plan was formed.

"So how is work going?" Terrence asked and the eldest boy groaned.

"Fudge is a bloody idiot! The moron isn't even able to make a decent decision without the help of a whole council. After the emergency session on Monday and the stupid decision they made in allowing Voldemort's minions to give financial aid, the Death Eaters in the Wizengamot believe they have more power. They visit Fudge every day and are trying to get information about the DMLE and Saint Mungo's. I already want the 19th to arrive so I can get rid of that incompetent buffoon," Marcus groaned, collapsing in the nearest couch.

"Ragnok told me they were hired to place wards, they're taking the opportunity to almost empty the vaults of many Death Eaters. However, he is suspicious. Why are they going so far to ensure the Tournament takes place?" Harry asked rhetorically. "Ragnok believes that they are planning an attack during one of the tasks and I agree. What a better way to demoralize the population than attacking their children? Although, they need time to get more people and have a solid plan. Luna, do you have any feelings?"

"I know they're planning something, but I have no idea what... I don't believe they're going to attack, but let's be ready just in case. Voldemort will begin to retrieve his Horcruxes in December," she informed the group.

"Bellatrix is out of commission and the shack can have a little accident and be reduced to cinders. The problem is Grimmauld Place, Hogwarts, and Draco's dad," Terrence said.

"The bastard will go to any length to pressure Lucius into handing him the diary and, if possible, kill him in the process," George muttered, his brown eyes narrowing.

"He'll put the manor under the Fidelius today, if possible," Draco grumbled, grabbing a piece of parchment and writing on it.

"Tell him to move to the castle. It's the safest place in the country," Harry ordered. "I'll talk with the school elves to see if they found the Horcrux."

"It's on the seventh floor, hidden in the Come and Go Room," Luna announced, her eyes turning glassy for a few seconds.

"Ares! Mars!" Harry called his elves, wasting no time. Two elves popped in, both standing with firm stances and wearing serious expressions. "This is an important task. Luna found the next Horcrux, it's in the Room of Requirement. I want you to tell Ragnok after locating the room; he will assign two Curse-breakers who will destroy the thing. By no means touch it or get too close," Harry ordered. The elves bowed and left with a pop.

Cedric observed the bizarre events that were taking place in the room with apprehension that was overshadowed by amazement. He was not expecting to see a boy that graduated inside the school, lounging in their room as if it was a common occurrence. No doubts were left in his mind about the Guild, it was a lifelong commission that went far beyond school duties. They had information about every move of the Minister and someone inside Gringotts. The way they were talking more resembled a military operation than opinions on social events. They spoke about different situations as if they were able to control them and perhaps they could... The Guild would change the world and he was proud to be part of it.

"So the Dark Lord is back," Cedric inquired looking around.

"Call him Voldemort or Tom," Neville corrected, paying him no attention.

"Why would I call him Tom?" the boy asked, bewildered.

"We forgot to tell you," Adrian grumbled.

"His real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle, son of Merope Gaunt and Tom Riddle Senior. He is a half-blood moron, so if you call him that ridiculous name I'm going to curse you," Daphne threatened.

"What's a Horcrux?" Justin asked.

"Right, we also forgot about that," Terrence groaned. "It's the fragment of a soul, created through a ritual as a way of anchoring one's soul to this world. Voldemort created five and, so far, we've managed to destroy four, but the fifth will join them soon."

"Does your father have more information about Tom?" Harry asked Marcus while the others were distracted explaining some of the Guild's extracurricular activities.

"Nothing that we didn't know, though he was trying to resist the Imperius, so I had to dose him with loyalty potions," the eldest male shrugged. "Bellatrix managed to survive, but her recovery will take at least half a year under constant healing. Rodolphus is still unresponsive, but Rabastan will make a full recovery in three months if he keeps being healed. He's recruiting once again, but that's no longer his main concern. He needed to change bodies to survive. The bastard possessed a human baby and is vulnerable at the moment, so his priority is to regain his body."

"Either way, we will be ready," Harry promised.

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Justin and Cedric walked back to the Hufflepuff common room after another tiresome day of arduous, yet gratifying practice. The boys were thankful towards the castle because they only

ascended one set of stairs and, somehow, arrived in the hallway of their common room. Cedric tapped one of the barrels in the painting, trying to be precise with the rhythm because he didn't fancy the idea of being drenched in vinegar. The door opened and both boys entered. The sight that greeted them wasn't something they were expecting.

There were a few tearful students looking at the ground. Others were red, and a few were glaring at nothing in particular. In front of them was a stern Professor Sprout, thing that unnerved both boys. When she saw them, her face softened and she signalled for them to join her.

"These students are examples of what a true Hufflepuff is. They don't exclude others. They are improving this House's good name by befriending other students. As I said, I'm ashamed of your immature behaviour. Cedric, I'm proud of you for joining a Hogwarts team. That way, our house will be represented in the tournament. Justin, I'm glad you expanded your circle of friends," Sprout congratulated them. "You are all dismissed but if I ever have to give this talk again, it will no longer be in the safety of the common room, but in front of the whole school," she threatened and left. Most of the students fled to their rooms and both boys remained in place, confused at what happened.

"She was angry and gave the House a scolding they won't forget," Susan told them, a wide smirk stretching her lips. "You look like shit," she said after examining them.

"Thank you for your kind words, Miss Bones," Cedric said, giving the girl a mock bow.

"I aim to please," she shrugged. "Anyways, I doubt they'll keep giving you trouble. Sprout chewed them out for a while."

"We didn't mind, anyway," Justin shrugged.

"Considering that both of you are always with Potter, I believe you."

"Do you have anything against him?" Justin asked when the girl scowled at the boy's surname.

"His idiotic godfather! That's what I have against him," the girl sighed, "he's dating my aunt and it's disgusting to see them together. I spent most of my summer with Andrea to avoid the lovebirds."

"Well, this is a small world indeed. Be happy, Susan. You may have little cousins soon," Cedric teased the pouting girl, already running away before she could hex him.

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One more week went by and the students were forced to wait for the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang delegations to arrive. The Sunday evening was particularly gelid and the dying sun did nothing to keep the students warm. The members of the Guild cast heating charms on themselves, then they began doing the same for the first years. Many professors noticed this and followed their example.

"Five points, to all of you for your initiative and thoughtfulness," McGonagall announced, smiling at the Guild.

Harry nodded at the woman and kept doing his job. When there was no one else to help, the group of friends walked to an empty corner and proceeded to ignore the boisterous students that seemed to only be able to concentrate on the newcomers. At last, the professors signalled for them to go inside. They were the last ones to follow the group of desperate students, who were almost pushing each other to get into the great hall as quickly as possible.

"Don't forget to come to our common room after the feast," Flora reminded the members who were not in Slytherin.

"We won't," Cedric promised the slight girl, a warm smile spreading on his face.

They walked to their respective tables and waited for the foreigners to arrive. Suddenly, the doors were brusquely opened and the Durmstrang students marched in, the ones at the front doing some acrobatics while a dour man strode after them. One particular student caught Harry's attention. The boy looked older than seventeen and was controlling fire as if it was a simple levitation charm.

The Beauxbatons girls came after, showing a grace he never saw beyond professional dancers. They were followed by a tall woman. An extremely tall one at that. Harry suspected that one of her ancestors was a giant for her to have such an impressive height. However, she was no less graceful than her students were. The girls' uniforms were made of delicate silk, a fact that worried him a little. It was designed to be aesthetically pleasing instead of functional and it offered no protection against the bitter Scottish weather. The French students produced a simple illusion of butterflies leaving their hands, though one caught his attention.

The blonde girl possessed an enviable beauty, but Harry did not care about that. What interested him was that her illusion looked solid and realistic, unlike the ones from her peers.

Dumbledore was exchanging pleasantries with both headmasters and the foreign students remained standing at the front until they were shown the tables they would be sitting at. The Beauxbatons girls walked towards the Ravenclaw table, where the morons were falling over to make space for them. Harry noticed as the beautiful girl sat further away from the other students, disdain colouring her features, but there was also the hidden wariness in her eyes. When he looked at the front, he noticed that the red-clad headmaster was observing him with intensity, but lifted his gaze when it met his own. His observations were cut short when the Durmstrang students approached and looked unsure of where to sit.

"Sixth years over there!" one of the prefects announced and signalled the empty space. "Seventh years, over here! Welcome to the Noble House of Slytherin," greeted the seventh year prefect.

"Welcome to Hogwarts!" exclaimed Dumbledore, wearing a cordial smile. "Let me introduce you to Madame Maxime, the headmistress of Beauxbatons, and Mister Bjelac, headmaster of Durmstrang. Now, our visitors will be staying in the Houses that they are sitting with throughout the year and I hope you treat them with the respect and kindness they deserve.

During this year, you'll share classes, meals, and facilities, so I hope many long friendships are formed.

"You'll have a month and a half to decide whether or not the eligible students will be putting their names in the Goblet of Fire, which will be available from October 30th to the 31st. The night of Halloween will be where our three champions are chosen. I'm sure you haven't forgotten the prizes, but I will remind you: a thousand Galleons of personal money, the honour of being crowned as the Champion, and eternal glory!" the man announced, and it seemed the information about the perils of the competition were erased from the memory of many if the excited murmurs were anything to go by.

"I will also remind you of a few details," Professor McGonagall announced, silencing the students. "Seventh year is important for you, not only because of the NEWTs but also because it will be your last year as students. You have to organize your time wisely if you want to enjoy it before heading for the adult world, where you will be considered one. I hope you make wise decisions because I know that it will not be an easy term. Take advantage of all the opportunities that are being offered this year but, overall, enjoy your last year as children before you leave and become the marvellous adults that I know you will be," the woman said, sitting down.

Her speech was followed by thunderous applause, but sobriety returned to the room after her words sank in. It seemed the visitors also took note of her heartfelt speech. The headmaster looked pained and on the verge of arguing, but unwilling to make a scene or confront the fearsome woman. The old man settled for looking at the professor with disappointment, something she ignored.

"Yes, anyway, I'm sure that you are all hungry. Enjoy the feast!" Dumbledore announced, and food appeared at the tables.

At the end of the feast, the headmaster gave another meaningless speech to encourage the students to submit their names for the competition. A speech Harry ignored with all his might until they were allowed to leave but, before walking out of the hall, he signalled the prefects to guide their guests through the dungeons and inform them about their rules in the process.

The Guild walked out of the great hall, followed by the Slytherins. When they arrived at their entrance, Harry could not contain the grin that escaped at the sight of it. This morning, the blank wall was changed by his hardworking elves, replaced with an exquisite embossing of a basilisk with chrysoberyl stones as eyes. Its head was in the entrance and its tail reached the end of the long corridor, adorning one wall. The elaborate craftsmanship, along with the meticulous details and encrusted peridot stones, made the snake seem real, which was only enhanced by the fact it was enchanted to move to protect the entrance.

The boy remembered with satisfaction the awed expressions of the Slytherin students, who kept admiring the snake. Daphne's face was adorned with a light smile when the basilisk moved, its head left the door and approached them. The basilisk's head re-entered the wall and the entrance was opened.

The room waited until the Durmstrang students arrived and, after a while, the door was opened. The six prefects walked in the room, followed by the twelve students who were

looking around, admiring the room. Terrence walked towards them and nodded, signalling Theo to start talking.

"Thank you for escorting our guests," Theo began saying and signalled for them to stay close. "Welcome to our Noble House. For years, we worked hard to gain the respect and admiration of the inhabitants of this castle. It was an arduous job, but we've managed to accomplish our objective. In order to safeguard our efforts, we created a few rules that we expect everyone to follow, including you. From the moment you sat at our table, you were considered Slytherins and your actions will bring repercussions to our house. Follow our rules and act in an honourable way - this is how you will avoid punishment."

"As I explained to you, we hold ourselves in higher regard than other houses do, so you are expected to do the same," Terrence added.

"Indeed. Now, I will begin explaining the rules. First, blood purity has no place in this House. Any use of terms related to that idiotic ideology will be punished," Theo warned, eyeing a student that seemed to want to object but was too cowardly to do so. "Second, no bullying is allowed under any circumstance. If you dare to try to harm any inhabitant of this castle because of your inferiority complexes, you will be punished. Third, always be polite. I don't care if it's a house-elf, a ghost, or an annoying first-generation magical, if we hear any rumours of low behaviour, you will be punished. Fourth, the Dark Mark is not allowed. If you believe in the idiocy that Voldemort preaches, that's your problem, but you'd better keep it so hidden that no one in this castle notices," he said, looking at two students who were flaring at him.

"We have no idea how your school works but here you will be nothing but respectful to every student in this castle, which includes all Beauxbatons students," Blaise added lackadaisically.

That was the final push a few students needed to react.

"Why should we obey these stupid rules?!"

"You are nothing but brats and we are international guests. There is nothing you can do to us!" another gloated and Harry took a deep sigh, massaging the bridge of his nose.

"I was hoping to avoid this, but don't forget that you forced my hand," Harry said.

He approached them and before either Durmstrang student could say something in retaliation, both fell to the floor, their screams breaking the tranquil night. After a moment, they stopped trashing and lay panting on the floor. The boy observed the reactions of their two new members carefully, in case they did not agree and needed to be taken care of. It was fortunate that neither seemed inclined to object any time soon. The boy that caught his attention earlier seemed to be pleased by the punishment his peers received, how curious.

"We don't care who you are in your country, you will behave. I hope you don't force me to punish you again," Harry said in an even tone and went back to his place.

"We will tell the headmaster! You have no right to do this!" the one that had remained silent exploded at last.

"By all means, do tell him. We have nothing to hide. Slytherin has rules and either you follow them or leave. However, for your lack of respect, you will be punished," little Luna told the boy and cast a curse.

The boy's eyes widened and he fell to his knees, horror painted on his visage. After a while, she lifted the curse and he fell to the floor; his limbs were trembling and he seemed unable to breathe properly. The other Durmstrang students finally understood that the Guild did not joke around and no one else dared to object.

"You can tell your headmaster tomorrow at breakfast but the moment he sent you here, your fate was decided. I'm sure none of you is as rash or stupid as these three," Theo announced, looking at the boys in the floor.

"I'm sure none of them represents you, so we will ignore their outburst," Daphne said with a gentle smile. "As members of this House, you will enjoy privileges no one else in the school has. An excellent example is our common room, one of the best rooms in the castle. Your rooms will be spacious and you are allowed to have your own if you wish. There are bathrooms designated for your use, which have different amenities that I am sure you will all enjoy. If you need anything, don't be afraid to speak with us, but please, do assign one person as a representative. We'll do our best to offer our assistance and we promise to take care of you as the Slytherins you became," Daphne finished her speech with grace.

"Your three peers, however, won't enjoy the same benefits that you do. They are assigned to a simple room that Prefect Yaxley will show them. If they wish to enjoy all the luxuries that are granted to you, they will have to show they changed," Blaise told them, looking with contempt at the boys who were beginning to compose themselves.

"The ones who want individual rooms raise your left hands, and the ones who want to share, raise your right hands," Theo ordered, and nine students raised their left hands.

"Excellent, you'll share a floor with the sixth and seventh years depending on what year you're in. Please, guide them," Daphne told them and the students in those years stepped forwards. "Show them the way and teach them how to use the different features in the bathrooms and bedrooms. Prefects, please lead these three students to a plain door that will appear on the seventh year floor. They have their own bathroom and under no circumstances are you to offer them any kind of help until they apologize properly," she ordered and the prefects nodded, pulling them up with more brusqueness than necessary and pushing them to walk.

"I regret the punishments had to be imparted so soon," Harry said. "However, I know that Slytherins are intelligent and cunning, so I trust you to talk with the other students and teach them what you have learnt. Those who were punished will not enjoy a single benefit this house has to offer, which is a shame, but I know you understand."

All the students seemed to agree with the boy, devotion illuminating their visages. With a gentle smile, they were dismissed and the Guild was left alone in the common room. Cedric would be conflicted a few weeks ago but, after being part of this group, he understood why idiotic ideals were not allowed. He understood why people were punished and how hard his



friends worked to keep the balance in the school. Cedric knew he fell under the enchantment of a charismatic boy with vivid green eyes, but he did not mind in the least.

"We'll need to be in the room to ensure order for a few days," Luna commented.

"Will they cause problems?" Fred asked her.

"They will try. Tomorrow they'll attempt to complain, but their own peers won't allow them. I know they're impressed with their rooms and are eager to learn what this castle has to offer... One of ours is among them," she announced, her soft voice contrasting with her intense words.

"So, we'll be complete," Neville nodded.

"Not yet, but soon," the girl declared.

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The next morning the Guild was resting in the common room after working out in their headquarters earlier. They were enjoying a quiet moment, or at least it would have been quiet if Theo stopped complaining and Draco stopped bickering with Flora. Harry watched his friends with amusement; it was good to see them relaxed and having fun. The tall Durmstrang student that had caught Harry's attention approached them and the Guild adopted their public persona.

"Good morning. My name is Viktor Krum and I was selected as the representative of my school. I apologize for our three peers - they were out of place and we will keep them in line," the male said with little accent. His posture was rigid and his visage serious.

"Good morning. Please, have a seat," Daphne offered with grace. The boy nodded and sat on a couch that was close enough to be polite but respected their space at the same time.

"Do you enjoy your quarters, or is there anything that you wish to add?" Cedric asked, and a few members smiled at the initiative of the boy.

"They are much better than the rooms at Durmstrang. The bathrooms are also interesting. I especially enjoyed the 'shower' and the 'jacuzzi'," the male said, pronouncing the foreign words with deliberate slowness.

"I am glad that you enjoy them. Are the other students enjoying their rooms?" Daphne asked.

"They are. We weren't expecting to be so comfortable."

"Excellent. Don't forget to tell us if you need anything or if you have any suggestions," Theo told the older male, who nodded and seemed to be debating whether to ask them something. "We'll answer any question you have."

"Is it true that you don't discriminate against muggle-borns?" Viktor asked with caution.

"We call them first-generation magicals," Harry explained to the boy. "My mother was one, it would be hypocritical of me."

"My father is a Pureblood, but my mother is a first-generation witch," Viktor explained, doubting a little when applying the foreign term. "In my country, they face discrimination to the point of not being accepted in school, so I want to thank you for teaching my classmates a different ideology," Victor said, standing up and giving them a deep bow.

"You don't have to thank us," Luna told the foreigner. "I know that she loves you so much that she would do it over again just to be with you," the girl said with a gentle smile and the boy's eyes widened in surprise. "He's one of us," Luna told Harry.

"Are you willing to keep a secret?" Harry asked the still shocked boy, who nodded dumbly. "Our Luna knows much more than we do because she has eyes that are able to see beyond ours," he explained, and their poor guest looked utterly confused.

"I was not expecting that," Viktor muttered after a short moment.

"No one expects our *modus operandi* to be doing Luna's bidding even though she's the smallest squirt in the room," Adrian shrugged and was rewarded by a grin from the alluded girl.

"I'll tell no one," said squirt promised. "But I understand how you feel. We all do. Anyway, have you ever tried sweet rice cakes? I've been craving them for a few days."

"I don't think I ever have," Victor answered, more confused than he had ever been by the awkward situation and strange question.

"You can join us for breakfast. I think you will enjoy the variety of food that we have," the girl said.

The Guild, plus their new member, walked to their usual place, where a variety of food appeared in front of them. With practised ease, they ignored the room's stares at their new addition. Luna's hand shot for the sweet rice cake plate, which she claimed for herself and swatted Draco's hand when he tried to get one, glaring at anyone who tried to do the same.

"This part is the traditional English breakfast. Most of us enjoy it, but Harry doesn't," Daphne explained to their new member. "If you enjoy lighter food we also have different kinds of yoghurts with fruit and cereal. You can also try Harry's breakfast. He's strange."

Viktor eyed the boy's food with bewilderment, it looked more like a meal than normal breakfast. There was rice, soup, fish, vegetables, and a few other things he was unable to identify. Deciding to go for the safe choice, he chose the English breakfast and perhaps would try the bowls of yoghurt with fresh fruit later.

"Try this," Luna ordered and handed Viktor a small square of something. With a shrug, he put it in his mouth. His eyebrows rose in surprise at the unexpected texture and rich flavour. "It's good, right?"

"Why did you give him one and not me?" Draco complained.

"Because I like him better," Luna answered, wearing an impish smile.

Much to Harry's relief, that was the moment the owls arrived. Perhaps those two would now save their discussion for another time. Hedwig glided to him, her white plumage almost shining with the sunlight. The boy grabbed the sausage plate, earning a glare from Blaise in the process. His bird landed on his shoulder and preened his hair while he untied the newspaper and signalled his owl the plate to eat. The headlines in the newspaper would certainly cause a scandal that would provide quality entertainment and facilitate their plans.

## ***CORNELIUS FUDGE: THE FRAUDULENT AND CORRUPT!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My dear readers, the news I have to deliver today are nothing but the harsh truth. For years, Cornelius Fudge caused different controversies, the most notable being: placing Dementors on Hogwarts grounds, reinstating a perilous Tournament, and his inaction while dealing with the Dark Lord. However, his last decision was enough to make me oppose him.*

*Last Friday, Fudge awarded himself the title of Order of Merlin, First class. You read that right, my fellow citizens! As we know, the title and that particular category are awarded to exceptional war heroes such as Harry Potter, our saviour. What did Fudge do to be under the same category? As far as I remember, his term is less than distinguished and below satisfactory. This controversial event led me to investigate the man we elected as Minister. I am disturbed by my findings and I am sure, my dear readers, that you will agree with me.*

*Cornelius Fudge's school performance was average at best. He obtained eight OWLs and five NEWTs, which shouldn't be enough to be Minister in the first place. However, those were turbulent times and more than one mistake was made. With Bagnold resigning, Crouch's son being a Death Eater, and Dumbledore rejecting the position, only one person was left. This situation wouldn't be so bad if my research had not revealed terrible details from his term in office.*

*Minister Fudge was the one who pushed for the DMLE funds to be cut and he was also the one who opposed most of the people who were trying to fund that important department. The problem is, where did those cut funds go during all these years? Not a single department in the Ministry was awarded extra income; on the other hand, many budgets were cut. Speaking with the employees, I discovered a terrible detail! The funds were disguised to appear as if the departments still received the money when Cornelius Fudge used them for his own benefit.*

*It was strange that, throughout the years, the man managed to afford his own manor and multiple luxurious trips, but I would never imagine Fudge was using our money to live a life of decadence.*

*If you don't believe my words, my fellow citizens, go and investigate it yourselves. The average wage of every Minister is twenty-four thousand Galleons a year, enough money to live comfortably, but not nearly enough to afford a manor. Also, the records about the funds are in the public domain and are available to anyone who requests a copy in the Ministry. You will see how they are still listed as department funds when we all know that the reason why the DMLE is able to work is not because of the money they receive from the government, but because of the generous donations from Lord Black and Harry Potter.*

*If this is not enough to convince you, my fellow witches and wizards, I have listed below every single one of Cornelius Fudge's eccentric purchases, a few of which are: pure Acromantula silk suits, a handcrafted gold chess set, a trip to the Bermuda triangle with special reservations to enjoy time with the sirens, multiple marble and gold statues, and so on. If you read the complete list, you will be as enraged as I am, especially when you see that the average cost of each is more than many of us make in a year.*

*By now, you must understand my indignation with the man, who promises many things but so far accomplished nothing! If this situation wasn't enough, I also uncovered further scandalous information. Cornelius Fudge received multiple bribes over the years to push for different reforms in the Wizengamot. I managed to obtain a copy of his account (see pages 3 and 4), thanks to a woman who works under him and wishes to see justice made. You will notice that the 'donations' were given by 'upstanding' society members, many of whom avoided Azkaban because they claimed to be under the Imperius. The meetings of the Wizengamot are in the public domain and, if you compare the dates, you will notice how they coincide with the 'donations' being deposited into Fudge's personal account.*

*I won't tolerate this man as Minister for another day! I call for your aid, my fellow citizens, to force him to submit an audit of the Ministry's funds and, hopefully, prove me wrong. Let's ask for an audit of his personal finances and perhaps he will be able to explain the origins of his fortune.*

*Never forget that we are the ones that decide who is in power and, if Cornelius Fudge is not willing to submit himself to the DMLE for audits, that means he has something to hide. I know Madam Bones is nothing less than honest, so she will unveil the truth. We are no longer gullible; we are the proud citizens of Magical Britain and we deserve a Minister who will look out for our safety instead of their pockets.*

*Today, I will be in the Ministry, raising my voice against corruption, and I hope that you are with me. May Mother Magic lead us through this precarious situation!*

Harry finished reading the article with a chuckle, handing the paper to a curious Viktor. He looked around the hall and saw the students whispering among each other while pointing the newspaper with clear disapproval. Perhaps it was not going to be the best publicity for Magical Britain, but it would ensure the idiot's crimes were not kicked under the rug.

"Do you think Madam Bones will arrest him?" Adrian asked.

"I have no idea, though she may have received an anonymous letter to watch out in case of a possible escape attempt, plus all the information Fudge wants hidden," Harry answered, taking a bite of his meal.

"So how will we push for Madam Bones to be the next Minister?" Terrence asked.

"Rita will publish an interesting article tomorrow about the exemplary actions of Sirius' girlfriend, plus the idiot, Lucius, and Neville's grandmother will push for her to be selected by the Wizengamot as interim Minister," Harry explained.

"From that position, it will be easy to convince her and the people that she is the best option," Neville muttered.

"That's the plan. Ragnok will empty the Fudge's vault and hand the money to Madam Bones in a show of good faith. It will be a coincidence if Rita happens to get hold of that information," Harry suggested.

"So your Minister is corrupt," Viktor said after reading the newspaper.

"He's more than that - he's an ignorant idiot!" Hestia huffed.

"Quite a scandal with so many foreign representatives," the Bulgarian boy commented.

"That, dear, is the point of the matter," Daphne retorted, her wide smile making her look like the Cheshire cat.

---

In that bizarre way, Viktor Krum joined the Guild. He especially enjoyed his unconventional friendship with Luna, who was the key to helping the boy loosen up and become an active member. Before the week was over, he adjusted to their dynamic and enjoyed having people who appreciated him for being Viktor and were not interested in his public persona.

"You're a professional Quidditch player?" Flora asked the older boy with wide, incredulous eyes.

"Since I was fifteen," Viktor confirmed.

"I knew, but didn't think it was too important," Cedric commented, losing another game of chess against Theo and cursing under his breath.

"So that's why we're followed by giggling dunces," Hestia mused.

"I may kill your fans if they keep trying to follow us," Daphne warned the boy.

Viktor was pleased with their answers. For the first time, he had real friends and not people who either liked to speak with the son of Iker Krum or who wished to befriend the Quidditch player Krum. He never felt more accepted and rejoiced in the feeling. Somehow, he was dragged to this unconventional group that ruled Slytherin with an iron hand but, at the same time, protected the House with zeal.

Unlike what people believed, Viktor was far from stupid. He knew that the Guild was not a game or a simple club - they held an unrivalled standing in the school. They were people who would inherit positions of power and whose families had gold and history to make them important. He joined, knowing there was no way back... The thing is, he didn't wish to return.

---

Harry Potter observed as Viktor Krum integrated with the Guild with unexpected ease. The older boy opened up to them and unveiled a few disquieting facts about his life. He was a half-blood. In the Slavic Regions, in general, people were more vocal about their dislike for first-generations, so his father kept his mother hidden to protect his reputation. Viktor's

mother, Svetlana Krum, nee Dobrev, was a talented witch, according to the boy. He narrated how his mother taught him from a young age and how loving she was. Thanks to his mother almost being a prisoner because of his father's lack of braveness, Viktor grew up with an intense loathing towards blood purity and, though it was not stated, it was obvious that his father was among the things he hated. His biggest dream was to free his mother and make sure she lived happily, swearing that he would always be proud of the great woman who raised him.

Harry realized that, while all the members in the Guild had different stories, they were all similar and their greatest desire was to protect the ones they loved. The boy admired Viktor for being able to have the patience to craft a plan that would guarantee his plans worked. The only reason he became a Quidditch player was that it would give him the fame he needed to fulfil his machinations. Although Viktor did not reveal his plans, you did not need to be a seer to know that getting rid of the man that helped to give him life was a vital part of it. The Guild did not need to voice their support and he understood that, when the time came, they would help him.

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The members of the Guild were sitting in the Slytherin common room for the last time that week, eager to go back to their headquarters. Just as Luna said, the three students did not even dare to look up while they were in the room and did not cause any sort of trouble. Viktor informed them of how the other Durmstrang students threatened them to control themselves or be excommunicated from their peers and be sent back to their school in shame. It appeared the headmaster believed in self-government and did not interfere in student affairs unless it was necessary. The other students enjoyed their accommodations so much that they had no qualm in controlling their wayward members.

"We have Martial Magic in a few hours," Theo groaned. During the first day of the week, they were informed the whole Guild was part of the advanced classes, save for Justin, but he was working hard to catch up, so they knew he would join the group soon.

"And I thought learning dark arts was hard, but it's nothing compared to your classes," Viktor almost whimpered. It seemed that Professor Flitwick had left an impression.

"You'll thank him later," Hestia muttered, glaring at the chessboard. She was losing a game against Blaise and, if she hated one thing, it was losing.

"I am sure I will, but for now I can complain," he retorted, ignoring the glare from the small girl. Harry noticed a prefect waiting to approach them and he signalled for his friends to remain quiet.

"Hello. Is there something you need?" he asked the girl. She did not meet his eyes, but her stance was firm.

"Good evening, sir," she greeted, her excited tone confusing him. "You ordered us to inform you if any of the foreign students looked uncomfortable or lonely. There is a Beauxbatons girl who is always by herself. Few of her peers speak with her, and it may have to do with her Veela heritage. I tried to approach her, but she was polite and denied having any problems," she informed them.

"Thank you, Emilia. We'll take care of her. Do you know her name or the places she frequents?" Terrence asked.

"Her name is Fleur Delacour. She's in the library most of the time, but there are times she's in the inner courtyard."

"Thank you. You have been helpful. Is there any way we can reward you?" Harry asked her.

"I aim to serve; that is my reward," the girl gushed, almost glowing in happiness.

"Very well, then. Thank you again, Emilia. You can leave," Harry told the prefect, who left wearing a wide smile.

"What's wrong with her?" Fred asked to no one in particular.

"Her name is Emilia Selwyn. She adores Harry," Terrence answered.

"So she has a crush on our handsome Potter," Cedric teased.

"No, she literally adores him. She sees him as a deity and she's not the only one," Terrence explained. "If Harry said that he was the only person in the castle allowed to have arms, then, she would remove everyone else's arms and then her own, just because he said so."

"I'll pretend I never heard that," Harry muttered, "I'll go to search for the girl."

"I'm coming with you!" Luna informed him. "We'll meet in Professor Munter's class," she said and grabbed Harry's hand, dragging him out of the room.

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### **Monday 19th of September, Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts**

Albus was nursing a half-empty bottle of Firewhisky. The day was hard and the week would only become increasingly difficult.

This morning, when that article was published, he ran towards the Ministry. However, he wasn't the only one with that idea - dozens of people were protesting in the atrium, led by an enraged Rita Skeeter. He decided to avoid the crowd and took the Floo to Cornelius' office, where he wasn't the first to arrive.

Madam Bones, Sirius Black, and Kingsley Shacklebolt were in the office, pointing their wands at Fudge, who was as pale as a ghost. Albus took a few steps and realized there was another person in the room. Marcus Travers was pointing at him with his wand, ready to take action in case he intervened in the arrest.

"Amelia, you have to let me go! I'll be sentenced to Azkaban or even worse," the Minister begged.

"You're under arrest. We will question you under Veritaserum and, for the last time Cornelius, if you don't come with us willingly, we will force you," the woman threatened, wearing her head of the DMLE persona. In a desperate attempt to flee, Fudge tried to cast a blasting spell

on the roof, but his wand disappeared from his hand and he was unconscious before any of the Aurors reacted.

"Excellent reflexes," Kingsley complimented the youngest person in the room.

"And no one believes me when I say he's wasted as an undersecretary," Sirius muttered.

"I only did my duty. I refuse to cover for any crimes," Marcus announced and Amelia smiled at the young man.

"You are an exemplary worker, Mister Travers. I believe it's time to question him and call for an immediate Wizengamot meeting," Madam Bones announced.

"I'll take care of it, love. You question the wanker and try to arrive on time," Sirius told the woman, who nodded and left the room along with Kingsley, levitating an unconscious Fudge.

"So what are you doing here, Albus?" Sirius asked him casually.

"I came to check on the situation," the old man answered.

"Then I don't think you'll object to helping me call for an emergency meeting in an hour. After all, we need a new Minister," Sirius said with a wide smile.

Albus wasn't able to make any excuses and ended up helping Sirius who, most of the time, ignored him, but assigned him small tasks to prevent him from leaving. With that hurdle in his way, he was unable to contact any of his allies to set up a possible interim Minister. In less than an hour, the meeting chambers were full and everyone was waiting.

"Good morning and welcome to this session. I believe that most of you know the reason why we are here today but, in case you don't, I will explain. Cornelius Fudge was arrested and found guilty. Any ideas on who may be the interim Minister until selections are called?" the headmaster asked, looking at Elphias to encourage the man to speak. However, Lucius Malfoy raised his wand instead.

"I believe there is only one person for that position. Madam Bones has been nothing but helpful and she is a prime example of leadership. I suggest Amelia Bones for the position," Malfoy announced and many seemed to agree.

"Amelia Bones has an excellent head on her shoulders and is an exceptional witch, more than capable to assume the position," Griselda Marchbanks announced, supporting Malfoy.

"Madam Bones proved to be an excellent leader and I have no doubt that she will continue doing an excellent job," Miss Blair announced, representing the ill Greengrass' family patriarch.

Albus watched with morbid fascination as most of the members of the Wizengamot raised their hands, not waiting for him to give the order. In a matter of minutes, the interim Minister was chosen and the headmaster could only hope that the woman rejected the offer. Amelia Bones was too brutal and assertive for his liking.



"I thank you for the trust you placed in me and I swear I will honour it and do my best until the new Minister is selected," she promised, and any kind of hope Albus may have held was destroyed by that simple sentence.

Amelia's methods were nothing Albus approved of and he was sure the woman would try to impose many of her beliefs on the Ministry. So he would try to contain her until a new Minister was chosen. Perhaps Elphias could try his luck.

That night was dedicated to nursing his ego and lamenting how everything complicated further. At least his trusted alcohol offered some comfort.

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### **Crouch Manor, Somewhere in Durham**

Tom Riddle observed from his throne as the Healer they managed to convince to join them tended Bellatrix. The woman looked frail and sick, quite an unusual sight. He was so used to seeing his general as powerful that her weak state disgusted and unnerved him in equal measures... Voldemort glanced at his own body and almost screamed in frustration. His temporal body was weak.

How was he supposed to know the DMLE had a special unit filled with heavy hitters?

Madam Bones was turning out to be troublesome, so her imminent demise was being planned. Lucius Malfoy was also being difficult; the man not only refused to return to his ranks but was also actively opposing him, signing his death sentence on the process. Sirius Black was yet another problem, financing the DMLE and becoming one of his greatest hurdles in the Wizengamot. He would be dealt with too. However, disposing of these threats was not easy. Greyback disappeared from one day to another, leaving no trace of where he could have gone. That disgusting werewolf was one of his best assassination tools along with the leaders of the vampire covens, who refused to join this time.

Somehow, all the advantages and weapons he possessed during the previous war were taken away. No werewolf or vampire joined him, recruiting was hard, he was being blocked by the Wizengamot, and the fear he once inspired in the magical population was almost non-existent. If that was not enough, his Dementors somehow were slaughtered en masse, cutting their numbers almost in half. His giants were also murdered and when the others noticed, many decided to leave his ranks. Voldemort didn't know who managed to damage his forces, but whoever it was, earned the honour to be dealt with in person.

Barty, his loyal servant, was already in the position to ensure his plans began moving. Soon, he would return as powerful as ever and teach the morons that dared to doubt his power why should you never question your superiors... His Horcruxes would be retrieved throughout the year and he couldn't wait to have them back.

Voldemort felt a painful shudder taking hold of his body and began coughing. His loyal Nagini slithered to him and injected her venom into his body, relieving the pain. Tom petted the snake with numb arms... Revenge would come later - what he needed now was a new body.



# Irony Flower

## Chapter Notes

Life is hectic right now so I am going to update whenever I have free time and actually feel like a human being instead of chopped liver.

Please stay at home, don't be paranoid, and enjoy the chapter!

### **Monday 19<sup>th</sup> of September, Minister for Magic's Office**

Marcus Travers entered the Minister's office, following Madam Bones and Sirius after the Wizengamot meeting. The woman plopped onto the nearest couch and Marcus went to retrieve the many documents that she needed to review. When he came back, he placed two folders filled with parchments in front of her, along with a glass of juice.

"Thank you, Marcus. Please take a seat," the woman said.

"The documents in the black folder are the ones you need to review within the week but aren't urgent, the ones in red are the ones that need your approval within three days, and this book contains the schedule the previous Minister followed," the young man explained and the woman nodded.

"I will need your help, but first, I need to speak with you. If you wish, Sirius will leave," Amelia offered, ignoring her offended boyfriend.

"I don't mind," Marcus shrugged, also ignoring the man.

"After witnessing your duelling abilities, I wanted to ask why you chose a political career instead of being an Auror."

"If I'm allowed to be blunt," Marcus inquired and Amelia nodded. "While you can help people being an Auror, the people in power are the ones that do the most, either by their action or inaction. I've seen many things I wish to change in the future and the best way to do it is by being a politician, even though I don't enjoy the title."

"I told you so! He's perfect for the position!" Sirius exclaimed and Madam Bones looked exasperated at his antics.

"Ignore his outburst," she almost begged, "you see, Marcus, that's the kind of answer I wanted to hear. Both of us know that there are no suitable candidates for the position so Augusta, Lucius, and even Andra have convinced me to agree to become the new Minister for Magic," she explained, looking at him. "However, I don't want the position for more than ten years and, if possible, I'd like to stay even less. You're an intelligent young man, well-

known by your admirable work ethic. I wish to promote you to senior undersecretary and, if you agree, to begin training you to take my position when I retire."

Marcus was not expecting that. While the Guild decided he would have a political career, they expected their plans on that matter to take a few decades or so. Now, Amelia Bones was offering him an opportunity he could not reject.

"I'm honoured and I promise to work hard, Madam Bones."

"Call me Amelia. After all, we'll be working together for the next decade," the woman said with a bright smile.

"Who will become the new head of the DMLE?" asked a curious Sirius.

"I'm not sure, but I have been considering Rufus Scrimgeour," the woman answered.

"What about Auror Moody?" Marcus suggested.

"Alastor would rather live without his wand than being involved in all the bureaucracy that the position entails," Amelia explained to the boy.

"Be that as it may, Auror Moody is the most experienced person in the department. He knows from first-hand experience what it is that the new Aurors need in order to achieve their goals. Perhaps he is a man who prefers action, but I think it would be good to have him in the position for a time and, if he wants to, he can train another Auror to take his place in the future. Besides, I doubt anyone will oppose his methods," Marcus explained in an effort to convince Madam Bones.

Alastor Moody would be far too useful in the position. The man was intelligent and would make the decisions Madam Bones was not prepared to. Marcus was sure Harry would support the idea.

"I never thought of it that way..." Amelia muttered, looking pensive.

"Moody will throw a fit," a resigned Sirius sighed.

"I'll find a way to convince him. I'm sure we'll make a great team, Marcus," Amelia said, smiling brightly at the young man.

---

Harry and Luna were walking towards the library, going through the inner courtyard just in case the Bauxbatons girl was there. They found no one who fitted her description or even wore the Beauxbatons uniforms, so they proceeded towards their original destination, enjoying the comfortable silence. For the first time in the term, Harry was able to appreciate the changes to the library. The bookshelves were new, the seating places looked comfortable - unlike the previous ones - the floor was changed to dark walnut, and the walls were painted a soft cream. The most notable change, however, was that the size of the place had increased, along with the number of books. The boy approached the desk near the entrance, where the librarian was reading.

"Good evening, Madam Pince," the pair greeted the serious woman.

"Harry, dear, it's good to see you here. You barely visit any more. Good evening, Miss Lovegood," the woman greeted.

"It's hard to balance my schedules, but I will be visiting more."

"I know you're working hard, being the best student in the school isn't an easy feat to accomplish. So, what books do you need?" the woman asked kindly.

"Nothing in particular. We had free time today and decided to spend it in the library... Although, does the school have some information about Beauxbatons? So far I haven't had the chance to speak with any of the French students and I'm really curious about their school."

"I'm afraid that we only have general information about other schools, which is a shame if you ask me. However, you can ask Miss Delacour, such a polite sweetheart. She's in the Charms section if you wish to speak with her."

"Thank you for the information. We'll try to speak with her," Luna said with her most innocent smile, which made the strict librarian return the gesture.

"Get going, then. I have a book waiting for me," the woman shooed the pair.

Both teens waved at the woman and walked towards the place she indicated. When they arrived, Harry saw the same girl that had captured his attention with her advanced illusions during the introduction feast. He debated with himself for a few seconds, deciding which would be the best way to approach the French student. Of course, Luna did not have the same qualms and advanced to the table with little jumps, startling the older girl. He sighed in exasperation and followed the unruly blonde, missing the times when she still looked for his guidance not so long ago.

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Fleur Delacour was beautiful ever since she can remember. When she was young, she didn't understand why other children didn't want to play with her or why parents looked at her with a mix of disapproval and resentment. As she grew up, she began to understand.

For many years, she loathed the hypnotizing allure she possessed and craved normalcy. For a time, she even hated her mother for being half-Veela. That stage had an abrupt end when her mother had almost crossed the gates of death while giving birth to her little sister. The possibility of losing half of her family was enough to ground Fleur to earth, forcing her to mature. Since that day, she became a devoted daughter and loving sister, knowing that family was above anything else in the world.

Also, Fleur Delacour started using her beauty as the weapon it was, ensnaring people with her charm and gaining an enviable position in the school. However, jealousy and lust remained constant in her life. Never before did she have any friends, only sycophants who wished to be seen with the persona she built. The sad part was that, even when she knew this, the loneliness was sometimes so suffocating she accepted their shallow company in order to

find some respite from her isolated life. She expected Hogwarts to be no different and she was proven right. From the first day, the girls eyed her with envy and the males with desire – nothing unexpected – but she still managed to get disappointed. The few students that approached her possessed those feelings even when they were trying to conceal them, so she decided to take her usual approach – ignore everyone until she felt loneliness oppressing her.

That is why Fleur was so confused when a young girl with dirty-blond hair approached her table. Her childish jumps and wide silvery eyes made her look as innocent as Gabrielle. Following her was the only person in the castle that managed to evoke her interest: Harry Potter. The boy, aside from his international fame, he was devastatingly handsome. If that wasn't enough, the boy seemed to be admired by the whole school and even had friends who adored him. While Fleur had once envied normalcy, now she envied the boy who seemed to possess the perfect life she once craved.

"Hello, my name is Luna Lovegood and this is Harry Potter," the girl introduced herself and the handsome boy. "Can we sit with you?"

"There's enough space. My name is Fleur Delacour," she answered, confused at what these strangers wanted.

The boy wasn't staring at her and the girl was wearing a wide smile, her visage contained no traces of the usual jealousy other females eyed her with. How curious was that?

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The first thing Harry noticed was the French girl's wariness - closed-off body language and rehearsed smile. In an effort to put her at ease, he barely looked at her and allowed Luna to take care of the conversation.

"Thanks, and sorry to interrupt you. It's just that we needed a quiet place to be. The school is filled with Harry's admirers and it's hard to find someone who won't overreact when he's close," Luna explained while she took the chair in front of the French girl.

Harry would be lying if he said he understood what the Luna was planning while selling him out the way she was doing, but he was sure she had a plan... or at least he hoped she did.

"I hope that the students are treating you well. Are you enjoying classes?" Harry asked.

"They are not bad," Fleur said with a heavy accent. "There are many good teachers, I especially like Professor Kowalski and Professor Flitwick's classes." When Harry heard the girl speak, he could understand how many would confuse her self-confidence with arrogance and her frankness with derision. However, he was not another person and these attributes enticed him more than beauty ever could.

"Have you tried Professor Munters' class? It's Martial Magic and he's awesome," Luna gushed, looking excited.

"Professor Kowalski suggested it, though I'm not sure. Next week I'm already joining the Duelling club and if I get chosen as a champion, I won't have enough time," the eldest girl explained.

"Perhaps, but what you learn in that class will be more useful than what you learn for a single task," Harry told the girl.

"Anyway, are you enjoying the food in the school?" Luna asked before the atmosphere could turn serious. "I really enjoy the traditional dishes, but Harry is weird and is quite picky with food. He's always asking the school elves for different plates so, if you get bored with the food at your table, you can always join us," Luna offered, her dreamy smile in place.

"Luna, dear, you do realize that I'm here and perhaps I may take offence?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It's not my fault you are weird. I would never imagine missing a simple Yorkshire pudding with gravy after eating it for three years," the young girl sighed.

"And how's that my fault? You can get that somewhere in the hall."

"Yeah, but I would have to make an effort," the girl pouted, "Fleur, do you exercise?"

"I beg your pardon?" the confused foreigner asked, looking incredulous.

"Harry forces us all to exercise and I'm always sore because of it. So I avoid any kind of extra effort unless it's necessary. You're with me, right?" Luna asked, her big eyes almost begging Fleur to agree.

"The problem is that you act like a whimsical cat. Let's not forget that you would turn into one, given the opportunity."

"Not true. I would turn into an owl," the girl stated with a superior smirk, Harry messed her hair in response.

Fleur watched their banter with amusement. It was obvious they were close friends, but unlike any other interaction she had experienced before, they included her in their conversation with no apparent effort. The older girl wondered if this is how it felt to have real friends, people who treated her as an equal but made her feel special at the same time. Without her noticing, the pair engaged her in an enjoyable conversation. They had asked her opinion on different matters and considered her answers. For the first time, she was treated as an intelligent person instead of a shallow, pretty face.

"Harry, it's twenty to three," Luna announced, looking disappointed.

"Time flies, indeed. I apologize for ending our conversation so abruptly, but we have Martial Magic classes," the boy explained.

"You can always join us, if you want to, of course," Luna offered, looking far too hopeful.

Fleur was left speechless by that simple proposal. Hope began blooming in her chest at the idea of them not being interested in her public persona, but the real person behind her pleasing looks. The fact that Harry Potter and Luna Lovegood treated her in a way only her parents and fellow Veela had, with natural respect, made her feel at ease in their company.

She didn't know how to feel about the people in front of her but, for the first time in years, Fleur decided she would take the risk.

"The class sounds interesting," the older girl agreed, and her response was rewarded by a bright smile from the young girl.

"Have you met Viktor? He's from Durmstrang," Luna said while they walked out of the place. "He's the only one in his delegation who has the balls to join the class, the others are wimps," the girl said in a singsong voice that contrasted with her words.

"Language," Harry chided the girl.

"I'm sorry," the small girl pouted. "You're right, they didn't have the ovaries to join," she corrected her phrasing with a bright smile. Fleur was unable to contain her laughter at the girl's bold declaration.

"You're spending far too much time with Daphne," Harry sighed. "See what I have to deal with? Promise you won't follow Daphne's example."

"I learnt that from Hwasa," Luna retorted, sticking her tongue out at him.

"Elizabeth is always with her," the boy groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Elizabeth is my little sister. It's annoying to see her grow."

"I also have a little sister. Her name is Gabrielle. She is still young, so I hope it takes her a long time to grow up," Fleur told them.

"Will she visit you during the tasks or will you be visiting your family during Yule?" the boy asked.

"She is coming over in January. Madam Maxime told us that we would spend Yule in Hogwarts to increase the 'international cooperation'," she mimicked in a high-pitched tone.

"Hogwarts is a boring place to stay in... Why don't you join us? I'm sure your family can stay for the holidays," Luna suggested and Fleur stopped walking. She glanced at the petite girl to know whether she was playing a joke but, much to her disconcertment, the girl looked eager to know her answer.

"Aunt Eleadora would kill me if I didn't introduce my new friends to her," the boy muttered and, once again, Fleur was left in shock at his casual declaration. "You don't have to decide now. If you want to join us, just tell me any time."

"I am honoured by the offer," the older girl answered after a few moments, deciding to take the diplomatic way and think about the offer in the future.

"It's normal for us to spend time in Harry's house, it's our meeting place. I'm sure you'll love Aunt Eleadora and the elves make the most delicious desserts!" the small girl confided. Harry groaned and started walking faster. "Don't worry. He's grumpy because we don't allow him to live in the library, as I'm sure he'd try to if we didn't force him out," she winked.



Fleur and Luna talked about multiple things on their way to their class. When the girls arrived, they saw Harry was already there, reading a book and ignoring their friends. A tall girl with almost golden hair walked towards them, beside her was a tall, handsome boy. The foreign girl wondered if it was requisite to have breath-taking looks to be Harry Potter's friend.

"So what did you do to him? Harry has been sulking since he arrived," the tall girl asked.

"I may have reminded him that the castle has turned into our reunion point... And perhaps reminded him of Aunt Eleadora. He's still sensitive about the idea of her teaching 'his little Elizabeth'," the girl said with an innocent smile. "Before I forget, this is Fleur Delacour."

"Daphne Greengrass. Thanks for making him sulk," she said with a pleased smirk.

"Well, I tried to do that for almost a month, so I officially concede defeat. Cedric Diggory," the boy introduced himself.

"Come with us. There are others that need to be introduced," Luna said, taking Fleur's hand and guiding the French girl towards a large group of people.

Fleur observed the students with interest. While most of them were Slytherins, there were also three Gryffindors and they seemed to be close, unlike the rumours she heard about the rivalry between the two Houses. She also recognized Viktor Krum, the famous Seeker that, somehow, was part of this strange assortment of people.

"Listen, everyone! This is Fleur Delacour. Okay, so the bleached blond is Draco Malfoy, the idiot trying to sleep is Theodore Nott and the other is Blaise Zabini. The redheaded morons are George Weasley and Fred Weasley, respectively, and the one they're corrupting is Viktor Krum. The midget bullying the idiot is Flora Carrow and the idiot is Adrian Pucey," Daphne introduced, earning many complaints.

"Be kinder," Cedric chided the girl. "This is Neville Longbottom and this is Hestia Carrow. Terrence is speaking with Professor Kowalski and will arrive in a bit."

"There's also Justin Finch-Fletchey, but he's in the intermediate level, so you'll meet him at dinner. We also have Marcus Travers, but he's graduated already. I'm sure you'll be able to meet him during one of our Hogsmeade visits... We also have Elizabeth, though she studies abroad, so you'll have to wait for the holidays to meet her," Daphne shrugged.

"I want to clarify that I'm not bleached - it's natural platinum blond," Draco complained, much to the French student's amusement.

"That's the entire group," Luna sighed in contentment, something that was not lost on the members close to her.

"Are you planning to visit Hogsmeade? Tomorrow will be the first visit of the year and you can always join us," the kind-looking boy named Neville offered.

"We'll take you to our favourite place, Dulcis Magicae. They have the best chocolate in the world," one of the redheads promised.

Fleur never felt so out of place and, at the same time, so included. Although it was obvious the group were friends for a long time, they included her in their interactions as if she was an old friend instead of someone they met minutes ago. However, she felt comfortable. None of the boys stared at her intently and it was almost as if they weren't even aware of her beauty, treating her as a normal person. The other girls engaged her in easy conversation, neither glaring at her nor showing signs of envy. So Fleur allowed herself to relax and enjoy their company until a boy with honey-brown hair came running to the class a few seconds before it started, she assumed he was Terrence.

Even though Fleur admitted not having high expectations for the British school after it lost its place among the best schools in Europe more than a century ago, she was surprised by the level of education it offered. The Hogwarts castle was almost rudimentary compared to Beauxbatons, however, it had a quaint charm that made it inviting. During her short stay in the school, Professor Kowalski's class was the most enjoyable. Nevertheless, she considered the physical part of the class as a brutal, cruel, and unusual way of ingraining the lessons in the students. Fleur considered Defence Against the Dark Arts the most painful and demanding class she ever experienced.

Of course, that only lasted until she committed the terrible mistake of joining Martial Magic. Never before she felt so exhausted and that was considering she did not do half of what the others did because she lacked proper clothing. Fleur eyed with equal degrees of admiration and horror as Harry Potter and his group were the only ones able to finish the exercises and begin duelling when the other students were almost dragging themselves to try to complete the sets. She would never consider herself unfit, but perhaps it was time to re-evaluate her opinions.

"They are nuts," Viktor hissed beside her and she was forced to agree.

"I believe that training with them will be harder than training for the tasks," Fleur muttered, not taking away her eyes from the spectacle.

"They wanted me to join their training schedule, but the trip did not sit well with me so I have been resting. I'm not sure I want to join anymore," the tall male complained.

Fleur wholeheartedly agreed.

The large group walked to the great hall after their classes with Professor Munter. Adrian was helping Viktor to walk in a steady line instead of the drunken steps the boy was taking. Terrence was helping Fleur to walk, almost carrying her because she looked ready to keel over. Cedric was leaning on Neville, who helped the boy without complaints. Draco took out the necessary vials of Navitas potions, a special creation by Fred and Flora, with a little (a lot) help from Eleadora, and forced their new members to have a vial each. It was a potion they designed to restore energy and stamina. The pair had worked hard to ensure it was highly effective and had little to no side effects. In a few words, it was perfect to renew your energy after a battle.

When they arrived at the hall, their three members looked more composed, but their legs were still too weak to walk without help. All of them plopped into their seats, where Justin was already sitting and eyeing them with amusement. Before he could tease them, food appeared in the middle of the table and they began serving it onto their plates.

Fleur was the heir of an old family and the daughter of an important politician. Thus, she was raised as such. She possessed impeccable table manners and a grace that spoke of years of practice. All her teaching went down the gutter when she saw the delicious food in front of her. After such a tiring day and gruelling torture, her normally absent appetite morphed into a ravenous hunger she never experienced. The only thing stopping her from giving in and devouring like a savage were the utensils. The chopsticks and large spoon disconcerted her.

"Justin, this is Fleur," Luna explained, filling her plate.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I see you enjoyed Munter's class," he teased.

"It was not what I was expecting. I have a question: What kind of food is this?" the confused girl asked to no one in particular, deciding she would skip the embarrassment of asking how to eat it.

"I'm sorry, we forgot. After training, we eat this, otherwise, we get hungry soon after the feast is over," Daphne explained. "That's ginger rice, quinoa, garlic salmon, Miso soup, tofu, salad, and green juice."

"Don't try the green juice. It's disgusting," Theo muttered, grimacing at the glasses.

"It's not bad, but he's afraid of vegetables," Daphne told the girl.

"The food is good, don't worry," Viktor reassured her.

Luna helped Fleur to fill her plate with the basics and handed the girl the typical Eastern utensils. The French student took a careful bite and, after noticing the food was delicious, she began eating at a pace that satisfied her hunger. After she was done, she decided to try a sip of the green concoction in her glass. It was unlike anything she tasted before, having a tangy yet slightly sweet taste, but it was so refreshing that she continued drinking. Perhaps the girl didn't notice or preferred to ignore the astounded looks she was receiving from a few members of the Guild.

"She drank it..." a perturbed Blaise muttered.

"Harry already corrupted her," Theo mumbled, looking at the girl.

"Did you enjoy the food?" Harry asked their new member.

"It was different, but it was good. I especially enjoyed the soup," Fleur answered politely.

"I'm glad, though I hope you saved space for dessert," the boy commented.

Before Fleur could answer, the empty food trays disappeared, being replaced by many small plates of different desserts. Fleur could recognize the different ice-cream flavours and the

enticing puddings. Without further encouragement, she chose a ramekin filled with chocolate pudding and ate it with gusto. The day was filled with new experiences for the French girl, from socializing with a large group of strangers to eating like a starved beast. She couldn't think about anything that would make it better.

"We still have time before curfew. Do you want to come with us? We have a room to ourselves," the mocha-skinned boy named Blaise confided.

This time she didn't hesitate to accept the offer.

The large group walked out of the great hall, dividing themselves into no apparent order and engaging in conversation. For a moment, she panicked because she felt like a stranger, an intruder even, but those feelings disappeared when the tall boy named Neville approached her. Fleur noticed, with slight amusement, how the boy was still in the awkward stages of puberty. However, his sharp features spoke of a handsome visage and his school uniform was unable to hide his muscular build.

"Did you like Munter's class?" the boy asked in a gentle tone.

"It was tiring, but I had fun," she explained, struggling a little with the language she began learning a few months ago.

"He's quite strict about the physical part of the training, though he has solid reasons. Most of the class would be unable to run fast or long enough to save their lives. In comparison, you did quite well. Is there any sport you like?"

"Quidditch, but I haven't played in a long time. The teams at Beauxbatons are... selective," she muttered, looking around to avoid the boy's gaze. She noticed they were taking the stairs that descended towards the dungeons and patted her wrist to check that her wand was in place.

"I see," the boy said, somehow understanding the real reason she wasn't allowed to join. "Why don't you try to join a team here? Fred, Terrence, Adrian, George, and Cedric are trying to form a team. I am sure you're better than any of the others who want to join. Besides, they already trust you, so it makes the teamwork easier," Neville informed her, indicating the Quidditch players.

"I don't think that's a good idea. I came to participate in the Tournament after all."

"I know, but don't forget it will be your last year at school. Enjoy it as much as you can," the boy said, giving her a gentle smile.

It was good they arrived at a door that was opened by someone in the front because Fleur had no idea how to answer the earnest boy who, despite being younger, possessed a maturity that was far beyond his years. She looked around the room and her eyes widened in surprise. The room was beyond anything Beauxbatons possessed, outshining it in decor and exquisite elegance. There were many different areas that she ignored in favour of the comfortable-looking sitting area.

She followed the example of the other people in the room, taking a seat in a single couch and waiting to see what would happen. Much to her surprise, one of the young girls, whose name she was unable to remember, and one of the redhead twins headed to a place with glass walls that seemed to contain enough potions equipment and ingredients that would turn Flamel himself green with envy. At least half of the group walked towards a rocky place that seemed to be taken out of a professional duelling circuit, something Fleur knew that no student should have free access to during school.

"How do you find the energy to keep training?" the boy named Cedric asked.

"Unlike a few lazy sacks of bones, we enjoy it... as long as Aunt Eleadora and Professor Flitwick aren't against us," Daphne muttered the last part with obvious reluctance.

"Professor Flitwick is a fearsome man," Viktor agreed, looking solemn.

"So what will we do about the Quidditch team? The ones who want to join are more interested in being part of the Guild than in playing," Terrence told the group. Neville, instead of divulging what she said to him, looked at her in silent encouragement.

"I can join," Viktor offered.

"We already have a Seeker, sorry," the other redhead twin commented. That simple dismissal surprised Fleur because they just rejected a professional Quidditch player with no hesitation. Such disinterested loyalties awoke her interest in joining and perhaps finding a way of belonging.

"I can go for another position... I never really liked being a Seeker. It's boring most of the game because you have to search for the blasted ball instead of helping your team," the Bulgarian student commented and brightened at his revelation, especially because no one judged him.

"I know, and I also hate it. I was the Seeker for Hufflepuff. I'm glad that I'll be Chaser at last," Cedric said, looking quite animated. "What position you like? That's if you like the game," he shrugged, implying no one would judge him if that was the case.

"Keeper," Viktor confessed with no hesitation.

"I would like to try for Chaser," Fleur announced. Her heart was beating fast and she regretted that brief moment of impulsive courage.

"That's great! Though we still need to try you both, I'm sure that, if you two pass, we'll be the best team in school!" George exclaimed, high-fiving the Hufflepuff prefect.

"We have the Quidditch room installed already. Someone would not stop bothering me until it was done," Harry sighed, eyeing the dreamy blonde girl.

"Do you want to give it a shot now?" Terrence asked.

"Don't be insensitive. They've just had their first class with Professor Munter," Neville chided the older boy with a soft tone that managed to convey his seriousness.

"We can try. We are rested and the potion really helped," Fleur commented, her inner Quidditch enthusiast taking control.

"It's the door at the back, the only one with a Q," Harry commented, taking out a book and proceeding to ignore his surroundings.

The potential Quidditch team walked to the signalled door after retrieving the players that were engaged in other activities. The redhead twin that was working with the young girl on some sort of potion had to be physically dragged away from his work because he refused to leave the room.

The moment they opened the door, Fleur's smile dropped. The room was bigger than expected. Much bigger. The ceiling resembled a bright, clouded sky, perfect for a match, and, instead of the usual bleachers, there were two large boxes to watch the game from. Beside the entrance, she could see an assortment of brooms, equipment, and protective gear that, judging by the quality and brands, it was worth a small fortune.

"The changing rooms and showers are behind that door," Luna informed the group and started walking towards the stairs that led to the boxes, dragging Justin with her.

The next hours were spent in a 'light' practice, where she managed to show enough talent to be accepted into the team. Much to her surprise, an impromptu match began with the other members that were practising their duelling skills – using facilities Fleur believed would be more appropriate for Auror training than student workout. Somehow, they still managed to have enough energy to play. The French student admitted not having so much fun in a long time. The game was fast-paced and, in the end, no one knew how it ended, being too tired to even wonder who won.

When the whole group returned to the main room's seating area, most collapsed on the couches.

"Did you enjoy the game?" Harry asked, wearing an amused grin.

"The team is complete," a breathless Adrian announced.

"Neville's a good Keeper, far too good," Cedric complained.

"Our Daphne is as cruel as she is beautiful," Fred sighed in a theatrical way.

"I think it's time to go to bed," Justin said, pointing with his chin at the sleepy Luna.

"Considering that the only thing she did was watch the game and be a sarcastic commentator, one would think that she wouldn't be the first one to fall asleep, for once," Blaise muttered, his soft eyes betraying his amusement.

"We can walk you to your tower. It's on the way," Neville offered Fleur, and the only response she could manage was a weak nod.

After many waves, the small group left the room. The French girl noticed with relief that the halls were as warm as the room was. That lasted until they somehow arrived at the

Ravenclaw Tower after walking up a single flight of stairs. She didn't know whether she should be confused by the sudden drop in temperature or because they managed to go up more than seven floors in a minute... Maybe she was just tired and didn't notice when they walked through the castle.

"Sleep well," one of the redhead twins said as a farewell.

"If you want, you can join us tomorrow. We'll be going to Hogsmeade for breakfast with Marcus," the other offered.

"I will, thank you," Fleur answered, giving them the first honest smile in a long time.

"Please, force Luna to go to bed or she'll end up sleeping on a couch," Neville requested, looking with fondness at the small girl beside her. "We'll stop bothering you now. Goodnight."

Fleur believed she would wake up because the experience felt surreal. In a few hours, her life changed and she almost fell asleep the moment she laid on her bed. Only her fear of everything disappearing in the morning stopped her from surrendering to exhaustion... Of course, sometimes not even a strong will is able to stop a person giving in and she was unconscious in seconds.

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Fleur Delacour walked towards the main gates, grateful for her mother's overprotective nature and packing her warmest sweater into her luggage. The silk uniform of her school was too thin to offer any kind of warmth, especially because the castle corridors were no warmer than the outside. She looked to her side again, trying to reassure herself she wasn't dreaming. The sight of Flora arguing with Draco about who had the best hair was enough to calm her.

When she woke up, Fleur was dreading the idea of going to the common room, even when she was ready for more than an hour. Finding no other excuses to remain in her room, she went down. Seeing Luna waiting for her filled her with a considerable amount of relief. Somehow, she was accepted into the group and she swore to be loyal to the people who offered her a place amongst them.

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The Guild was walking towards the village, ready to have breakfast at the café with Marcus. Harry paid attention to their new members, thinking about how they adapted to their new lives. Justin and Cedric adapted so fast that it was almost as if they were with them from the beginning. The problem is Hufflepuff was divided in opinion regarding both boys. Cedric was their golden boy and most accepted his decision of leaving the Quidditch team after a few weeks. Perhaps the scolding Professor Sprout gave them helped the situation. What no one expected was Cedric becoming more even more popular because of the Guild.

On the other hand, Justin received open criticism that bordered on harassment. All the people that were too frightened to go against Cedric went after the younger boy, even the pair he once called friends. Susan Bones ended up being an unexpected ally, defending him in their common room and even going so far as challenging many people to duels. However, Justin

spent most of his time with Cedric and the Guild, so he had little interaction with his House and their open hostility did not affect him.

Viktor was an addition Harry was not expecting. The boy was silent most of the time and his almost flawless English turned heavily accented whenever he spoke with outsiders. The Bulgarian possessed dry humour that matched his own and enviable self-control, forcing himself to test his own limits while training. Nevertheless, he was also gentle and caring, treating the younger members like siblings and indulging them to the point of spoiling most of the group.

Fleur was still an unknown element and Harry was careful with the information that was revealed to the girl, but Luna trusted her, so he tried to be as honest as possible. It was quite obvious the girl's heritage done her no favours while growing up. Whilst Fleur was graceful and polite, her awkwardness when interacting with someone could still be felt. She was not used to being with people and Harry was not blind. Most girls eyed her with envy even if they were trying to conceal it, rationalizing their illogical dislike for the girl by classifying her as shallow and stupid even when they knew nothing about her. Many boys believed Fleur was a prize, treating her as eye candy instead of the intelligent person she was. She found solace in his group and Harry hoped Luna was right because having a talented Veela in their ranks would be extremely beneficial.

All in all, the new members were adapting rather fast to their new lifestyle. Cedric and Viktor did not enjoy the physical training, but the latter had a steel discipline that did not allow him to quit, much to Cedric's and Theo's horror. Fleur had above average stamina and physical strength that didn't fit her small frame, however, her body was not used to being pushed. Nevertheless, the girl was filled with determination and she refused to give up, even when she was on the border of collapsing. Justin, on the other hand, was so used to exercising he was the one to advance the most, yet he still had loads to learn before he could reach the level the Guild required... They all did, and yet, no matter how much they still needed to advance, they managed to fit perfectly with the group of misfits.

Harry looked around when they entered the café. Marcus was sitting at their usual table, reading something that appeared to be fascinating, if the man's face was anything to go by. The whole group walked towards their table, except Luna, of course. The girl, instead of walking, decided to jump on their oldest member and almost give him a heart attack in the process.

"This is Marcus Travers," Justin introduced. "These two are Viktor Krum and Fleur Delacour, our new members."

"Pleased to meet you. I already ordered breakfast, but someone didn't tell me we had new people," the young man complained, "so if you want to order anything else, feel free to do so."

"What's this?" Luna asked Marcus.

"A book," Adrian deadpanned and tried not to laugh at the girl's sour expression.



"Great observation, Adrian. I'm glad that all the Bludgers your head stopped haven't killed your remaining brain cells," Terrence commented.

"Hey! Do you want me-"

"That looks old. Why are you reading it, Marcus?" Daphne asked, interrupting any possible discussion before it even began.

"It's one of my ancestor's journals. He was one of the members of the Hogwarts Court," Marcus shrugged, but his sharp eyes were focused on the two new members in case they were not informed about how their group worked.

"We already explained," Hestia said, looking at the man.

"So what do we have to do?" Draco asked, looking impatient. Harry signalled for the group to cast a silencing barrier around them to avoid any eavesdroppers.

"My ancestor wrote about their Queen, a woman named Helena of Morgen, but used the name Clarissa of Lowell during her school years." Noticing the intense stares and concealed surprise, Marcus decided to explain. "He didn't know whether she was related to Morgana, but he believed her magic was so pure she must either be related to her or to the Fay somehow... The way he described the coronation was symbolic and there were no defined steps. He said Hogwarts accepted their Queen as her protector when they announced her, bathing her in power. He just wrote that they announced the Queen and waited for the castle to answer... There's also another thing. You know that the school elves serve the students because they are what the castle considers her children, but the Queen was able to give them orders. It was because Hogwarts blessed her, or at least that's what my ancestor wrote," Marcus explained, looking at Harry.

"So we don't know if we'll have the same benefits," the boy muttered, understanding Marcus' implication.

"Indeed, but we can assume we'll have some of the benefits they did, such as knowing all the secret passages and controlling the castle's structure. What interests me the most is that my ancestor described the school as a beating heart - like a loving mother trying to nurture the students and a spiteful enemy to those who harm her residents," the man finished narrating.

"We all know the school can't attack people," George said with a raised eyebrow.

"That may be the fault of the headmasters who believed the wards didn't need to be recharged. In the journal was described how the Queen restored the protections of the school because, after three-hundred years, no one bothered to do so," Marcus told the group.

"So she's weak at the moment," Blaise concluded.

"The first step would be hiring the best ward crafters that Gringotts has to offer. When we have the ward stones ready, we'll be able to modify them and add them to the castle," Harry said, already lost in his plans.

"Did Ragnok contact you about the thing in the Room of Requirement?" Marcus asked Harry.

"I forgot to tell you, sorry. It was the diadem and it's already destroyed. Mars and Ares found many interesting objects aside from that, including ancient manuscripts and a considerable amount of gold," Harry sighed.

"If it's considerable for you, that means it is a fortune," Theo joked.

"The money will be used to improve the castle's wards. We'll need them," Luna stated, and Harry looked at the girl. "We should also place wards around the forbidden forest. The centaurs and fairies are almost defenceless against an attack."

"I'll send a letter to Ragnok today... Perhaps we can make another donation to the school. This time it can be another Quidditch pitch and many other improvements that we can use to mask when the wards are being installed. Any suggestions?" Harry asked, deciding to begin eating breakfast.

"An entire renovation, the whole school hasn't been maintained in a millennium," Daphne huffed, but no one chided her because she was right. "I also think the path and boats for the first years need to change. As the rational person I am, I don't think that guiding eleven-year-olds through an austere path in the middle of the night and placing them in boats that don't have the minimum protections is intelligent."

"She is right, I also thought it was ridiculous," Cedric agreed, "I think it would be good to improve the carriages. Since Hagrid left, few thestrals accept to guide them."

"It is because none of the teachers understands other species the way Hagrid does," Luna muttered, a dreamy smile adorning her face. "I would like to change astronomy, it is too troublesome to go to classes in the middle of the night."

"I was going to suggest new telescopes for the school, but you have a point," Theo nodded.

"It is ridiculous to ask the students to buy one when it would be easier for the school to have their own," Draco commented.

"A planetarium would be great, that way we could take astronomy during the day," Justin said.

"What is that?" asked a confused George.

"Right, muggle thing. Is a place where you can see the sky in much more detail thanks to a projector..." Justin's enthusiasm was extinguished with that last word. "Forget it, it won't work."

"It could, but I need to ask for aunt Eleadora's help for the project. I think that illusions will be necessary, that or some kind of runes," Harry mused, lost in his thoughts.

"Aside from your planet thingy, it would be good to buy new telescopes as Draco suggested," Flora said, deciding to interrupt a conversation she did not understand.

"I think it would be good to hire counsellors for each House. Many students tend to have problems and they aren't close enough to the teachers so they keep it all in," Neville suggested. "Two counsellors for the whole school would be a great start. However, I think we should hire first generations with knowledge in psychology. That subject has been incredibly useful to understand many things."

"That is an excellent suggestion," Harry nodded, "It will take time to train the appropriate people, but I think we can manage to hire empathetic first generations."

"They have to be young so the students relate better," Fleur added, looking uncharacteristically shy.

"All of that sounds great and dandy, but I have an even better suggestion in mind. We should get some way of making the classrooms warm. During winter it's a nightmare to keep asking the teachers to cast warming charms," Blaise sulked.

"The greenhouses, if they're expanded then the school will be able to grow its own plants for food and medicinal herbs. Besides, it will be the perfect excuse to examine the area to see how many ward stones we'll need," Neville suggested.

"Enchanted lamps. I'd be glad to never see an oil one again," Flora said.

"We can also request warding to be taught as an elective. I'm sure Ragnok knows someone we can hire to be a professor but, at the same time, review the wards at the school and whether we will need to add more protection," Draco suggested. Harry had a slight suspicion that the boy wanted that subject to be included so he could further his studies on the topic, but did not comment because his arguments were solid.

"In the Muggle world, we have more sports. Maybe it would be good to introduce them to the magical world," Justin commented.

"All of those are excellent ideas. The donation will be made in April, so we need to prepare a proposal for the changes. Professor Flitwick can help with that. What sports do you suggest?" Harry asked.

"He knows?!" Cedric exclaimed, choking with his food.

"Of course he does. He isn't the head of Ravenclaw for his handsome face, you know," Daphne retorted, scowling at the vegetables she was stabbing for having the audacity of not tasting of something the girl liked.

"We can try football. It's quite popular," Justin said, ignoring the other conversation. "There's also basketball, volleyball, and tennis. I'm not sure about others. I don't think the magical people are ready for so many changes."

"We can add others later on, but I think it would be good to have a pool, even if it's just for relaxing," Terrence suggested.

"Mother enjoys ballet so I think that would be a decent option," Blaise said.

"We can build a sports complex or something like that if the teachers don't want it inside the castle," Fred commented.

Viktor and Fleur observed this unusual interaction with interest. It was not the kind of conversation teenagers should be having, but they understood the Guild was more than a group of friends in a school. Viktor already knew this group was important but, until now, he had no idea how involved they were in the real world, and his resolution to take part was cemented. Fleur, on the other hand, did not know what to think. They were kids playing a game of adults - that was her first thought - and then she recognized the badge the oldest boy wore. It was a Ministry badge, the kind that only the high-ranking employees wore, and she knew it was not a game. However, she already promised herself to be loyal and nothing would change her resolution.

"So how is everything at work?" Draco asked the eldest male.

"Much better since Fudge was sacked. Even better now that Umbridge is gone," a content Marcus answered.

"Was the woman re-assigned or fired?" Hestia asked.

"She was questioned just in case she was aware of any of the illicit activities of the last Minister. I wasn't expecting much but I was surprised," Marcus commented, "She was the spy of many Death Eaters who were generous in their donations. She was sentenced to the lower security area in Azkaban for a year."

"That's some of the best news I've heard. I don't think I'd be able to tolerate her irritating voice during the Wizengamot meetings my dad forces me to," Draco said, wearing a relieved expression.

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Luna cuddled up to Marcus' side, using that as an excuse to observe with glee as the plans to announce their King to the castle were made. Soon, the Hogwarts Court would be formed. She observed the French girl with interest. She was fiercely loyal and that trait would be important in the future. Viktor was intense and did nothing by halves, which meant he would contribute to the Guild in ways that the others were not able to... Yes, they were perfect.

The castle was thrumming in excitement, ready to accept her new protectors. Ignoring their detailed plans, Luna decided to walk towards the empty wall beside the front door and placed her hand on it. Waiting until she felt the wall beating like a gentle heart, she called Harry - his magic was the only one the castle would accept. She tried to not show surprise when she felt him beside her. The small girl should have known that, if it was related to magic, then their King would be the first one to feel it. She grabbed his hand and placed it where hers was a few seconds before. Taking a few steps back, she spoke at last.

"We are requesting to be your protectors under the guidance of our King, Harry James Potter. Do you accept our humble petition?"

What happened next could not be described with simple words, and not even a picture would do the marvellous event justice. Hogwarts, alive and feeling, accepted them eagerly.

However, it was not the spectacle they were expecting. There were no blinding lights or thunders, or even sparkles. There was a deep understanding instead. Every person in the room was able to feel her, as if the castle was part of them. They could feel her sorrow, weakness, and impotence. They could feel her joy but, most of all, they could feel her fear, because there was some kind of danger in the school.

The feeling could have lasted an eternity, but it was as ephemeral as a single breath. Although they were not able to feel her as they did seconds before, they were still aware of her presence and it was a comforting sensation.

Before anyone else could react, Luna's sweet laughter erupted and she hugged Viktor in glee. The others followed her example, being filled with such a pure joy that it was impossible to contain.

The Guild was complete and a Court was formed.

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The weeks that came after the day the Hogwarts Court was formed were nothing they were expecting or even ready to confront. Harry, true to his word, contacted Ragnok to arrange the contract of confidentiality for all the people he needed to hire to reinforce the wards of the school after centuries of neglect. It would be an arduous job that would take the better part of the year to have the ward stones ready and, of course, that did not include the installation. However, Harry considered it a necessary step. He felt the wards and they resembled wet paper, unable to hold back a strong wind, much less an attack.

Ragnok was already writing the draft for the next donation, being explicit with the requirements they would place on the school. The boy also considered asking the school elves to place wards but decided against it. The fact that his own elves were able to pop inside the castle was an invaluable advantage he was unwilling to give up.

Their school life also changed in an expected but still surprising way. If before the halls seemed to take them anywhere they wished to go, now it almost felt as if they could control the school. There was not a single place where they were not allowed to enter, including the common rooms or the Hogwarts hall. Not even the restricted section in the library was out of bounds, even after all the wards that were placed during the summer. There was also a special discovery that was still hard to process because the event was so unbelievable it would be easy to classify it as a mere illusion created by an overactive imagination.

It had been a normal day for the Court. They were walking towards their headquarters when the school guided them to another place. It was an unknown part of the castle. The stones on the floor still looked rough, as if they were not used with frequency. What caught their attention, however, was the wall-length symbol. It resembled the school's crest, but the design had a few differences. The typical House animals were still part of it but in a different order. The most obvious disparity was the two dragons surrounding the emblem, instead of the usual ornamentation.

Before anyone could speak, the wall parted and they were allowed inside a room that seemed ancient at best. There were four doors. Each one had engraved initials, along with many bookcases and a small sitting place with chairs that looked so old they were afraid to use

them. However, the most interesting feature was a small table where a single journal was resting.

Overpowered with curiosity, Harry walked towards the table and cast a few detecting charms in case the journal was cursed. Finding no trace of evil intent, he picked the worn book up and opened it with delicate moves. The first thing he noticed was the initials H. G. M.

"I don't recognize the language it's written in," Harry sighed, giving up at the sight of unknown symbols.

"Of course you don't," Luna stated. "Helena Guinevere of Morgen was an intelligent woman and decided that only those who were worthy would inherit her knowledge. She encrypted every single book in the room herself. It is your duty to discover how she did it." The girl's expression were blank but her usual pale, silvery irises seemed to have lost most of their colour.

"So what is this room?" Daphne asked the girl with caution in order not to break whatever trance she was in.

"The founders' room, of course. Each room contains their journals and the protections around it are heavy, but I know you'll be able to do what the last Queen wasn't able to," she said looking at Draco and Flora. "The information that this room contains will be invaluable, for the last Queen was the only daughter of Morgana Le Fay."

"What should we do first?" Blaise asked the girl.

"Begin with Rowena's room, her magic was weak before her death. Finish with Helga's, she died as a warrior and her magic remains strong to this day," the girl whispered. Her almost white irises recovered their colour as she regained full awareness. Without wasting a second, Blaise held the confused girl and helped her to stabilize.

"So I guess we should search the entire room for something Helena might have left to understand these books," Harry sighed.

"Or we can call the elves. For someone who has more elves than most of Magical Europe combined, you tend to forget how efficient they are," Hestia said with no real fire behind her words.

"Right. We also need to tell Marcus," the boy sighed, wondering how many sleepless nights would be devoted to understanding what the last Queen left.

That evening was dedicated to sorting out the books, a task that the Potter house-elves facilitated. Rome was the one to find minuscule inscriptions in different parts of the rooms, giving Harry a basic clue on how to solve the unnecessarily complicated puzzle the woman had left behind.

That day turned even more interesting for another reason. Viktor showed his magical talent when he cast a spell no one knew existed to reveal any possible hidden features.

"That was incredible! What spell did you use?" Hestia almost demanded to know, ignoring how the boy seemed to be abashed by her praise.

"I created it," the Bulgarian student muttered, and the room fell in silence.

"You're a spell crafter!" Justin exclaimed.

"That's much more interesting than being an International Professional Quidditch player," Blaise commented.

In that way, the new Court discovered Viktor's talent for crafting spells and little Hestia took particular interest in that branch. Harry would never imagine having someone with so much knowledge about the subject in his group. The older boy narrated how his mother taught him from the basics, passing her extensive knowledge to him. When he saw the longing and sadness in Viktor's eyes, Harry swore to help him free his mother, no matter how hard it was.

It was interesting how their dynamic worked. The moment Harry decided that he would help Viktor, the whole group seemed to reach a unanimous agreement to do the same. Even Fleur, who was their newest member, seemed to be in tune with them because the same steel resolution could be seen in her eyes.

Their moment was broken when a screeching noise pierced the room. Everyone got ready to confront the threat. However, it ended up being a simple compartment hinge complaining about the lack of use and oil. A compartment that appeared where once was nothing but the grey stone of the fireplace. Thanks to Viktor, they had discovered something hidden - a simple metal circle that was no larger than a plate, but heavier than a boulder and which had a Hydra carved in the middle, surrounded by symbols no one was able to recognize. Beside it, there was a simple piece of parchment, on which a few lines were written.

"Our symbol, the Hydra, represents our ideals. If one of us is gone, two will take their place. Ceterums, protectors of magic."

"If I'm not wrong, they were the ones who created Diagon Alley and protected Hogsmeade from any possible attack. They established the outer wards of the school, the village and the Alley," Adrian said, his eyes widening with realization.

"They changed history and so will we," Luna announced.

Aside from that interesting event, what had caught them all by surprise was how aware they were of the castle, which carried with it the frustration of being unable to understand who or what the threat was inside the school. Hogwarts alerted them a few times, especially when the international delegations were inside, but they were unable to find anything strange. Even Fleur and Viktor kept an eye on their headmasters and fellow students, finding nothing out of the ordinary. Therefore, they concluded that the castle was wary of the strangers... However, they still kept their guards up.

Aside from that perturbing sensation, everything seemed to be going well. The day their Quidditch team was complete, his friends urged him to speak with Professor McGonagall for permission while they spoke with Madam Hooch. Of course they had to send him to the lion's

den. Not that he minded that much because he enjoyed speaking with the woman, but it was not his idea or even his team to be representing. Not that they cared, of course, though the trip was worth it, even if it was just to see the woman out of the strict persona she used most of the time.

Harry was walking towards the Transfiguration Professor's office, a pouting Fleur walking beside him. The Quidditch players debated for a few hours over who would be the captain, their discussion getting louder with each passing moment. The French girl got tired of it and put them all in their places. In that way, Fleur Delacour became the unwilling captain of the team. Harry managed to persuade her to come with him to talk with McGonagall and felt quite smug about that fact. Reaching their destination, the boy knocked on the door. A few moments later, it was opened.

"Mister Potter, Miss Delacour. It's a surprise to see you here. Something happened?" the woman asked, immediately alert.

"Not at all, Professor. We have a simple request," Harry answered, calming the teacher.

"Of course. Take a seat." Harry nodded and pulled out a chair for the older girl, who glared at him but took it. The boy pushed her chair and tried to hide his satisfied smirk.

"Thank you, Professor," the girl said in a polite tone, ignoring the boy sitting beside her.

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Minerva McGonagall was a woman of the world, having experienced intense love and equally intense pain. She was always clever but, no matter how much she thought about the reason why these teenagers were in her office, she couldn't find a possible answer, unless... Harry Potter inherited most of his traits from Lily but, perhaps, there was also a little James in him. While the boy was young, he was at an age where females started being attractive and, even though the foreign students were in the castle for less than two weeks, Minerva had no doubt any girl would fall for her handsome student. However, she expected him to pursue another girl, maybe Miss Greengrass or Miss Lovegood, and yet, the more she looked at the teens in front of her, the better the prospect of their relationship looked.

Miss Delacour was a beauty among beauties, owner of a sharp mind and lethal with a wand. Now that she thought about it, the girl reminded her so much of Lily that she wondered whether that was the kind of woman the Potters were attracted to in order to better the family. Not that Harry was inferior in any way, he was extremely handsome, making more than one heart beat faster when he passed by. He possessed impeccable manners and was a true gentleman, treating every person with respect, and his talent with magic classified him as no less than a genius... Though Minerva expected him to go with Filius because they were quite close. It was an honour to guide the boy in this new stage of his life.

For a moment, she allowed her inner romantic to take control and was already imagining their future. Harry Potter escorting a glowing Miss Delacour to the Yule Ball, then they would send letters to each other, with the girl eventually moving to the country in order to be close to her beloved. Perhaps they would also marry young; she could already see their beautiful blond children with vivid green eyes or maybe black hair paired with innocent blue eyes...



"Professor McGonagall?" the boy asked, forcing her inner romance enthusiast to surrender control.

"Excuse me. You were saying?" Minerva said, trying to control her embarrassment.

"We wanted to ask your permission to form a Hogwarts Quidditch team," the girl told her.

"I believe Madam Hooch is the one in charge," the professor answered, trying to contain her disappointment at the request.

"Yes, but this is a bit different. My friends decided to form a Quidditch team that would include foreign students. Fleur was chosen as captain," Harry clarified, surprising the woman.

"That isn't something that I was expecting," the woman admitted, looking strangely crestfallen. "I see no problem in including our visitors."

"The thing is, ma'am, that Viktor Krum is part of the team," Fleur explained, surprising the woman.

"I now understand... I don't think it's fair to have a professional Quidditch player, so he would need to be replaced or you wouldn't be allowed to compete."

"He won't be playing as a Seeker, but as the Keeper," Harry told the woman, his vivid green eyes melting any kind of resistance.

"If that's the case, I see no problems," McGonagall agreed, sighing at the boy's charm. Harry would be able to persuade a nun to follow the path of sin with a single look.

"Thank you, Professor. We'll do our best," the French girl promised.

"I hope you do and I'm eager to see you play. I'm glad that you decided to join a team at last, Mister Potter," Minerva congratulated the confused boy.

"I'm not joining any team," he answered. "I decided to walk Fleur to speak with you in order to offer moral support," he explained, failing to conceal his amusement at the baffled expression of the girl sitting beside him.

"I'm glad that you're the perfect example of a gentleman. Lily would be proud," Minerva congratulated the boy, feeling disappointed at the revelation. It seemed that Harry hadn't inherited the most minuscule interest in Quidditch, just like his mother. "Is that everything you wish to tell me?"

"Yes, that's all," Harry said, much to her disappointment. "We'll stop bothering you. Have a great evening, madam."

"You're both welcome any time. Have a good day," the woman said, waving them off.

Such a shame. Though that didn't mean Harry Potter and Fleur Delacour wouldn't date in the future. Minerva began daydreaming about their intense love story and was already planning on the betting pool she would begin with the other teachers.

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The students left the office in direction of the Court's room, each lost in their own thoughts. Harry wondered what Professor McGonagall was expecting because, for a moment, she seemed far too eager. Perhaps she really was hoping for him to become a Quidditch player, just like his father, something Harry was not willing to do in this lifetime. The game holds no appeal for him and he would rather use his valuable time doing something productive.

"Was the professor expecting something else?" Fleur asked after a while of walking in silence.

"I'm not sure, though I admit she looked far too interested at the beginning of our conversation," he agreed, and, out of mischief, he decided to add something. "Perhaps she was expecting us to confess our undying love for each other."

"I'm sorry to disappoint her, but I don't think that will be happening in this lifetime or the next," the girl snorted.

"You offend me, Miss Delacour. Are you implying that I'm not good enough?" Harry asked in mock offence.

"I'm saying that I'm not a child molester. In the eyes of the law, I am officially an adult," Fleur answered with a graceful hand gesture.

"I'm glad your interests don't stray towards that dark path but, according to my observations, they sway towards another official adult who happens to be a Prefect and is a great Quidditch player," the boy commented, containing his amusement at the girl's flushed cheeks.

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Harry Potter waited with impatience for the History class the Sorting Hat would dictate. They discovered the Founders' Chamber, as they decided to call the room, a few days ago and questions were plaguing his mind. Harry knew history was far too tainted with the opinions of the ones who wrote it to have an accurate description of the past. However, until then, he never imagined the story of the founders being completely different from what the books told. This simple idea raised many inquiries only the founders themselves could answer, but maybe the Sorting Hat could give him an idea of where the truth lies.

With this thought in mind, he hurried his friends to reach the class, where they were the first ones to arrive. The minutes Harry spent waiting for the rest of the students and the teacher were denting his already diminished patience. At last, the man entered, carrying the ragged hat in his hands.

"Good evening," the professor greeted, and every conversation in the room stopped. "Today, the Sorting Hat will help me give the lecture. Last class we were discussing the witch hunts and the reasons why the International Statute of Secrecy was established. Before we begin, does anyone have any questions?" Without wasting a second, Harry raised his hand and a surprised professor signalled him to talk.

"It has nothing to do with the theme, but I was wondering whether the hat could tell us the story of the founders and how the school was created from his perspective." Many students in

the room had the audacity to snort at his request and the group remembered why they hated sharing classes with Ravenclaw.

"That's an excellent suggestion, Mister Potter! It would be great for the hat to tell us who the founders really were instead of the people that history portrayed. Five points for that brilliant idea!" the professor announced, wearing a bright smile.

Any kind of derision that the students may have felt was eliminated at the words of the teacher. Daphne noted Padma Patil was one of the few who did not mock Harry's request and decided that she would pay attention to the girl.

"So you want to know about the founders, eh?" the hat asked. "I'm glad that someone asked me at last because, through the centuries, I heard the most ludicrous stories about them. As many of you know, I belonged to Godric Gryffindor, but the four founders each gave me a part of them and brought me to life so I could perpetuate their teachings. I possess the knowledge of the great four!" the hat announced.

The whole room was entranced by the introduction of the hat. Even the professor looked interested. However, the members of the Court were another story. 'Perpetuate their teachings.' That was the phrase that managed to distract them. They had been thinking about some way of doing just that and the phrase fitted with Luna's description of how they would continue teaching future generations about their rules. 'We will leave part of ourselves in the castle'. Those were the exact words from their seer. Harry knew he needed to discover how the hat was enchanted. It was time to ask the elves to search in the vast Potter library for useful information.

"The turbulent times in which this school was founded were filled with violence and death. Muggles were frightened of anything they didn't understand and in those dark ages, when magicals still lived among them, gallons of innocent blood were spilt. Godric Gryffindor was a brave man indeed, but he was a strategist, never going into battle unprepared unless there was no other option. He met Salazar Slytherin when they were both young and they became brothers in everything but blood, united by their tragic past. Both men lost their families to the hatred of Muggles but, while Godric lost his wife and his only daughter, Salazar lost his entire family when he was barely a child. Unlike what history says, they weren't water and oil for they shared more qualities than not and rarely differed. Salazar learnt to be cunning in order to protect himself. He learnt to be resourceful and, overall, he learnt to use any means in order to survive. Both praised ambition and power over any other quality and that's how they chose their students."

"But we all know that Slytherin was ambitious and evil," Anthony Goldstein interrupted.

"Ah, you've all heard about it, but that doesn't mean it was true," the hat told the boy, who was beginning to blush. "Salazar was ambitious, that's right. His greatest ambition was to create a haven for all the magical people so no one else would suffer his fate, an ambition he shared with the other founders. If they hadn't possessed that trait, this school would have never been created. Now, where was I? Oh, yes! Rowena was as beautiful as she was sharp. However, what made her formidable was one trait in particular. Fair Rowena never trusted the information of a single source, she always went out of her way to find the truth and, even then, she rationalized the information. Last, but not least, is Helga Hufflepuff, one of the

most admirable witches I've ever met. Gentle as she was, Helga was a lethal warrior and not even Godric dared to go against her when she was in one of her moods."

"But, she was Helga Hufflepuff! Gryffindor was the greatest duellist of his time!" Lisa Turpin exclaimed. Her wide eyes would make saucers feel inadequate.

"And Hogwarts was said to be the best magical school in Europe," the hat commented, shutting down any possible protests. "Helga didn't enjoy violence for she contained the kindest soul, but do not dare to mistake her kindness for weakness. She trained every day and possessed skills that few, if anyone, could counter. While she was hard to anger, no one ever survived her ire," the hat said, mesmerizing the room with that declaration. "Hogwarts was created to protect the children and Hogsmeade was meant to be the refuge of the magical people and, for a time, everything was well. For decades, they worked every single day to build this school and, at last, Hogwarts was born. Thanks to all the intent behind the founders' magic, the castle began feeling and she's the first line of protection against any threats.

"They began receiving students and everything seemed bright, but nothing good lasts long... The founders started accepting Muggle-borns, but soon realized it may not have been the best idea. Few knew the basics of reading and they possessed no knowledge on how to write. They were not educated, for they lived in ages that even Muggles remember as dark, where knowledge was a luxury and poverty was the norm."

"Those were the Middle Ages, right? Why did they take in only the lower class? I'm sure that the nobles and royalty were somewhat educated," Padma Patil asked.

"Indeed, Miss Patil, but those were turbulent times and, if any Lord or King discovered how the magicals were being taught, they would find a way of destroying us. Let's not forget that, even then, they outnumbered us," the professor explained.

"True. We have always been fewer," the hat agreed. "Salazar Slytherin blood-adopted a child while the castle was still being built. He was named Hector. The boy served as a teacher in the castle and began opposing Muggle-borns, but Helga decided that they should give everyone the opportunity to learn and all the founders supported that decision. Hector was already bitter because, while he inherited his father's talent, he was unable to surpass him and, when his father didn't support him, hatred began to contaminate his soul. Hector decided he would take the matter into his own hands and began sending snakes to kill the students he called 'impure' using the gift Salazar passed to him by blood. Obviously, he was discovered when two children were bitten and almost died. Fortunately, Helga was an accomplished healer. Salazar himself decided to exile Hector from these lands because he was a leader and, even though he loved his son, he chose to protect the school he worked so hard to build. As I said, he learned to use any means to accomplish his goals, even if it included breaking his own heart in the process."

The story of the founders was beginning to make sense to Harry and he even had an idea of how it ended. He admitted being fascinated with the information of Salazar's son and how history forgot his existence. Another thing that intrigued him was the reason for the castle's sentience and he wondered if the Potter castle would ever possess the same quality.

"Hector was filled with hatred and started committing heinous acts using the name of his father, deciding he would become Salazar Slytherin - his goal was to purify this world. He was the one who started using the terms that we all know about: mud-blood and blood traitor. However, he was the son of two Muggles, something he hid from the world. A man who possessed the 'polluted blood' he loathed so much was the one who created the idea of blood purity. Isn't it ironic how life works?" the hat asked no one in particular.

"If all of this is true, why didn't you reveal it sooner?" Sue Li asked in genuine curiosity.

"I'm confined to the headmaster's office three hundred and sixty-four days of the year. My only source of information about what happens out of the walls from this castle is the students and the portraits of the headmasters in the school. My duty was to solely sort them not too long ago," the hat explained. "It was painful to see how history remembered the ones I consider my parents."

"What happened after?" Blaise asked, wanting to hear the whole story.

"Of course, let's go back. Where was I?... Ah, now I remember. Hector gathered a number of followers who believed in the superiority of their blood. Rumours of the vicious massacres and those responsible for it arrived at the castle. Salazar was heartbroken by the news. While he was a man that made decisions by thinking of all the possible variables and planning for everything in advance, the news of the crimes his son was committing led him to make the first impulsive decision in his life. Salazar decided to search for Hector and kill the monster he raised. At this point, Rowena already perished; the betrayal of her daughter broke her heart. Helga and Godric begged him not to go but they were unable to change his mind. Salazar parted on a rainy dawn and never returned."

"Did he die?" asked a wide-eyed Terry Boot.

"We supposed he did because, not long after, Hector arrived at the borders of the village, declaring war on the two founders and waving the wand Salazar crafted for himself decades before. Godric was torn by grief and attacked the enemies, succumbing to his rage. His wife, Katherine, also joined the battle in an effort to help him. She died while covering his back with her own body. The wound was so lethal that not even Helga could bring her back. At last, Godric confronted Hector. He was defeated and would have lost his life had it not been for the loyal Griffin that rescued him."

"What was Hufflepuff doing?" Anthony asked, making no effort to hide his derision at the idea of the woman not fighting.

"Until that moment, Helga remained as the shield, protecting the villagers and the students from anyone who passed Godric. However, when he was brought back, already crossing to the realm of death, she knew she had no other option. First, she healed Godric and joined the battle the next day. The enemies were overwhelmed by her raw power and her ruthlessness. She considered Hector's existence and ideologies to be a threat and mercy was not granted. Helga battled Salazar's son and ended up as the victor. Singlehandedly, she defeated every single person who was still a threat to the ones she loved. However, that prowess did not come free. She was wounded and her core was almost depleted. Having no other healer in the castle, she died."

"She died the death of a warrior, protecting the ones she loved," Draco commented. He was not looking at the hat, but at his friends. Not waiting for an answer, he began writing on a piece of parchment and Harry knew that the boy found a clue about how to open the woman's room.

"That she did. Godric woke up a few days later, only to discover his only remaining friend was dead and his recklessness caused his wife's death. He descended into depression. A few months later, unable to continue living with his sorrow, he committed suicide using his own sword," the hat stated and many people in the room gasped at the revelation. No one was expecting the brave man to meet such an end. "Helga's youngest daughter, Beatrix, took control of the school. Had she not assumed the responsibility, Hogwarts would not be standing today."

That day, the students were strangely subdued as the story was retold all over the castle. At the end of the day, the whole school knew the real story of the founders. The Hufflepuff House, which was commonly seen as the house of leftovers, was glowing in pride. Knowing the real story of blood purity was the last push the Slytherins needed to be disenchanted with the ideology, along with many other blood purists that seemed to be experiencing a life crisis during dinner.

"We should find a way of making sure the whole world knows the truth," Viktor suggested.

"He's right," George agreed.

"A book – that's the answer," little Luna said, gaining the attention of the Court. "Tell Rita to write a book about the founders and we'll publish it."

"I'm sure Professor McGonagall will allow her to speak with the hat," Hestia said.

While the others planned the details of the book, Harry was lost in his own thoughts. The hat described Salazar and Godric as two almost identical people who believed in the same ideologies, but there were a few traits that made them utterly different. Both founders preferred students who were resourceful, determined and, above all, desired to be acknowledged by the world for their great deeds and power... But Gryffindors tended to be dominated by their emotions - they were utterly ruthless and, yet, were the ones who discovered and experienced the adventures life had to offer. Slytherins tended to see everything in shades of grey and followed their own code and, yet, were the ones who dreamed and hoped. One would die to protect while the other would kill to defend and both were the only ones able to sacrifice the ones they loved for the greater good.

Helga and Rowena were not so different either. Rowena did not choose the smartest ones, but the ones who were willing to question things and who valued knowledge. Helga was a fair woman who accepted everyone who was willing to work hard and believed in equality and valued loyalty overall. Both took the students who seek personal growth instead of glory, students who thought out of the box, students that never conformed to having only two choices and always found another solution... But Hufflepuffs were the cruellest amongst any of the Houses. Their intense loyalty would lead them to commit the most vicious acts and, yet, they were the ones who loved and found beauty in life. Ravenclaws were the ones who would obsess with the idea of being defined by their beliefs, the ones who would cut down

the people who shadowed them and, yet, were the ones who found wonder in the simplest details that life offered. Once again, one would die and the other would kill, and neither would even consider sacrificing the ones they held close to their hearts.

That is the reason why Harry found their deaths to be ironic. The wise Rowena died because of the pain betrayal brought, unable to find any solution to her plight. The ambitious Salazar died as an unremarkable man, buried under the shade of his son. The gentle Helga died covered with blood and carrying the deaths of dozens because her loyalty would not allow her to stop fighting for the ones she loved. The brave Godric was unable to deal with the consequences that his recklessness brought and did not have the courage to confront his guilt.

What was the most ironic thing, in Harry's opinion, was the existence of a Sorting Hat that possessed marvellous powers and, yet, did not sort into the Houses according to the traits that the students possessed. Rather, it sorted them according to the traits that the students admired. Ironic indeed.

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**Omake: Shipping? Does it have anything to do with Business?** (Inspired by the constant request to partner Harry with someone and maybe a bit of Minerva's inner fan-girl which, let's admit, represents all of us).

Harry Potter was confused. No. That was not enough to describe how he was feeling. These last few days, he noticed how the professors gossiped while looking at him and even how many students blushed when he had some kind of physical contact with another member of the Court. The difference was that the teachers gossiped when he interacted with a female and the students blushed when he interacted with the males. Utterly lost and unwilling to ask anyone in his family, he decided to approach the wise Charms professor.

"So what's been bothering you?" Filius asked the distressed boy.

"Strange things have been happening... Many girls have strange reactions when I interact with my male friends and, if that was not enough, many teachers seem too eager when I interact with my female friends. I don't understand why," the boy complained.

Filius nodded in understanding. Opening his special drawer, he took out the box filled with pastries and handed one to the boy who, for some strange reason, looked insulted instead of being pleased. Was there something wrong with his baking? He was sure that he used the recipe his dear grandmother taught him.

"This will be hard to explain. You are at an age when you start noticing you're attracted to people," Flitwick began explaining.

"Not really," the boy interrupted.

"Could you explain what you mean?" asked the confused teacher.

"I'm not attracted to anyone, though I know what you mean. Too many boys have been eyeing Daphne up, and Blaise would throw himself in the Black Lake if Luna asked him to. I'm able to appreciate beauty - I know when a person is attractive, especially when I see

myself in the mirror every single day. However, I just don't like people," the boy shrugged as if it was not important.

"Ehm, well, when you have... you know, those dreams where a person, it doesn't matter the gender... then you wake up and," the man began rambling, feeling embarrassed.

"Aunt Eleadora explained it to me years ago and we had sex-ed in school. I know what's supposed to happen, but I don't have them," the boy explained.

"Not even the urges or... well, you know, when you wake up and, well, when it's-

"I feel the stimuli," the boy interrupted him and Filius felt like an embarrassed, inexperienced teenager once again, "but not the need. Honestly, I'm fourteen. Anyways, you haven't answered why they keep reacting that way."

"I guess I'll be blunt then. Have you ever heard the word shipping?" Filius asked, recovering his composure.

"Does it have anything to do with business? I have a profitable one involving silk shipping, but how do they know that?" Harry asked with wide eyes.

"No, it has nothing to do with business. How do I phrase it? ...It's the action of wishing that two people enter a romantic relationship," the man explained and watched as the usually calm Potter was filled with horror at the realization.

"I'm fourteen," Harry almost whimpered.

"Yes, but many teachers think you look 'cute' when interacting with certain people."

"So, may I conclude that the students are, for some strange and perturbing reason, excited in more ways than one when I interact with my friends," the boy said blandly, his face regaining his usual neutral expression.

"Well, yes. Teenagers and even adults tend to find reasons to ship certain people - it may be because of their chemistry, experiences, interactions, background, and many other reasons. This has many different names such as yao-"

"I don't want to know," Harry interrupted. "If you'll excuse me, professor, that's more than enough information that I hope my brain will erase."

The boy left the office with hurried steps, making plans. Perhaps he should transfer to an all-boys school. That thought quickly vanished - in an environment filled with testosterone, many strange things tended to happen, so that was a no... A monastery. Yes, that sounded better. Maybe he could become a monk and get free from the strange world of 'shipping'. That word was enough to send cold shivers down his spine.

The members of the Guild wondered what was wrong with Harry. The whole evening he was muttering about being only fourteen, perverts, shipping, and becoming a monk.



"Maybe he's sulking because he's only fourteen and will not be able to go shipping with perverts to become a monk," Luna concluded, wearing a wide smile.

...So that is how rumours are created.

## Curiouser and Curiouser

The new Hogwarts Court walked towards the Great Hall for breakfast as the day for the Goblet of Fire to be placed in the room arrived at last. However, the occurrence did not capture Harry Potter's attention at all, although the events that would follow certainly did. Rita Skeeter wrote an article that would trigger a scandal of such magnitude Harry was sure the whole continent would feel the impact. After all, what was more outrageous than the Head of the ICW being caught in an international lawsuit for his immoral behaviour and blatant criminal responsibility?

This situation would give Amelia Bones the necessary leverage to modify the Tournament as she wished and the Wizengamot would be submerged in chaos, something Lucius and Sirius would take advantage of. That is without mentioning Miss Blair. The woman was gaining quite a lot of influence for her brilliant proposals and strategic mind. The fact she held the votes of the Potter and Greengrass families might have also helped to increase her reputation.

Though there was still time to cancel the competition and avoid international ridicule because the champions had yet to be chosen, so the Triwizard Tournament was still not official. Not that Harry wished the thing to be cancelled. Fleur and Viktor just arrived and Harry would not allow for his Court to be divided sooner than necessary. However, he was sure the new Minister would try to do that exactly, hence the reason for the wait.

The only thing about the Tournament that intrigued Harry was the identity of the future champions. Fleur and Viktor had come to the school to compete, but even in that situation, they asked for his approval to do so. Cedric had no wishes to get even close to the object, but his father was pressuring him to put his name as a possible champion. Nevertheless, he had disregarded his father's letters and also asked for Harry's approval. To say the last Potter had been pleased when the newest members requested his consent would be unable to describe the male's satisfaction at the development.

The three of them were going to put their names in during breakfast, giving the image of a united front. The teen wondered if fate shared his same kind of humour because it would be amusing if the three of them managed to get selected. Not that it would happen, of course, but the idea of the Court being so well represented still entertained him.

The large group arrived at the Great Hall, commanding the attention of every person in the room with their mere presence. As usual, they sat in the middle of the Slytherin table, ignoring everyone in the hall.

"One would think that we are the foreigners by the way they stare at us," Daphne huffed.

"It could be worse," Adrian commented.

"And how is that possible?" Hestia questioned the older boy with an incredulous expression.

"I don't know. Maybe they could all be against us for some reason and we would get the cold shoulder instead of fans," the boy shrugged.

"That's impossible. Not even during the worst times Hogwarts would teachers be so useless in preventing bullying, especially if it was on such a large scale." Neville dismissed the fifth-year.

"Well, I'm not so sure about that," Justin muttered, reminding the Court that, before they intervened, the school was almost as safe as the Forbidden Forest.

"Good morning, students," the school's headmaster greeted, interrupting their conversation. "Now that most of us are present, it's time for the great announcement! The day for the Goblet of Fire to choose the champions has arrived at last!" the man announced, unveiling an oversized goblet that rested on a pedestal. The object began flaring with intense blue flames until the fire turned into a gentle blaze that lit the cup. All in all, it was an interesting, if overly dramatic demonstration. "All of the students who are of age are invited to put their names on a piece of parchment. Don't forget to write the school you belong to, otherwise, you won't be selected. The Triwizard Tournament will bring honour to the three chosen champions and eternal glory to the winner of the competition!" Dumbledore's exclamation was followed by excited conversations and rowdy chatter.

"If I may have your attention please," Minerva McGonagall announced and every student fell silent with a simple look of the woman. "Thank you. First of all, I wish to announce the first inter-house Quidditch matches will begin this weekend. The Hogwarts matches will begin in two weeks and I'm glad that so many teams will be participating. I will use this opportunity to remind our new students they still have time to join any team or club, and even form their own until tomorrow evening, before the feast. I wish to congratulate every single one of you because, although this year has been filled with radical changes, everyone adapted and thrived. I'm proud of you," the woman announced and the silent hall erupted in polite applause.

"I don't know about you, but I think McGonagall would be the perfect Headmistress when Dumbledore's out," Fred commented, impressed by the woman's ability to command respect.

"From what my father told me, he'll only give up his position if his body expires, and even then he'll try to remain as headmaster," Cedric told the others, an amused smile playing on his lips.

"Don't tempt us," little Luna muttered, making more than one choke on their food at her bold statement.

"There's something I wanted to ask you," said Neville looking Fleur. "Veela are some of the greatest illusionists that exist, to the point they're able to perform an Illusion Solidification and Transformation, and even Guise Manipulation similar to Metamorphmagi. Is that because of their innate magic or is it taught from one generation to the next?" The boy's question was enough to earn the interest of the whole Court and Fleur herself looked surprised.

"We are great illusionists," the girl answered after brief seconds of hesitance. "Although, I'm not sure how to answer your question... Maybe it is a mix of both plus a dash of legilimency. My grand-mère taught me about illusions for as long as I can remember, but I know that most magicals are not able to learn how to use them."

"That's interesting. You already know that I'm interested in that branch of magic and, a few days ago, Aunt Eleadora sent me a really interesting book. The author was an expert in Occlumency, to the point few illusions affected him. He wrote about Veela and their true faces. While Veela allure didn't affect him, their disguise did. According to him, it wasn't a simple illusion, but something that changed their physical form," Neville told the others and Harry understood at last where his friend was going.

"Veela disguise themselves as beautiful females. However, it's not an illusion. It's Guise Manipulation. They're able to change their appearance without being Metamorphmagi, with more limitations, of course. The theory is their illusions are able to cause real physical changes as long as the caster is powerful enough," Harry commented and the Gryffindor boy nodded.

"I am not sure how to explain this," Fleur muttered, her brow furrowing a little. "Full Veela indeed possess that ability, but I'm not sure it's an illusion, because their descendants are not able to assume the... ehm... less attractive form," the girl explained.

"Or maybe it's so intrinsic to a Veela that not even they know how they do it," Neville suggested.

"The same way Harry is able to use magic the way he does, but he doesn't know how to teach us," Viktor muttered and looked at the younger boy, while the group looked at each other.

"You could try," Harry told the girl after a moment. "Neville's theory is valid, the most you can lose is a few hours a week."

"I want to try if Neville is willing to help me," Fleur agreed.

"It'll be good to have someone else to practice with, besides Marcus," Neville nodded. "Thinking about it, all of you need to meet Aunt Eleadora as soon as possible."

"Their specializations," Draco muttered, smacking his forehead in frustration.

And with that realization, Harry felt the urge to slap his forehead.

Harry decided that they would put a brief stop to the new members' general training and each member of the Guild would explain their specializations so they could choose the fields that caught their fancy. He decided that the duelling and spell casting would take priority over their training. They could still exercise in the mornings... At that moment, Harry decided he would personally instruct the two Hufflepuffs in order to shape them up as soon as possible.

"Use Legilimency," Luna suggested, looking at no one in particular.

"For what?" a confused Blaise asked.

"For them, that way you'll be able to guide them," the little girl said, looking at Harry expectantly.

"I didn't even know that it could be used that way."

"Me neither," Luna shrugged.

"Okay, I'm confused," Cedric said, expecting some kind of answer.

"We'll be changing our training schedule," Harry announced, signalling for the Hufflepuff prefect to wait a little for his explanation. "It's time to train in the mornings again. I expect you in our room at six," he stated and Theo groaned. "All our free time will be dedicated to duelling and spell practice, aside from our studies. We will all explain the fields we have decided to study and teach them where possible... Though, if you choose a field that none of us is studying, then you will have to wait until you meet Aunt Eleadora. I will help the ones that are having trouble with the mental part of our training." He didn't need to say names, not that they were needed.

"We have to be careful while organizing our schedules. This year will be full of activities," George warned the group.

"That's true, but we need to be ready when the time comes," Luna answered. Her words accompanied by her grave expression caught the attention of her friends.

"Do you have any feeling of what may happen?" Daphne asked.

"I have no idea," Luna sighed, rubbing her face in frustration. "The only thing I know is something will happen, but I don't know when or even how. This Tournament is the key for things to begin, that is the only thing that I know at the moment," Luna sighed.

"We can cancel the Tournament. It wouldn't be hard," Harry told the girl, already thinking of alternatives for Fleur and Viktor to stay longer.

"That's not a good idea. They want something with this. I don't know whether it's to attack the students or if they have another objective, but if we cancel it, there will be more collateral damage... Besides, we at least have time to prepare before everything happens," Luna murmured, her features marred with a frown.

"That means we need to be ready," Draco sighed, but unlike his defeated tone, his face was etched with determination.

"I think it's time to put your names in the Goblet," commented Terrence, breaking the tense atmosphere that was beginning to form.

Without further encouragement, the three adults stood up and walked towards the artefact. Maybe because they were the first ones to put their names in the Goblet or perhaps it was because their presence commanded attention, but it only took a single instant for the whole room's focus to be centred on them. Even the professors were observing the trio. The three members of the Court presented a united front, showing the camaraderie that was formed in such a short time. They looked at each other and placed their names at the same time. The cup's fire intensified for a brief moment. The sepulchral silence was broken by tumultuous applause. The furore did not stop even after the whole Court left the great hall.

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That whole day was marked by Harry Potter being far too immersed in his thoughts to pay attention to anything around him. The boy was pondering the Tournament and Luna's eerie warning. So far, she was never wrong and he doubted this would be the exception, so it was time to plan. Their training would once again be increased because, even though Harry loathed putting his friends in danger, he knew the whole group would be involved in one way or another.

Professor Flitwick would be more than willing to continue showing them how much they needed to improve, so the duelling part was taken care of. Though Harry would need to push the new members in order for them to obtain the necessary skills to survive a possible confrontation. He also needed to consider other aspects of their training.

At the moment, most of them were adept in the mind arts. Even two of their new members possessed an enviable skill in the field. Viktor was taught by his mother and his skills with Legilimency were on par with Harry's. Not mentioning the fact Fleur had an uncanny and beyond extraordinary talent for both fields. She told the others Veela possessed a natural inclination for the mind arts because it aided with their illusions. The fact there were other people as talented as himself amused Harry because, until then, he believed himself to be a prodigy with the mind arts. Once again he allowed his ego to take control, but it was quickly put back in place.

Thinking about the new members of his Court brought other problems to his mind. The Triwizard Tournament was meant to be a tool to finally get rid of the headmaster, but his plans were taken off his priority list. Harry would be lying if he said the way in which Albus Dumbledore observed him did not perturb him. It felt as if the man was expecting something from him and there were a few occasions where the old man looked as if he was mourning someone... Dumbledore's gaze was always fixed on him and that fact disquieted Harry more than he was willing to admit. However, there was nothing he could do against the headmaster for that reason alone. Hence, Harry decided to find other ways of dismissing Dumbledore as headmaster. Now, though, there was a more pressing threat he needed to take care of.

Tom Riddle was turning into a really annoying bug that refused to stop being such a hindrance. The man and his followers needed to be eliminated. The problem was Voldemort hid and the cowards of his followers were too useless to act alone. It was good that Ragnok almost cleared their vaults thanks to the Death Eaters "donations".

For a time, Harry believed Voldemort wanted to murder as many children as possible in order to intimidate the magical population into submission. However, there were other much more frightening possibilities. They could be planning on killing Amelia Bones and placing another person in the position, they could be trying to start a war with France and Bulgaria, and, by definition, The Union of The Northern Countries. There were far too many variables to know what their real purpose was. So all he could do is taking extra precautions in order to prevent as much damage as possible in any foreseeable scenario.

However, even with his good intentions, the populace came in second place. Harry's priority was his family. Therefore, the armour his elves and the goblins were improving would be needed sooner. During their last confrontation, they ended up victorious because they had the element of surprise and superior protective gear. Harry doubted they would be so lucky again.

Harry also considered the security measures during the Tournament. Ragnok was taking care of the wards personally, so he had no doubts they would be safe, but still needed to speak with the man about the Dark Mark and if there was any progress in removing the thing.

Madam Bones was placing Aurors among the spectators and Auror Moody was in charge of the security, so that was another thing taken care of. Harry still needed to know where the tasks were going to take place in order to set up extra security measures, which meant he needed to speak with Marcus before planning anything. He would contact the man as soon as possible.

Also, the story of the founder's plagued Harry's mind. To say it was a revelation was an understatement. Rita was already working on the book and requested a meeting with the hat, something he had no doubt she would obtain as long as McGonagall was in a good mood... Maybe it would be good to publish the real story of Voldemort along with the book, yet that man didn't deserve attention so an article would have to do.

Harry sighed at all his self-imposed tasks. He was fourteen, so no one expected him to act like an adult, even less to contribute to society, but he did. Revolutionary, that is what he wished to believe he was. Somewhere in the time he spent in his parents' world, he decided he would change it for the better. Perhaps his upbringing had ensured he grew up with a hero complex or something similar, but he refused to be a simple observer when faced with injustice... Or maybe he was pursuing a lost cause and getting involved in matters that had nothing to do with him. Who knew?

He got out of his musings thanks to his own brain refusing to continue cooperating with him. Harry looked around the Court's headquarters and noticed George, Theo, and Justin were poring over a piece of parchment. It took him a few seconds to recognize the Marauders Map. Ah, so that was it. George's project was creating a new map after they found so many different passages and a few strange chambers they did not dare to venture without further preparation. After the Court was created, Hogwarts gave them access to a few places they still needed to examine.

Their first discovery was a passage that led to Honeydukes. Harry was surprised and beyond peeved at the idea of the school having so many secret entrances. Hence, he began a quest to seal all the passages and create new ones. Much to his surprise, the eldest twins were the ones who contributed the most with their experience and the map.

It was curious, he forgot about its existence after the Weasley twins joined. Well, at least it was an enlightening day.

"So, we forgot about the map," Fred began explaining, eyeing with obvious nervousness a scowling Daphne. "Although it's not our fault!"

"We used it until we start hanging out with Harry," a sheepish George said. "One time we forgot the map and found Filch lurking in the corridors."

"We explained we were helping a friend with his homework and were ready to be punished."

“He just told us to be more careful with the hour next time and let us go,” a still surprised boy explained, looking at his brother.

“Since that day we kind of forgot about the map because Filch would only greet us and keep patrolling. By the way, what did you do to him?”

“The wonders that politeness can do,” Hestia huffed.

“Yeah, anyway. We managed to write our ideas to replicate it, though we absolutely forgot about the journal Harry loaned us,” Fred said, handing the map and a stack of parchments filled with annotations and a few doodles.

“That is also not our fault,” George tried to explain. “We had so much catching up to do that most of our time was dedicated to studying.”

“And our free time was for training,” Fred muttered.

“It is nobody’s fault. I also forgot about it,” Harry sighed. “Find a way to re-create it, then we will find a way of giving a copy for each member. Though we will need better security measures than a simple phrase. I will talk with Rome, he will organize the elves to seal the passages on both sides. We will need to create new ones. Any suggestion?”

“One in each common room so the students have a way to escape the castle if necessary. Though I have no idea where they could connect to,” Blaise muttered.

“What about Harry's businesses in the village?” Viktor suggested.

“I'm with him,” Theo nodded.

“I think we should have one in our headquarters. The shrieking shack already has a passage; we can change it and make the place presentable. That way we have another meeting point outside the school in case of an emergency,” Daphne said.

“I'll talk with Ragnok about buying the place. I would rather do everything in a legal way so no one trespasses on the property,” Harry stated.

In that strange turn of events, he now was the owner of a dilapidated shack Nile had the pleasure to redecorate. Although Ragnok insisted on placing the wards first so no one managed to enter his new... recently acquired shack. Harry hoped his elves worked their magic on the place because he refused to sully the Potter name by owning a simple shack. Nevertheless, the important thing was the elves somehow managed to create a passage from their room to that place, discovering in the process the Whomping Willow was another entrance. Access to that was blocked just in case other people were aware of its existence.

In comparison, creating a passage for Slytherin was simple, although they had a lengthy debate over where it would lead to. In the end, one of the restaurants was chosen. They would have a harder time creating the passages in the other common rooms, but there was no hurry and they could wait until summer. Aside from the three other passages, the group had yet to



decide where the others would be placed and what protections the entrances would need so they only opened for those in need or something similar so no attacker could use them.

Ah, Harry almost forgot about the other reasons for his constant stress: the rooms Hogwarts showed them.

They would be nothing impressive if the contents of each one were not so peculiar. There was a secret room in the lowest level of the dungeons, which contained different manuscripts and strange ingredients filled a whole wall along with pieces of wood. Unfortunately, it was also encoded by the previous Queen, but it was not hard to conclude it was a wandlore dedicated room. Another room was also in the dungeons but in one of the middle levels that no one frequented. It was filled to the brim with knickknacks and other pointless artefacts... At least that was their first impression, which didn't last long. Justin managed to glimpse an opalescent stone that caught his fancy and decided to summon it. The thing had a rune etched on the middle and its magic was still active. Therefore, many of his elves were assigned to go through the room. So far, they found different types of weapons, a whole pile of rune-etched stones, antique books, a few vials of poisons Blaise and Flora battled over, and a few magical artefacts they did not know the use of.

However, their most impressive discovery was the Ward Stone vaults. Each was in an essential part of the castle. The dungeons, the astronomy tower, the ground floor, the library, and near the greenhouses. At first glance, they were nothing impressive, just a room with a huge stone that lay on a pedestal in the middle of the room. It was easy to miss the hundreds of ward stones that decorated the walls or how detailed the runes on the pedestal were... Harry then knew it would be extremely hard to replace the stones and activate the wards.

Nevertheless, George looked ecstatic, his eyes almost twinkling while he admired the handiwork. Theo, Draco, and Hestia were not far behind, but the sheer fascination George had with runes was a disturbing sight to witness.

There were other rooms, but they decided not to explore them until they were ready to confront any danger, or until their flayed nerves recovered.

The characteristics of the room they discovered in the restricted section were discouraging enough, influencing their decision to wait until a more appropriate moment. Guarded by particularly vicious fairies and two annoying boggarts, not counting its eerie appearance, it was not an environment Harry considered inspiring. The fact they received similar greetings in the other rooms and the ambience was not any better may have also been an important factor at the moment in taking the decision. While Harry had no problems in burning the little pests, he doubted the castle would appreciate his violent initiative, so he needed to think of a non-lethal method of incapacitating the room's protectors... Besides, fairy magic was far too volatile to confront and he was too pleased with his features to change them for whatever abomination fairies could think of.

Maybe once the armour was improved he would be ready to confront the little devils.

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The last day of October the new members of the Court learnt what a hard workout entailed and were not amused. Viktor was lying on the floor, his chest still heaving. Cedric and Fleur

almost collapsed during their training, so Terrence and Neville moved the pair to the closest couch, on which they were still sitting, looking utterly exhausted. Justin was out of breath, but he fared far better than many of the oldest members.

"How can you look so well after that?" a panting Theo accused the young Hufflepuff.

"I told you already, I enjoyed sports in the Muggle world and was never truly able to leave them behind," the boy shrugged, taking a swig of his water bottle.

"I might hate you," Hestia muttered, stealing the boy's bottle and drinking as if she never drank water before.

"That was pure torture," Viktor gasped, not moving from his spot on the floor.

"Why are we doing this again?" Fleur mumbled.

"Because if we went through the torture, you will too," Draco stated, sagging on the closest chair.

"While that's true, it also has to do with being ready for any eventuality," Daphne added, somehow managing to still look regal while sporting pink cheeks and messy hair.

"I thought I would need to train in case I'm chosen as a champion. Doing this every day will be more than enough. I'm sure no obstacle they plan will be worse," Cedric managed to say between pants.

"Drink this," Fred ordered, giving each member a vial of Navitas potion with the help of Flora.

"This is what we consider real magic," Neville sighed after drinking his potion.

"True, be thankful that you have this. When we began training the only thing we had to help with the soreness was sleeping it off and hoping it didn't hurt so much later," Adrian grumbled.

"Stop being babies," Luna chided the complaining boys.

"I don't know about you, but I'm taking a bath before dinner," George exclaimed, leaving for the showers in the Quidditch room.

"I think they will need help," Blaise commented, signalling the three members that looked on the edge of passing out.

Harry and Luna led the Court towards the great hall for dinner, talking with each other. George, Adrian, and Neville were helping their tired members to walk at a steady pace. Seeing how exhausted they were, Fred gave them a second dose and, although they still looked drowsy, at least their steps did not emulate an inebriated person with poor balance. Flora took that as a personal insult to their creation and was writing in a notebook all her ideas to increase the effectiveness of the potion, something Fred got dragged into. Justin was paying close attention to the pair's conversation with interest shining in his eyes.

When they entered the hall, they ignored all the stares and settled into their usual places. Harry watched with amusement as Cedric filled his plate as fast as possible, only to be glared at by Daphne before he could even begin eating. It seemed the prefect learnt the girl was not someone you should trifle with, which was for the best. With an exaggerated sigh, the eldest Hufflepuff began eating at a moderate pace. Fleur did not have such a problem because the girl was graceful even while eating like a famished creature and Viktor was too tired to devour.

Their dinner ended with no conversation, no one having the energy to talk. Now that they were full, Luna was leaning on Viktor. She was about to fall asleep but no one had the heart to wake her, especially when half of the group looked ready to follow her example. The sudden darkness jerked the girl out of her sleepy state, but she was not the only one to be surprised. All the students were paying attention to the Hogwarts headmaster, who was walking towards the Goblet of Fire. The object and the candles were the only illuminations in the hall, adding a dramatic effect.

"Good evening, students. Yesterday, the Goblet of Fire was activated at last and now it is time to know its verdict!" the man announced. The gestures Dumbledore was making while speaking added to all the theatrics, something Harry was sure the headmaster enjoyed. "The time for the Goblet to choose our champions arrived at last! The three champions will be bathed in glory and the next months will be filled with trials, which I hope they are able to overcome. Don't forget this is not only a great honour, but also a great responsibility because the tasks will be perilous."

"He should have said that yesterday," Cedric grumbled, scowling at the old man.

"Any moment now, our impartial judge will choose the first champion!" Dumbledore announced and, as if on cue, the Goblet spat out a flaming piece of parchment that the man caught with unexpected agility. Harry wondered how long he practised in order to achieve such perfect synchronization with the artefact. "The first champion belongs to Durmstrang. Let's give a round of applause to Viktor Krum!" The hall erupted in applause while Viktor looked surprised.

"Follow me, Mister Krum," the Durmstrang headmaster ordered, walking towards a door near the staff table, a door Harry could swear was not there yesterday. Viktor nodded at the members of the Court and followed his headmaster.

"The champion for Beauxbatons is the lovely Miss Delacour!" the old man announced a few moments later and, once again, the hall was filled with applause. Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise; he was not expecting two members of the Court to be chosen. However, it made sense. They were the best candidates from their schools... He wondered if the same rule would be applied for the next champion but dismissed the idea. That was too much coincidence.

"Miss Delacour," Madam Maxime called the girl, who smiled at her friends before walking towards the strange door.

"Finally, our third champion and the representative of Hogwarts, let's give a round of applause for Cedric Diggory!" at the man's announcement, the whole hall erupted in an

ovation that was far louder than the other champions received.

Harry ignored that entire situation in favour of his own thoughts. It was curious for the three champions to be part of the Court. He considered the possibility of the three of them being chosen but he never believed it would become a reality. However, he was unable to hide his pride and slight worry. The champions would be the only ones who were not going to be protected by the wards during the tasks, something he would find a solution for. Now, though, Harry would allow himself to share in Slytherin's celebration because, even though none of the champions was an official snake, the three of them belonged to the House.

"Excellent! We now have our three champions! The first challenge they will have to confront-" the man's excited speech was interrupted by the Goblet spitting out another parchment. Harry wondered what was all that about because, unless the headmaster was addicted to drama and bewitched the cup, he doubted that the legendary artefact would comply with his whims. "Harry Potter," the man stated with no inflexion, looking his way.

Harry raised an eyebrow at the old man who was watching him intently, the same way the whole hall was doing, he noted with a slight scowl. 'Is this a joke?' That was the first thought that came to his mind. However, the man did not stop looking at him and the tension increased.

"Harry Potter, please join the other champions," Dumbledore ordered.

That simple sentence was enough to wake the ire of the young man. He ignored the applause that filled the Slytherin table, which the other Houses followed with less enthusiasm. He ignored all the looks and the whispers; he even ignored the worry that was flooding from his friends. He walked with all the grace he could muster, promising retribution. Harry did not even spare the headmaster a look, thinking about what he should do with this annoying occurrence.

His first thought was cancelling the competition and punish the responsible. Harry took a deep breath, trying to control his increasing anger. He knew if he lost control now all his efforts to earn the reputation as the golden boy would be in vain. When he entered the room, his three friends looked at him in surprise, but he paid them no mind.

"Harry, does your headmaster need something?" asked Viktor, eyeing him with obvious worry.

"Please, call Professor Flitwick and McGonagall," he asked to no one in particular, yet the three champions heeded his order without question.

It would be a shame if he publically denounced the Wizengamot and the Headmaster for endangering his life by not placing more security measures around the Goblet. Even worse if Rita caught a whiff of what was happening. Perhaps this could be his opportunity to finally get Dumbledore dismissed as headmaster and to beat the useless members of the Wizengamot into submission... Yes, that was it. If Harry was dragged into this competition, he would make sure to use it to his advantage. Miss Blair would need to sue the Wizengamot for approving the blasted thing. If he dropped the demand out of the goodness of his heart, he would have leverage over that vermin. Yes, this was an opportunity in disguise. However, before he could

think on any other plan, he needed to contact Sirius and Miss Blair. He also needed Madam Bones.

"Harry, what happened?" asked Flitwick, rushing into the room.

"I have no idea, but I need Sirius here. Could you please contact him for me? I would be thankful if you also told him to bring Madam Bones and Miss Blair," he requested with a polite smile.

"Ah, Harry, I don't think that will be necessary!" Dumbledore announced, entering the room. "But we need to know how you entered your name into the Goblet? Did you ask an older student to put it or-"

"Of course he didn't!" announced a scowling Fleur, her English turning heavily accented. "We were with him for the whole day and he did not do such a thing."

"Ah, Miss Delacour, such a loyal friend you are. However, I doubt you were with him the whole time," Dumbledore commented genially.

"Actually, we were," Viktor deadpanned, almost looking disinterested.

"Besides, your age line was supposed to avoid anything like this happening Professor Dumbledore," Cedric said in a fake cheerful tone. His statement was enough to rekindle the anger of the Deputy Headmistress, who remained silent until the moment.

"I did not put my name in. However, someone did and I wish to speak with my legal guardian," Harry stated, his polite facade in place, interrupting the woman's undoubtedly amusing yet time-consuming scolding.

"I will do that at once," Filius announced and the tension in the room thickened.

"You may have not put your name in, but you will need to participate," Dumbledore stated, having the audacity to look.

"I am afraid that's true. The goblet works in strange ways and your magic would be in danger if you didn't participate," one of the Ministry delegates stated in a bored tone.

"Are you sure, Leonard? He's only fourteen," McGonagall told the man. "I'm sure there's a rule that can protect Mister Potter. This foolish thing is meant to be for adults!"

"I agree, the boy should not compete. It would be unfair if Hogwarts had two champions!" Madam Maxime announced, her heavy accent making her words hard to understand.

"Madam, he's under a magical agreement so he will need to," a bulbous man told the woman. Harry blinked at the ridiculous person - he was wearing a bright yellow sweater with black stripes, reminding the boy of an annoying and particularly revolting bee.

Harry ignored their bickering and looked at his three friends. He gave them a slight smirk but decided to remain silent. Plans needed to be made. Sirius would make a scandal and Amelia was someone to reckon with because the woman was not afraid of gutting people in the name

of justice. Nevertheless, the one he was expecting the most was Miss Blair. Yet, he did not really care about the Tournament. Whether he was a champion or not held no importance to him because he knew he could overcome any task.

His main goal from this entire thing was the leverage he would gain over the Wizengamot, which would give his people an extra advantage at the moment of making any decisions. Harry's thoughts were interrupted by a furious Sirius, who kicked the door open in the most literal way.

"What happened?!" his godfather demanded. His eyes were narrowed and his displeased sneer was enough to end the bickering between the adults.

"Ah, Sirius, this is a hard situation to explain. Harry was chosen as a champion and he-

"I know that already, but I want explanations. Weren't you supposed to take care of any eventuality?" he asked, interrupting Dumbledore.

"We want to know how this happened. Mister Potter is still underage and the tasks you designed are not meant for children," Amelia said, glaring at the whole room. "Bagman! Fawley! What are the rules that can exempt him from being a champion?" the woman barked and the disfigured bee blanched.

"I am afraid there are none," the other man answered, looking unaffected.

"I would like to take a look at the rules. I'm the legal representative of the Potter family," the woman stated. That was enough to earn a reaction from the bored-looking man, whose eyes widened for a brief moment.

"I don't have the rules here."

"That's no problem. I'm sure they must be in the public domain so I'll send an elf to retrieve a copy from the public archive," the woman said, a polite smile plastered on her face.

"Miss Blair, you are an accomplished attorney, but do you think this will be necessary?" Dumbledore asked, his smile looked pained.

"Magical agreements are quite tricky. We need to know all the rules of the Tournament so we can prevent any damage to the only Heir of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter," the woman told the headmaster.

"The thing that worries me is that the Goblet was meant to choose three champions. Why did it choose a fourth one?" Cedric asked, interrupting the adult's conversation.

"That's an excellent question that didn't cross my mind... Moody will examine the Goblet," the Minister stated, nodding at the vivacious young man.

"The problem of Hogwarts having two champions still remains!" Madam Maxime interrupted.

"May I have the parchment that contains Mister Potter's name?" Amelia requested, ignoring the tall woman. The look on her eyes was enough to make clear it was not much of a request as it was an order. With a sigh, Dumbledore handed the Minister a charred parchment. "It only has the name, there is no school."

"If you don't mind, I'm tired and I'm sure that my friends feel the same way," Harry told the adults, interrupting the argument that began boring him. "Miss Blair, I want to sue whoever put my name in the Goblet. However, if it was a student I will be satisfied with an apology."

"I already summoned the head of the DMLE, Moody will be launching an investigation in the school. I'm sure that you don't mind as long as Professor McGonagall is there to supervise the procedure," Amelia said.

"I don't think that--"

"I don't mind in the least," the woman agreed, interrupting whatever Dumbledore was about to say.

"Excellent, they're waiting at the outer gates."

"I'm sure none of the professors will mind accompanying me while Amelia keeps you company," Minerva commented in a saccharine tone.

"I'm certain that your headmaster won't object. After all, if it was a prank, the worst that will happen is that a student will need to apologize," Viktor announced and Amelia smirked at the boy.

"Mister Potter, what will happen if you need to participate?" Andra Blair asked him.

"I don't really care about the competition, but I agree with Madam Maxime. Hogwarts will not have two champions," the boy answered, his stoic demeanour making uncomfortable more than one adult.

"All the champions must represent a school," Dumbledore told him, his smile faltering.

"And this Tournament is only meant to have three champions," Harry retorted, "if I need to represent something, then I represent the Court," the handsome boy said with a slight smirk, containing his amusement at the Potions teacher's pale face. "If you'll excuse us, we will get going."

"The new head of the DMLE will be in the Slytherin common room in an hour at most," Amelia told him.

"Very well, goodnight," he said and walked out of the room, his three friends following.

"Who do you think was responsible?" Cedric asked after a few minutes of walking.

"I have no idea, but maybe this has to do with what Luna told us."

"Why would they put your name in?" asked a bewildered Fleur.

"Maybe they're hoping to kill me this way. Voldemort is petty enough to somehow devise a plan that will end up in my imminent demise," Harry shrugged.

"But you said no one recognized you when, you know, the Cup," Cedric hissed.

"That's why I said petty. Perhaps he's so frustrated at his constant defeats that now he wants to kill the 'saviour of the Magical World'. Either way, it's nothing but a minor hindrance." His lackadaisical attitude somehow managed to both annoy and calm his friends.

"Don't you think he is a threat?" Viktor asked, looking incredulous.

"Not really, the man is nothing without followers. His followers are nothing without money. At the moment, most of the Death Eaters barely have enough gold to cover their expenses. They are used to living on old money and few of them hold real jobs. They were moronic enough to pay for Goblin wards and my dear friends almost left them destitute."

Once they arrived at their room, they were surrounded by many concerned people, shooting questions as fast as they were able to. Harry ignored them, taking a seat on the nearest couch. Without wasting invaluable time, he called Ella.

"Master calls," the little worker inquired, her face adorned with an impish smile.

"I did Ella, I need you to bring Rita Skeeter to this room. Tell her it's an order and she must be ready in less than a minute," he told his personal elf, who nodded and popped out.

"So what's the plan?" Daphne asked, sitting beside him.

"Ensure our dear reporter has all the information, of course." They shared smiles.

"It would be a shame if she happened to call for the heads of the ones who are endangering the precious Potter," Blaise sighed, a mock look of regret on his face.

"So you will end up participating?" Draco asked.

"I don't know and if I'm honest, I don't really care. Marcus will know what all the tasks are so none of us is in danger, but I don't like to be ordered around," Harry said, his amusement faded and only an inscrutable expression remained so no one dared to continue questioning him. Much to their relief, Ella arrived a few seconds later, along with a confused journalist.

"Here is your reporter," the elf announced with a bright smile. "Is there something else that sir needs?"

"No, dear, you can leave, though I'm sure a few would appreciate your exquisite chocolates," he told Ella, who brightened along with a few others. Harry left the sweet maniacs to their own means while he signalled Rita to take a seat.

"Good night Mister Potter. May I know why I'm being summoned?" the woman asked, already taking out her quill and parchment.



"Thank you for coming," Harry began, almost smiling at the woman's eager eyes. "Somehow, my name was entered in the Goblet and I was chosen as the fourth champion. I still don't know if I will participate or not, but I want the ones who pushed for the competition to be reinstated publicly ashamed, along with the people who agreed with the idea. Drag Dumbledore's name through the mud and make the public disapprove of him so much that he's dismissed as headmaster, don't forget to add his scandalous demand. Later tonight I will tell you if I will become a champion or not, but that doesn't change the article. Do your worst, Rita," he encouraged the woman, whose eyes lighted at the idea.

"I will drag their names through the mud," she promised, already writing on her parchment.

"Prepare your memories."

Without hesitation, his Court followed his instruction, teaching their new members on the fly how to extract memories. In less than five minutes, six vials were handed to the reporter, who took them as if they were poison instead of silvery plasma.

"Tell me what interviews you need and I'll get them for you, but I want that article for tomorrow morning regardless of them," Harry told the woman. Before Ella took the woman away, he added, "Rita, do not disappoint me."

The journalist gave the boy a rather stiff nod and left with his elf. Harry walked towards their common room, ready to receive the Aurors in his humble abode.

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Severus Snape took deep breaths in an effort to contain his increasing frustration in order to not curse the people who were walking with him towards a common room he hadn't visited in years. Apparently, he needed the supervision of two dozen people for the castle to allow him entrance! Containing his rising need to strangle someone, Severus decided to concentrate on any other thing that may distract him from the humiliating situation he was forced to endure. For some reason, his brain refused to cooperate and the only thing he could concentrate on was the discussion that took place not long ago... Perhaps the useless Black's presence was the reason he was unable to maintain his usual calm facade.

The professor didn't utter a word when the brat was announced as the fourth champion. However, he was extremely satisfied because Severus thought his colleagues would see the boy's true nature now. Of course, he was sorely mistaken. That boy was an excellent actor, he would admit that. Not for a moment Potter looked nervous or pleased, only slight annoyance was showed and he managed to convince everyone of his innocence. But unlike the others, Severus wasn't fooled.

However, he never imagined Albus or the Ministry representatives would allow Potter to compete. He was wrong. Potter, despite all his achievements in school and being hailed as a genius, wouldn't be able to deal with the tasks. In any other circumstances, he would not care in the slightest. Unfortunately, Severus swore to protect Lily's son, no matter how much he loathed the brat.

For a long time, he observed Potter but was unable to find any flaw in his perfect disguise so far. Potter inherited far too much from his dear Lily. Her enviable mind and composure, not

to mention her beauty and charisma. Unfortunately, he also inherited her silver tongue and innocent aura. No one would support Severus if he antagonized the boy and, in theory, he had no reasons to... But there was something wrong with Harry Potter. Severus didn't know what it was, but the boy's mere presence put him on edge. Maybe it was his eyes that lacked the warmth that characterized Lily or perhaps it had to do with how robotic he acted.

Deep down, he knew the truth. Severus Snape was afraid of Harry Potter. The boy's magic was far too powerful to be normal, his mind was far too sharp, and he possessed an unparalleled talent to manipulate people as if they were mere puppets. Severus knew those blessed with power were the ones who got corrupted by it and he was not blind, Potter already began treading that path.

The knowledge of a Court being formed was the last confirmation he needed.

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Sirius Black was having a tranquil evening with his girlfriend. Even though a few months went by since they started dating, she became an essential part of his life. Amelia Bones was the woman that grounded his feet to reality and yet encouraged him to continue dreaming. She was the one who helped him get over his memories of Azkaban, despite having little to no time for herself. That day would have been another unbelievably perfect one in his new life.

It was obvious he jinxed himself because, not even a minute later, he received an emergency Floo call from Professor Flitwick, summoning him, along with Amelia and Miss Blair, because his godson was selected as the fourth champion of that bloody Tournament. It took all of his self-control not to invade the school screaming bloody murder and to contact the attorney while his girlfriend spoke with Moody.

He flooded to the castle thanks to the access Flitwick granted them. Sirius strode towards the great hall. On his face was etched an uncharacteristically grave expression and the murderous glint in his eyes scared away any curious student. He knew that moronic championship would bring nothing good! But had they listened to him? Of course not! Now his godson was paying for his inability to cancel the stupid thing. However, if they thought he was going to allow his pup to compete, they were going to discover the reason why he was a Black.

He barged into the room that the vertically challenged professor signalled, interrupting the conversation and demanding answers. It was good Amelia was beside him, helping him to keep his temper in check, or he would have crucioed the pests that kept insisting on the idea of his godson participating. It was also good to be the boyfriend of the Minister, who also happened to be an intimidating woman that few dared to oppose. It was even better Andra Blair could instil fear in the bravest of men with the threat of a lawsuit. Between the both of them, Sirius didn't need to crucio anyone because the women did a better job than the curse.

The only thing that bothered him was how nonchalant Harry was with the situation. For a brief moment, Sirius considered Harry actually put his name in the Goblet. That idea was discarded when he glimpsed the teenager's eyes - they held an eerie resemblance to Lily's when some poor bastard managed to anger her. That woman was the gentlest person Sirius ever met, but Merlin knew she had a temper. Lily Evans' ire was ice cold, so she never yelled or exploded; she waited until the perfect moment to respond. She rarely used force; instead,

she used acerbic words that left a scar on whoever had wronged her. Of course her son also inherited that trait.

In an inappropriate moment of humour, Sirius remembered why he always saw Harry as a little Lily. No matter how much he wanted to see another James in the boy, Harry was nothing like his father. Sirius sighed while he watched his godson leave. Most of the time, he was grateful his godson was more like his mother because he couldn't imagine all the migraines a little James would cause him. However, he still wished his pup possessed that mischievous spark that characterized his best friend.

Never mind. Touching the wood of the closest chair, Sirius begged to any deity that heard his ramblings to ignore them. He had enough headaches as it was and the idea of raising a James Junior made him shudder. The sight of a far too cheerful Bagman brought him out of his musing and his anger was rekindled.

"Miss Blair, please go and get a copy of the rules. We can keep in contact through the mirror," Sirius told the woman, who simply nodded and left the room without looking back. "First, I want to know what would happen if Harry didn't compete."

"He would lose his magic," the idiot, Leonard, answered as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"What worries me is not whether he competes or not," announced an annoyed Flitwick, tired of their useless discussion. "This Tournament is meant for adults. We don't know whether the Goblet accepted this rule but, if it did, it could strip Mister Potter of his magic if he does compete," the man said. The realization his words brought was almost enough to make Sirius' knees buckle.

"What will we do?" whispered a pale McGonagall. An attractive blonde woman helped the professor to take a seat in a conjured chair, good thing because the old woman looked about to collapse.

"That's exactly my point," Flitwick sighed, looking like the old man he was for once. "The rules don't really matter because we don't know what the Goblet considers as such. We may be sentencing him if we force him to participate, but then he will also be sentenced if he doesn't... There are no precautions too excessive, so I suggest making Mister Potter a legal adult, just in case."

"Filius! How could you even suggest that? He's a child," Dumbledore rebuked the man. The headmaster's usual grandfatherly smile was gone, replaced with a stony expression.

"How could I suggest that? Simple. I'm thinking about the best way of preserving the safety of my student. Harry loves magic and if he lost it... I don't even want to consider that possibility. My question is how dare you try to admonish me? I told you that a simple age line would do nothing and even offered my services to create a ward around the Goblet. Do you remember what your answer was? 'It won't be necessary, I doubt anything will happen.' Those were your exact words. If there's someone who needs to be reprimanded, it's you for your irresponsibility," Flitwick snapped and, although he didn't raise his voice, his words

were enough to ensure Dumbledore remained silent, though the headmaster's reluctance could be seen by the tightness of his jaw and the way the man gripped his wand.

"Professor McGonagall, the Aurors are waiting," Amelia Bones reminded the woman, ignoring the tense atmosphere that refused to dissipate.

"I'll take care of the inspections, along with the professors that wish to come with me," the attractive blonde woman offered, patting McGonagall's shoulder. "I hope students aren't the only ones being inspected. A professor is more likely to have circumvented the headmaster's age line."

"As long as the professors have no problems with it," Amelia answered after a brief moment of deliberation.

"I don't believe anyone will. I also suggest examining the Goblet and parchment."

"I can lead the Aurors to examine the goblet while Isabelle takes care of the students, then we'll lead you towards the professors' quarters," a tall man offered.

"Very well, I thank you for the assistance," Amelia sighed, rubbing Sirius' arm.

"I will be leading the Aurors to the Slytherin common room," Snape announced, much to the displeasure of the blonde woman.

"Let's get back to the important matters," Filius said once the group left. "What will we do about Mister Potter?"

"I'll speak with Andra so he can be emancipated. I won't risk his magic," Sirius answered. For a moment, the man looked far too old and tired for his body.

"I don't think that's the best decision," Dumbledore told the man.

"Then what do you suggest? Is there a way to prove Harry will keep his magic even if he's not a legal adult entering the competition?" Filius asked, his voice dripping irritation, and the slightest hint of anger was beginning to appear on the man's usually cheerful face.

"Harry is far too young," Albus tried to argue.

"And yet you were agreeing with him being forced to enter the competition," Amelia snapped.

"So the boy will compete?" asked Madam Maxime, reminding the people in the room of the presence of the other two headmasters.

"Is that all you care about, Olympe? Are you so frightened that a fourteen-year-old boy will outshine your student?" demanded a furious Minerva, her anger winning over her worry.

"It is unfair that Hogwarts has two champions!" the tall woman argued, her heavily accented English turning almost incomprehensible.

"My godson said he won't be representing Hogwarts," hissed Sirius.

"I believe we'll never find agreement in this matter," said Flitwick, his tone ensuring the discussion was stopped. "I believe it would be appropriate if each of our visitors chose another champion, though it would be fair if all the students were given an equal opportunity."

"The Goblet doesn't work that way," Pedja Bjelac grunted.

"They don't have to be chosen by that archaic artefact. A simple name drawing will do. It would also be better if we did it in front of the whole school, for fairness' sake, you know?" Flitwick commented.

"I like that idea," Madam Maxime nodded, the scowl disappearing from her face.

"Don't forget that each school may only have one champion, so the ones you choose will have to represent another group," a cheerful charms professor reminded the woman.

"Unlike Olympe, I don't like the idea. This is meant to be the Triwizard Tournament. I did not have much problem with Potter competing, but now we are adding more people," Pedja almost barked, glaring at everyone in the room.

"I agree with you, but nothing about this Tournament is going as we expected," Flitwick shrugged.

"I'll go to speak with my godson," Sirius muttered after a few moments of silence.

"The Aurors will also inspect the offices. This could be a direct threat to the last Potter and that's enough to launch a full investigation," Madam Bones said, looking at Dumbledore. "Therefore, no one will be spared. I will begin examining the wands of all the people in this room."

Sirius waited until Amelia was done inspecting the wands, finding no possible spell that could force the Goblet to choose a fourth champion. After what felt like an eternity, the pair left the room and made their way to the dungeons. They waited in the entrance of the dungeons until the group of Aurors arrived, being led by a sneering Snape and a scowling Moody.

Amelia noticed Sirius' tense posture and tried to reassure the man by holding his hand. No words were needed; he took a deep breath and allowed himself to relax. The pair ignored the ruckus the Aurors ahead of them were making, or at least tried to, but their annoying yelps were enough to merit their attention. While Madam Bones prided herself on her stoic demeanour and how her years as an Auror ensured her reaction to danger were of the violent kind, the shock prevented her from raising her wand. A basilisk was about to eat the Potions professor. Not that she minded, but dealing with a basilisk was not what she was expecting to do that night. Her eyes widened even more when the giant snake returned to the wall and the entrance to the Slytherin common room was revealed.

Right, Salazar Slytherin was bonkers. Who else would enchant a wall to look like an overfed basilisk to guard a simple entrance?

The couple shared a look and kept walking with reluctant steps.

The moment Sirius stepped in the common room, his eyes widened in surprise. The room was a hundred times better than the Gryffindor common room. Even though both had hideous guardians, he believed the basilisk was less annoying than the Fat Lady.

"If I'd known they had such a place in the castle, I would begged to be a Slytherin," he almost whined and all Amelia could do was nod.

Sirius observed the way his godson managed the situation with pride. His pup was growing up way too fast for his liking, but he was still young... The man sighed in defeat and his heart contracted in searing pain at the idea of making the boy a legal adult at such a young age. Harry would be thrown into the world of politics, where he was nothing more than a hefty bag of galleons in the eyes of unscrupulous people. However, he was Lily's son through and through. The boy possessed a tactical mind and knew where his limitations lay, a sensible trait neither James nor he had and, more times than not, wished they did. For someone so young, Harry had a way with words and unrivalled charisma.

The problem was he had wished to guide the child, just as James asked him to. So far, Sirius was only been able to offer Harry minimum counsel because, most of the time, it was Harry taking care of him instead. The man admitted feeling defeated. He hoped for so many things when he was freed, but was able to accomplish none of them. His godson was already self-sufficient and fiercely independent when they met once again, not relying on him, or anyone else for that matter. It was quite depressing to acknowledge he wasn't able to fulfil his duties as godfather.

His moment of self-pity was interrupted by Amelia, who took his hand in hers and intertwined their fingers. The woman knew him far too well, but he didn't mind. He gave her a small smile and walked towards his godson. Sirius may not be the best godfather, but that didn't mean he was going to stop trying to protect the boy he considered his own child.

"Harry, I need to speak with you once the inspection is over," he told the boy, who nodded at him but kept looking at the Aurors inspecting the students.

Sirius waited with patience he was not aware of possessing until the inspections were finished. Taking a deep breath, he scowled at the floor. It was definitely not a student who put Harry's name on the Goblet, Moody would notice the slightest hesitation from anyone. The only suspects left were the staff from the school and the Ministry representatives. Of course, there was also Voldemort, though what rational and remotely intelligent being would submit a name into a competition instead of finding other ways of attacking his fourteen-year-old nemesis? He doubted the aesthetically-impaired man was that petty or stupid.

An amused huff left Sirius' lips - exhaustion made your thoughts go in strange directions. At last, the Aurors got ready to leave.

"I'll go and help Moody with the inspections, okay?" Amelia whispered.

"After talking with Harry, I'll go to the great hall," he told the woman, placing a soft kiss on the back of her hand before she left.

"Sirius, do you want something to drink? You look tired," Draco told him, slight worry shining on his eyes.

"Not really. Harry, we need to talk," Sirius sighed.

"If your face is anything to go by I guess I'll be competing," Harry muttered.

"The Tournament isn't what worries me now. Flitwick said something. Unfortunately, it makes sense," he murmured and after a moment, he decided to summon his courage and tell everything to his godson. "...We don't know what rules the Goblet considers to be in place, including the new regulations they implemented. You're a minor entering a competition that is meant for legal adults, which means you could be breaking one of the rules and lose your magic," he stated, closing his eyes, for he didn't wish to see Harry's fear.

"That means I have to become a legal adult," Harry nodded. "I don't mind, though I won't take my seat in the Wizengamot in the foreseeable future, or maybe ever."

"That's it?" Sirius asked, incredulous.

"What were you expecting? Not much will change. I'll still live in the castle, Ragnok will still be in charge of the money, I'll still ask you and Aunt Eleadora for permission... I think I'll also keep ignoring the Ministry events unless Madam Bones is organizing something," he said in a casual tone.

"What about the responsibilities of being the official Lord Potter?" Sirius asked, his mouth refusing to follow his orders and close.

"I'm not becoming the Lord until I'm at least seventeen, though the liaisons of the house are going well," Harry said, signalling his friends, many who also happened to be heirs. "Ploutos and Ragnok are taking care of the businesses and investments, not much to do."

"I was worried for nothing," Sirius chuckled and then sighed. "What about the Tournament?"

"What about it? Professor Flitwick is giving me sixth-year material, so I'm not that far behind. Besides, the other champions will take pity on poor innocent me and help me if necessary," he said, smirking at his friends and causing an unknown girl to snort in amusement. "Any other things we should know?"

"Yeah, the other schools will also choose another champion each. That French harpy was being too insistent on how unfair the competition would be, so Flitwick suggested it."

"That's not fair," one of Harry's friends muttered.

"It doesn't matter, we have other advantages," Harry told the boy, holding back a smirk. "I don't think you know my new friends yet. This is Justin Finch-Fletchey, Cedric Diggory, Viktor Krum, and Fleur Delacour. This is my godfather, Sirius Black."

"Pleased to meet you," the man told the kids, smiling at them. "It's strange the four official champions happen to be friends."

"What can we say? The Goblet knows how to recognize real talent," the French girl retorted, her slight accent betraying her nationality and making the man explode in laughter.

"Damn right. Okay kiddos, it's time to leave. My lovely girlfriend is waiting for me," the man announced, his cheerful disposition reappearing after the stressful evening.

"How will we arrange the emancipation?" Harry asked his godfather.

"Amelia and Andra will arrange everything. Though, if we need anything, I will be dropping by."

"Sure... You'll have to tell Aunt Eleadora and I will tell Elizabeth," Harry sighed, trying to ignore the trepidation that crept into him.

"She hates me!" Sirius whined.

"Do you want to tell Lizzy?" Blaise asked, incredulous.

"I would rather not tell any of them and leave that task in your capable hands," the man blabbered, already taking a few steps back.

"No thanks, besides, the worst she will do is rant for hours... or curse you and murder those responsible," Harry shrugged. "My sister will yell at me for most of the night. I refuse to lose a whole night of sleep."

"I'll tell Remus to tell her!"

"If you also want to hear his rant," his godson shrugged.

Sirius left the Slytherin common room muttering about sadistic godsons and a particularly evil woman.

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Albus Dumbledore entered his quarters and, with no hesitation, he walked towards the table where his strongest firewhisky was. That whole night was a disaster that would only become more troublesome in the near future.

That night, sleep eluded him and his brain refused to cooperate. He drank until the first lights of the day entered his room, signalling it was time to face the day.

Albus was sure Madam Bones would raise hell in the Ministry, but it was good she couldn't cancel the Tournament, otherwise, the champions could be harmed. That didn't mean it was going to be an easy day. The ones who disagreed with the competition being reinstated would have leverage on the Wizengamot. Of course, that didn't include the fact Harry Potter could sue them all and, if Albus knew something, was that Miss Blair was more vicious than a famished werewolf during a legal battle. He couldn't afford more trouble.



A month ago, he received a notification. The owner of the dragon reserve sued him through the ICW for his request. It was an international scandal and Albus thanked the heavens for the slivers of luck because Rita Skeeter didn't catch a whiff of what was happening.

The first trial was two weeks ago and he was sure that his position as Head of the ICW would come to a terrible end when the verdict was given. How was he supposed to know that the new owner would make such a scandal? Though it was a bit idiotic on his part to request nesting mothers, Albus admitted that.

The first task would definitely change now that dragons were no longer an option. Amelia and Sirius' influence in the Wizengamot would be unrivalled thanks to Harry being involved in the mess. No one would dare to go against them, which meant the woman could now change the tasks as she pleased. However, he would still try to keep the events as close as possible to the original ones.

While entering the great hall, Albus was greeted by the glare of Minerva, who seemed to be ready to rip him a new one. Being the sensible man he was, he decided to sit next to Severus for a few days... or weeks. The hall was already full and Albus sighed, it was time to give the news.

"Good morning, students! I beg a few minutes of your time," he announced, putting on his grandfatherly persona with more effort than usual. "Yesterday there were, uhm, surprising events taking place. It was decided Mister Potter will participate in the Triwizard Tournament, but he will not be the only addition. Today, two additional champions from the other schools will be chosen!"

"As the headmaster said, other champions will be chosen," Minerva announced, interrupting the speech he was planning to give. "However, the new champions will not be selected by the Goblet, much to their luck and my relief. Professor Flitwick enchanted these boxes himself. They will be impartial and choose the other competitors. If the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students who wish to compete would come to the front and put their names in the box."

Most of the French girls put their names in, but only two of the Bulgarian boys did. Perhaps Pedja managed to intimidate his students into submission, though he doubted he was granted access to the Slytherin Common room. Deciding he would rather sit down than look like a fool, he did just that. Each of the two principals approached their respective box and chose one of the papers each offered.

"Valerie Aguillon," Olympe announced.

A tall girl with chestnut hair walked to the front. Her smirk spoke of arrogance and the glare she directed at Miss Delacour made him sigh. Children were so prone to allowing their jealousy to take control and create grudges. However Albus could understand the reasons why the girl envied her classmate. It was almost impossible to compete against the beauty of a Veela, who also seemed to be intelligent and had talent with magic.

"Iwan Bobkov," Pedja called.

A thin boy of average stature walked to the front. The boy didn't seem to have any impressive attribute or characteristic, aside from the fact he was wearing glasses. While the boy was particularly plain, he seemed clever enough, for he bowed to his headmaster and the staff and returned to his seat. The other girl flushed and followed his example.

"Those are the six champions!" Filius announced after he failed to finish the speech because he was too distracted with his thoughts. "We wish to congratulate you and remind you that this is not only a great honour but a burdensome responsibility. This year you will be taking your NEWTs, don't forget that. One more thing, none of the three additional champions will represent their schools. They have to choose a group or another institution they wish to stand for. Mister Potter said there was only one Hogwarts champion while he represents The Court. You will have a week to make a similar decision and tell any of the teachers."

"The first tasks will take place on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November. You have less than a month to prepare yourselves, so be wise with your time," Albus advised, smiling rather stiffly. "Now continue eating, breakfast is the most important meal of the day!"

The tired headmaster sighed. For some reason he felt uneasy; a sense of foreboding distracted his keen mind. Either that or age was making him paranoid - both were possible. The owls began flying into the hall and the old man sighed, the last vestiges of energy leaving his body at the idea of confronting whatever Rita wrote that day. When he saw the headline, Albus Knew he would need alcohol to get through the day.

## ***HARRY POTTER:***

### ***SAVIOUR IN MORTAL PERIL!***

***By Rita Skeeter***

*My dear readers, your eyes don't deceive you! Harry Potter, the boy who saved us from those dark times where You-Know-Who ruled, is in a dangerous situation. Yesterday, the three champions for the Triwizard Tournament were chosen. However, no one expected the Goblet of Fire to choose a fourth champion, but it did... That is right my dear readers, Harry Potter was selected as the fourth competitor!*

*Through good sources, I know takes an expert magician to fool such an antique object as the Goblet of Fire. The Head of the DMLE, Alastor Moody, and the Minister, Amelia Bones, went in person to investigate. While many may think it is overkill to have such an important figure investigating what could be a prank, the fact the sole Heir of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter is in danger is enough to merit such a reaction.*

*Now, you may be asking yourselves: how does this endanger our hero's life? Allow me to explain this dire situation and even more terrible repercussions. For those who didn't read my article against the Tournament being re-instated, I will explain one of the major reasons and how it relates to the last Potter's safety.*

*The Goblet of Fire is an old and powerful artefact that acts as an impartial judge to select the champions. However, the moment the student puts their name in, they enter a magical agreement. That is right, my fellow citizens! The ones that are selected must compete even if*

*they are fatally injured, else lose their magic and maybe even their lives. This means no competitor is allowed to leave the Tournament under any circumstance. Now, you may be asking yourselves how this affects the boy-who-lived aside from being forced to compete. The answer is simple my dear readers. The Triwizard Tournament is meant for legal adults and Harry Potter is still a minor, which means that the Goblet of Fire may strip him of his magic and reclaim his life even if he does compete.*

*Now you understand, our saviour will be sentenced whether he competes or if he doesn't.*

*That is right, my fellow citizens, Harry Potter may lose his magic!*

*Yesterday night, I went to the Ministry in order to try to find an answer, researching the rules about the Triwizard Tournament in hopes of finding a loophole that would protect our protector. Much to my surprise, I found Attorney Andra Blair, legal representative of the Potter Family, in the same situation. Together we tried to find anything that would help the boy. A few hours later, Lord Black and Minister Bones also arrived, after visiting Hogwarts.*

*Lord Black, Harry Potter's godfather, suggested a brilliant solution that will save our saviour: emancipation.*

*That is right, my fellow witches and wizards, Harry Potter will be emancipated at the tender age of fourteen in order to preserve his magic. I know you must be relieved, I almost cried when that astute solution was given. However, with a heavy heart, I must admit that, once again, we failed our hero. I should have been more insistent with the idea of cancelling the competition, but I allowed all the 'security measures' that were implemented to lull me into a false sense of security.*

*Now that we know our hero will not lose his precious gift, I must ask, who is responsible for this situation?*

*Yesterday night, as I mentioned before, Minister Bones and Auror Moody conducted an investigation in the school in order to find the possible culprit. The Aurors searched all the rooms and reviewed every wand in search of the culprit, but no student or teacher was to blame. How was his name placed in the goblet then? We still don't know, but the Head of the DMLE, Auror Alastor Moody, is conducting the investigation in person.*

*I took the liberty of researching what security measures were placed around the dangerous artefact in order to prevent an underage student putting their names in. Much to my horror, there was a single protection: an age line. For those who are not warders or curse-breakers, I will explain why that measure was no better than wet parchment. An age line prevents people of a certain age from entering a place. However, it only does that. An underage student could have asked an older one to put his name in, a piece of parchment could have been levitated in or simply thrown into the Goblet. This was more of a joke to discourage students than to protect them!*

*Who drew this flimsy excuse for protection, you may be asking yourselves and, my dear readers, I am sorry to disappoint you once again with the news. Albus Dumbledore drew the age line himself. That is right! The man we forgave over and over again, entrusting our*

*beloved children to his care, did the bare minimum to protect them. This mistake could have cost the life of Harry Potter!*

*For a long time, Albus Dumbledore has been making one mistake after another: housing trolls in the school, trying to hide petrifications, hampering the education of our children by ignoring the fact that Hogwarts standards had fallen. If that was not enough, he, along with the convicted criminal, Cornelius Fudge, pushed for the Tournament to be reinstated and for the Goblet of Fire to be used, all in the name of tradition. My fellow citizens, I apologize for delivering this news. I have discovered even more information about the Hogwarts Headmaster, the man that also serves as Chief Warlock and Head of the ICW.*

*Albus Dumbledore is being sued through the ICW under these charges: immoral behaviour, wildlife crime, strict liability, influence peddling, and clientelism.*

*He requested nesting mothers from the dragon reserve in Romania, Loc Sigur, in order to use the creatures during the first task! That is right, my dear readers! The champions were going to confront dragons that happened to be nesting mothers as a task. Outrageous! The owner of the reserve sued Dumbledore through the ICW for trying to endanger a species that is already in danger for a simple competition. Nesting mothers are sensitive and the unhatched dragons may perish during the trip; a simple spectacle could have cost the lives of many innocents. The owner of the reserve refused to use his dragons in such a cruel way and condemned the suggestion. The trial took place two weeks ago (read pages 7 to 10 for information about the trial and demand). Now, Magical Britain is in the eye of the whole magical world because they believe the whole country is as cruel as the man who represents it. For what I discovered, Dumbledore is going to lose his position as Supreme Mugwump of the ICW and there are possibilities of the organization demanding another representative.*

*We are all kind people, but even kindness has its limits. We can't keep forgiving Albus Dumbledore for the constant mistakes he makes because, so far, they all proved his disregard for the lives of our children. I say no more!*

*My dear readers, be ready to read the interview with the Minister and the Head of the DMLE, along with more information about the Triwizard Tournament tomorrow. All I can do now is wish good luck to our Saviour. May Mother Magic protect him from danger.*

Albus read the article and felt his frustration growing with each word. The woman seemed to have a personal vendetta against him as the article had portrayed him as some kind of villain, though he admitted with no little amount of embarrassment she hadn't uttered a single lie. It was not pleasant to have his mistakes thrown into his face in such a public way.

He saw a Ministry owl carrying a familiar envelope and sighed. Although he was the most affected, everyone who agreed with him now was at a total disadvantage and he was sure the Wizengamot would be in utter chaos. Not even nine in the morning and he already wished to be in bed. The man doubted his old body was ready to take all the stress it was going to be subjected to.

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The Court walked towards the great hall for breakfast. Even though they were used to the constant looks, today the scrutiny they were subjected to was enough to put them on edge.

Yesterday was exhausting and it seemed that this day would be no different.

Harry ignored everyone with no more effort than usual, for his mind was centred on important matters. The boy was trying to devise a plan to discover who dared to submit his name. He never liked being ordered around and he only did things when he wished to.

However, what worried him the most was the safety of his friends who would also compete. He did not care if the champions were unprotected against any eventuality because they were not important. Now, though, he would have to contact Ragnok to arrange placing the necessary wards around the whole place where the tasks were going to be, including the new one against every person who carried the Dark Mark. For all he cared, Snape could remain in the dungeons... Also, armour: his new members still didn't own any. How clumsy of him.

The thought of armour led to other ideas that he needed to consider. They needed subtle protection for the tasks, maybe similar to the training gear in design. Something able to protect them against everything from magical attacks to blunt force, impervious, and able to maintain body heat. Yes, something that resembled the armour they wore while fighting during the World Cup, but more subtle. He began writing his requirements, ready to send letters to Ragnok and his elves. The sooner they arrived, the sooner they could be done, and he would have one less thing to worry about.

Harry sighed and looked to the person beside him, Fleur. She was part Veela, powerful with fire but weak against water... Her protective gear would need to be special in order to fit her needs. He would need to ask Penelope, the elf in charge of creating the armour, to research ways of enhancing the protective gear to fit each of the Court's needs. It was good the female had the patience of a saint because Harry kept asking her to improve their armour in different ways.

"What happened?" asked a curious Fred when he saw a furious Cedric.

"Idiots. They were making a drama about Harry stealing 'Hufflepuff's spotlight'," the prefect spat, a rare sneer on his lips.

"Yeah, Susan punched Zacharias Smith and sent him to the hospital wing. Though I think she only used Harry as an excuse because she's wanted to punch the guy for a long time, not that I blame her," Justin shrugged, taking a seat beside Neville.

"Yeah, a few Gryffindors were complaining yesterday," Neville commented.

"They stopped when our lion boy hexed anyone who dared to talk ill about Harry," George exclaimed, a prideful smile playing on his lips.

"What did McGonagall do? They complained to her, right? Or Neville also threatened them?" asked a worried Fleur. Harry noted absently that her English improved drastically over the short time she spent with them.

"Nah, they complained alright," Fred chuckled. "Minnie came this morning and took five points from Neville for attacking his classmates."

"Though she awarded him ten points for loyalty and braveness," George added.

"I thought the rules were against attacking students," Theo deadpanned.

"By all means he should have been suspended," Hestia nodded.

"But we all know that McGonagall has a soft spot for Harry," Luna shrugged.

"For some reason, few of the school rules apply to him," Terrence sighed dramatically.

"I guess that's one of the perks of being the best student," Viktor commented.

"Even Filch likes him," Adrian groaned, rubbing his face in a comic way.

"Mister Filch is a kind person," hissed a scowling Flora, glaring at the older boy.

"Only because he gave you those little monsters," muttered Blaise low enough not to be heard and incur in the wrath of the youngest twins.

"Yeah, I don't think Susan has the same invulnerability," Cedric commented, the banter of his friends calming his anger.

"Maybe not, but I doubt the niece of the Minister will be expelled. Besides, I think Madam Pomfrey will turn a blind eye, along with most of the teachers. Smith was going to get punched sooner or later with that attitude of his," Daphne said, petting one of the cats Mister Filch had given the twins.

"What happened to him?" asked Justin, signalling Harry.

"He's thinking or at least I think he is. He's worried," Luna shrugged.

Harry heard the conversation his friends were having but decided to ignore them for the moment. There were letters to be sent and plans to be made. Besides, he was tired. Yesterday, true to his predictions, his sister raved for hours and then broke down in hysterical sobs. It was painful to watch her so worried and it took a long time to reassure her. At last, he somehow managed to calm the girl. However, seeing Elizabeth's worry scared away his desire to sleep.

Now he was tired, but he thanked his magic for somehow keeping him alert, at least for now. Harry knew he was going to sleep as soon as he had free time. He dutifully ignored whatever was happening in the hall, including the speech or the identity of the new champions.

His musings were interrupted by Hedwig, who got tired of being ignored and bit his ear, making him wince. The boy sighed and apologized to his owl, untying the newspaper and handing her the whole platter of bacon, something that a few objected to, which he ignored with practised ease. He read the title and his eyebrows were raised in surprise. The article completely slipped his mind. Rita was more of a gossip magazine writer than a newspaper journalist, but the woman had talent to play with people's emotions, so he did not complain.

Harry skimmed over the paper and approved of it. For the few hours he gave the woman, she did a decent job, although it was a shame Dumbledore's scandal was relegated to the other sections of the newspaper.

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### **Early morning, 1<sup>st</sup> of November, Minister's Office**

Amelia Bones finished reading the newspaper with a sigh. Today was going to be even more troublesome than expected, as if yesterday wasn't tiring enough... Somehow, Rita found out what happened in the school, but the woman was particularly tight-lipped about her source of information. It was a surprise to find the reporter in the public archive of the Ministry, helping Andra to go over the rules of that stupid Tournament.

All night Amelia tried to find any kind of loophole that would allow her to cancel the competition without endangering the champions. Of course, good fortune eluded her and no plan that came to her mind was feasible or remotely effective. It was time to accept the bloody thing would be taking place, even though she tried so hard to avoid it. However, she now had leverage over the Wizengamot and she was going to use every tool possible to ensure the safety of the children.

"Madam, please eat this before the meeting," Marcus told her, placing down a tray filled with food that was making her mouth water.

"Thank you, Marcus, but would it kill you to call me Amelia?" she asked, a bit miffed at the overly formal young man.

"It may," he answered, concentrating on his own pile of documents. "Miss Blair told me about the demand she is preparing against the Wizengamot," the male said after a few minutes, allowing her to eat in peace.

"I'm sure that will finish scaring off the cowards," the Minister sighed. "Any ideas on how to manage the chaos that we'll have to deal with?"

"A few. What I believe would be the best option to placate the people is removing Dumbledore from his position as headmaster. I'm sure that there are already people claiming his head outside."

"I couldn't agree more, but that sneaky old man has the school's Board of Governors in his pocket, or at least he did when Madam Marchbanks tried to kick him out last year. Dumbledore has too many connections, so I'm not sure if we'll be able to take him out," Amelia explained. "That doesn't mean he's getting out unscathed."

"We can use his blatant irresponsibility as an argument to change the tasks and I'm sure no one will oppose," Marcus smirked. "I already have the documents for Harry's emancipation, it only needs your signature, along with Sirius'."

"Thank you. The sooner we have it done the better. Sirius is about to have a mental breakdown from the stress. Any suggestions for the Tournament?"

"Aside from changing the tasks, there isn't much to do, though I would suggest inviting the families of the foreign students to watch the tasks. Also, I think it would be good to incorporate the different disciplines the school has to offer in the tasks. The last Minister purchased special mirrors to be used in the Tournament. It would be good to use the mirrors to follow each champion up close, but we would need to speak with the owners to see if there is a way of showing what the competitors are doing through them."

"That's an excellent idea, Marcus. It will be easier to plan for tasks so the audience doesn't get bored."

"I will contact the owner then... If you forgive my bluntness, I believe that only having students as spectators is not sensible. We should build another stand for people who wish to attend, maybe it would be good to sell tickets in order to avoid being crowded."

"I also considered that, but we have Death Eaters to look out for," Amelia sighed, rejecting the idea.

"Then maybe we could place the mirrors in strategic places in the Alley, but it would be waste because they would only be used three times. What about scattering the stand with Aurors? It would also be good to have the spectators arrive an hour early and confiscate any kind of edibles and drinks in order to avoid being fooled by the polyjuice," Marcus suggested.

"The idea has merit, but we need to speak with Moody. Though, I'll follow your other suggestion. The families of all the foreign participants will be invited to observe the competition; it is only fair."

"Indeed, ma'am. Now, I think the inept members of the Wizengamot have waited long enough."

"Lead the way, Mister Travers."



# Burdensome Regrets

## Chapter Notes

Hello, I wanted to tell all of you a little something before you read.

I have little free time and everything is a mess right now. I will not keep a regular updating schedule because, even though I have many chapters written, logging in and polishing them takes time that I don't have at the moment.

My schedule will go back to normal in a few months (at least I hope it does), but until then, I will update every time I remember to and have free time to enjoy this hobby.

Stay at home, please don't be paranoid, and enjoy the chapter!

### **First of November, 1994, Wizengamot Chambers**

Pandemonium. That was the first word that came to Albus mind when he entered the room. Nevertheless, that simple description was unable to portray the utter chaos that ruled the place. Most Wizengamot members were yelling at each other and even the most stoic people seemed to have lost their composure. The only calm persons were the ones he wished to avoid at all costs.

Sirius Black, Lucius Malfoy, and Attorney Blair were conversing, somehow managing to ignore the ruckus that surrounded them. For a moment, he considered approaching them but discarded the idea - Sirius might still be angry and today he needed as little opposition as possible. In a corner of the room, he saw Madam Marchbanks and Augusta Longbottom enjoying a cup of tea, ignoring the riot. He took a deep breath and kept walking towards the podium, hoping the Minister arrived soon, for his own peace of mind.

Dumbledore slumped into his seat - all his remaining energy left him and he doubted he could stand up. It was time to admit he made another mistake believing his age line would be enough. Why didn't he accept Filius' offer again? ...Ah, of course, how could he forget? He rejected the offer because he felt offended at the implication of his barrier not being enough. Mmm, the pride that blinded him during his youth made an inconvenient appearance.

Never mind that, there was no reason to cry over spilt milk. It was time to plan. Albus admitted not being a decent headmaster over the past few years, but he changed. Being at Hogwarts helped him to keep his feet grounded on earth. All those children were the Magical World's future, so he tried to impart his knowledge and beliefs on each new generation, in hopes of avoiding another Dark Lord. He needed to remain in the position, at least until Voldemort was defeated. Now, the problem centred on how to do so.

Rita Skeeter wrote the facts based on her own perspective, polluting the population's opinion about him. Nothing to do there. Albus couldn't deny any accusation and no one would hear his explanations either way. He almost groaned at the only idea that came to his mind, not wanting to use the few favours he had left. However, he couldn't think of other option. It was time to allow his inner politician to take control and use his greatest weapon: charisma.

The familiar sensation of dozens of eyes staring at him broke his train of thought. Of course people would notice his presence when Amelia had yet to arrive. In the corner of his eye, Albus saw a group of people approaching his position and he prayed to all the deities that he could think of to avoid the confrontation. Much to his relief, his prayers were heard and the Minister entered, accompanied by young Marcus and Moody.

"Good morning! I apologize for my lateness, but there were important matters to take care of," Amelia greeted, putting an effective end to every conversation in the room.

"Meh, let's make this quick because I still have paperwork to finish," Alastor grumbled loud enough for the whole room to hear.

"Before we begin the session," Madam Bones announced from her place on the podium. "I ask the Chief Warlock to be relieved from his duties during this meeting. It is counterproductive to have the person responsible for this whole mess involved in the decision taking."

"If I may, I suggest Madam Marchbanks as interim Chief Warlock," Malfoy announced.

Albus could only sigh at the terrible beginning this meeting was having. Madam Marchbanks was the kind of woman few dared to cross. He contained another sigh when he noticed the number of people who raised their wands in agreement.

"Very well, Madam Marchbanks will be presiding over the meeting," he announced, wearing his grandfatherly persona, and walked to the seats reserved for Ministry workers.

Albus decided it was better to give in before antagonizing anyone, he wasn't in a position to have enemies today.

"That done, let's be brief and concise because I have many matters that need my attention, thanks to the carelessness of certain individuals," Amelia stated. The members of the Wizengamot knew this was not going to be an easy day.

"First matter in the agenda is the Tournament," Griselda Marchbanks said, signalling Miss Blair to speak.

"As the representative of the House of Potter, I am announcing a demand against this body through the ICW for its negligence. Mister Potter is not pleased with the idea of being dragged into the ill-planned competition and wishes remuneration," the attorney declared, provoking surprise in most of the people in the room.

"...Your client is within his rights to demand remuneration. However, we cannot afford another international scandal," Lucius sighed and Albus thought he looked too pleased with

himself.

"Mister Potter wanted to make his intentions known so you have time to get ready for the public trial," Andra said with no inflection, looking disinterested in the response.

"Is there any way to convince him to drop the demand?" begged a nervous Elmo Humpty.

"Perhaps, but the Wizengamot needs to move fast because the demand will be presented next week."

"What demands does Mister Potter have?" asked a curious Augusta Longbottom.

"He wishes the destruction of the Goblet of Fire once the competition is over," Miss Blair said in a clear voice, still looking uninterested. "Also, my client doesn't feel safe around those who agreed on the Triwizard Tournament continuing despite the evidence of its dangerous nature. He wants a restraining order against each one of the Wizengamot members who agreed on the competition and charge them with criminal responsibility."

"The first one is doable, but don't you the others are excessive?" asked Albus, trying to show his best smile.

"Let's us be frank," Andra said, her disinterested facade being replaced by a scowl. "My client is in contact with Reporter Skeeter. I think you all know he will have his demands whether you like it or not. In the end, he is the sweetheart of the press and the country itself. The demand is a mere formality because we all know people will revolt if the Ministry does nothing."

"He is nothing but a spoiled child," Amycus almost hissed and part of the dark faction seemed to agree. Albus knew things were only going to go south after this.

"Perhaps, either way, he is one of the most influential figures of the country. If you really want to do nothing that is none of my concern. Either way the demand will be presented," Andra stated casually and the man remained silent.

It was hard to admit a fourteen-year-old teenager had more influence on the people than the government. It was something the Wizengamot would rather forget.

"You were not given permission to speak, Mister Carrow," Amelia snapped at the man. Albus knew that expression, it was the one Moody wore before hunting. "Miss Blair, does your client have any other request?"

"Many," Andra said in a monotonous tone and the Minister gave her a nod so she elaborates. "Mister Potter wishes an audit to be made. Not only to the Wizengamot, but to the Ministry itself. He demands an investigation to those who agreed on the Tournament. It is too suspicious for the last Potter to be forced to participate in a mortal competition. Don't you agree?"

Silence. For the first time, the room was silent. Albus knew Andra was behind of all the demands, Harry was a clever child, but he lacked the cut-throat nature that evil woman

possessed. It was obvious she wanted something specific, otherwise, she wouldn't be revealing the information and simply catch them unaware.

"...I believe it's in our best interest to make those requests possible," young Travers said, breaking the silence.

"Do you really want-"

Whatever Jugson was going to say was interrupted by the gavel hitting the desk. Madam Marchbanks needed to do no more for silence to return and she nodded at Marcus.

"We are not in a good position. If the last Minister's scandal was not enough, now we have the Chief Warlock causing problems. People lost their trust on the Ministry and an insurgence is not far-fetched considering the aurors are being deployed to control all the riots. We don't have the support of the public and we can't afford to have the Saviour of the Wizarding World as our enemy. Complying is in our best interest, but we need a way of dissuading Mister Potter of going ahead with his demand. I doubt granting him what he would either way get is enough."

Whispers broke in the room, but the air was heavy. A part of Albus wanted to beam at how smart Marcus was, other part of him wanted to quiet the boy. A look at Andra was enough to know she was satisfied with the turn of events.

"You are right, Marcus," the Minister said and silence returned to the room. "Miss Blair, do you have any idea if your client is willing to come to an agreement with us in order not to present the demand?"

"He is, but he has certain conditions," she answered and received the approval to continue. Andra took her time to look into her portfolio and retrieved a roll of parchment. "First, he wants those who campaigned for the Tournament to be reinstated being dismissed from their duties."

Albus could feel eyes on him and knew it was time to act. Either way, he would be thrown at the werewolves by these people so better take the jump himself.

"I agree with you, Attorney Blair," Albus announced, all the attention was on him. "I will respond to all the mistakes I committed as Chief Warlock. I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, hereby resign from my honourable position in the Wizengamot. I retire in shame and will reflect on my actions. I apologize for all the problems I caused and will apologize to the population."

Albus bowed and took a sit, the room went silent. He crossed glances with Andra. While she didn't look pleased, neither she looked surprised. She may be an excellent lawyer, but he had more than a century of experience and used it to play his cards right.

"We accept your resignation," Madam Marchbanks announced, no one opposed. "What other requests does Mister Potter has?"

"For those who voted for the Tournament to be given a vote of no confidence." At this declaration, uproar descended the room until the Minister stopped it. "However, we all know that is not viable," Andra continued as if she was never interrupted. "The Wizengamot can't work with eighty percent of its members gone. Right? The next option is marking those who supported the Tournament so the next time they make a mistake of this nature, they are dismissed from their duties."

Silence descended once again and Albus sighed. Andra won this one.

"Despite of all your... concessions, I doubt Mister Potter backs down," Andra sighed, "you are not granting him much more than what he would get. His passiveness can be confused by weakness and we know that the last member of a House has much to lose in that situation. However-" she said louder when people began whispering. "-there is one thing the Wizengamot can do for Mister Potter to not present the demand."

"Tell us what is it," the Minister demanded after the woman went silent.

The tension in the air increased and Albus looked around. Everyone was on edge. However, Sirius seemed calm enough and Lucius was wearing that infuriating smirk. Andra Blair was stoic as ever, though he could almost feel the satisfaction oozing of her.

"Mister Potter, just like every Potter before him, is a fierce supporter of creature rights. If we abolish the regulations that suppress other species and offer it as olive branch, then I can almost assure you my client will drop the international lawsuit."

Chaos erupted once again. Some were yelling, others were furiously whispering to each other, a selected few were observing. Albus looked at the Minister, she was silent and her expression inscrutable. Her undersecretary was having a whispered conversation with Alastor, they arrived to an agreement and the scarred man went silent while Marcus whispered to the Minister. Amelia nodded once and signalled Madam Marchbanks to return the order. The gavel hit the desk once and the sound was amplified, enough for the people to go silent once again.

"Beggars can't be choosers," the Minister said in an even tone and more than one gasped.

"You are suggesting we treat those beasts as people?!" Parkinson yelled, losing any semblance of composure.

"Giving them some concessions won't affect us. Minister Bones is right, beggars can't be choosers," Lucius commented, making more than one yell in indignation.

"Silence!" the Minister commanded, raising her voice at last. "We don't have time for petty arguments! Do you want to face an international lawsuit? Then suit yourselves. I accepted to lead a country that is in the verge of collapsing because I thought I could prevent that, but if your beliefs are more important than our people then go ahead. I want to see what happens then."

Silence descended in the room once again. Amelia took a side and the Wizengamot was officially divided. Albus took a shallow breath, knowing the situation could turn violent if

someone lost its temper. By the looks of it, Alastor was going to be the first one to snap.

"An international lawsuit will ruin us. It is not far-fetched to think that the Wizengamot would be disbanded if we go against the darling of the magical people. Skeeter will rile them up and, in the best scenario, we will be sacked by the population. This is not a dictatorship, but a semi-direct democracy. Other countries would certainly take advantage then," Mister Travers explained, breaking the heavy silence. "I don't like it, but I choose the lesser evil."

"We need to decide which creature regulations will be nullified," Griselda announced.

"If you forgive my interruption, I'm sure Miss Blair is qualified for that task. If we sort those ourselves, we will spend the whole day here and I have urgent matters to sort regarding my godson and his emancipation. I believe we should give free rein to attorney Blair so she takes care of it, then she can present her proposal to the Minister," Sirius suggested, looking far too pleased for someone who personified the walking misery less than a day before.

"That is not a wise or viable suggestion, Sirius," Dumbledore announced, unwilling to allow things to take that catastrophic turn. "The regulations were placed on creatures for a reason so we should be careful while examining them."

"C'mon Dumbledore, I have to take care of the riots and paperwork to fill. Neither Minister Bones nor undersecretary Travers slept a blink last night, I would know because we were all sorting the mess all of you caused. If you have time to waste, congratulations, but there are some people who actually work here," Alastor snapped, obviously losing his patience. He did nothing to hide the wand holster on his wrist.

"Who votes for Attorney Blair, as representative of the House of Potter, to be in charge of the onerous task of determining the regulations that will be repealed?" Madam Marchbanks asked, also looking impatient.

This time, the ones agreeing were a little more than the half, but it was enough. Many looked ready to argue but there was a reason Alastor earned his title as Vicious Hunter. Sighing, Albus knew he needed to speak with Andra as soon as possible.

"Another matter that I wish to discuss is the Triwizard Tournament," Amelia announced, after nodding at her undersecretary. "The tasks will change."

"I understand the first task being changed - nesting dragons weren't a good idea - but the others are fine enough," Elphias Doge said, frowning at the Minister.

"You agree with putting a seventeen-year-old part Veela underwater for an hour?" Madam Bones asked, raising an eyebrow. "A girl who also happens to be the eldest of Mister Delacour, previous French Minister for Magic and perhaps one of the most influential persons in that country? I don't know about you, Mister Doge, but I would rather avoid a confrontation caused by endangering an international guest," the derision in her tone was not lost, but the truth in her words was enough to ensure the man remained silent.

"What do you suggest as the second task then?" Amicus Carrow snapped.

"Forgive my interruption, Minister, but as far as I am concerned, it's not within the Wizengamot's duties to decide the tasks," Lucius Malfoy said before the woman could answer.

"Indeed. With the help of Mister Bagman and Mister Fawley, I will reorganize the Tournament. Of course, they will join me after their legal problems are sorted," Amelia said, far too cheerful for many people's liking.

"Is that all? I still have an investigation to take care of and Amelia has a disaster to sort," barked an annoyed Moody, glaring at the few who wanted to continue the discussion. "Bah! I don't have time to waste."

"Although that was inappropriate, I agree with Auror Moody," Augusta announced.

"Very well, with no more matters to take care of, meeting adjourned. The new Chief Warlock will be announced next week," Griselda said.

Once the woman uttered her last word, the room was once again submerged into chaos. Many were trying to approach Miss Blair, but she was speaking with Moody and no one dared to interrupt. Albus decided to be the brave one and neared the pair with cautiousness, just in case the auror got startled and began throwing curses.

"Ah, Andra, I wished to speak with you," he greeted.

"Is it about your trial? Do you need the assistance of a lawyer?" the woman asked, looking surprised.

"No, that isn't what I wish to discuss," Albus answered cordially. "I came to offer my assistance in helping you go through the regulations. You see, I helped many of them to be placed in the first place. My objective is the protection of the magical people and now I have quite a lot of free time."

"I thank you for the offer, though I am forced to reject it. At the moment, you still have legal issues to be sorted and I doubt my client will appreciate having me near to one of the people who endangered his life," the woman chirped, her smile was far too bright for Albus comfort.

"Yeah, whatever. Let's go to my office," Alastor muttered, turning around. "My brats are second class citizens now and that is unacceptable. Of course, now I have to deal with paperwork, but I don't think Kingsley will be able to survive if I dump the new batches on him... Meh, it's not like I like sleeping either way," the grumbles of the man were lost to Albus and he could do nothing but watch as those two walked away.

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Andra Blair enjoyed some wine after the meeting. Everything fell into place.

She eyed the documents on her desk and sighed, the creature regulations were officially abolished. She took another sip of her wine. The Wizengamot really wasn't aware of who Harry Potter really was. Right? That boy was too influential to be so young.

It would be a lie to say she was the only attorney that worked for Harry Potter. There were dozens of people behind her - the elves the previous Potter Head trained, the goblins that dedicated all their lives to understand the laws of the mages and were experts in turning everything to their favour, the multiple squibs and mages that specialized in different branches. Andra was the face, she was capable, yes, but she was only one person. She was in charge of the team that worked from the shadows to ensure Mister Potter's wishes were accomplished.

She refilled her glass and smiled a little. The Ministry had no idea who they messed up with, but that was fine, she wasn't completely sure either.

Harry Potter. The boy was clever, she would give him that, but they had few meetings despite of working years for him. But then again, she was just another employee. The meetings she attended every week or so were with Ragnok and Ploutos, those two were ones behind the success of the last Potter. However, she had a feeling that the boy knew much more than she could image. While she didn't know how involved in his family matters he was, she knew he had big plans.

Andra thought it would be fun to watch the world burn and be reborn from the ashes, built exactly like Harry Potter wanted. To be honest, the future did look promising.

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The members of the Court decided to have a tranquil lunch at their headquarters. The whole day they were subjected to the constant attention of the students, who apparently had nothing better to do than stare at the champions. Besides, they needed some privacy. Marcus called Harry early in the morning through the crystal to inform him of the emergency Wizengamot meeting. It was convenient his legal representative already prepared his requests. Of course, they were ready for a long time, but that was a minuscule detail. Now, Harry was waiting for Marcus to call and give him an update on what decisions were made.

"I can't believe the whole school has nothing better to do than stare at you," Draco complained, pointing at the four present champions.

"And I can't believe the teachers did nothing. I'm not even a champion, but classes were still unbearable," Terrence groused in agreement.

"At least you didn't have to deal with all the whining in your common room," Justin shrugged

"Whatever, what do we know about the other champions?" Blaise inquired.

"Iwan is a good person - pretty calm and quite clever. He liked the idea of knowing how he would deal with any possible challenge in the competition. He talked to me last night about putting in his name," Viktor explained.

"I don't know Valerie that well, though she is good at charms... She doesn't like me and the feeling is reciprocated," Fleur stated.

"We have an hour to train before classes, come on," Daphne ordered, signalling the dummy area.



"I think Fleur and I will practice our illusions," Neville told the group, but looked at the French girl to see if she agreed. The blonde nodded and they walked towards the duelling area.

"I guess I'll start with the both of you," Harry sighed, looking at the two Hufflepuffs. "Cedric, begin meditating. Justin, try to relax and look at me. I'll try to show you how I transmit my intent to my magic," he ordered and both boys obeyed.

Harry took a deep breath and looked at the youngest Hufflepuff's eyes. He allowed himself to examine the mental shields for a handful of seconds before invading his friend's mind. The first thing he noticed was the utter disarray of memories and the jumble of clouds that piled in one place. He approached it with care and analyzed it... Apparently, those were the memories from Justin's time at Hogwarts. The ones at the base looked almost grey compared to how colourful the ones at the top were. He decided to summon a recent memory of the boy casting a spell instead of taking the time-consuming task of looking at each one of the orbs.

It was bizarre to experience things from the perspective of another person, although what took most of Harry's attention was the understanding of what was his friend's problem.

In all his years practising magic, Harry never felt her so unresponsive. However, neither had he felt that kind of disregard towards his precious gift. For him, magic was his constant companion and protector, Justin saw it as a tool that he had the right to wield. This was definitely something Harry didn't agree with, so he chose a random memory, where his magic resembled a second heart while casting a spell. Once he implanted it, he left Justin's mind.

A moment later, Justin's eyes widened and his breath quickened.

"What... What was that?"

"That was magic. You see her as a tool when she is not, so she takes retribution by not answering when you try to summon her," Harry explained, patting Justin's knee.

"I had no idea..."

"I guess it's understandable, though now you need to work on that."

"I will," Justin promised and began meditating.

Harry sighed and glanced at a sleeping Luna, she was far too tired these days - if this continued, then he would take her to the healers. Although he wished to speak with her first, though he had no idea how to breach the topic. Besides, he respected her privacy far too much to pry. He concentrated on Cedric, who was twitching far too much to be meditating.

"Okay, you can open your eyes now," Harry told his friend. "Tell me, how much you advanced?"

"Not much. I'm trying to find my core but so far I've got nothing," Cedric sighed.

"Try to relax. I will show some memories of how my magic core feels and then you will try meditating once again," the young Slytherin said as he looked at the other boy's eyes.

It was somewhat exasperating how easy it was to invade the older's boy mind. While Harry was not expecting resistance, it was still disquieting to confirm how defenceless Cedric's mind was. He decided to put his worries aside and looked around, surprised at the sight. Mind spaces tended to take the shape of the place the person was the most comfortable and familiar with. He was not expecting for Cedric's mindscape to be in the shape of the headquarters, though it lacked its usual organization.

Without wasting time, he summoned a memory. After seeing it, Harry was sure that the prefect didn't have the same problem as Justin. By any means, Cedric should have already been able to find his core... Unless... Was that even possible? Perhaps it was.

Harry never had problems with remaining still and his concentration was perfect, though he had people who lacked his gift. During his school years, he met a few decent people who had more cognitive ability than most of his peers. One, in particular, stood out. Although he didn't remember her name, he remembered how curious the older girl was. Never paying attention and always doing three things at the same time, though she always managed to remember what she read with uncanny precision. Attention deficit with hyperactivity, that is how that girl named her situation.

While other people saw this as a disadvantage, he saw it as the gift it was. The girl multitasked as second nature while he needed to train that ability for many years and still struggle with it. What many called scatterbrain, he called sheer genius. She was able to think of many different things at the same time while ignoring the world that surrounded her, yet somehow being aware of her surroundings, as paradoxical as that sounded. That was the first person Harry was jealous of. However, the medications she was forced to take dulled her abilities, to the point gifted her a Rubik's Cube and asked her to stop consuming those things. How curious, he didn't exactly remember when she was moved to another class for her improved performance.

Anyway, that was perhaps Cedric's case. The boy thought about a dozen different situations while casting any spell and, while he was able to feel his magic, remaining still for so long made him lose his thread. So, what could he do?

The idea knocked into Harry like a sledgehammer. Although it was an advanced piece of magic, it would be easier for the boy than it was for the others. If the prefect tried to use wandless magic while meditating, accessing his mind space and his magic core would be easier. If that didn't work then they would find another way.

"Cedric, I think I know what's happening but I have a few questions. First," Harry told the fidgeting prefect, "do you have a hard time remaining still or paying attention during classes?"

"Most of the times. I had many detentions during my first year for that. I still have trouble paying attention, though I learnt how to pretend I do," the older boy shrugged.

"I noticed a while ago that you tend to play with your fingers, but I thought it was a nervous quirk... I'm no expert on this subject but I will do my best to explain. Have you ever heard the term Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder?"

"Attention what?"

Harry tried not to grimace. "I guess that's a no, though I'm not surprised. It's a muggle medical term. In essence, it's a condition that affects a person's ability to focus, pay attention or control their behaviour. According to them, it's a disorder, but through my experience, I think of it as a gift."

"Is that it? All my life I thought I was wrong for not acting like everyone else," Cedric muttered, a grin slowly forming.

"I'll ask Miss Blair to find a psychologist or maybe it should be a psychiatrist? Never mind, I'll ask her to contact someone to diagnose you. In the meantime, try to use wandless spells while trying to locate your core. I think it would be better if you begin with the basic spells."

"But wandless magic is supposed to be advanced and I'm not sure I have the reserves for that," a surprised Cedric argued.

"That's why you should begin with the basic ones. I believe you can manage, so don't worry. Concentrate on your magic every time you try to cast a spell and get familiar with it. Think about the place where you feel the most safe in, that's generally the place your mindscape will resemble." Harry decided not to tell the older boy about how his mind palace looked - that way Cedric would have more practice.

As if on cue, that was the moment Marcus chose to call, putting an end to the conversation. The young boy signalled Cedric to begin his practice, which the boy did, albeit with a bit of reluctance. Harry could only smile at the somewhat childish tendencies the prefect showed from time to time. Wasting no more time, he answered the call.

"You won't believe what happened today," Marcus said instead of a greeting, and although Harry was unable to see the man, he could almost hear his smile, if such a thing was possible. "Dumbledore resigned from his position as Chief Warlock."

"Not as good as if he resigned as headmaster, but it's something. Do you think the Board of Governors will fire him?"

"I don't think so. I don't like him, but he's clever. He admitted all of his mistakes, but he did so under the name of Chief Warlock."

"Which means they've already been accounted for under that title instead of headmaster," Harry sighed, feeling the strange need to pull his hair. "Never mind, what else happened?"

"Miss Blair had a field day. It was decided that she will go through the creature regulations and choose the ones to abolish in order to placate the saviour of the magical world," the man puffed in amusement. "Well, it seems the fates are smiling on you because Madam Bones dumped anything that doesn't deal with major laws on me."

"She's training you to become the next Minister," Harry cooed to annoy his friend.

"That's what she calls it, though I prefer the term slave driver."

"Anything about the Tournament?"

"Not much was said during the Wizengamot. However, we already have an idea about what the first task will be. Moody has been helping with the planning and I think you'll like it. There will be the physical part and I suggested an obstacle course. We'll make it more challenging, though we're not sure how. We're researching for a creature that offers enough challenge without being potentially lethal. I never imagined that would be a hard requirement, but apparently, it is."

Harry allowed his friend to complain, he obviously needed it. "Anything new with your parents?" Marcus' sigh was all the answer he needed.

"Not really. Father says Voldemort is still in that baby body. I've seen his memories and the thing is disgusting. However, he's not part of the inner circle so he isn't privy to Tom's plans. Mother is as docile as ever; the loyalty potions Aunt Eleadora brews are way too potent. Most of the time, she's the oblivious housewife, but I'm dosing her every two weeks because she's developing immunity. If this continues she'll have to fall so ill that magic will be unable to avoid her tragic death," the man explained, keeping his tone as casual as if he was speaking about the weather.

"I'm sorry for putting you in that situation," Harry apologized in an earnest tone.

"Don't be, she was a terrible mother. Although, we'll have to do something about my father. I have to dose him every three weeks and cast the imperius twice a week, just in case. However, he has a few moments of clarity every now and then. Do you think it's time to get rid of them? Neither of them is useful either way; we have Luna and she can give us a more accurate description of what Voldemort is doing."

"Don't sound too eager," Harry sighed.

"I'm not, though I won't deny that it has a little to do with petty revenge for all they put me through. If my parents were to suffer a terrible accident, then I could appoint my own proxy for the Wizengamot, which is far more useful than having my father there," Marcus explained.

"If you think so, then I agree. Do you want me to take care of it?"

"I'll do it."

"Ask the help of Ares and Mars, they aren't the Head security elves for nothing. Don't forget neither should have any residue from the potions, so maybe it would be good to keep them in their house until they are clean," Harry suggested the man.

"Don't worry, I'll be careful," Marcus promised.

"Yes, yes, whatever you say... Luna has been asking for you, try to visit this weekend."

"I'll visit," Marcus promised and Harry was glad he was not forced to explain further.

"I will. See you on Saturday," Harry said as a farewell and cut the connection.

He took a moment to gather his bearings and looked at the two people practising near him. Justin was immersed in his meditation, and his magic was flowing as it never had before. Excellent. There was much improvement in such a short time. When the young male looked at a pale Cedric, his palm itched with the desire to smack his own forehead. How could he be so oblivious? The Hufflepuff prefect was aware of many of the dealings the Court was involved in, but he wasn't informed of a few particular details. Such as the sudden illness that led Daphne's father to an early grave, or that Adrian's father was long gone and the boy's elf was posing as the man, or that Marcus' parents were under the influence of the imperius and loyalty potions for more than a year.

The time to explain arrived. If the reaction he received was not what he expected, then it was good that memory charms were created.

"Do you remember the massive breakout from Azkaban?" Harry asked, looking at Cedric.

"Of course I do, the Aurors are still looking for the Death Eaters," Cedric answered, not daring to look away from his hands.

"Marcus' parents received two at their house and were nursing them back to health. They even captured a healer that Marcus managed to rescue before they killed her," the boy began explaining, leaving Cedric speechless. "We decided they were close enough to Voldemort to be our spies, but not trusted enough so no one noticed the change in them. We dosed them in loyalty potions and used the imperius."

"Why not give them to the DMLE?"

"Do you remember who the Minister was? Amelia and Fudge were in a cold war and Death Eaters controlled the Wizengamot. If she managed to get any kind of evidence, then it would simply disappear and she would either be fired or murdered. Marcus decided he would join our efforts to protect the magical world, even if it meant going against his parents... You know how most of the members were called future Death Eaters because of their families. The thing is, Cedric, it wasn't false."

"What do you mean?" asked a scandalized Cedric, not a terrible reaction.

"What you heard. Theo's father was amongst the fugitives. That man is part of Voldemort's inner circle. He wouldn't give Theo a choice and would have forced him to take the Mark. Lucius would perhaps done the same had Narcissa not grown a backbone and gone against him in order to protect Draco. He changed since then... Adrian's father was one of the most loyal supporters of Voldemort, though he decided to change before losing his son. Terrence's family... that's complicated. His parents housed three fugitives and forced his eldest brother to take the Mark. His other brother fled the country when they tried to force him."

"What will happen to Terrence and Theo?" Cedric almost demanded.

"Nothing. We altered their parents' memories for them to believe they sent their children to stay with distant relatives or to different schools. At the moment, they stay at my house during the summers and holidays. Flora and Hestia also live with me, but for different reasons," Harry sighed, thinking of the twins that no longer resembled the stoic girls they were a few years ago. "Amycus Carrow is their father and Electoral Carrow is their aunt. I think you can deduce what they went through."

By the way on which Cedric's face paled, he did have an idea. "Why not make it public?"

"Fudge. That man sold himself to the highest bidder. Besides, in the eyes of the law, I'm still a child and am unable to get their custody. At the moment, nobody knows or needs to know. They have other relatives that would fight to have them, though their intentions have nothing to do with fondness."

"I understand," Cedric sighed, looking calm. "You couldn't trust the government and took matters into your own hands. I don't like the methods, but I would do the same as Marcus if my parents were Death Eaters."

With that declaration, Cedric smiled at him and went back to his practice. Although the prefect seemed to have accepted the information rather well, Harry decided to keep an eye on him, just in case.

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The following days were a blur for Harry Potter, except for a couple of interesting events. The school classes were monotonous and quite dull compared to his personal studies, yet he learnt years ago to use those invaluable hours of his time for something productive. Now, when the others were listening to the theory, he read more interesting texts. In the beginning, few professors approved of him not paying attention. However, they knew his understanding of most subjects rivalled that of older students, so the most Harry received were disapproving glances and glares, the latter being courtesy of Snape.

While his classmates were concentrated on trying to cast the new spells, he would refine his own techniques in order to master the assigned charm or the next one on his list. Whilst the teachers tended to applaud his initiative, there were students that tried to emulate Snape by glaring at him with jealousy almost emanating from their pores.

Of course, for the non-wanded subjects, things were a bit trickier. His excellent memory and analytical brain were enough to grant him an unrivalled place. Nevertheless, his mental prowess was unable to compete against Neville's sheer genius when dealing with plants or match George's erratic yet surprisingly effective rune arrays. Nor did he possess Fred and Flora's passion for potion brewing, though his knowledge was far beyond what any school student should possess, much to his chagrin and aunt Eleadora's satisfaction. Harry Potter's potions were nothing but perfect, a fact that pained Snape every time he tried to find flaws in his work.

Harry tasted the invigorating satisfaction of being second to none... What an addicting sensation that was. By any means, the boy should have already skipped a year or even more. This was not Harry's desire, for it would only hamper his plans for the future. Hogwarts was the perfect place to keep out of the eyes of the public while the initial stages of his projects

took place. For the moment, he would enjoy his last years of peace before he was thrown in the backstabbing world of adults.

Then, there was also the matter with his reporter. Rita was ordered to write a more detailed article about the 'Triwizard Scandal', as it was named. The woman didn't disappoint. Skeeter wrote about the changes the competition would go under in order to ensure the safety of the six champions. There was also a juicy interview with Minister Bones and Auror Moody, informing about the new security measures and explaining with detail how a first-year student would do a better job organizing the event. That was the last nail the planners' coffins needed.

Leonard Fawley was fired that same day, thanks to the ire of the magical citizens. The misshapen bee, however, suffered a more terrible fate. Bagman had many gambling debts, which Rita described in detail thanks to the information the Goblin Nation provided. It was a shame the man ran away from the country before the DMLE visited him.

However, the *crème de la crème* had been the information about 'Dumbledore's shameful resignation from the position he managed to pollute in ignominy,' as Rita stated. Even though there was much uproar, the population was appeased, that didn't please the last Potter in the slightest. Lucius and Sirius confirmed how Dumbledore managed to keep the position of headmaster by the skin of his teeth. Yet, Harry had to admire the sheer determination the man had to safeguard his place in the school. What did a school offer compared to the Wizengamot?

Harry sighed, noticing he spaced out again. When he focused his eyes, the sight that welcomed him was Luna playing with Marcus' hair, much to the man's reluctant delight. He wondered where the rest of his members were, and then he remembered they said something about practising for the Quidditch match next week... Mmm, he should talk with them about their uniforms.

"It's good that you're amongst the living again," Marcus joked.

"I apologize, having a limited mental capacity must be frustrating," the teenager answered, containing the smirk that wanted to escape at the man's offended expression.

"I've been having these strange dreams," Luna commented, breaking the playful banter.

"Is that why you've been so tired?" Marcus demanded to know.

"In part. I woke up confused and drew to calm down. There is a dark place and a door that has a knob in the middle. Inside, there are many orbs that like to gossip... I'm not sure what they are, but they resemble memories when they are pulled out," the slight girl sighed.

"That's perhaps the strangest room in existence," Harry muttered.

"It is, but they whisper to me. One tries to warn me, but I can't hear anything it says. Another dream I've been having is about fairies... Those are the worst," she muttered and walked towards Harry. Luna latched to his side and he comforted her with an embrace. "For some

reason, I'm able to see how they were hunted. It was so cruel... I see glimpses of fairies being experimented on, that's how Time-Turners were created."

"I always believed runic arrays were responsible," a surprised Marcus murmured.

"In a way, but the essential part of every Time-Turner is the dust. Fairy wings and hearts, those are the main ingredients. They are the only beings that are able to alter time as they wish," she tried to explain between sobs. "It was so cruel... Mother Magic wept for her children; she cursed the ones involved in the research."

"Is that why the knowledge of how to make them was lost?" Harry asked the girl that somehow moved into his lap, not doubting for a second that what she saw was real.

"Harry, I want to destroy them," Luna whispered, drying her tears.

"Then we will."

"The last Time-Turners are in the Department of Mysteries," Marcus commented, looking thoughtful. "I can get access thanks to my position, but I think it will be better if we send someone else in order to keep a low profile. Better yet, we can capture an Unspeakable, extract the information and obliviate them."

"The elves I acquired from the Ministry could be useful; ask them when you arrive at the castle. Though you just piqued my curiosity; what on earth is the Department of Mysteries?" Harry asked.

"The place where the Unspeakables research and examine magic and its phenomena. Honestly, it's the place where the Ministry dumps everything they can't understand or is far too afraid to try," Marcus explains, wearing a light scowl. "One of its divisions is in charge of the Time Room."

"That will be our next objective then."

"The Hogwarts Quidditch matches will begin next week. I already want to see them," Luna said in that dreamy tone of hers that dissipated the tension.

"You know? You should speak with Ragnok about improving the school's pitch. The wooden seats are far too uncomfortable, not to mention that it's hard to concentrate on the game when the sun is doing its best to cause third-degree burns or when it's so cold that the best you can do is try not to freeze to death," Marcus suggested, remembering all his terrible experiences as an spectator and consequent painful memories as a player.

"I never had the displeasure to see any game other than the World Cup, but I will speak with Ragnok," Harry agreed. "I've been thinking of having all the students examined by a certified psychiatrist and a psychologist. I discovered a few days ago that Cedric has trouble concentrating. However, since he started practising wandless magic he advanced more than I expected. He's able to connect with his core with no problems and begun building his mental shields. What I worry about is the amount of potential that is lost thanks to the professors' ignorance of the matter."



"That's not my area, but I think it's a good idea," the man nodded. "In any case, it would be good to have a profile of the students. Many Dark Lords could have been avoided this way."

"Miss Blair is searching for reliable people to hire... I guess I will also make this a demand when we donate all the money," the boy sighed.

"What about the uniforms?" Luna chirped.

"What's wrong with them?" Marcus asked in response.

"Not this one, the ones that our Quidditch team will wear and, of course, what our four champions will wear," the girl deadpanned.

"I'll call Ella to take their measurements when they finish practising. I already told Penelope to create a subtler version of our armour so we can wear them during the Tournament, though she needs to know what colours they prefer... Let's stop wasting time, who wants to duel?"

Hours later, dinner was being served in the Court's Headquarters, where all the people present looked as if they run a marathon. Harry tried to regain control of his legs while he waited for his elves to arrange the tasty-looking plates filled with food.

"Master, enjoy your meal!" Ella told Harry, who returned the smile of the cheery elf.

"Thank you, dear, will you join us?"

"No sir, Lea and I are dining together. We are experimenting with new desserts."

"Very well then. Before you leave, I have a small favour to ask. Could you please take the measurements of my new friends?"

"Of course!" the little one announced. With a snap of her fingers, a measuring tape appeared and she walked towards the four newest members.

"Why are we getting our measurements taken?" asked a curious Fleur, who was the first one to volunteer.

"Because we will need uniforms to compete. Minister Bones may be in charge of organizing the tasks, but there's always a possibility of something going wrong," Harry explained.

"But you will all choose the colours," Luna told the others.

"I want mine in red wine or burgundy," the French girl commented.

"Um, black?" Cedric said with a sheepish smile when he noticed Ella was waiting for his answer.

"Wearing black isn't always the most subtle approach," Blaise told the boy.

"Then I give the elves free rein," the Hufflepuff prefect said, raising his hands in surrender.

"I think I will do the same," Viktor agreed hurriedly.

"Ehm, that is great and all, but why am I being measured?" asked a bewildered Justin.

"We all have armour, besides, we get our clothes in Harry's store so the elves already have our measurements," Draco explained, not waiting for the others to join and began eating.

"Talking about uniforms, what will we wear for the matches?" asked Adrian while casually stealing the pot of soup.

"Clothes of course, unless you wish to go au naturale," Terrence shrugged.

"I will decide what we are wearing for the matches. Ella, do you mind if I call you tomorrow?" Fleur asked the elf, who just finished her job.

"Nope, I have a free day tomorrow and I don't mind spending it with master's friend," the elf nodded with eagerness. "Goodnight!"

"Do you need to kidnap my elf tomorrow?" Harry asked the French girl.

"It is not kidnapping, we will have a girl's day and she will help me choose our Quidditch uniforms," she answered casually. "... Who wants to join?" Fleur asked, ignoring the males in the room.

In that strange turn of events, Sunday in the Guild's Headquarters was spent without the females of the group. While their dynamic wouldn't be normally affected, six worried boys didn't allow the others to enjoy their day. This small group was formed by the members of the Quidditch team, who were fretting about what their captain would choose as uniforms.

"Why did we choose Fleur again?" groaned a frowning Terrence.

"Because she has more guts than all of us together," was Fred's languid response.

"But what if she makes us wear skirts?" asked a fretting Adrian.

"Then I suggest asking Professor McGonagall for that waxing charm she likes to use," answered a lackadaisical Harry.

"We are men," whimpered Cedric.

"And how's that my fault?" retorted Blaise, who was being shaken by the Hufflepuff prefect. "But you have a point. I doubt any of you will be able to pull off a skirt."

"What side are you on?" demanded a scowling Adrian.

"The side of my sanity, which is telling me that I don't want to see any of you in a skirt unless you try to look presentable," murmured Neville, who ignored the argument until the moment.

"I think it's a lost cause. No matter how much they try, Fleur will look better," shrugged Theo.

"I don't think that we should worry about wearing a skirt," whispered a grave Viktor, interrupting the argument. "Have you ever heard of corsets?" he asked in a deep voice that filled most of the group with dread.

"Those tight things that my mother likes to wear," Blaise answered in a dismissive tone.

"They are not simple clothing," the Bulgarian student denied. "They are torture devices," he announced, making many gasp in surprise. "Its purpose is to rearrange the spine and abdominal organs, making the wearer look leaner."

"Do you... Will Fleur make us wear those?" asked a cowed George.

Harry could only sigh at the idiocy of his friends, whose theories turned even wilder and unrealistic by the second. It seemed his vexation was shared by Justin, Blaise, and Neville, who grew up having a female as main influence. At least their strange conversation amused him. However, he knew Fleur was a practical person and the Quidditch team would not be wearing the ridiculous things they were speaking about... Much to his slight disappointment, considering all the blackmail material he could acquire.

It was what it was. Besides, his elves were going to make the clothes, so it was offensive his friends believed their attire would be anything other than astounding. It was not Harry's fault they lacked the physical attributes to complement the garments.

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The days until the Hogwarts Quidditch Tournament went by in eternal torture for some and infinite amusement for others. The members of the Court that participated were filled with dread; undiluted fear of what had their captain chosen as the team uniform, frightened about having to wear one of the torture instruments females favoured. Said captain enjoyed her friends' dilemma, especially after a concerned Neville asked her to stop torturing her team. Not that she stopped, but most of the time they were so tired they barely remembered the match.

At the moment, Harry was leading his group towards the seats in the Slytherin stands that his elves had enchanted in order to make them more comfortable. Draco and Theo were whispering to each other, worried frowns marring their features.

"When will you tell them that they aren't going to wear skirts?" Luna asked him.

"Skirts are not what they're worried about," answered Daphne in Harry's stead, a wide smirk plastered on her face.

When the Court's team was announced, the worried teens' eyes widened in surprise. They were not wearing skirts, or dresses, or corsets, or high heels. In essence, it was a simple but quite practical uniform. White pullover, black track pants, and the usual protective gear that included a helmet and protective goggles... It was strange no one ever included those in the sport. After all, a Bludger in the head was enough to send someone to St. Mungo's for a long, long time and eyes were not easy to replace. The only thing that stood out – aside from their protective gear – was the golden numbers in the back of the players and the lack of the traditional robe.

"They look... normal," whispered a shocked Theo.

"What were you expecting Fleur to choose?" asked a curious Blaise, making the boy and Draco blush.

"She wouldn't allow the students to be traumatized with the terrible sight of them wearing skirts," added Hestia, winking at her sister who was trying to stifle her laughter.

Harry decided to ignore the banter that was about to take place in favour of watching the game, something he would not do under any other circumstance. But he had duties as a friend.

George and Fred were formidable Beaters, knowing each other so well they didn't need words to communicate. The devil twins were forcing the opposing Chasers to concentrate on dodging the Bludgers instead of scoring or trying to catch the Quaffle... Not that they would be successful against Fleur, Cedric, and Adrian. The three Chasers had terrific teamwork, thanks to the arduous hours they dedicated to practising. While they were busy scoring points, Viktor was the impenetrable wall that blocked the opposing team. It went without saying that Terrence was giving a migraine to the other Seeker. The boy fainted so many times that his rival was unwilling to follow his lead, something that gave him an advantage when he spotted the Golden Snitch... Suddenly, Harry understood the reason why Fleur decided to include gold in the uniforms. *Such a devious woman*, he thought, containing his amusement at the cunning plan she devised.

Ten minutes in and the Court's Quidditch team was already dominating the game, less than an hour in and the results of the game were almost defined. The opposing team was playing for honour and perhaps hoping to catch the Snitch, that way their defeat wouldn't be so appalling. However, Terrence crushed their rival's last chances of victory when he caught the golden ball. Three hundred and sixty to seventy, a pitiable defeat by anyone's terms... Now that Harry thought about it, it may be possible that having a personal Quidditch pitch to train was an unfair advantage. Well, it was not as if he cared. Each person had different tools to their advantage and they needed to learn how to use them.

The raucous cheers of the students reminded Harry of the reason why he loathed crowds and Quidditch matches in general. This game may have not been so bad, but he still had no interest in it. He regretted not asking his elves to put barriers up to block the noise or doing it himself. Yet, seeing the stoic McGonagall cheering so loud that she drowned the commentator was a sight to behold.

The group waited until most of the spectators left the pitch in order to go to congratulate their friends. Harry sauntered to the dressing rooms, unlike the over-excitable balls of energy that ran in that direction. When he arrived, the sight that welcomed him was almost enough to make him laugh. Luna was hanging on Viktor, emulating an overgrown koala and, for some reason, Adrian was sitting on the floor.

"Let's celebrate the first victory of the Court's Quidditch team," suggested Flora.

Instead of using their Hogsmeade privileges, they decided to spend the day in their Headquarters. Thanks to the elves, they had a variety of treats and desserts, something that

most of the members enjoyed.

"Astoria was complaining about her grades not being enough to get the sweets she wants from the store," Daphne commented.

"Should we assign her a tutor to help her in school?" asked a surprised Draco.

"She doesn't need it. The problem is that she wants everything that the place has to offer," the blonde girl dismissed him.

"So, do the students like the store?" Terrence asked to no one in particular.

"Ickle Ronnikins loves it," said an amused George.

"That's the reason why he's studying," Fred chuckled.

"It's good as an immediate reward system," agreed Blaise.

"You know? All the Durmstrang students like this school better," Viktor told the group.

"Even the three troublesome guests?" asked a smirking Justin.

"Maybe not them, but they won't complain. The Durmstrang castle is smaller so we have to share a room with at least five others and the bathrooms are nothing to be proud of. At least they now have a semblance of privacy," shrugged the Bulgarian student.

"Most of the Beauxbatons students find reasons to complain. It is annoying," murmured Fleur.

"So what do they complain about?" asked a smiling Theo.

"Everything, from the food and the climate to the lack of attractive men," the French girl answered. "They are just offended about no one paying them attention."

"So nothing important or interesting," sighed Hestia.

"Touch wood, we have enough as it is," murmured Marcus, "Madam Bones found the perfect location to build the arena. It's near the school, in a deserted clearing on the outskirts of the village. It was literally desolate, but the Ministry officials found a nasty goobsnark that tried to eat one of them. We're thinking about using it for the competition."

"Then what's the problem?" Cedric asked.

"That we are not sure if the stands will be built in two weeks," the man groaned, rubbing his face in frustration. "The Minister spoke with the Gringotts representative. The wards are already in place, and Andra is writing the hiring contracts so the place is safe, but we don't have time to search for all the workers."

"Then ask Rome. There are so many elves in the castle that they don't have enough things to do and are getting bored. I'm sure that a few dozen will like the idea of helping," Harry

suggested.

"Thank you," Marcus said in the most relieved tone any of them had ever heard. "But Madam Bones will have my head for sharing the information."

"Just tell her that you asked Harry permission to recruit his elves for two weeks," Daphne appeased the stressed male.

"I will ask Rome this evening," Marcus sighed. "I was speaking with the elves that worked on the Ministry and they had quite a bit of information. A few of them recognized the place that Luna drew as the Hall of Prophecies, where every single prophecy is recorded and stored there."

"So there could be a prophecy about Luna or any of us, or even about her father or some acquaintance," Harry sighed, not satisfied with the information.

"Prophecies are untrustworthy," Blaise said, frowning.

"Have you ever heard of the terms self-fulfilling and self-defeating prophecies?" Luna asked, playing with her food and ignoring everyone in the room. "Merlin believed he was given the prophecy of the Saviour and he did everything in his power to ensure he was born, destroying many lives in the process. Arthur was never named, just the supposed stars of his birth, which could be interpreted in thousands of ways. Merlin, in his mania to protect the Magical world, ignored all the signs of his wrongdoings and that was his own downfall. He was defeated by Morgana, one of his victims, a monster of his own creation. Arthur was left fighting a war by himself. In the end, Albion was never formed and the magicals kept being hunted, but at least people no longer dared to harm the ones who carried the blessings of Morgana... History likes to repeat herself, how cruel."

While Luna explained, her eyes acquired that eerie pale colour that characterized her when she was lost in the knowledge of the past. Multiple times, Harry wondered what the limitations of the girl's gift were. She had notions about the future, an invaluable tool that had aided their group to prevent innumerable catastrophes. The problem was that seers were meant to see the future, but Luna had knowledge about the past and the present. No matter how hard he searched, the information about savant seers was almost non-existent so he didn't know whether it was part of her gift or if it was another totally different talent.

"Every time I hear you talk about Merlin I feel less impressed by him," commented Draco, breaking the tension.

"Yeah, he sounds like a manipulative son of a-"

"Shut it, you may be insulting an innocent woman," Daphne interrupted Theo's rant.

"That doesn't mean it's not true," said Terrence.

"Do any of your family libraries have more information about Merlin?" asked a curious Neville, glancing at Blaise, who was already beside Luna.

"One of my ancestor's journals has a few details about Morgana, that's it," muttered Daphne.

"Not to be bothersome or anything similar, but Harry probably does," murmured a blushing Cedric. "Well, you know that the Potters are one of the oldest families in Europe, so maybe they have information about real events."

"You're not wrong, but it's a nightmare to go through my entire library," Harry sighed.

"I never thought you would say that," gasped Marcus, "With your unnatural love for books and trying to live in the library... I wasn't expecting to hear that coming from you."

"Do you want to sort through the library then?" retorted the boy.

"No thanks. If four hundred elves aren't enough to go through all the books, then I have no chance," the male answered, raising his hands in surrender.

"Four hundred elves?" asked Fleur and Viktor in unison.

"He bought the elves from the Ministry," shrugged Neville.

"Never mind that, how big is your library?" asked a wide-eyed Justin.

"Imagine the school's library five times bigger and then some more," was Hestia's casual response.

"Who's coming at Yule?" demanded an excited Flora, interrupting the exchange.

"Mother got another husband so count me in, though I will visit my grandparents," said Blaise, forcing Luna to eat a bowl of fruit instead of the sweets she was trying to munch.

"Depends on what expedition Daddy decides to join," the dreamy girl sighed.

"I am also joining, but I have to spend a few days with my family. This will be the first Yule without father," Daphne sighed, hiding her smirk.

"Grandma loves you so she won't mind, though I will visit my parents. Mum loves when I give her chocolate and dad likes to hear about my friends," Neville said, wearing a slight smile.

"Can we come with you or should we wait until summer?" asked Daphne.

"They'll like it. Mum didn't stop smiling when you visited and I think dad liked when you read to him, or he may have liked to have an attractive young woman paying him attention," teased Neville, earning a soft hit in the arm.

"Did your grandmother reconsider the idea of moving them?" Harry asked the boy.

"She doesn't believe Muggles will be able to help. Grandma gave up long ago."

"So we'll have to do it the hard way," Harry sighed but nodded at Neville, who returned the gesture.

"If you don't mind me asking, what illness do your parents have?" asked a naive Justin.

"They were tortured to insanity during the war. Don't worry, I'm not offended," Neville reassured the pale Hufflepuff, "if anything, I'm proud because they sacrificed themselves to protect me."

"My mother is a doctor, a neurologist. My family owns many hospitals and research facilities. If you want, I can talk with mum about admitting your parents into one of the clinics," Justin offered after a brief moment of silence.

"That would make everything easier. I would be thankful and of course, I will pay the-"

"Don't worry about it, I'm glad to help," the Hufflepuff boy interrupted his friend.

"I guess this means we'll go ahead with the plans of moving them in December," Harry commented. "We have to define every detail before we do so."

"That means he has to ask Ragnok," Luna said, wearing an impish smile.

"Later," Neville muttered, obvious happiness shining on his eyes.

"We have time before Yule," Harry agreed.

"Aside from that, my parents and I are joining," Draco shrugged. "What about you?" he asked the newest members.

"Um, I don't know," Cedric said, blushing when the attention was directed at him.

"You're all invited and there's more than enough space. You have time to decide before the holidays," Hestia chirped.

"I will speak to my parents and, if they approve, then I will join you," Fleur gibbered after a few moments.

"You can also ask your family to come," Harry told the girl, who nodded with enthusiasm.

"Master Harry, the professors are looking for you," someone said, surprising the members of the Court at their sudden appearance.

"Thanks, Dudi," Harry told the school elf, the first one he met in Hogwarts and a personal friend of his. "Do you know what they want?"

"Oh, yes! There is this ritual for the champions. The dishevelled man tells the angry woman if a wand is fat!" Dudi chirped, managing to confuse Harry.

"To tell if my wand is fat?" the teen asked to confirm, and the elf nodded. "Very well then, where should we go?"



"To the inner courtyard!" the school elf answered with a happy grin.

"Thank you, Dudi," Harry told his friend and signalled his fellow champions to follow him.

"Will Master dine in the great hall? Dudi is cooking!"

"Surprise us then." The elf didn't bother answering for he was too busy planning the meal and muttering under his breath.

"Ehm, are you sure we should go? I don't think my wand needs to be told if she is fat," a sheepish Viktor muttered.

"I've been teaching Dudi and the other elves the proper use of language, but they fall into old habits fast," Harry explained with a sigh. "I'm sure this is something important, but his way of interpreting the world is a bit... different."

"I never asked you this, but I'm curious. Your elves speak in a different way and they actually wear clothes. Why?" asked a frowning Cedric.

"Why not?" was the teenager's easy response. "They're invaluable friends and deserve respect."

"But if you give them clothes you free them and, without the bond, they die," retorted the prefect.

"Not if you give them fabric or send them to get clothes. Honestly, why would I ever force them to wear a dirty pillowcase and go barefoot? They belong to the Potter family and, in a way, they represent the house," Harry shrugged.

"That is the same thing papa says," Fleur commented. "He is a politician and is always preaching about how the most insignificant detail represents the whole family."

"Yeah, my dad doesn't punish our elf. Actually, I thought that we treated her as a person until I met Ella... Now I'm sort of ashamed," murmured a grimacing Cedric.

"Well, there's time to change. You don't even want to know how Lucius treated Dobby before Draco intervened," Harry told the older boy.

They allowed the conversation to die there and walked to the indicated place in companionable silence. The sound of excited conversations met them when they arrived at the hallway that led to the courtyard, which was filled with gossiping students. It was not unexpected or even remotely surprising when all conversations ceased once they caught a glimpse of the four champions, but that didn't mean it stopped being annoying. Harry controlled the desire to curse someone, hiding his rather violent impulse behind a neutral mask.

"There you are!" exclaimed Professor Sprout, darting towards them. "We searched everywhere. Where were you?" asked the woman, a slight frown marring her usually gentle features.

"I apologize, ma'am, we didn't know there was going to be an event," Harry told the woman, using his charm to appease her.

"We are really sorry, Professor Sprout," Fleur told the teacher, wearing an embarrassed smile. "After the Quidditch match, we decided to celebrate."

"Ah, don't apologize, dear. I'm sorry for overreacting. Severus was meant to tell you, so we assumed you would all be here," sighed the professor.

"Well, that confusion aside, why are we here?" asked a confused Cedric. "Dudi told us that they were going to tell us if our wands are fat."

"Oh my, what an ingenious creature," the woman giggled. "It's not wrong, but it's not right. This is the Wand Weighing Ceremony, Mister Ollivander came to examine if your wands are working properly. Now hurry up, they're waiting for you."

The group followed the professor's order, entering the inner courtyard only to stop in surprise. In their defence, they were not expecting to see the Minister along with Marcus, the head of the DMLE, or all the reporters. The four newcomers considered all the paraphernalia excessive, but they guessed it could be worse. At least a spacious place was chosen and they were not shoved in a classroom or anything similar.

"There they are!" exclaimed a relieved McGonagall.

"We apologize, ma'am. No one told us there was going to be an event relating to the Tournament," Harry informed the woman, making her frown. "We're sorry for making you wait."

"Don't be, Mister Potter, don't be," the woman grumbled, glaring at the Potions professor. "We'll clear up this misunderstanding later."

"Now that all the champions are here, we can begin!" announced the Headmaster, not giving them time to greet the people that were present.

Harry decided to ignore the man and began greeting the other two champions, the reporters, Ollivander, the three Ministry officials and the school staff, along with the other two headmasters. His friends followed his lead and, for some reason, the other Beauxbatons champion looked sour, glaring at them as if they insulted her in some way. At last, they greeted Marcus, who smirked at them and signalled a fuming Madam Bones. Something happened and the Minister was angry, which meant that someone was going to pay dearly... Well, it would be high-quality entertainment.

"Without further ado, let the Wand Weighing Ceremony begin! Garrick, if you will," Dumbledore told the wandmaker, signalling the now empty podium.

"Of course. Now, how will we begin?" the over-energetic man asked himself. "Oh yes, ladies first! How could I forget?"

Not waiting for the man to call her, the other French champion approached the podium with firm steps and haughty air. She held her wand out and the old man took it, examining it with interest.

"Such an interesting combination, eight and three-quarter inches, unbendable... Vinewood and... Oh my, such an oddity! Dahu horn as the core!" the man commented. "I've never had the pleasure of working with this core in particular. Dahus are quite hard to find and stubborn; the last I met tried to eviscerate me when I asked for a bit of hair... Let's see, Laminae," the man intoned and flower petals erupted from the tip of the wand. "This one is working perfectly, though I suggest calming down. Vinewood is not the most patient in the face of insecurity," he recommended, giving back the wand to the scowling girl. "Now, Miss Delacour if you will."

Fleur approached the man and smiled at him. The wandmaker reminded her so much of her late grandfather she couldn't avoid being amused by his antics. She took her wand from her holster and gave it to Ollivander.

"What do we have here? Ah, yes, nine and a half inches... Inflexible... Rosewood and it contains... dear me!" the man exclaimed, his eyes widening in surprise.

"The hair of a Veela, my own grandmother," she explained, smiling at his amusing reaction.

"Such a strong will to control a temperamental wand... Orchideous!" the man said and a bouquet of flowers burst from the tip, which he gave to the girl in front of him. Fleur smiled at the present and curtsied to the man, who returned her wand. "Who will come after the charming Miss Delacour... Mister Bobkov, to the front," the cheery old man said, and the student complied.

"Here," Iwan said, maintaining his stoic expression.

"Well, well, well. An unusual and quite powerful combination... Eleven inches, quite stiff..." the man muttered. His eyes were twinkling while he examined the wand. "Fir, a wood that only those with strong minds are able to wield, and what's this? So curious! A Lashy hair, voluntarily given, such an oddity! Perfect for healing and abjuration, but also favours charms... Ignis!" the wandmaker exclaimed and sparks erupted from the tip. "Congratulations Mister Bobkov, such a loyal wand."

"Thank you, Mister Ollivander," the male said, but he was unable to hide the way his chest puffed out in pride or how the corners of his mouth threatened to lift.

"Let's continue with Mister Krum," the beaming old man said. "Oh, this is great! A Gregorovitch creation. Such a shame Mykew decided to retire."

"Indeed, I was amongst the last ones to purchase a wand from him," Viktor grunted in agreement.

"Mmm... Ten and a quarter inches... Thicker than usual and quite rigid..." the man muttered, frowning at the wand in his hands. "... Ah, hornbeam wood and dragon heartstring. It's curious how life works; my own wand is made with the same combination... I guess that

stubbornness is not an uncommon trait, but yours, young man, is quite devoted to you. Avictus!" he exclaimed, and a few birds were blasted from the wand. "Such a devoted wand, she bit me," the man grumbled, giving back the wand with careful movements.

Ollivander remained silent, frowning at his hand. This lasted until Professor McGonagall lost her patience.

"Mister Diggory, to the front," the woman ordered and the prefect complied.

"Mister Ollivander," Cedric said, breaking whatever trance the man was in while handing him his wand.

"Ah yes, how could I forget yours, Mister Diggory?" the man asked, examining the wand with less intensity than he did those of the other champions. "Twelve and a quarter inches, pleasantly springy. Ashwood and, ah, how can I forget that... The core is the hair from a particularly fine male unicorn, which nearly gored me with its horn after I plucked it from his tail. Never in my life I have run so fast," he muttered, "Lumos!" a sphere of light left the wand and it vanished a second later. "I see you strengthened your bond with your wand; she didn't want to respond to me," the man muttered and returned the wand while casting wary glances at Harry's direction.

"Mister Potter, please, to the front," McGonagall ordered, not willing to allow the man to enter another one of his trances.

Harry walked towards the podium, reaching for his wand, though he wondered why the man looked so nervous of all sudden, searching frantically in his pockets until he found a pair of dragon hide gloves and put them on without wasting a second. From the corner of his eye, he saw how interested Dumbledore seemed to be when he almost ignored the previous champions. However, what annoyed him the most was the gossiping students. It was a simple wand, not the revelation of the answers of the universe.

"Mister Potter," Ollivander said and accepted the wand with reluctance, observing it with distrust shining in his eyes. "I will never forget this wand, perhaps one of my finest creations and the only one that tried to eviscerate me while testing her. My hands had to be bandaged for two weeks," the man grumbled, handling it with wariness. "11 inches, unyielding... Taxus and Sambucus, horned serpent horn and thestral hair, tricky to make... It was hard to get rid of the splinters," the man complained, still frowning at his wand. "The first dual wand in more than half a century, if I am not wrong."

The old man returned Harry his wand with haste, not willing to stretch his luck and try it. Merlin knew that it was almost fatal to make and he liked his fingers where they were, thank you very much. Murmurs erupted amongst the reporters, the students, and even amongst a few of the teachers. Harry could only sigh at this new development. He didn't need more attention, but life didn't agree with his wishes.

"With this, the Wand Weighing Ceremony is concluded," the Minister announced. Her sharp eyes were enough to ensure all the students left the place, scampering to safety. The woman didn't wait until for the students to leave and glared at the conversing teachers, who took the

wise decision of shutting up. "May I know where were you?" she asked the four champions that arrived late.

"I apologize, Minister Bones, it is entirely my fault," Harry said before any of his friends spoke. "I decided to spend the day in Hogsmeade to celebrate Fleur's team's victory in the Quidditch match and my friends followed me. When we were returning, an elf told us we were needed."

"Am I correct to assume you weren't told?" the woman asked, and the boy nodded.

"If I may," Iwan said, earning the attention of Madam Bones. "I was not told either; the only reason I arrived in time is that Professor Flitwick saw me going towards my common room and sent me here instead."

"Very well, who was responsible for informing the champions?" the woman demanded, not giving room for arguments.

"The headmaster assigned Professor Snape and Miss Aguillon was supposed to inform Miss Delacour," Professor Flitwick told the woman.

"We will begin with you, Miss Aguillon. Why didn't you inform your classmates about this event?" the Minister asked the girl, whose eyes widened for a second before composing herself.

"It is not my fault that she always arrives late to the room and leaves when all of us are sleeping," Valerie huffed, her heavy accent made her words hard to understand.

"I always arrive at ten on the dot. Last night you were in the company of Mister Bunt, so I didn't wish to interrupt," Fleur said, using her wide eyes to look innocent while delivering the delicate information. "I leave in the mornings to train. It is not my fault that you consider six to be an ungodly hour."

"Fleur!" Madam Maxime chastised the girl, who ignored the tall woman.

"Aside from that explicit explanation, what is your excuse, Professor Snape?" asked Marcus, winking at his French friend who smirked in return.

"I'm also interested in this answer," McGonagall said.

"Now, now, let's calm ourselves," Dumbledore told them in an appeasing tone. "Professor Snape is a busy man who not only teaches but also brews the potions for the infirmary. I'm sure it must have slipped his mind."

"Bah, he could have told any of his students to tell the brats or tell them today in the morning or during breakfast," Alastor said, scowling at the Potions teacher.

"If you'll allow me to ask, why did you not announce the event during the week?" Marcus asked the headmaster, who grimaced at the question.

"The students would have flooded the place out of curiosity," Albus admitted.

"What is done is done, but I want to hear Mister Snape's answer," Amelia ordered.

"I forgot," the man muttered, his eyes narrowing when he admitted his mistake.

"You sure did," Moody snarled at the man.

"Alastor," the Minister warned the Auror, who took a step back. "I hope that this... mistake is recorded in your file," she said, looking at the Transfiguration teacher, who nodded. "Now that this matter is sorted, we can proceed with the interviews. Don't forget that any inappropriate question will have your magazine or newspaper banned from the competition," she warned and most of the reporters didn't waste time to nod.

"Miss Skeeter, you may begin," Marcus told the reporter.

"Thank you, Mister Travers. My first question is for Minister Bones. I know there were multiple changes to the tasks, including the security and the arena. How are the preparations going?"

"It is complicated, especially because the organizers left a mess to be sorted," Madam Bones sighed, "Mister Travers was essential to me. Thanks to his help, we will be able to have everything done in time." The woman signalled another reporter after she answered.

"This is Jean Dubois for the Nouvelles Magiques," the man said. "Magical Britain is under the scrutiny of the whole world after the scandal of Mister Dumbledore. How has this affected the competition? What security measures will be taken to prevent another attack by your Dark Lord?"

"I won't deny Headmaster Dumbledore's mistakes were a hard hit for the whole country," Marcus began, "however, Minister Bones worked without respite and her efforts are bearing fruits. The tasks changed and I have no doubt that they will present a decent challenge for the six champions."

"I'm in charge of the security and that's all you need to know," Moody told the reporter.

"Auror Moody is excellent at his job, one of the best Aurors the DMLE has ever had," Marcus explained, softening the harsh response of the man.

"Yes, his reputation reached France and beyond," the reporter agreed, apparently not taking offence at Moody's brusque ways. The Minister signalled another reporter.

"This is Veronica Hudson for Witch Weekly. We all know Mister Potter's entrance was irregular; has the culprit been caught? My other question is for Mister Potter: How does it feel to be the youngest of all the champions?"

"I'm leading the investigation and we haven't found any trace. Whoever did this knows about the procedures of the DMLE, but I will find the coward," Moody snapped.

"It's quite intimidating to be the youngest," Harry said before the Auror got angry and cursed a few reporters. "It's obvious that I have less experience than others, but I will do my best."

"If I may," Professor Flitwick said, "Mister Potter is a bright student. His wand work is nothing less than astounding and his magical core is quite developed for his age."

"Besides, he is not alone," Fleur said, smiling at the reporters and more than one person blushed.

"In this short time, we managed to become close friends," Viktor agreed.

"And we will support him through this," Cedric said and the reporters started whispering to each other.

"This is Vjera Kozlov, for Magicheski Dnes. Do you think your friendship will be able to survive the competition?"

"Miss Kozlov, you seem to forget what the purpose of the Triwizard Tournament is," Harry scolded the female, wearing a charming smile that made the woman's cheeks acquire a pink hue. "It's meant to improve the fraternization between schools. This competition will end, but the friendships that are formed will remain."

"Mister Potter! This is Philip Anderson for The Prophet!" yelled a reporter without been given the signal to ask, "We all know about your scandal regarding the... shady emancipation. How will this affect the Potter family? What are your plans as a legal adult?"

"That has nothing to do with the Tournament; this is your first and last warning, reporter Anderson," Madam Bones warned the man, who was about to protest but one glare from the woman had him cowering enough to remain silent. "Mister Potter, you are not forced to answer."

"Thank you, Minister Bones," Harry told the woman. For a moment he considered answering, but not to this reporter. Maybe he would give Rita an exclusive.

"I have a question for the six champions," Skeeter said after Madam Bones gave her the signal to speak. "The Triwizard Tournament was meant to be for three champions. How do the competitors feel about this change?"

"It is good that more champions were chosen because many others don't fit the criteria," said Valerie, sneering at her fellow competitors.

"I think I speak for all when I say that we were surprised," Fleur began explaining, ignoring the other girl's words with ease. "No one was expecting this development. However, I believe it will be beneficial to promote healthy competition between the schools."

"Though the name no longer fits for six wizards will be competing," Iwan added, keeping his tone even and controlling his breath. As stoic as the boy was, his tense shoulders still revealed his nervousness.

"I agree with Iwan; it's unfair for the other champions to keep calling it that," Cedric agreed, smiling at the male.

"This question is for Minister Bones," one of the reporters whose name was forgotten asked. "Will the champions be allowed to receive help from the professors or other external sources?"

"All the staff in the school will be allowed to help in their preparation, minus the three headmasters," Amelia said, looking at the three of them with murder in her eyes. "They were quite... adamant, we could say, in getting information about the tasks. Nevertheless, for security reasons, they will not have all the details about them, only a general idea about what they entail. The professors, on the other hand, have no idea about what the tasks convey and are allowed to help the champions that request their aid."

"If I may add," Marcus said, looking at the Minister for permission and receiving a nod in response. "Every single person who is involved in the planning signed a non-disclosure agreement. We exerted all our efforts and resources to ensure the safety of the participants, spectators, and judges."

"I recently spoke with the manager of Mirror Summons for an interview about the innovative uses of the communication mirrors," Rita said, "it's well known the last Minister spent a rather large sum on one of their new devices. Will they be used for this competition?"

"It's good you brought up this theme, Miss Skeeter," Amelia told the woman, smiling at the reporters. "The owner of the company agreed to share one of the greatest inventions in the magical world. All the mirrors in the arena will capture the task and reflect them in other mirrors that will be placed in the restaurants and cafés in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. That way, the citizens will be able to observe the tasks as if they were present," she announced, surprising many with the announcement. "The fees will vary, but the beginning price for entrance is one Galleon. Everyone will be able to purchase a seat in the different establishments a week before the tournament begins."

"In the arena, there will also be a stand for the citizens," Marcus continued the explanation after Amelia nodded at him. "However, they will have to purchase tickets from the Auror office in the Ministry after filling out a few forms. We're being cautious with the security for obvious reasons so, please, be understanding. The price for these tickets will vary depending on the seat you select, but the basic price is ten Galleons."

"The owner of Mirror Summons is lending his services without any charge, as the owners of the restaurants and cafés. All the money that is collected will be used for all the students in need. Hogwarts is an expensive institution and they wish to help those families of scarce resources. Therefore, they asked me to use the Tournament as a way to announce it."

"Such a generous person!" Rita exclaimed, raising her hand to earn the attention of the Minister. "I know this has nothing to do with the competition, but I need to ask how the families who lack economic resources will be able to access these funds."

"They only need to request the forms from the bank two months before school begins. In it, they will have to submit their annual income and how many children they have. Not many families have more than two children, but for the ones that do, they will automatically qualify and the tuition for all their remaining children will be paid. Their school materials and



uniform are included in this. Also, students with exceptional grades will be granted scholarships and apprenticeships," Madam Bones explained.

While she spoke, her anger seemed to vanish. How curious, the woman was indeed a Hufflepuff at heart.

"Yeah, yeah, all is fine and dandy," Moody grumbled, "When will we finish this thing? There are people who actually have to work here."

"Auror Moody is right," Professor McGonagall announced, reminding those present of the other people's presence. "Our champions need to rest."

"If any of you wants to interview them, you will have to send a formal request with all the questions and we will decide if it's appropriate," the Minister said, putting an end to the interview. "We'll escort you towards Hogsmeade. Have a good day."

With those words, the Minister began walking towards the entrance, followed by Moody and Marcus. The latter gestured at them to let them know that he would visit after finishing his work for the day.

"I will go before they leave me behind! Madam Bones is quite a temperamental woman," chirped the forgotten Ollivander, walking out with a spring in his step.

"Miss Aguillon, before you leave," Professor Flitwick said, not needing to raise his voice to stop the girl, who turned around with caution. "Ten points from Ravenclaw for your irresponsibility. This time we will stick with point deduction, but if there is a next time, you will face detention. Don't forget that you are a student of this school, even if it's for a short time," the man told the girl, who nodded with reluctance and left the courtyard with hurried steps.

"Well, what do we do now?" asked Cedric when all the teachers began leaving.

"We can have a duelling match," Fleur suggested. "Iwan, do want to join us?" she asked the boy who somehow always managed to blend with their surroundings.

"No, thank you," was the boy's hurried answer. "I saw Viktor dying after those practices of yours. I would rather spend the evening with a book."

"You don't know how much I envy your good sense," Viktor told his classmate, looking solemn.

"Shut it," Fleur huffed, managing to drag the tall boy with her, against all physical laws. "You have no complaints, right?" the girl asked Cedric, who denied as fast as he could.

"And that's my life," Harry sighed, smiling slightly. "Anyways, if you want to join us for training, you just have to ask. The same invitation will be extended to Valerie, so if you catch her, please tell her, though I'm kicking her out the moment she antagonizes Fleur. Enjoy your evening," Harry said and followed his bickering friends, who were supposed to be the adults.

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Albus noted he was left alone in the inner courtyard, but who could blame him? This month was tiresome and the day alone was filled with unnerving revelations that had leached his remaining energy. He walked towards his office, his body unable to take more than a few steps per minute. When the tired man arrived, he took out a bottle of his reliable firewhisky, but before allowing himself to enjoy it, he decided a conversation with Severus was needed.

"Dinky!" he said, calling an elf that appeared in a pop. "Call Severus for me; it's urgent."

The man ignored the over-energetic elf and he waited, deciding to take a few gulps of his beverage before the professor arrived. He didn't know how long he waited until the wards alerted him of the presence of the Potions teacher. Severus entered his office wearing his classical sneer.

"Why are you calling me, Albus? I'm a busy person and need-"

"Take a seat," Dumbledore interrupted the younger man's tantrum, showing an uncharacteristic stern expression and neutral tone. "Why didn't you inform them about the ceremony? I want the truth," he ordered, making the man in front of him take a sharp breath.

"I wanted everyone to see how arrogant Potter is," Severus muttered, knowing this wasn't a moment to play games.

"My position in this school is hanging by a thin thread - we both know that," Albus began explaining while filling his glass with the alcoholic beverage. "If I'm out of this school there will no longer be a place for you and I'm not in a position to continue protecting you. Severus, don't forget that the reason why you are here and not in Azkaban is because I vouched for you, but that ability was taken away from me. If you don't want to forget petty rivalries that's your problem, but I will remind you of a few facts. Lily would be alive today had you not told Voldemort about the prophecy. Harry Potter is her only child and you vowed to protect him. Let's not forget the life debt you have with James Potter," the stern man stated, making Severus flinch at his harsh words. "Your duty is to be a spy, no more, no less... I lost much of my influence, so if you make a mistake there will be no one to protect you. Leave," he ordered, and the younger man almost fled the room.

Albus stared at the door with impassiveness... He indeed was quite cruel while young. No matter how hard he tried to suppress that side of him, it always managed to resurface. That way, he drove away his brother and pushed away his mother and sister while they were alive. However, he learnt that being a leader was not the glamorous position he used to believe. No, it was anything but... Being a leader implied being ruthless, making decisions that made you a monster in the eyes of the people you were trying to protect. One of the traits Gellert praised the most was his ability to manipulate people as if they were mere puppets.

He always saw that trait as a curse instead of the gift that Gellert swore it was. Ah, but he had no qualms in using it... *It doesn't matter*, he told himself over and over again, because Albus Dumbledore knew he would rot in hell either way. What did his life matter compared to the hundreds of innocents that would be protected? What was a life compared to hundreds? Nothing, and he was willing to pay the price.

*Ah, Gellert, I'm sure you must be proud of me... At least we'll be together in hell.*



## Eerie Blind Hope

It was a normal day at Hogwarts, or as normal a day as could be. Excitement thrummed through the students and teachers alike, filling the air with anticipation and feverish enthusiasm. In less than a week, the first task of the controversial Triwizard Tournament would take place. However, that was not the main focus for the day.

As in any other school, especially one containing unruly and quite hormonal teenagers, there was a group of students admiring one of their peers. Many blushed when the object of their affections looked up from his book, but his gaze did not even register their presence. While in any other circumstances they would try to approach him, the boy was not alone, something that was a rather common, if disappointing occurrence. Harry Potter was never alone.

Him sitting beside a single female instead of being surrounded by his entourage would not be enough to stop the infatuated teenagers if only his companion was another person. Had the student been any other than her, there was no doubt someone would make a move to gain the attention of the attractive student.

"This is a library, not the great hall!" Madam Pince admonished the group, blocking their view.

The glare the woman directed at them promised a terrible detention to anyone who remained. At last, the group of fans dispersed, though not before casting wistful glances at the person who managed to steal their hearts. The librarian huffed at the blatant disrespect the students showed to the place she considered sacred. That is without counting the fact they were almost stalking her favourite students, two quiet and respectful kids who understood the value of a good book. She glared at the few students who were making noise and went back to her desk after they stopped talking.

"Madam Pince is our hero once again, protecting us from your evil fans," stated the attractive girl with a few dramatic gestures that made her companion smile.

"I have no fans, Miss Delacour," the boy retorted, imitating his companion's dramatic tone. "It is you who has attracted such a crowd."

"Oh my, Mister Potter, you flatter me," Fleur answered, directing a flirtatious smile towards him, "but we both know only your charm is able to entrance all those students."

"I must disagree, Miss Delacour," he stated, giving his friend a charming smirk that would make the strongest person feel faint. "Your beauty is a mere compliment to your clever mind, which is enough to drive any mage to their knees," Harry whispered, enjoying the girl's unusual blush, but deciding he embarrassed her enough. "Have I congratulated you?"

"For what?" asked the confused girl while looking at the table as if the answers to life's mysteries were written on it.

"Your English improved, it's hard to believe a month ago your accent was heavier than Maxime's."

"See what I mean? You say all those things and manage to seduce so many innocents," Fleur said, though there was still a slight blush adorning her cheeks.

"Shut up, I was complimenting your English, woman, not asking you on a date," grumbled an exasperated Harry. "Talking about dates, how was your outing with Mister Diggory yesterday?"

"Good enough," she shrugged, a smile tugging on the commissure of her lips. "He wanted to go to that hideous pink place but I convinced him to go to the Quidditch store instead. We got a few boxes of chocolate and came back. Marcus doesn't visit every day, you know?"

"So, when will I be giving both of you the shovel talk?"

"Hopefully never," she replied with an easy smile. "I realized I like him as a friend and, while he finds me attractive, he doesn't like me either... And if we are honest, he spends as much time as Draco on his hair. I don't think I have that kind of patience."

"You do have a valid point," Harry nodded at Fleur, "though not everyone is blessed with good genes. Let's go."

"As the King commands," she said, curtsying with all the grace she could muster.

Feeling quite mischievous himself, Harry offered her his arm in order to guide her. The older girl gave him an impish smile and accepted the offered arm. The duo exited the library after engaging the librarian in a brief conversation and commotion followed their path when students caught a glimpse of the pair in what they considered a compromising position. People stared and gossiped as the news spread throughout the school like fire on gasoline.

"You know? By the time we reach our room they will be talking about our imminent wedding," Fleur commented, a smirk stretching her lips.

"Well, that depends," Harry said with a casual tone. "According to the rumour mill yesterday, Daphne and I have been engaged for a year... Though there is also a rumour about Theo being my long-time lover." While these statements were delivered in an almost lackadaisical manner, it was obvious Harry was somewhat vexed by them, but amused for the most part.

"I talked with Valerie yesterday," Fleur said, deciding that it was time to change the topic. "She refused the uniform again and it is the last time I am going to ask her."

"You only had to ask her once," Harry deadpanned.

"Maybe, but I didn't like the idea of her being the odd one out."

"You did your best. When people don't want to be helped, there's nothing you can do."

"At least Iwan agreed on the uniform... Though he chose red," Fleur huffed.

"Is it the same shade as yours?"

"Oh, no, that's why I'm offended - that bright shade of red is hideous."

"When did you see it?" Harry asked with caution after a few seconds.

"Yesterday. While Cedric and I were in the village we saw Iwan entering the clothing store," she commented, not noticing how the boy beside her relaxed. It was good to not have a stalker in the Court. "...and I had to force him to try on a few things. One of those was a robe that complimented his features, so I bought it as a gift to him. You know, for being a decent human being unlike many others and all that. The thing is Cedric was whining about also needing a new robe and I bought him one. Of course, he began nagging me about getting matching sweaters, so I ended up dragging him out," she finished her narration with an annoyed huff.

Harry just blinked at his companion, not knowing what the appropriate response to such a bizarre story was, a story he somehow managed to miss the beginning of, though his sense of self-preservation won over his curiosity and he remained silent. Much to his relief, he noticed they were already at the doors to the Court Headquarters, which opened without aid. Fleur left his side and hopped towards Neville, who was so concentrated on his book that he did not notice the girl. Harry walked towards his usual place and took out the journal they found in the Founder's Chamber, along with his notebook. He spent more time than expected in solving the puzzle that was left behind, admitting without the slightest hint of resentment the previous queen was a clever woman.

"I managed to translate the journal," he announced.

The room fell silent for a brief moment. Before his friends swarmed him, Harry raised his hand in a tacit cue of silence and signalled for a few to retrieve the members that were in the other areas of the room. After a few minutes, the whole Court was assembled. Every member was silent, paying attention to their leader.

"The last Queen was brilliant," Harry began explaining. "She not only created a code, but she also managed to charm every single word in her journal and all the books we found with a potent and almost undetectable confundus charm. Also, most of the leads that we found in the room were false. The only way I could begin deciphering the code was thanks to the plaque Viktor discovered."

With those words, Harry opened the journal and cast a silent spell on it. The letters morphed and moved through the pages until normal words were left.

"My name is Helena Guinevere of Morgen, daughter of Morgana, supreme enchantress, and Queen of Hogwarts," Harry began reading and the air got thick with anticipation. "The world in which you are living now is my legacy, in one way or another. I hope my experiences are able to guide you throughout your journey to protect magic because. While now I am an accomplished witch, I once was a student. During my Hogwarts years, I was forced to go through the name of Clarissa of Lowell for my protection. The times where I was young were turbulent and much resentment was built over the years. But before I write my story, I will tell you about the situation the magical world was submerged in.

"History vilified my mother and hailed Merlin as the greatest wizard in history. However, the real man behind that facade was nothing but a despicable megalomaniac who believed every decision he made was the right one. He was a young magician when he witnessed a prophecy. However, he believed it was given to him and he did everything in his power to turn it into reality. 'For three moons, the king will covet. The fourth, the king will take. The fruit of pain and desire will be born, the innocent Saviour of Albion. In a land where peace reigns, the ruler will be crowned and magic will be safe. An oath the child of fear keeps with his final breath as the King receives the kiss of Death. By the hand of a man, the world will fall, but by the fruit of the Queen, it will reborn.'" As Harry read the prophecy, Luna's eyes glazed over, acquiring that strange pale hue that still managed to surprise the group.

"Morgana's mother was the wife of a rich merchant. The woman was so beautiful that the king coveted her from the moment he saw her," Luna narrated, taking out an empty parchment and beginning to draw. "The family was invited to the palace for a banquet and the king ordered his servants to drug the merchant because he rejected all the advances of the concubines and ladies of the court. The king forced himself on the woman. Morgana was always clever and she managed to subdue all the soldiers that guarded the entrance to the chambers. What she was not expecting was another mage to be in her path. Her adversary was much more experienced and managed to subdue her.

"The next day the merchant was murdered. Morgana was thrown in the dungeons while King Uther planned his wedding with the unwilling bride. Knowing her mother depended on her - Morgana managed to escape her prison and, by a hair's breadth, rescue her mother. Both disappeared from the kingdom and lived in peace for a few months. Tragedy struck again when the women believed themselves free at last, for the mother was with child. Despite the origins of the baby, Morgana decided she wouldn't hate an innocent. However, her mother didn't possess the same fortitude, perishing while giving birth.

"Years went by and, despite her tender age, Morgana took her father's place and went on with business, practising her magic, and raising the child as best as she could. It was hard, yet she found happiness in her simple life. One day, a disguised man invaded their home, demanding her brother. She recognized him as the mage that allowed such a heinous crime to take place and a battle ensued. Morgana improved but was defeated. Once more, she could only watch as the man took away the last member of her family. She swore revenge."

Luna's soft voice entranced the people that surrounded her. Harry listened to the story and waited a few moments for her to speak again but she was focused on her drawing.

"Morgana trained herself for years, assuming different identities," Harry continued narrating, deciding to forego the reading. "During those years, she travelled the world and discovered it was a rotten place where death and bigotry ruled. In order to keep her father's business afloat, she disguised as a male. Actually, she was amongst the first recorded Metamorphmagi. Years later, she heard the rumours of the great Merlin and decided to search for him in order to learn, without knowing he was her sworn enemy. When she arrived at the kingdom that no longer hunted magicals, but where they were still hated and feared, she assumed the identity as Guinevere as a precaution.

"Once Morgana met Merlin, she knew it was time to act. The man took her under his wing, enchanted by the talented witch who he was going to train to be the king's healer. When Arthur met her, he fell immediately in love and began courting her."

"But they were siblings!" exclaimed a horrified Fred.

"That hasn't stopped pure-bloods before," said Hestia in response, though she looked as disgusted as the others.

"Morgana took the opportunity and she became the queen after brief months, and thus her revenge began," Harry continued narrating, dismissing the interruption. "She dosed Uther, the last king, with a potion of her own creation, one that made every breath excruciating torture. The man lived for years in endless agony until she killed him. During this time, she got close to Merlin. He was entranced by her beauty and charisma, soon enough, she became his confidant, but Arthur began suspecting the affections of the man he considered his mentor towards his wife. While both of them were engaged in a silent battle for her heart, she met Merlin's protégé and Arthur's greatest friend, Lancelot du Lac."

"They fell in love," Luna commented but kept drawing. "While her husband and her enemy were in a feud, she enjoyed years with the man she loved. However, this didn't mean she spent her time idle. She practised her magic and searched for information about Merlin while she waited for the best moment to reveal her trump card.

"During her travels, she met an ill woman who claimed to be King Uther's wife. She ran away with her son when the magician brought a child that, according to him, was the fruit from the woman the king wished to take as a wife but disappeared, leaving him heartbroken. Uther loved the new child more than he loved his previous one and the woman feared for her son's life. In the end, Morgana took care of the child, raising him to be the weapon of her revenge. She named him Mordred, and when he was of age, she sent him to the north in order to gather troops while she searched for Merlin... It was all a tangle of lies and deceit," Luna sighed and went back to her drawing.

"Once Mordred contacted Morgana to inform her he had an army and a kingdom, she decided to expose her affair with Lancelot and a civil war erupted. While Arthur was the King, Lancelot was a brave knight who earned the loyalty of more than half of the troops. It was all a bloodbath. Merlin decided to side with Arthur because of the prophecy yet did nothing but the bare minimum to aid him. Morgana took a neutral stance and provided healing for her husband and her lover, biding her time. When they were at their weakest, Mordred attacked and the massacre began anew.

"Morgana took her opportunity and confronted Merlin, killing him at the end of their battle. The man died knowing he created his own downfall, not even death relieved him from his guilt. Her husband was left fighting a war he was already losing. She watched as Arthur murdered Mordred, but she shed no tears for he accomplished his purpose. Lancelot landed the killing blow on her husband and the battle was over. She destroyed all the journals that belonged to Merlin, erasing the evidence of the brutal ideologies of the man. As the queen, she announced all children carried her blessing and disappeared, not to be seen again. Stories of her blessing being given in different villages circled around for decades."



"Every magical heard about the battle, and especially about Morgana," Luna muttered, looking at Harry. "She was heralded as the murderer of Merlin, the greatest wizard of their times. No one wanted to believe such a feat was possible, but fear permeated all the magicals that heard of the confrontation. As a result, she was turned into a villain... There were rumours of her reappearing after a few years, when her name was still whispered in fear, but people forgot her blessing. A whole village was annihilated, except for the children, who all carried the mark of Morgana."

This time, Harry allowed for the silence to stretch. By no means was the information given easy to assimilate; knowing that the man who was named the greatest wizard of the millennium was not the white dove he was remembered as must be disappointing.

"It's official, I hate Merlin," grumbled Cedric, gaining the attention of the other members.

"While he was no angel, Morgana was not an innocent either," Flora said, frowning at the table.

"He turned her into the person she became," Adrian argued.

"She could be the better person, but she chose revenge instead," claimed Daphne, scowling at the opposing party.

"It's an interesting story, but why is it important?" asked Theo, trying to avoid a debate that would take far too long for his tastes.

"Because the Queen was the child of the prophecy," Terrence muttered as his eyes widened at the realization.

"Indeed," Harry nodded at the bright male. "The prophecy was far too vague, but Helena fitted better than Arthur did. We don't know who her father was - it could have been King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, or any other man for the matter."

"Who, by being the Queen's lover and at the death of Arthur, became the de facto King," Hestia analyzed.

"Hogwarts may be the land where peace reigns and she was crowned here," Fred added.

"And all that disaster was because of one person," muttered a still shocked Viktor.

"What else happened?" asked Fleur, interrupting the analysis.

"Those were shaky times and there was still no other safe place for the magical people aside from Hogwarts. Helena decided to change that. When she was in fourth year, she began the Slytherin Guild and when she was in sixth, the Court was created," Harry explained, and no one asked for more details. After the story of Morgana, the life of her daughter seemed rather dull in comparison. "As you know, they placed the protections for Hogsmeade and created Diagon Alley. I will give you all a copy of her journal - there are interesting things about the school and how they built the Alley."

"You know, I always thought Diagon Alley was a bit antiquated and, let's admit it, the entrance doesn't give the best impression to the newcomers," Justin commented, looking lost in his thoughts.

"There's no way to refute that," Harry agreed, frowning at the memories of his first impression of the magical world.

"Let's build a new one then!" exclaimed an excited Hestia, hitting her complaining sister while a maniac smile stretched her lips. "We have the information and you have the money," she chirped, imploring Harry with her eyes.

"That's a solid possibility, but we need to think about the location, the design, the protection, the entrance-" Harry was interrupted by the squealing Carrow twins.

"Mister Filch!" they announced in unison.

"You said you were thinking of buying one of those Muggle places that have cats and hire him," Flora babbled in a single breath.

"If that's common for Muggles then that can be the entrance," Hestia declared.

"I'll think about it, but I need to speak with Ragnok," Harry told the young girls.

"Of course you do," Draco teased. The boy was silenced when the two balls of energy began nagging him, much to Harry's delight.

"When will you mark us?" asked Luna. Her eyes had yet to return to her usual shade. Harry noticed Blaise was at her side, ready to help when the trance was broken.

"What do you mean?" retorted Harry in a dismissive tone, not ready to broach the topic.

"All leaders have a symbol, but the one you are planning will be the turning point," she commented while still drawing, her words brought a heavy silence to the room and every member of the Court paid attention.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Terrence with caution.

"Marks are not only a sign of loyalty but a sign of trust," the girl answered. "Harry is designing a mark for our protection. By placing it on us, he is giving us his trust, and by accepting it, we are showing him our loyalty."

"I would be honoured to take it," announced Fleur in a soft voice, breaking the prolonged and quite tense silence that seemed to vanish when she spoke.

The members of the Court looked at each other and their decision was made. The Court would change the world and the mark would be a sign of their loyalty.

Harry could only smile at his friends, and think of how much Marcus would nag him for not being present.

"The mark isn't finished, there are a few details I still need to fix," Harry explained.

"Soon," Luna sighed and stopped drawing.

The girl leaned on Blaise and closed her eyes, allowing exhaustion to take over. Harry approached them without wasting a second, worried about her health. However, when he caught a glimpse of the parchments she was using, every single thought fled his mind and he froze in his place. On those pages, the life of Morgana was drawn, from a frightened child bound on the floor, observed by a stoic male, to a beautiful woman who now wore Merlin's expression.

*And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.* Nietzsche was right after all.

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Since that taxing evening, the members of the Court renewed their efforts to discover the secrets of the Founders' Room and the last Queen's Court. However, their main focus was on Morgana's story. The woman was vilified by history and that travesty would be corrected, but they would not portray her as a saint either. The woman would be shown as she was: a victim who became a monster. Nevertheless, the real story of the founders was their priority.

Professor McGonagall supervised in person the multiple visits Skeeter paid to the Sorting Hat. The reporter was overworking herself in an effort to have the book ready for the Yule Holidays - what a scandal it would be. This matter brought another concern to be sorted. Rita Skeeter was already a thorn in the side of the Death Eaters, but this book would turn her into a prime target, which meant she needed protection. With this in mind, Harry bought a quaint house in a Muggle neighbourhood. The wards were set in place and the woman would be soon relocated.

Harry Potter's musings were interrupted by the door being opened with excessive force and a furious Fleur stomping towards him. No one dared to intercept the girl for multiple reasons, the main one being her training with Neville being successful, perhaps more than they were comfortable with. Through harrowing hours of practice, Fleur managed to achieve a partial transformation to the Veela's less attractive and much more dangerous appearance. While she was not able to grow wings yet, she could turn her skin into that fire-proof scaly exterior her ancestors prided themselves on, and her dainty fingers into sharp claws. Considering this detail, the people in the room made the wise decision of looking from afar.

"Can you believe that woman?!" Fleur almost yelled. "How dare she? But if she thinks that she will be safe then I will teach her."

"Hey, what happened?" Neville asked the girl, ignoring the alarmed looks he was receiving, but keeping himself out of claw radius while she grumbled intelligible curses under her breath.

"Maxime is what happened," Fleur snapped, taking a deep breath to control her anger. "She called Valerie and me to her office to tell us what the first task will consist of."

"While that isn't fair, how is it different to Marcus giving us information?" asked a frowning Justin.

"Marcus gave us a general idea of the task because Harry said it would be boring if we knew all the details," Fleur began explaining while pacing around. "Besides, we already told Iwan and Valerie rejected our help multiple times. Maxime told us everything she knew about the task, including what creature we will end up confronting and what obstacles are in the way. While she doesn't have much information, she gave us a list of spells to practice that will earn us extra points... She kept Valerie in her office."

"I understand," Viktor sighed and approached the girl, who slumped once he put an arm around her shoulders. "That woman wants one of her champions to win, but she already has a favourite," he explained to the other members.

"She doesn't like anyone who is part Veela," Fleur muttered while clinging to Viktor. "She changed many of the school policies that were meant for our protection. While she is a half-breed herself, she disapproves of us and favours other students."

"So what will we do?" asked Neville, patting the girl in a comforting manner.

"That's obvious, Mister Longbottom," answered a smirking Cedric, whose eyes acquired an uncharacteristic hard glint. "As champions, it's normal to aid one another. Therefore, it will be no surprise that we are upset by the unfairness of Madam Maxime. I think Professor McGonagall will be furious, and that goes without mentioning our Minister," he said, smirking at his friends.

"Let's go to Flitwick, McGonagall is too passive," Harry sighed.

"Drink this," Flora ordered the still distressed French girl, handing her a vial that was consumed without hesitation.

"I'll contact Marcus," Luna commented in a dreamy tone. "That way he'll be ready."

Four champions walked towards the office of the Charms professors, filled with determination. While Fleur was gripping Viktor's arm with more strength than necessary, the boy did not complain and gave his silent support. Harry watched this interaction with amusement; the delicate French girl was anything but, and far stronger than anyone would give her credit for. He admired Viktor's iron will to not complain when he was sure that bruises were already forming. His attention was taken away by their arrival at Flitwick's office and he thanked Hogwarts for facilitating their trip through the school. Without further ado, he knocked on the door. They did not wait long until it was opened by a smiling teacher.

"Oh my, the champions are here, come on in," the man squeaked in excitement. "Do you need help with something? We can have a last-minute duelling practice!"

"Good evening, Professor," the four said, smiling at the man's antics.

"While I always appreciate the practice, I don't fancy being humiliated today," Harry answered with a smile while the group sat on the couches.

"Ah, such a shame," the man muttered. "I acquired this book of spells that were created over the last few years. I'll lend it to you and I expect a few surprises for our next practice."

"Yes, sir, though we have a different reason for coming," Harry told the professor, who frowned when he noticed the distressed girl.

"How clumsy of me... May I inquire about what happened?" Flitwick asked Fleur, smiling at her.

"Madam Maxime called Valerie and me to her office," she began explaining, looking at her hands. "She told us what the first task will consist of."

With those words, the professor's eyes hardened, but he controlled himself before he could give the innocent girl the impression he was angry at her. Sighing, he flicked his wand and a small chest levitated towards them. The rich scent of chocolate filled the room and he offered a treat to the girl, who accepted it with eagerness.

"I'll contact Madam Bones, so please, wait a few minutes."

He stood up and walked towards the fireplace, throwing in Floo powder and leaving the castle.

"That went better than expected," Cedric muttered, eyeing Fleur's treat.

"Madam Bones will use this as an excuse to keep the headmasters in the dark about the tasks," Harry commented, though he was frowning. "We'll have to convince them not to disqualify Fleur for the first task."

"I never considered that," admitted a scowling Viktor.

"I don't mind," Fleur shrugged. "It's not important either way."

"Do you want to compete?" Cedric asked the girl.

"Of course I do, but if I have to be disqualified for that woman to be punished then I don't mind."

"If you want to, then you will," Harry promised.

While they waited, Fleur offered a bite of her chocolatey treat to her friends, smacking Cedric for taking a large bite and then scowling at Viktor for not taking enough. Harry could only smile at the behaviour of the three supposed adults... Although, he was now also considered one, which brought many perks but it was still strange to think of himself as mature enough to assume all the responsibilities that adulthood conveyed. The flaring of the fire drew the attention of the bickering trio and their thoughtful companion. Professor Flitwick arrived, followed by Minister Bones and Marcus.

"Why is it always that, when something happens, you're involved in it?" Amelia asked Harry, a small smile stretching her lips at the boy's surprised expression.

"I have no idea what you mean, Madam," was his easy answer.

"Yes, yes, anyways. Let's get to the main matter, I'm a busy woman. Miss Delacour, can you tell us the exact information that was provided?" the woman questioned, taking a seat on the free couch.

"She mentioned an obstacle course, though she didn't give me much information about it," Fleur answered in an even tone. "She did tell us that we would confront a... Goose skunk?" the girl ended up almost asking the unfamiliar name of the creature.

"A goobsnark," Marcus corrected gently.

"That. She also gave us a list of spells that would grant us more points if we used them," she ended her explanation, handing the Minister a folded piece of parchment she retrieved from her robes.

"This is the list I gave the judges," muttered Amelia, glaring at the parchment.

"I'll take care of it," announced Marcus, much to the woman's relief, who nodded at him before he left through the Floo.

"Miss Delacour, may I know why you decided to report this incident?" Madam Bones asked.

"Because it is not only an unfair advantage over the other champions but the behaviour of the headmistress is unethical and a shame to Beauxbatons," Fleur answered, her eyes blazing with determination.

"Are you aware that we might disqualify you and your schoolmate from the first task?"

"Yes, I am," she said, meeting the woman's eyes without hesitation.

"Minister Bones, if you forgive my interruption," Professor Flitwick said, interrupting the fiery staring contest of the females. "Miss Delacour showed her integrity. I know it's too much to ask, but can you change a few details of the task? I'll personally help you to arrange it if you grant me this favour," the man promised, winking at his surprised students.

"There's no need," the Minister sighed, smiling at the people in front of her. "Marcus made a few backup plans in case of certain eventualities - it seems I owe him an apology for my merciless teasing regarding his paranoia. Miss Delacour will not be disqualified. However, I cannot promise the same regarding Miss Aguillon. We will give her until tomorrow night to tell one of the teachers. If she doesn't, then I fear she won't participate."

"Madam Bones, can't there be another punishment for Valerie?" asked a defeated Fleur, grimacing at her own words. "Perhaps she can have a point deduction, detention, or something similar. It would be cruel of me to be the only Beauxbatons representative," she said, surprising the two oldest people in the office.

"I promise nothing, but I'll keep your suggestions in mind," a confused Minister said. "I beg all of you to say nothing about what happened today. Marcus and I will sort the problem with the judges and Maxime."

"Miss Delacour, twenty points to Ravenclaw, for your honourable response and your loyalty to your friends," the professor declared, smiling at his students. "Go and rest now."

"Yes, Professor, thank you," Fleur gushed at the man.

"Have a good day," Harry said as a farewell and led his friends out of the office.

"They're an exemplary group," Amelia commented once the students left.

"Indeed," Filius agreed. "What will happen, then?"

"I'm not sure, but all the judges will be questioned under Veritaserum," the woman said with a tired sigh. "I will ask for another representative for Beauxbatons instead of the Headmistress. In any case, this gives me an excuse to have the nosey headmasters ousted from interfering in any aspect of the competition."

"So you chose other judges."

"Of course. It was ridiculous to have them in the position - conflict of interest and all that stuff."

"Ah, I always knew you were Ravenclaw material," the professor commented with an amused smile. "But after you sent Mister Smith to the infirmary with a broken nose and bruised unmentionables, I knew you were a Hufflepuff at heart," he chuckled, reminiscing on that particular incident years ago and making the woman blush in the process. "Susan's following in your footsteps."

"I received the letter from Professor Sprout," Amelia groaned, covering her face. "And I want to clear up that misunderstanding. Joseph thought it was a good idea to grope me and I taught him otherwise," the woman explained with a scowl. "Susan did it out of spite and the only reason she was given a second-degree detention is that none of the Hufflepuffs saw a single thing. Without witnesses, there is no crime. That doesn't mean her comeuppance will disappear once she arrives home."

"Ah, I must agree with you. Minerva was amused, but Poppy and Pomona were quite livid, and I may have also been amused had the method been less violent. Mister Smith needed a wakeup call and I hope this is enough because it would break my heart to see him suffer the same losses as his father did to open his eyes."

"Professor Flitwick, the way you treat the students is the reason why you should be the next headmaster."

"No, thank you. There's far too much paperwork and not enough fun," the man said, wearing a kind smile. "I love teaching and I want to do that for the rest of my days."

"It's a shame, but do remember you have my support if you change your mind," she commented in a candid tone. "I'll return to the Ministry now, poor Marcus is always doing more than necessary to help me," Amelia confessed with a chuckle.

"Tell me if you need anything."

"I will. Have a good day, Professor."

The Minister walked to the fireplace and left the office. Filius could only smile at the woman who once was his student. Few would be able to understand, but teaching was perhaps one of the greatest honours that existed, not to mention the unparalleled pride that bloomed in one's chest when you saw your children grow up into marvellous people. The man smiled and went back to his desk, preparing his classes for the next week.

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Marcus Travers arrived at the Minister's office after leaving the school, sighing at the amount of work that was deposited into his already busy schedule. To think he planned for an early dinner and a relaxing evening...

He began walking towards Moody's office, giving himself time to organize his thoughts. The first step would be to get the judges into the DMLE headquarters, thanking Attorney Blair for drafting the contract the way she did as there would be less opposition. Well, that may be the wrong word, but there was definitely going to be less paperwork, an excellent outcome in Marcus' opinion. That was where the easy part ended. The Beauxbatons Headmistress signed no contract, which meant questioning the woman or even bringing her to the Ministry would be a nightmare, so he needed to contact the French Minister if he wished to avoid an international confrontation. Being the clever man he was, he decided Madam Bones could take care of that.

The next matter was related to the task itself. Once again, he thanked his paranoia for being ever-present in his life. He didn't wish to even consider what would happen if they gave all the details of the task to the headmasters instead of a general idea, though the goobsnark needed to be replaced. Shame.

Who wanted to take care of a goobsnark? No one, absolutely no one. The things looked adorable when they were not trying to gut you. They resembled cute little puppies, cute and somewhat deformed puppies that tried to assassinate you. And what kind of person harmed a puppy? A goddamned bastard, that is, and no one wanted to be the evil sod that kicked the goobsnark out of its new home in the Department of Mysteries, no matter how much destruction the blasted creature caused, even with the amount of paperwork that was involved in each disaster. The first task was the perfect place to get rid of the creature - there was always the chance of a misguided spell hitting it.

Marcus took a deep breath, noticing he was rambling, he would take care of the goobsnark later. The man noticed he arrived to Moody's office and was about to knock when it was opened.

"What are you waiting for? Come in," the Head of the DMLE barked.

"Good evening, Auror Moody," Marcus greeted, taking a seat and forgoing his usual formality.

"I already told you to drop the titles," the man grumbled, scowling at his visitor, though he could also be scowling at the mountain of paperwork that flooded the desk or maybe even be



smiling at him - it was hard to tell. "And if you came here to give me more paperwork to fill, leave before you regret it."

"I'm surprised to see you doing it and not Kingsley."

"Bah, he bailed out a few hours ago, something related to not having slept for a few days," the man grumbled, stabbing a piece of parchment. "I don't think you came here to chitchat."

"No, I didn't," Marcus agreed, mourning his once free evening. "I need you to send a few Aurors to retrieve the judges of the Tournament. While the international ones are out of our reach, we'll begin with our own and then we can focus on the others."

"So one of them already broke the contract... I must say this again boy, your talents are being wasted in your position. You would make a great Auror," the scarred man commented and sent a patronus to his Aurors.

"I believe you're one of the few who call paranoia a talent," the younger male answered, composing a polite smile and pretending he didn't hear Moody complimenting him.

"Constant vigilance!" his companion exclaimed. "That's a true talent that few possess. One of the reasons I'm still alive and one of the best qualities an auror can have. Constant vigilance is the-"

The man's passionate discourse was interrupted by four Aurors barging into the office, dressed and ready for the emergency call. Marcus contained a relieved sigh - he didn't want to hear another speech on why paranoia was vital.

"Attention!" the severe head of the DMLE ordered. "You are going to retrieve... Who are the judges again?"

"Newman Twig, Head of the International Magical Cooperation Department. Jennifer Sagrav, Head of the Magical Games and Sports Department. They must be in their offices at this hour and, if they aren't, you're allowed to search for them in their houses. The last judge is Madam Marchbanks - she may be in the usual cafe, enjoying her evening. In case she's not there, ask her secretary for her location," Marcus explained, envying the old woman and her paperwork delegating ability.

"What if anyone complains?" asked a young Auror that had a quite unusual shade of hair, as he doubted that bubblegum pink was normal, though her face seemed familiar - maybe she was also a student while he was at Hogwarts.

"Remind them of the contract and the penalties. If they try to resist you are allowed to use force," Marcus told her.

"What are you waiting for?" Alastor snapped at his subordinates. "I want them in different interrogation rooms in less than an hour."

"Yes, sir!" the four said in unison and left the office in hurried steps.

"Have the Veritaserum ready," Marcus told the older man in a nonchalant tone.

"Do you have any idea of how much paperwork that involves?" Moody asked with deliberated slowness, as if testing his mental capability.

"You forget that I'm the senior undersecretary and don't have a minion doing my work," was Marcus' somewhat querulous response. "It's fortunate for both of us that being questioned under Veritaserum, in case of an emergency, is part of the contract they signed."

Marcus ignored the predatory glint in Moody's eyes at the news and wondered if it was wise to inform the man about that detail. Deciding that it may not be his smartest decision, but not really caring about the outcome, the young man relaxed for a few seconds before going to his office.

"Please, summon me when the judges are ready for questioning."

"Won't you wait here?"

"I have a few stacks of paperwork that are waiting for me," was Marcus' nonchalant response to the surprised man.

The senior undersecretary exited the office after nodding to the Auror, who seemed to share his pain regarding the torture named paperwork. He was walking at a leisurely pace, procrastinating for as long as possible, when someone crashed into him. Marcus stabilized himself without problems and helped the stranger to do the same, noting with some degree of amusement the angry glare that his assailant was directing at him.

"I apologize, I was distracted," Marcus said, emulating the gallant tone Harry used whenever he wanted to piss off people.

"It's fine," managed to mutter the person in an almost inaudible voice.

"Did you get hurt?" he asked, smiling at the annoyed worker, feeling satisfaction at the person's souring scowl. "After all, I wouldn't want Mister Twig's assistant to fail his duties due to my clumsiness."

"There's no problem," was the dry response.

"If you say so, Assistant Weasley," Marcus said, wearing a captivating smile that would make many blush, but it only served to make the red-head angrier. "Ah, before you leave, do you know where your boss is?"

"Mister Twig's schedule is private. If you want to-"

"I think you misunderstand me," Marcus clarified. "This has nothing to do with personal matters, but with official business. If you know, please go to Auror Moody's office and tell him, preferably without warning your boss... unless you wish to deal with Minister Bones, of course. Have a good day, Assistant Weasley." His farewell was delivered with the utmost respect, which did nothing to appease the incensed assistant.

Marcus arrived at his office with no further interruptions. While he enjoyed riling up the twins' brother, as petty as it was, it was unable to suppress the anger that simmered in his

core... He didn't forget the bruise on Fred's cheek, nor forgave any of the Weasleys for allowing it to happen. One day, they would pay, as would all those who dared to harm his friends.

Though he guessed the Weasley patriarch wasn't that bad - the man did his best to provide for his family, not noticing he was pushing his children aside. The eldest brothers of the twins weren't that bad either and he didn't know their youngest siblings... Perhaps Marcus had a personal vendetta against the Weasley matriarch and that annoying child of hers. Either way, there was always more space if people needed to be added to his blacklist.

With a defeated sigh, Marcus began working on the details that would have to be changed for the first task. He thanked that overcautious voice inside him that forced him to make plans in case something like this happened because it meant he would actually sleep a few hours. Between filling forms, checking records, and issuing orders, he didn't notice time flew by until a mastiff-shaped patronus pranced into his office.

"The judges are waiting," it announced in Moody's voice and dispersed.

Marcus filled two folders with the necessary documents and walked to the DMLE cells without interruptions. Madam Marchbanks was sitting on a couch, sipping tea while she reviewed some documents and somehow ignored the mayhem. The young Auror that seemed familiar was sporting bright hair that fluctuated between red and blue while muttering curses under her breath. Madam Bones was barking into a mirror in fast-paced French and Moody was almost glowing in excitement, which was such a surreal sight that his brain suppressed it from his memories. However, in contrast to the man's expression, his eyes were hard.

"Marcus, here you are!" Madam Bones exclaimed.

"Madam, I apologize for the lateness," he muttered, still looking around in confusion.

"It's a mess," the Minister muttered, "Auror Tonks and Auror Watson went to Jennifer's house because they were unable to find her. They found her alright. She was meeting with Maxime," the woman explained, sagging when her last sentence was delivered.

"I guess the Headmistress got apprehended."

"She did, which means I have to sort the international melodrama..."

"I already sorted the documents for the task and the elves are taking care of the changes. Only a few papers need your signature," he told the tired woman.

"Perfect. I'll be leaving all this mess in your hands while I speak with the French Minister."

"Understood, but I suggest having a few Aurors following you."

"Dawlish and Shacklebolt are on their way."

"Very well, I will interrogate the judges but do nothing with Maxime until you say so, Ma'am."

"Thanks," the woman said, looking grateful. "I'll be going."

Marcus nodded at the tired woman and hardened his visage while he approached the Head of the DMLE.

"Auror Moody, I think it would be better to begin with Madam Marchbanks so we don't make her wait."

"Ah, Travers, your talents are being wasted," the man muttered, his expression morphing into what could be considered a frightening version of a smile. "Warrens! Escort Madam Marchbanks to the questioning room! Let's go, lad, we don't have all day."

The men entered a rather spartan room that contained a few chairs and a table. Marcus thought that Nile would have a heart attack if he was ever introduced to such a bleak place... But then again, the elf re-decorated the Blacks' house and he might consider it a great gift to show off his talents.

"Good evening, Madam. I apologize for bringing you here in such an inappropriate way," Marcus said as a greeting.

"No problems, dear, though I want to finish this as soon as possible. A delightful dinner is waiting for me," the old woman said in an almost lackadaisical way. "We can skip the pointless interrogation and go straight to the Veritaserum... For your information, I do read what I sign," the woman said when she noticed the surprised expressions on her companions' faces.

"Very well, if you're willing..." Marcus muttered, signalling the Auror to administer the doses and taking out a dictaquill and a few parchments. "Transcript of the Formal Interrogation of the British Judges of the Triwizard Tournament: Griselda Marchbanks and Newman Twig. Main Investigators: Auror Alastor Moody and Undersecretary Marcus Travers. Reason for Investigation: Speculative contract infringement, abuse of authority, and high treason against the British Ministry of Magic. Place of Interview: DMLE interview room number 8. Date: November 24th, 1994." The young man said, and the quill danced over the pages while recording his words. "Questioning of the suspect Griselda Marchbanks begins at 17:46. The suspect volunteered to be questioned under Veritaserum, which was administered by Auror Jacob Warrens. The cork carries the official certification seal P-55 and is labelled as vial number 135," he described while checking the vial and signalling Moody to begin the questioning.

"State your complete name and date of birth," Alastor told the woman with more gentleness than expected.

"Griselda Marguerite Marchbanks, born on 16<sup>th</sup> of January, 1815," the woman stated, her potion induced trance not allowing her to notice her companions choked when she mentioned her age.

"Did you, at any moment, infringe the contract that you signed regarding the Triwizard Tournament?"

"No."

"Did you, at any moment, commit any crime relating to your positions of authority?"

"No."

Moody observed the woman's blank expression for a few seconds and signalled the other Auror to administer the antidote. He shook his head at Marcus, who nodded in understanding.

"The suspect proved to be innocent; no further action will be taken. Auror Warrens administered the antidote for the Veritaserum potion. The cork has the official certification seal A-78 and is labelled as vial number 285," Marcus muttered, touching the quill for it to stop writing. "You can leave now, Ma'am. We apologize for the inconvenience."

"There's no need. I know very well what my job entails," the woman dismissed the youngster's worries. "Alastor, dear, I'll be expecting you and Edgar on Saturday for tea," the woman said and walked out of the room.

"A word of this, and both of you are dead," growled the scarred man after the old woman left. "Warrens, bring Twig!"

Marcus smirked at the man and could have sworn that there were the hints of a blush on his cheeks. He decided to archive this newfound piece of information as teasing material for later... However, his thoughts were interrupted by the loud complaints of the struggling man Jacob was bringing with him.

"You can't do this! It's an abuse of authority!" Newman yelled as loudly as he could.

"Mister Twig, we will begin the interrogation whether you like it or not. It depends on you whether it will be easy or hard," Marcus told the man in a cheery tone.

"I did nothing wrong," the man insisted.

"Then I believe you will have no problem with answering our questions, and even subjecting yourself to Veritaserum," the undersecretary told the man.

"I won't accept the Veritaserum, that's a violation of my rights," the man snapped, sneering at the other people in the room.

"I'm afraid I have to inform you that isn't your decision to make, you renounced to many rights the moment you signed your contract," Marcus informed the irrational man. "Now, let's stop chitchatting," he said while touching the quill, which sprang to life, ready to take notes. "Questioning of the suspect Newman Twig begins at 17:53."

"State your complete name and date of birth," Alastor barked at the pale man.

"Newman Walter Twig, born on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December of 1968," the man muttered, clenching his fists.

"Did you, at any moment, infringe the contract that you signed regarding the Triwizard Tournament?"

"Of course not! I don't want to be left destitute because of those ridiculous fines," the man answered in a huff.

"Did you, at any moment, commit any crime relating to your positions of authority?"

"No," Newman muttered in an almost unintelligible way.

"Is there something you wish to confess before the Veritaserum?" Alastor asked the man, examining his every movement.

"You can't force me to consume Veritaserum!"

"As I said before, Mister Twig, yes we can," said Marcus, smiling at the sweating man.

"If you say what you know, the repercussions won't be as terrible as when we eventually find the truth," Moody warned the man, signalling the Auror to prepare the vial of the potion.

"She's my friend," the man sighed, sagging on his chair and casting a longing glance at the door. "Jennifer is my friend."

"And she was caught in a compromising position. She was found giving Headmistress Maxime more information about the Tournament and will be lucky if her job is the only thing she loses," Alastor informed the distressed man, who paled further.

"I'll talk, but promise you'll do your best for her not to end up in Azkaban," Newman begged, looking utterly defeated.

"You're asking us something that isn't feasible," Marcus told the desperate man and took pity on him. He knew that, for a real friend, a person would do the impossible. "However, I can promise you that her name won't appear in the newspapers. Her crimes will not be of public knowledge but they will remain on her records."

"Do you promise?" asked the man, his dull eyes illuminating with the slightest glimmer of hope.

"I do."

"...Jennifer is in a bad economic situation since the last year and neither of her jobs is enough to pay for the debts her sister has. Last week, she finished paying everything," the man said in a shaky tone. "I knew she did something to receive such a large amount of money, days later, I heard her speaking with someone about meeting in a bar of Knocturn Alley. At first, I thought the desperation drove her to extreme measures, so I followed her to confirm my suspicions and help her if possible. I didn't recognize the person she met with, but she handed him a folder and received money in return... I confronted her that day. She begged me not to say anything because she needed the money and I agreed... What else could I do? She is my best friend," the weary man explained.

"Did you loan her money?"

"I did, almost my whole salary until she began rejecting it."

"That's all," Moody told the defeated man. "You're not allowed to leave the country unless you receive the explicit permission of the Minister. You will be trailed by an Auror until the trial takes place as we may need your testimony in the future. Also, you are not allowed to contact Jennifer Sagrav in any way. Warrens, guide him out and tell Sterling she's assigned to guard him."

"The suspect proved to be guilty of covering up the perpetrator, a fine will be issued but no further action will be taken," Marcus told the quill, which wrote until it was deactivated. "We need more information about the woman... Ares!" the young man announced, and an elf popped in the room.

"Mister Marcus, what is it that you need?" asked the curious elf.

"Sorry to call you this way, but I have an important task for you," he said, and the little worker's ears perked up. "Jennifer Sagrav. Find everything you can about her."

"Everything?"

"Everything," the young man confirmed and the elf's smile would have put the Cheshire cat to shame. Ares disappeared in a pop.

"You assigned an elf to investigate," Moody muttered, looking at the undersecretary as if he was a strange and quite imbecilic bug.

"You can thank me later," was Marcus' casual response.

"You're nuts," the scarred man commented but said nothing else regarding the theme. "Sagrav attacked one of my Aurors," he muttered while glaring at the door, "I want her charged with attempted murder."

"We can add that to the interrogation," Marcus agreed, "How's your Auror?"

"Watson is being treated at the moment. We have no idea whether he'll make it," the man grumbled, clenching his fists as he explained. "I have to thank you, Travers. You bugged me and Amelia till the Aurors received basic medical training. If it wasn't for that, a good man would've been lost... Tonks is still in shock. She's a good kid, a tad impulsive, but her instincts are enough to make up for it. I don't if she would have been able to get over the death of her partner."

"At least my paranoia did something good," the young man muttered in an effort to break the serious atmosphere. "Auror Tonks is a metamorphmagus, right?"

"That she is. I'm surprised you don't know her - she graduated two years before you."

"Ah, I wasn't a social butterfly," Marcus explained and a comfortable silence descended on the room as both occupants were focused on their own thoughts. "Where's Sagrav?" Marcus

asked after a few minutes, frowning at the door.

As if on cue, the door was kicked open and a struggling woman was dragged in by two Aurors. Tonks' red hair was almost flaring as she pushed the accused into the chair and Warrens cast a binding spell on her. Marcus observed the panicking woman and the two Aurors, raising an eyebrow.

"We apologize, she was resisting and we didn't want to manhandle her," Warrens explained between gritted teeth.

"Stay at her side," Alastor ordered the male Auror. "Tonks, out."

"I need to be here!" she explained, but one could almost hear the pleading in her voice.

"No, you need to rest," the scarred man told her, leaving no room for discussion.

The young Auror left the room with heavy steps and slumped shoulders. Moody's eyes softened for a fraction of a second, hardening again when his gaze landed on the accused.

"Transcript of the Formal Interrogation of the British Judge of the Triwizard Tournament: Jennifer Sagrav," Marcus said, after touching his quill and subjecting the woman to an impassive stare. "Main Investigators: Auror Alastor Moody and Undersecretary Marcus Travers. Reason of Investigation: contract infringement, abuse of authority, attempted murder, and high treason against the British Ministry of Magic. Place of Interview: DMLE interview room number 8. Date: November 24th, 1994. Questioning of the suspect Jennifer Sagrav begins at 18:21."

"How do you plead to these charges?" Alastor asked the squirming woman, who remained silent.

"Miss Sagrav, we don't have all day," the younger man told the woman. "If you refuse to answer, then we will be forced to administer Veritaserum."

"You can't do that," the woman whispered in an almost robotic tone. "It's illegal to administer Veritaserum without the explicit agreement of the questioned or without an order of the Wizengamot."

"You seem to forget something important," Marcus said with more enthusiasm than necessary. "Your contract," he declared while taking out a parchment from one of his folders and placing it on the table for the suspect to read.

"One more chance, Sagrav. The moment we put you under the potion, your stay in Azkaban will be longer," Alastor told the paling female. "Warrens, prepare the--"

"I'll talk," she murmured between clenched teeth, "but you have to promise that you'll be lenient."

"You're in no position to make requests of any kind, our response depends on your cooperation... In any case, Mister Twig will still be prosecuted for covering for you," Marcus stated, giving her a cheery smile.



"He has nothing to do with this!" she snapped but controlled herself. "Please, leave him out of this... My family has many debts because of my sister - she has a gambling addiction that only worsened as time went by. I've been trying to pay off her debts to protect my family, but the collectors became more violent this year. My salary wasn't enough to cover my family's expenses and pay off the debts... Newman lent me a lot of money, but I couldn't keep taking it. He had his first child not long ago and his family needs it more than I do."

"Before you continue, why didn't you report this to the DMLE? Betting is a highly regulated activity."

"Because I'm ashamed and to protect my sister," the woman muttered. Her fists were clenched so tight it was obvious she was hurting herself.

"You haven't answered, Sagrav. How do you plead to the charges?" Moody almost growled.

"Guilty to contract infringement and innocent to everything else... I declare myself broke, the fine the contract dictates is much more than what I can afford," she muttered as her cheeks burned in shame at the admission.

"You were found dealing with information today, in your house. What details did you sell to Maxime?"

"First, I gave her the information about the first task. Yesterday I had a glimpse of the obstacle course in the arena. I was telling her about that when the Aurors arrived."

"Did you sell information to any other person?" Marcus asked before Moody could state his own question.

"Yes," she whispered after a long moment of deliberation. "He sent me a letter stating that he would pay me a large sum of money if I told him details of the task. We met once... I never saw his face and the voice wasn't familiar. He never gave me a name to be addressed by and I never asked."

"What details did you share with him?"

"Everything I know about the Tournament."

"Why did you attack my Auror?" Alastor asked at last in a deceptively calm tone.

"It was on instinct," she answered, though she paled further. "Two people suddenly barged into my kitchen - what was I supposed to do? Offer them tea and biscuits?"

"Were you unable to recognize the uniform?"

"I said it was on instinct, once I properly saw them I didn't resist."

"Your version clashes with my Auror's report," Moody sneered at the woman.

"Maybe your Auror is biased because I accidentally harmed her partner."

"Maybe, but it will all be cleared up when we question you under Veritaserum," Marcus informed the accused.

"Can't we skip that? I don't feel comfortable with you questioning me under the potion."

"That's quite unfortunate, Miss Sagrav. You see, the thing is that no one here trusts you," Marcus cordially told the woman.

"I told you everything I know," Jennifer snapped at the other occupants of the room. "I already admitted selling information! What else do you want me to do? To lie and say I'm guilty of-"

"Mister Marcus," Ares said as a greeting when he popped in, almost giving a heart attack to three-quarters of the room. "Here is everything on Jennifer Sagrav," he said, handing the young man a thick folder. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have training waiting for me."

With those words, the elf left the room with a pop. Moody stared at Marcus, dumbfounded, and the other Auror was not in a better state, though the woman paled even more, if that was possible. The undersecretary opened the folder and skimmed over it for a minute before handing it to the Head of the DMLE.

"Jennifer Sagrav, thirty-five years old. Sorted into Hufflepuff during Hogwarts and graduated in 1976 with above-average grades. Overall, a promising individual," Marcus mused out loud and the alluded woman tensed. "Julia Sagrav, older sister, thirty-eight years old. Sorted into Gryffindor and graduated in 1973 with average grades, but a recommendation to become a healer. Apprenticed under the Head of Saint Horan Hospital in Ireland, is currently working there as a healer and is a candidate to replace the current Head... From what I can see, her bank account is much more stable than yours, not to mention her savings surpasses yours by a wide margin. That's not the profile of a gambler," Marcus commented.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jennifer spat, clenching her teeth.

"Do you want me to name the - how can I say this - less than reputable people you owe money to? Ah, that's not all. You also happen to be a regular patron at the 'Broken Wand' and 'Cursed Cavern', among others. What can you tell us about this?"

"It's my life and I can do what I want. We're here because of the investigation regarding the Tournament, not my personal activities," the woman murmured, taking rapid breaths.

"You're right," Moody acknowledged, "Warrens!" The Auror approached the woman and forced her to take the prescribed amount of the potion.

"The accused proved to be less than cooperative in the interrogation. As the contract dictates, she was forced to take Veritaserum as a last resort. Auror Warrens administered the potion. The cork has the official certification seal P-56 and is labelled as vial number 136," Marcus sighed as he signalled Moody to begin.

"How do you plead to the charges issued against you?"

"Guilty," was the woman's vacant response.

"To how many people did you sell information?"

"Two."

"Who were they?" Marcus asked with a sigh. Veritaserum was an effective potion, but one needed to be quite specific while asking something or he would receive no answer.

"Olympe Maxime and Alex Dumont."

"Tell us about the latter."

"He's attractive and rich."

"Anything else?"

"That's all I know."

"Describe his features," Moody grunted in obvious frustration.

"I don't remember," the woman answered and Marcus frowned.

"Describe your conversations," the young man ordered.

"I don't remember."

"A confundus charm was used on her, along with memory and compulsion charms," the undersecretary muttered as he cast a few diagnosis charms. "We'll need a mind healer, I don't have a good feeling about this."

"Me neither," Alastor agreed with a grunt. "Warrens, get a team of Aurors to join Sterling and another team to retrieve the Sagravs."

"Yes sir," the man agreed and left in hurried steps.

"What is it that you remember about Alex Dumont?" asked a weary Marcus.

"A birthmark... He has a curious birthmark on his left forearm."

# First Task

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The day of the first task arrived at last, with anticipation and many whispers about what might happen that day. Sudden silence dominated the Great hall when the Court entered and took their usual place. The conversations restarted with much more vigour at the sight of the champions in the hall. Thanks to the excitement, few noticed the absence of one person during breakfast.

"Madam Bones did improve the security measures," commented Terrence while looking around.

"Well, considering the great Hogwarts gossip network has no idea about what happened, I must agree," muttered Daphne.

"So, what happened?" asked Fred, looking sheepish.

"It's not our fault you and my sister decided potions were more important," retorted Hestia.

"But we want to know," the other potion-obsessed student whined.

"Not much," Luna said, taking pity on her friend. "Professor Flitwick called Valerie to his office and she was questioned."

"Iwan and I were also called in," Viktor added.

"Maxime was captured on Thursday and is still in the DMLE," Fleur shrugged, though there was a smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

"Marcus discovered one of the judges violated her contract by selling information," Neville informed the group. "She'll spend two years in Azkaban, but that's not the important part. She sold information to Maxime and to a person they are still unable to identify. A mind healer has been working on her, but so far, there are no results in clearing her mind... If I'm not wrong, the French Minister withdrew any support for Maxime and will send another representative in a few days."

"Valerie will compete, though she has a second-degree infraction on her records," added George with a wince of sympathy.

"Along with a twenty-point deduction for the first task," said Cedric with obvious disdain. "She got off easy, if it wasn't for Fleur, she would be disqualified."

"I think she hates me even more than before, if that is possible," Fleur said in a casual tone, looking at the Ravenclaw table, specifically, at her fellow champion.

"You won't be ready until you have breakfast, so hurry up," ordered Terrence, glaring at the untouched food of his friends.

Breakfast was a tranquil affair for them, enjoying the company and the food, not showing a hint of nervousness. Harry took the opportunity to appreciate the attire his fellow champions wore, satisfied at Penelope's dexterity in clothes making. While the design was the same for all of them, the colours differed.

A tracksuit along with a white turtleneck shirt, which was so heavily enchanted that only an unforgivable curse or lethal blunt force would be able to harm them. Of course, that is without mentioning they were all wearing a special protective suit underneath, pockets that contained potions, and the emergency portkey that they wore as a necklace. Overall, Harry considered his friends and himself to be as protected as they could be.

*Not that I can say the same about the other champions*, Harry mused, ignoring with ease the slight guilt this caused. He gave Iwan the uniform, as heavily enchanted as their own, though he lacked the other protections. And Valerie, well, the girl was a special case. While he didn't like her for her attitude towards Fleur and every person she considered competition in general, she was still offered a uniform. This kind offer was rejected on multiple occasions. Well, he did his best.

"Good morning, students!" Dumbledore announced, taking the boy out of his introspection. "Today, as we all know, the first task of the Triwizard Tournament is taking place in a few hours. Our six champions will be escorted by Professors Munter and Kowalski to the designated arena. All students who wish to attend need to present their signed permission to their House Heads or their assistants. Now, time to continue-

"I apologize to all first and second years, who are not allowed to attend," Professor McGonagall added when the headmaster was about to dismiss them. "However, I have news I think you will like. Mirror Summons was kind enough to lend the school their projection mirrors, which can be used to see the event. They were installed in the Hogwarts Hall yesterday evening, so those who wish to watch, please inform Professor Holmes and Professor Aldington. Your other professors, along with their assistants, will be supervising you for today. If you want to spend the day in another part of the castle they should be informed immediately. This is a security measure that will be put into effect each day a task takes place."

"Yes, thank you, Professor McGonagall, for that information," the headmaster declared, though the words brought a pained grimace to his expression. "Now, champions, please follow your assigned professors. I'm sorry to inform you none of your respective Headmasters will be able to join you for the day, but the professors will be available in case you need assistance. Mister Bjelac has not been feeling well and Madam Maxime... Well, she has complicated matters that need to be sorted and I'm not allowed to interact with the champions," the man explained, souring with every word that he uttered. "That's all, students - go to your common rooms and your respective teachers will collect you. Have a good day!"

With that announcement, chatter filled the great hall. The champions were led away after their friends wished them good luck. They walked in silence until they reached the carriages that were stationed near the now-abandoned cabin that once belonged to Hagrid.

Harry took a few apples out of his pockets and fed the thestrals, petting one of them. He did not notice the wide eyes of the professors or the confused stares of the other champions, although he did notice the gentle hand on his shoulder and the soft eyes of the usually stern Professor Kowalski. They would be silent, was it not for an innocent yet tactless question.

"Harry, how did you make the apples disappear?" asked a curious Cedric, not noticing the silent plea the professors sent him to not broach the subject.

"I guess you can't see them," Harry muttered, looking thoughtful. "The carriages are pulled by thestrals, though not everyone can see them."

"And how is that you are able to?" asked a naive Iwan. Professor Munter groaned.

"You have not studied this far yet," Professor Kowalski announced, distracting the teenagers. "Thestrals are curious magical creatures, who aren't evil for they cause no harm but are classified as dark by the Ministry. You could even say they're pacifists for their gentle nature."

"Then why are they classified as such?" Valerie asked, her voice lacked that acerbic quality most associated with the girl.

"Because thestrals can only be seen by those who have seen death and accept it," the woman stated, putting an effective end to the subject.

"Not much is known about them," Professor Munter commented in an effort to break the tense silence. "They are able to fly long distances without tiring and they can carry fifty times their weight, or that's what the last gamekeeper left written. thestrals aren't domesticated but, somehow, our old gamekeeper managed to do that. They've been pulling the carriages for more than forty years, although they demand apples and beef jerky as a payment," the man said, looking amused. "I was told the kitchens were ransacked by them because no one knew the thestrals pull the carriages for treats. The poor school elves came crying because the 'baddy black horsies' were destroying their kitchen."

"That's something that wouldn't happen anywhere other than at Hogwarts."

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Amelia Bones observed the arena from her seat in the judges' box. To say she was pleased was an understatement. Despite the short time they had, the place was built with efficiency, resembling a professional, if a bit small stadium. Once again, she thanked her stars for having Marcus Travers at her side - without that man, she would end up murdering someone because of the stress of her position. Her undersecretary took care of most of the paperwork, which meant she wasn't enslaved by her office, and that is without mentioning his brilliant ideas.

As a matter of fact, the first task would be postponed if not for him, something that would bring even more shame to the country. Marcus had the insight to ask Harry Potter permission to use his elves and everyone knew the Potter Family had house-elves to spare, though she was not expecting to have twenty elves ready to work. Then again, there wasn't much to do in an empty house. The little ones were far more efficient than anyone gave them credit for and had the place ready days ago, though they decided to add a few details of their own, much to

everyone's consternation. They changed the seats for a much more comfortable version that somehow ended up being less expensive than she expected. One of the elves, a quite... conspicuous individual that may have a better fashion sense than her, decorated the box himself. Honestly, she had no idea how the place ended up resembling a lavish reception with the low cost it had, but at least the guests were impressed.

She glanced to the side and noticed Marcus was doing her job by socializing with the international guests that would be acting as judges and the families of the champions. Not that she could blame him - at the moment, she was more of a zombie than a Minister. The last few days were harsh, between sorting the mess of the corrupt judge to changing the details of the first task. As a matter of fact, she slept almost six hours in two days, enough to function but not to act like a civilized human being.

Amelia took another glance at the arena and smiled in satisfaction. Yes, it would all be worth it, and she admitted being excited to see how the champions would fare against the obstacles.

"Drink this," a familiar voice requested, handing her a vial of what she recognized as Pepper-up.

"Thank you, Sirius," she sighed, drinking the potion.

"At least you'll look less like an inferi this way," he said, giving her a wide smile. "Don't worry, Marcus is taking care of everything and the champions already arrived."

"He's a dependable young man," she agreed.

"Keep complimenting him and I might get jealous," her boyfriend teased.

"You're the one who compliments him the most," Amelia retorted, smiling at the man who always managed to lift her spirits. "It's time," she whispered and Sirius nodded, walking towards the large group of people.

"If I may," he announced, interrupting the cordial conversations, "it's time for the relatives of the champions to follow me to the assigned seats."

"Please take a seat, I'll be giving the speech in a few minutes," Amelia declared, composing her expression to resemble her usually stoic one.

The Minister observed the crowd before speaking, buying her time for the potion to act and for Moody to arrive. The man may be the best Auror in history, but he had no people skills whatsoever and scampered at the idea of socializing. On one side of the stadium, the students were whispering amongst each other, which was nothing new or remotely surprising. Teachers were scattered amongst them to keep a relative order. On the other side of the arena, the crowd of citizens was almost silent. Considering no less than twenty Aurors were looking at them like falcons and Moody tried to curse anything that dared to move during the last hour, she admired their determination to stay and watch the event.

Everything was going well. No Death Eaters or any other kind of troublemakers were found, which was always a positive thing. The door of the box was opened and Moody entered,

which was her cue to begin her speech.

"Good morning!" she announced, placing her wand on her neck to amplify her voice. "Today, the First Task of the Trischool Tournament will take place. I know you aren't familiar with this name, but it was decided the competition should be renamed because of the exceptional circumstances that surround this event and all the organizers agreed with the idea," she explained, conveniently forgetting to mention the organizers were her and Marcus.

"First of all, I'll introduce the judges for all the tasks. From France, we have Minister Aceline Deschamps, along with the Head of the Honourable Council of Justice, Jean-Pascal Beauchamp, and the Head of International Affairs Simonne Giraud. From the Northern Union, we have Minister Iskren Voronin, the Head of the Great Council, Mladena Kulakov, and the honourable Czarina Milica Volenskii. Finally, from magical Britain, we have the Head of the DMLE, Auror Alastor Moody, the Head of the Education Regulation Department and Chief Warlock, Madam Griselda Marchbanks. Due to different circumstances, the Department of International Magical Cooperation and the Department of Magical Games and Sports will no longer participate in the planning of the event or any other facet of it. As a replacement, we have Marcus Travers, Senior undersecretary, and me, Amelia Bones, Minister for Magic."

The introduction of the judges was met with much surprise and excitement from the public, especially when their visages were shown through the innovative projection mirrors that dominated different parts of the arena. She glanced at the judges, who showed different grades of appreciation towards the gigantic mirrors.

"The commentator for today is Mister Tiberius Ogden, who is explaining the rules to the champions at the moment," she announced after the crowd calmed a little. "Before I explain the task, I wish to thank Mirror Summons and Gringotts Bank for their support to have everything done in time. I also wish to remind you that three unique golden eggs will be auctioned in the Ministry Attendance Hall after the task. Don't forget all the money that is collected from this event will be donated to the three schools."

She moved her wand from her neck and cast a silent *adapertio*, a taxing but impressing charm that revealed the true appearance of the arena. The sight of it made many jerk in surprise and others to stare open-mouthed at the astounding field of obstacles. Amelia smirked at their reaction, she would be offended if her long hours of planning were not rewarded. Yes, she would definitely enjoy explaining the task.

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The six champions entered a surprisingly well-built place. Considering the Potter elves only began helping two weeks ago and, according to Marcus, the place was deserted, the most the group was expecting was a tent and crude wood stands. But that was impossible. What self-respecting country would receive international guests in such a crude space? The mere notion of something similar happening was ridiculous.

After a few minutes of walking through corridors, the champions arrived at a bare room where Aurors were waiting.



"We apologize for this, but each of you will be examined by an Auror and a healer for different reasons," Professor Munter explained. "We have to ensure there are no impostors and that none of the champions is under the influence of any kind of spell or potion."

To give an example, both teachers were examined with different spells and passed through what resembled a wall made out of water, though neither was wet. Following the teachers, the six students were meticulously examined by the experts. When they were cleared, they were allowed through a hidden door in the room that led them to another hallway.

"The organizers insisted on having these security measures," one of the teachers commented.

"I find them intrusive," muttered Iwan.

"Be as it may, it's a necessary hassle," Professor Kowalski answered. "High profile people will act as judges, not to mention there are other important guests. Every single person that wished to enter the arena submitted to the examination, including the judges and guests."

The conversation died there and no one was willing to begin talking. At last, they entered a spacious room that was decorated by a large sitting area, where an old man was waiting.

"Tiberius, it's good to see you after all this time!" Professor Munter greeted.

"Benedict, my old friend, age doesn't go through you!" complimented the merry man.

"Let me introduce you to Professor Isabelle Kowalski. Isabelle, this is Tiberius Ogden, a member of the Wizengamot."

"Ah, it's a pleasure to meet such a beautiful woman," Tiberius told the woman as a greeting, earning a glacial stare as an answer.

"Good morning sir," was the woman's formal answer. "These are my students, though it would be a waste of time to repeat their names when the newspapers do that every single day."

"Um, yes," the man commented, uncomfortable by the young woman's aloof demeanour.

"Why are you here?" asked a still jolly Professor Munter.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I am the commentator for this task!" the man announced, puffing his chest in pride. "Gather around. I'll be explaining the rules," he said to the champions, not waiting for them to gather and began to speak. "Due to, ehm, different circumstances, you have a general idea of what the task involves. However, I will explain it nonetheless. All the disciplines taught at school will be tested through an obstacle course. While it isn't measured by time, finishing it early will grant you extra points. There is an object you must retrieve and, while it may give you a bonus, you don't need it to finish the task. The use of a wand is allowed, though no other magical artefacts are permitted, but don't forget a wand isn't the best weapon a mage possesses. Now, you all have to take a piece of parchment from this box," the man announced, producing a box from heaven knows where. "Ladies first," he offered gallantly, and Valerie was the first one to approach the man.

"Of course," Fleur said, trying to contain her impish smile. "Viktor, if you would."

"Please, I am not a Lady," the male huffed, his eyes twinkling in amusement. "If anything, I am a queen - don't demote me," he said with exaggerated hand gestures and a sassy hair flip that made the girl giggle.

This simple exchange made even the phlegmatic Professor Kowalski smile, though Mister Ogden looked quite surprised and a tad uncomfortable by it. The man composed himself and offered the box to each person until it was empty and all the champions reviewed the contents of their parchment.

"This task will be a sort of race between two champions," Mister Ogden said once everyone had seen their parchments. "You will compete against the person that has the number that follows yours, so numbers one and two, raise your hands." Cedric and Viktor raised their hands and then high-fived, surprising the man once again. "You two will go first, number three and four, you will go second," Fleur and Iwan raised their hands and looked at each other, the girl hitting her partner's arm playfully. "That leaves five and six, who will go last."

Valerie did not look impressed and Harry returned the feeling. While the girl was an unknown element, he doubted she was able to surprise him with her magical ability.

"You see this white line, right?" the old man asked, pointing the obvious line against the dark floor. "From here to the door you entered from is silenced, but from here to that door you will be able to listen to everything. You have to decide where you wish to be. The teachers will guide you towards the changing rooms, where you can leave anything you brought with you. They will also help you to link the crystals and explain a few details. Now, it's time for me to go. A bell will chime when it's time for a group to enter the arena. Good luck!"

The man was kind enough not to comment Valerie was the only one to carry a duffel bag or her attire, which was different from the other champions. Harry took a seat in the closest chair, an example the others in the room followed.

"You're too calm, Harry," Professor Munter commented while approaching a table in the corner of the room, where a plain wooden chest lay.

"The worst that will happen is not being able to finish the task," Harry shrugged.

"That and the national humiliation," Cedric added with a groan.

"Considering the whole school already talks about me, I don't think much will change," was Harry's lackadaisical answer.

"I doubt anything they can think of rivals what Professor Flitwick considers training," muttered a grimacing Viktor.

"You went through Filius' training?" asked a surprised teacher, receiving five dejected nods.

"I made the mistake of joining them out of curiosity," Iwan sighed, emulating the personification of misery. "I regret every second."

"If you survived that, then you'll complete this," said Professor Kowalski with a chuckle. "After all, Professor Flitwick wasn't an international duelling champion for nothing, especially when you consider he kept the title for more than thirty years. That man has more combat experience than most could ever hope to learn."

"That's true," Harry agreed, "but that doesn't mean that we have to enjoy the pain his training brings."

"We will explain this quick," said Professor Munter, interrupting the conversation. "I know you all heard of the company Mirror Summons. They launched this new product," the man explained, opening the box and showing its contents. "These crystals will follow you around from the moment we activate them to the moment the scores are given."

"They will project your image to their projection mirrors," the woman continued, "so that all the public is able to see what's happening from their places. Mister Diggory, Mister Krum, come here," she ordered, taking out a crystal with each hand. "I want each of you to cast a simple Wingardium Leviosa and hold the spell for a whole minute so it identifies your magical signature."

The students looked at each other but did not comment on the strange request, mainly because Harry gave them a detailed and headache-inducing explanation on how the things worked. Both cast the spell at the same time. When the minute was almost over, the crystals turned iridescent and floated near them.

"Excellent, now you are ready," the woman congratulated.

"You will all do this when your turn arrives," Professor Munter told his students.

Before anyone could retort, a bell chimed. Cedric blanched at the sound, but Viktor helped the prefect to remain steady. Professor Munter placed a comforting hand on their shoulders and guided them towards the door that led to the arena.

Harry only watched as Valerie paced in the area that was not silenced and tensed up with every sound she heard. In his opinion, that strategy was not the smartest or the most logical. The incertitude would only put her on edge, which would result in the girl being stressed before even competing, a thing that would not allow her mind to remain clear. A poor tactic indeed, but she was grown enough to make her own decision and live with the consequences. Thus, he decided to ignore her and focused instead on a book he produced from his pocket. Then proceeded to ignore the people in the room in favour of the interesting tome.

"Mister Potter, prepare yourself," Professor Kowalski told him, breaking his book-induced trance.

The only reaction he showed was a slow blink when he noticed the only champions left were him and Valerie. Casting a longing glance at his book, he closed it and put it in his pocket once again. He ignored the amused smile the teacher was giving him and did not question the absence of her co-worker, though he took pity on the nervous girl, who was sitting close to the door and changed clothes while he was reading.

"Being there isn't doing you any favours," he said, surprising her.

"At least I have an idea of what will happen," she snapped, scowling at him.

"I'm sure you do, but we can also thank Madam Maxime for that, don't we?" Harry said with faux gentleness, annoyed at her uncouth response. That is what he got for trying to help; it was good to be reminded that kindness was not always the best policy. Harry decided to ignore his fellow champion from there on.

"Here are the crystals, you know what to do," he professor told them.

Without any hesitation, Harry cast a silent Wingardium Leviosa on it. He was so lost in his own thoughts he didn't notice his crystal changed colours much sooner than those of the other champions... That didn't mean the others didn't. When the bell chimed a few minutes later, he followed the teacher at a steady pace while ignoring the glares he was receiving from Valerie. They arrived at the end of a hallway, where they ascended the stairs. Blinding sunlight hit the group when they entered the arena, along with thunderous applause that made Harry's ears ring.

"The commentator will be explaining what you have to do," Professor Kowalski told her students. "I'm sure both of you are able to complete this, so there is no need for me to worry. Even so, good luck," the woman said and went back towards the stairs, leaving the champions alone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, here we have the last champions!" Mister Ogden announced with obvious excitement. "Allow me to introduce you to the French delegation's champion, Miss Valerie Aguillon! And the Court's champion, Harry Potter, the boy-who-lived! Now, I know you heard this before, but we need to explain the rules. Champions, you have to overcome different obstacles to retrieve the golden sphere from the clutches of a dangerous creature. It contains information about the next task, so it will give you an advantage over your competition! I will remind the crowd that the silencing wards will be reactivated for the champions' benefit. Now, without further ado, the champions can begin when the horn sounds!"

Instead of paying attention to the man's speech, Harry analysed his surroundings in an effort to find any clues. However, his efforts were not rewarded because their sight of the arena was blocked thanks to a low hill. The deafening sound of a horn brought him out of his reverie and the task began. For a second, he considered walking at a leisurely pace in order to annoy the people, but then he remembered a good book was waiting for him and discarded the idea with a despondent sigh. The prospect of actually putting effort was aggravating, though he ran uphill without complaints... or at least not loud ones.

Harry was expecting different things for the task, but a chasm that separated the arena as the first hurdle was not one of them. Curiosity won over him and Harry decided to take a look at what it contained and regretted that decision immediately, shuddering at the sight. Death Worms. The abyss was filled with bloody death worms, which meant falling was not an option. The mere idea of being surrounded by those things made him shiver. What could he do then? Transfiguration was a valid option, though he would need to destroy parts of the arena to have enough rocks and Marcus would complain too much so the idea was discarded.

He could charm a rock to transport him... or show a particular trick that would make Professor Flitwick proud. So the latter it was.

Augmentation magic was indeed an interesting, if a tad brutal discipline. Enhancing the body with magic made possible great feats that most believed to be unachievable. Flitwick began teaching him this particular art a few months ago and, while it was not his favourite because of its hefty price on the body, he could see its advantages.

Without wasting more time, Harry walked back a few meters and then ran to the chasm, jumping at the last moment. The second his feet left the earth, he cast a cushioning charm where he would land and slowed his descent with well-timed depulsos. This only lasted a few seconds and the transition was so swift that, in the eyes of the public, he managed to fly. The crowd was frantic with excitement and the judges were whispering amongst each other, trying to identify the technique the youngest champion used. Not that he noticed the uproar he just caused.

A basic obstacle course was the next part of the task, one that he was curious to try. However, Harry stopped when he noticed something drawn on the floor and crouched to analyse it. Much to his surprise, he noticed runes were etched into the stone. *Younger Futhark runic alphabet, a basic array. Nauðr, which contains and constrains. Sól and Maðr that represent magic and continuity together. Ísa, the only one that is able to block those two*, he thought, analysing the drawings with an amused smirk. The runes were meant to prevent magic being used by containing it in the body, a quite brilliant tactic of which he began thinking uses for in the future, though he hoped no one panicked when their spells didn't work.

Now, what to do? He could always destroy them, but that could destabilize the whole array by damaging the runes that may be hidden, so it was better left untouched because Harry was not willing to search for more runes and he didn't fancy the idea of physical harm. Shrugging, he continued on his way while placing his wand in its holster, paying more attention to his surroundings.

Before approaching the beginning of the obstacle course, which resembled a large version of monkey bars, much to his amusement, he decided to examine the floor since it rippled in a curious way. *Does Madam Bones have a fixation for deep places?* Harry thought when he noticed the whole obstacle course was built over a profound pool that contained an unidentified liquid instead of the normal stone ground that he was standing on.

He was tempted to get closer to it, but the stench made him rethink that decision. How could he not recognize it when it was such a basic potion, at least by Aunt Eleadora's standards? Dysodis pagos, also called foul ice, a gelatine-like substance that was characterized by its nauseating odour. Not to mention its main property was instantly hardening around whatever was stupid enough to enter it. Falling in was definitely not an option because, while it would not be painful, the putrid smell would take days to wash off and there was no other route to go over the thing. Satisfied with his analysis, Harry began the obstacle course.

The monkey bars could not even be considered a hurdle and it was passed in a short time, Harry mentally thanked Flitwick for forcing him to exercise. Then there were swing-like objects that glided over the surface of the pool. They were not hard to cross, though he almost slipped once and his life flashed through his eyes. After that, the next obstacle put a

halt to his steps. Beams that were too thin to be walked over but thick enough to hang onto, the problem being how close the things were to the surface of the nauseating gelatine. Harry crossed the obstacle as fast as he could, breathing through his mouth and pretending his stomach was not trying to rebel. Though he wondered who was the poor soul forced to brew so much of it, sending his condolences to the person's olfactory ability.

The next thing that obstructed his path was a wide and quite steep slide. Perhaps Madam Bones and Marcus found inspiration in a Muggle park, though they twisted the playground in quite a bizarre way.

Without wasting more time on his thoughts, Harry ran up and promptly slid down. With a frown, he noticed the surface of the thing offered almost no friction, which complicated the task. What to do if he couldn't project his magic? Harry almost smirked at the preposterous notion. He guessed no one expected a single champion to be apt at wandless magic, though the way he used magic could hardly count as such. Feeling his core thrumming, Harry centred his magic on his hands, in specific on the fingers. *Fleur must have enjoyed this so much*, he thought, amused at the idea of Fleur scratching her way up.

Once Harry was ready, he climbed the slide. His fingertips broke the surface of the slide as if it was made of butter, yet he scowled the whole way up. Harry swore to himself that, if his nails were somehow ruined, Marcus would have hell to pay. His annoyance increased when potent jets of water began attacking him from all sides. Harry thanked his foresight by asking for waterproof clothes, though nothing from his chin up was saved. Once he finished the thing, he tried to get rid of the excess of water with his hand and hoped his sunscreen was not washed off. Heaven help Marcus if he got sunburnt. Taking a deep breath, he concentrated on the next obstacle. His eye began twitching at the sight of it and for a good reason.

In the judges' box, Marcus felt a gelid shiver slithering along his spine.

Of course, they couldn't bring a sphinx or acromantula. No, they had to bring an ogre and adapt a part of the arena to look like its home. Harry clenched his jaw in disgust at the horrid creature and was about to blast its head off when he heard a high-pitched scream... How curious, he forgot about his competition.

He looked back and noticed Valerie was on the monkey bars, her legs stuck on the gelatine. Now, this was entertaining. What should he do? Allowing her to remain there was almost as tempting as going back and pushing her off himself, though he was sure Madam Bones had people ready to take her out when the gelatine got too cold or if she gave up, which was a shame in his opinion. The world could do without Valerie. As tempting as those thoughts were, Harry had an image to protect. With a heavy sigh, he went down the slide and landed in an almost lazy crouch. He crossed all the obstacles until he arrived at the monkey bars, where the girl was clinging to for dear life.

"Give me your hand," he ordered, having no patience to use his usual polite facade.

"Why should I?!" she shrieked, annoying Harry further with her impertinence and the unnecessary decibels of volume.

"If you want to remain here, be my guest."

"Wait!" Valerie yelled before he could turn to leave. "Help me," she muttered, her cheeks flaming a fiery red.

If Harry was a weaker person, he would make her beg for the much-needed help. Well, being honest, he would do it regardless. However, today he was not in the mood of playing games and his limited patience was almost depleted. Wasting no time, he grabbed her arm with unnecessary force and pulled her up. He brought the girl's body closer to him in order to yank her completely out of the gelatine, ignoring her protests. He had to clench his teeth at the effort he was putting into lifting the girl and helping her to sit on top of the bars.

"You're heavy," he commented and left before she could respond.

While Harry crossed the obstacles once again, he pondered what just happened. *Is Valerie really heavy?* This was the unconventional question that plagued his mind, she didn't look that heavy. Yet, if she was not heavy, by definition he was weak. This conclusion made Harry frown and he tried to dismiss it as inconsequential, but his brain did not agree with him and focused on the matter.

He trained his body for years, though his goal was endurance rather than strength. Harry tried to think of scenarios where brute force without magic would be able to protect his Court and, much to his dismay, more situations than he was comfortable with bombarded his mind... Therefore, his training would be upped to a much harsher one. Although, he guessed few of his friends would appreciate the decision.

Once again, his hair got soaked while climbing the slide, though Harry noticed something he had somehow missed the last time. There were runic arrays etched into the floor at the top of the obstacle, which meant he could use his wand again, much to the oblivious ogre's good luck. The creatures were extremely territorial, and could be dangerous if someone invaded what they considered their home. Their weakness was their one-track mind. He dried his hair with a silent spell and transfigured the pebbles that surrounded the creature into shiny objects. As a precaution, he blasted a piece of rock and transfigured it into a donkey, charming it to move around. The ogre was too distracted collecting pebbles to notice the transfigured animal, but Harry believed prevention was the best course of action.

Afterwards, Harry thought of different ways of crossing the swamp without dirtying himself and saving his elves the task of cleaning his boots. He would never abuse his loyal workers in such a way. What kind of horrid human being made elves clean boots covered in mud and whatever else was mixed with it? No, that was not an option. He could use augmentation magic again, but he would rather not use it for prolonged periods of time. As he looked to the side, an idea came to his mind.

A simple obhaeresco charm to his shoes, along with a silent stabilis, and Harry walked up the wall as if gravity was a lame joke. He used the wall to cross the swamp without the ogre noticing his presence. Well, he could also thank the singing donkey that was distracting the growling ogre. Curious, Harry only charmed the thing to speak.

The obstacle was not as hard as expected and he relaxed slightly. As Harry walked, he was suddenly stopped when an earthquake began shaking the arena and a mountain formed before him. For a few moments, he considered climbing it, until he noticed all the runes that were

etched on the surface. In front of him, a door-like stone was formed, but instead of being plain rock, it was carved with strange figures. Out of curiosity, Harry decided to touch it after casting a few diagnosis charms on it. With careful movements, he traced the outlines of a figure. It moved.

Intrigued by the puzzle and patience restored, Harry began moving the pieces to find the pattern. After a few minutes, he found the solution and took a few seconds to admire it. In the centre of the door, the image of a mermaid was etched, but that was not the curious part. The breath-taking mermaid was sitting on a rock and under her was another one, though it was showing its true face under the surface of the water. What captured his attention the most was the bronze key that materialized from the door. Unable to contain his curiosity, he grabbed it and the door was opened.

The dark space was lit by dozens of torches that did the bare minimum to illuminate the place. The dim room resembled a disorganized - more like vandalized - library, with different messages etched on the walls and books. He took another step to analyse the place and a message formed in front of him.

"Copper and tin are what you need, but pay no heed. Brass makes the key, though water and air may also be. While iron and carbon make the door, or at least that is what we were told. Look around and find the lies, close your eyes, and the truth may rise."

Harry read the puzzle and his eyes acquired a strange glint as his heart began to pound on his chest, making his heartbeat the background music... How much he missed this! The challenge, actually making his brain work! Ah, he thanked his good sense for never leaving his Muggle Studies aside, which made the riddle far too easy. However, what made his blood boil in anticipation was not the enigma, but the sensation of forgotten knowledge tickling his mind. What his brain forgot, he didn't know but, although the sensation was not welcomed, the reminder of the many hurdles that awaited despite his talent and intellect ignited that competitive fire that was almost extinguished.

He smirked at the message and walked towards the end of the room without even bothering to look around. The bronze key remained in his hand.

With almost a lazy gesture, Harry placed the key on the steel lectern that had a hollow in the middle, where the bronze key fitted perfectly. *Seriously, the answer is in the riddle*, he thought to himself as the wall opened, revealing another dark room... He took a few careful steps, having his wand ready, when a wall of fire erupted from the ground, stopping him in his tracks, but not before he cast a shielding charm. The fire glowed a bright blue and its heat could almost be felt. It was no Fiendfyre, but neither was it a normal flame.

A table rose from the ground and Harry approached it after casting some diagnosis charms. Across it were a multitude of vials in no apparent order, but Harry ignored the potions and cast another diagnosis charm on the fire. Yes, it was the stygius flamma, also known as the infernal flame. Not quite a curse, but close enough. The only potion that could protect you against it was the Umor Niflheim, a potion that could be identified by its pearly white appearance and for being almost gelid to the touch. With a glance, Harry identified the only potion that qualified as what he was looking for and was immediately disappointed. The vial



didn't have the seal of guarantee, which meant it was not brewed by a professional and it was not safe for consumption.

Harry let go of the bottle with a heavy sigh, the crystal shattered on the ground and its contents were spilt, further proof it was not apt for consumption. After all, what kind of amateur used breakable vials? Not pondering it any further, he did the next best thing. Taking a deep breath, he pointed his wand to the fire and sizzling noises filled the room along with warm vapour. Water, being the superior element against fire, encased the borders from where it was originating, succeeding in neutralizing the threat.

He walked through the now empty space but decided to leave the charm on until he was a safe distance away from it. Blinking a few times to adapt his eyes to the brightness of the midday sun, Harry dropped the aguamenti and the fire resurfaced with vengeance. With a shrug, he kept walking.

Then Harry stopped in his tracks and his eye twitched when he noticed the titanic wall blocking his path. No longer was he in the mood to climb, despite his gloves protecting his precious fingers. He considered he abused them enough for the day by using them as shovels. While he could formulate another plan, his patience was almost depleted and he took the logical decision. Pointing his wand at the wall, he cast a protective shield around him and blasted it with an overpowered reducto.

Harry walked through the hole he created in the wall, eyeing it with raised eyebrows... Curiosity began to gnaw his mind and he desperately wanted to experiment with the potency of different spells. Now that the idea crossed his mind, it was a solid task in his to-do list. The golden sphere lay on a pedestal and he was about to take it when a familiar person hugged him. While he did not tense, his eyes narrowed at the contact.

However, Harry returned the hug with the usual tenderness he treated his sister with, though his mind was working overdrive to understand the situation. He knew Elizabeth was not here. Whatever this was, they could not emulate his sister's warm magic or the exact pressure she used while hugging. He concentrated on his mental shields and noticed a slight disturbance, but that information was not enough to eject the subtle intrusion. Practising occlumency was also added to his to-do list.

This creature was not his Elizabeth; nevertheless, as long as it assumed her shape, he was unable to harm it. Raising his hand, he caressed her cheek with all the gentleness he could muster; the same way he touched her. Harry may have learnt a plethora of spells and magic theory, yet his knowledge was a measly drop compared to the ocean of information that existed. He was the first one to admit his magical knowledge was basic. However, this did not mean his use of magic was restricted. He and his magic were one - they aided each other and he needed no spell for her to act as he wished.

With this in mind, he willed the creature to reveal itself. The strange thing's eyes glazed over as its body rippled. Elizabeth was replaced by a hideous thing Harry faintly remembers a book describing.

Harry Potter was angry at the thing for daring to impersonate his sister. Without consideration of his surroundings or public, he cursed the thing. It wailed as it disintegrated and only

cinders remained, which were carried away by the gentle breeze. This brutal show of raw power lasted brief seconds, yet it was enough to shock the crowd into silence. He grabbed the sphere and sauntered towards the door that was marked as an exit.

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The public remained silent for a few moments before erupting into deafening cheers, forgetting about the last champion.

The tumultuous excitement that possessed the crowd was not shared by everyone.

The judges' box was submerged in stunned silence. Should they join the ovation and forget the youngest champion managed to eliminate a non-being? Should they send the Aurors to examine his wand to see if he used dark magic?

In the box of the champions' families, Sirius Black was in a similar state of confusion. *What did Harry do?* This was the question that invaded the man's mind, but for different reasons than expected. He was a Black, which meant he knew dark magic through and through... However, whatever his godson used was different. Sirius knew Harry didn't believe in the exclusive use of light magic and had no problems in delving into the dark arts. Yet, Sirius wasn't worried because dark magic was hardly enough to fulfil Harry's inquisitive nature. The boy saw magic as something neutral, but that didn't mean everyone agreed with his ideology.

Unlike what many would expect, Sirius began planning ways to protect his child in case the feat of magic he showed condemned him in the eyes of the public.

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The moment Harry Potter stepped out of the arena, he was besieged by a mob of frenzied and somewhat hysterical healers that began examining him without considering his annoyance. However, there were a few who looked tense and unwilling to approach him more than necessary - smart people, those ones. The healers might have excellent luck or maybe Lady Fortune was in a good mood because his friends took him away before anyone was injured, despite the medics' complaints, which were quieted by a glare from Professor Kowalski.

"Glad to see you in one piece," Viktor tried to joke, though the worry lines still marred his face.

"What you did there, no one else could even come near that level of destruction," Cedric said, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder and guiding him towards the couches.

"It was nothing impressive," Harry answered in a dismissive tone, taking deep breaths in order to regain control of his fluctuating temper.

"Well, maybe it is because you were the one experiencing it instead of seeing it from the perspective of a normal mage," Fleur said, pouring a cup of tea and offering it to him.

Harry raised an eyebrow at the girl's words but accepting the tea nonetheless. "Should I feel insulted?"

"Not at all," she denied, taking a seat near him. "It is just... The way you control magic is... unbelievable," she tried to explain, stumbling with the words and getting frustrated at her lacking vocabulary.

"Fleur is right," Cedric muttered, saving the girl more frustration. "The wall wasn't meant to be destroyed, but you did it either way... Well, Viktor also managed."

"Barely," the boy in question added. "After three bombardas and an excscindo, a spell that my mother created," he clarified, glaring at the ground.

"I told you it doesn't matter. I'm fine already," the Hufflepuff champion said with an overly cheery tone.

"What happened to you?" Harry asked, frowning when he noticed Cedric was favouring his right arm while the left one was resting over his lap.

"Not much, just a little scratch-"

Viktor tsked. "Sprained ankle and dislocated shoulder. I blasted the wall and made Cedric fall from the top of it."

"But he was the one who interrupted my fall and doesn't want to believe me when I say the harpies scratched me," Cedric retorted with equal irritation.

Harry sighed and looked at the ceiling. "We will talk about this later."

His friends went quiet when they noticed his stormy expression. Fleur bit her lip and exchanged worried glances with the others.

"Well, aside from that, I must say that I am offended," Fleur announced, surprising her friends with her sudden outburst. "Valerie got stuck and you helped her," she accused Harry, poking his side.

"Were you expecting me to leave her there?" asked Harry, grinning at her.

"Actually, I was expecting you to push her," was Fleur's innocent answer. "I could almost feel your desire to do so."

"Ah, I won't deny it, Miss Delacour," Harry agreed, wearing a charming smirk. "However, I am a gentleman at heart."

"Liar," she grumbled a tad too loud. "You have no consideration for any lady while duelling."

"Therein is how I stress this trait," Harry explained as he felt his anger vanishing thanks to the distracting conversation. "A real gentleman will never treat a person as inferior. Respect and politeness are the bases to how a decent human lives," he explained, smirking at his scowling friend.

"But you helped Valerie because you have a reputation to maintain," Viktor commented, winking at the still scowling Fleur.

"Indeed," the accused acquiesced with a heavy sigh.

Fleur huffed and proceeded to ignore her friends while grumbling about annoying teenagers that were too intelligent for their own good and annoying brats that kept creaming her during duels. Her not so silent complaints lifted the mood of her friends, who were amused at her antics. Their interaction was interrupted when a limping Iwan collapsed on a nearby couch, looking ready for a long nap.

"What happened to you?" Harry asked the exhausted male.

"Got burnt by harpies and almost kissed by an ogre," was the Bulgarian's sullen response. "Though Fleur protected my maidenhood, the healers took care of the burns and only the trauma remains," he added in a jolly tone and the group wondered if he suffered a concussion as well.

"What harpies?" Harry decided to ask instead of dwelling on Iwan's mental stability... or lack of thereof.

"Of course, you didn't see them!" Cedric exclaimed while smacking his forehead. "They were at the top of the wall. Now I thank Professor Flitwick for his dodging exercises; the things teamed up against me and tried to see how flammable I was... I'll apologize to him for all the bad thoughts that invaded my mind while he forced us to learn the aguamenti charm. Thanks to it I'm not a roasted champion."

"I got annoyed by the idea of having to climb the wall and tried to blast it instead," Viktor explained, much to the surprise of the newcomer.

"But it regenerates," Iwan said.

"I noticed," Viktor deadpanned. "It took quite a lot of power to create a space wide enough to pass."

"How did you deal with the Roubreang?" asked Fleur to no one in particular.

"Well, I really didn't-"

Whatever Cedric was trying to explain was forgotten when a fuming Valerie stormed into the room, a flock of healers behind her. The first thing the girl did was glare at Harry with so much anger any other person would wilt under her gaze. Harry, on the other hand, only raised an eyebrow at her and ignored her. Before the animosity between the champions could escalate, two teachers approached the group.

"Congratulations!" Professor Munter exclaimed, clapping Iwan on the back. "Although you could have finished the task without being so amorous with the ogre," the man said, making his usually stoic student blush a bright red.

"Anyway, now you're all here, you'll have to wait until the judges deliberate and have your scores ready," Professor Kowalski explained, saving her mortified student further

humiliation. Iwan noticed the woman's efforts and sent her the most grateful look he could muster.

"While we wait, we want you to explain how you crossed each obstacle," Munter announced, taking a seat on the remaining couch.

"Then, we want a written analysis of how you could have done better. Benedict, Flitwick, and I will be available in case you have any questions. You have a week to present it," Kowalski said, sitting on the armrest of the same couch. "Mister Diggory, you may begin."

"Well, the first obstacle wasn't hard," the boy in question answered, looking thoughtful. "Though it would have been if I was alone. Viktor and I decided to transfigure stones into a simple bridge. We both blasted the rocks and Viktor held them in place while I transformed them."

"Oh yes, that was an excellent idea, not to mention the advanced wand work," Benedict congratulated his students.

"Ehm, thanks... We crossed the obstacles without much trouble, though I'll never complain while training again. What gave us problems was the slide."

"Yes, we tried many things but were unable to cross it. Then I saw the runes at the base of the slide and we deciphered them," Viktor added.

"Yeah, I stared while he did the entire job. Runes make my head ache," Cedric admitted a bit sheepishly. "Viktor was the one to discover the small compartment where the ropes and anchors were. We managed to put those together though it took time to make the rope go around the pole."

"So that is why a pole was at the top of the slide," Fleur said, her eyes lighting in understanding.

"Yup, then we had the ogre. We panicked until Viktor noticed the runes on the floor signalling that we could use our wands again."

"And Cedric transfigured a rock into a dog and animated it. The ogre was too focused on it to notice us," Viktor retorted. "The mountain was perhaps the hardest part. We wasted so much time on trying to blast the door open before we noticed it was a puzzle... Then we wasted even more time solving it. Also, we would have stayed trapped if Cedric hadn't thrown the bronze key at the door."

"A surprising way of finishing that part," the professor agreed.

"Then we had to cross the fire barrier, but we noticed that there was only one vial that contained enough liquid for one person," Viktor explained as if he wasn't interrupted.

"I used the aguamenti charm to surround us while Viktor created a shield... Then, like the idiot I am, I decided that it was better to climb over the wall instead of following him," Cedric muttered with a grimace. "I charmed rocks to stick to the wall and was welcomed by

harpies. One pushed me over and Viktor managed to cast a levicorpus before I broke something."

"I still say that my spells were the ones to destabilize you," the Bulgarian student muttered but continued explaining. "Then the Roubreangs approached us... I knew it was not real because my mother is not here, but I followed it for a few moments, until I glimpsed the golden sphere and scared off the creature."

"Neither of you should worry about being affected," Kowalski began explaining, "Roubreangs have a particular type of magic that allows them to penetrate even the most experienced occlumens' mind. They aren't powerful, but there's no defence against their capabilities."

"I must add this," the other teacher muttered, his visage being marred by an accentuated frown. "Both of you had excellent teamwork, though that's not what we were expecting. I don't know how the judges will react, but I want to say you did an excellent job," the man said, smiling at his students.

"Miss Delacour, your turn."

"I transfigured a rock into a broom, and then charmed it to fly," Fleur said, containing her pride at the amazing feat. "The obstacle course was easy for me."

"Being that strong is not natural," Viktor muttered under his breath, low enough for no one to hear him.

"Ah, about that," Professor Kowalski interrupted, "I was wondering how you managed to get up the slide."

"Being part Veela has a few advantages," was Fleur's answer. Valerie scoffed at this, but the French girl ignored her classmate. "I placed an illusion around the ogre... Sorry for that Iwan," she apologized, looking abashed.

"No worries, you only have to pay for my therapy," the boy said with a shrug. "Although you managed to save me from it and helped me go up the slide, so I think we can forget about it."

"I will buy you something," the girl decided, dismissing Iwan's words. "Where was I? ...Ah, I climbed over the mountain and crossed the fire obstacle and-"

"How did you manage to do that? It was an impressive display," the female teacher complimented.

"Veela are immune to fire, so I trained in the ability," she explained with a shrug. "I climbed up the wall, cursed some harpies, burned a few others... The Roubreang brought me problems, though. I am not sure I would have broken the illusion if Iwan hadn't squealed for help."

"I do not squeal," Iwan answered, the throbbing vein on his forehead being quite visible.

"Whatever, the thing is that I went back to help him and charmed the ogre to sleep. Then I finished the task."

"Well, while your tactics were unexpected, they were effective," Professor Munter commented. "Mister Bobkov, your turn."

"Nothing impressive in comparison," the boy sighed. "Charmed a flat rock to levitate and crossed the chasm, got stuck on the obstacle course, almost fell into that foul stuff," the boy mentioned in an almost lackadaisical way. "I used the holes Fleur left on the slide to climb up, broke a finger, an ogre almost took advantage of me, solved the puzzle, got trapped, solved another puzzle, got burnt, broke another finger, got burnt again... Then I almost followed a creature to its cave, until I remembered my sister would rather be bald than hold my hand and finished the task."

"That was quite a specific and vague explanation at the same time," Cedric muttered, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"You did well, Mister Bobkov," one of the professors congratulated. "You have the third-best time of the champions. Mister Potter, your turn."

"I jumped over the chasm-"

"Oh, yes! That was an amazing thing to see," Professor Munter gushed, earning a 'subtle' glare from his colleague.

"Please, continue," Kowalski ordered and willed the other teacher to remain silent with a simple look.

"The obstacle course wasn't hard, though I could have done without my olfactory receptors being so horribly attacked," Harry said, only his slight scowl showing how much he disliked the task. "I confess the stench got on my nerves and I didn't stop to think how the judges wanted the tasks to be solved, so I did it in the way that would take the least amount of time."

"Are you also part Veela?" Valerie asked, using her usual acerbic tone. "You left holes in the slide."

"Ah, I'm afraid I don't share Fleur's heritage," was Harry's gallant response. "I didn't use any kind of special power, I simply used augmentation magic on myself."

"Brilliant!" Munter exclaimed, looking quite excited. "While magic was contained inside the body thanks to Nina's array, you used the magic within your body. To think that you did that without a wand-"

The man's outburst was cut short by an ominous smile from the woman sitting beside him. If betrayal took human shape, it would emulate the professor's expression at the moment. Professor Kowalski, on the other hand, looked as calm as always.

"Please, continue," the woman ordered and Harry complied without comment, knowing better than to try to understand the complicated female mind.

"I was about to confront the ogre when I heard Valerie and decided to help her," Harry explained, not even looking at the girl. "Once she was safe, I went back and transfigured a few stones to resemble precious materials, then transfigured a rock into a donkey and charmed it to distract the ogre. Copper and tin are the main components for bronze, so it was easy to deduce the puzzle solution."

"How did you know this? Only alchemists tend to have knowledge about metal mixtures," Professor Muntter asked, eyebrows raised high.

"I continued studying a few Muggle subjects that caught my fancy. Muggles have this fascinating subject named chemistry... Thinking about it, alchemy and chemistry are closely related," Harry answered, looking lost in his thoughts. "Ah, anyway, the next obstacle was simple. Every kind of fire is extinguished if the aguamenti is powerful enough."

"Sorry to interrupt, but how did you know it would work?" the woman asked. "I saw you decipher the puzzle and find the potion, so why did you use the charm instead?"

"I have an aunt - she's a Potions Mistress," he began explaining, "She taught me to never trust a potion unless it carries the certified seal, you brew it yourself, or it was brewed by someone you trust with your life. Perhaps Minister Bones trusted her brewer, but I was taught potions are a delicate matter and that lesson won't be forgotten. Besides, aguamenti has the elemental superiority over fire; only Fiendfyre would be a threat and I doubt the organizers would use that curse."

"Good answer, Mister Potter. That lesson should be taught to all students, please continue."

"I could have climbed the wall but I decided to blast it instead. Beforehand, I cast a praesidium summa, instead of a simple protego, to avoid any kind of damage. The confrontation with the Roubreang wasn't hard. I knew the person it was trying to impersonate wasn't here and, while the similitude was uncanny, it was unable to emulate a few crucial traits. For some reason, it dropped the disguise."

Harry's explanation left the teachers speechless for multiple reasons. Neither could believe such a young student was able to cast that complicated shield, but what bothered the professors the most was the curse he used and didn't mention.

"May I know what spell you used to destroy the Roubreang?" Professor Kowalski asked with caution.

"Of course, it was a simple obfensus jinx."

"An obfensus jinx isn't strong enough," one of the teachers retorted.

"Here," the boy said, giving his wand without even being asked. The kind of act only an innocent would be willing to do... an innocent, or a brilliant mastermind.

Harry watched with a bit of apathy as Kowalski cast a Proigoumeno Xorki on his wand, the spells he used throughout the day appearing on a list. With a sigh, his wand was returned and Kowalski looked pleased for some reason.



"Let's move on. Miss Aguilon, your turn."

"I charmed two rocks to cross the chasm," the girl began, glaring at the floor. "I slipped during the first part of the obstacle course and was unable to climb back until Potter helped me," she spat the words as if Harry offended her in some way. "The obstacle course was hard for me, though I managed to climb the slide," she did not mention it was because of the holes Harry left, though her burning cheeks revealed she was not proud of her performance. "The ogre was too busy growling at a donkey so I had no problems there. The puzzle was doable... There was still a small hole in the wall so I went through it," she muttered, her face contorted as if the words caused her physical pain. "The Roubreang wasn't hard to defeat... My mémé never wears the same outfit twice so the illusion didn't affect me."

"Excellent, now we will deactivate your crystals and wait until the judges have a verdict."

Harry only raised an eyebrow at the woman and contained a smirk that threatened to surface. Isabelle Kowalski was not a simple teacher, of that he was sure. There was a reason why she was in Hogwarts and he doubted it was because of her profession.

He knew the reason the crystals were being deactivated after the champions' explanations was so the judges had the full picture. He thanked his magic once again because, as useful as his wand was, it would never be able to surpass the innate power Mother Magic blessed him with. Thanks to that, the Roubreang disintegrated. He only wished the creature to suffer for its impertinence and it was done, no need to use his wand, though he still cast the jinx. Harry Potter was many things, but reckless was not one of them. Overly cautious and prudent were words that defined him.

"Harry, we are being called," Fleur whispered to him, breaking his focus.

"Where to?" he questioned once he noticed the room was empty.

"There is a room across the hall where we can see the judges' scores through a projection mirror and, in return, they will be able to see our reaction."

"Lead the way."

The duo walked in silence until they reached a plain room, which was definitely not decorated by the Potter elves. Harry eyed the couches in distaste and decided he would rather stand up - he was not the only one.

"Okay then, in that mirror you will be able to see the judges," Professor Munter began explaining. "This crystal will move from person to person to capture your reactions."

Harry sighed at the superfluous paraphernalia regarding the event. Did they think that everyone had their time? Considering how much free time commoners seemed to have, it was a possible and likely answer. Yet, every second of his time was precious and the only reason he remained in the room was because Madam Bones earned his respect... That, and he did not fancy hearing Marcus whining the whole evening because he left early.

Therefore, rather than paying attention to the banal speech the commentator was giving, Harry was making plans for the Court during Yule Holidays. Many important events would be taking place.

Harry, contrary to popular opinion, was a simple individual. He made logical choices that would bring more benefits or less trouble in the future. With this reasoning, he helped his friends to be free from their families and it was his duty to do it once more. A simple overdose of the draught of the living death, an accidental fall, or even a Death Eater attack and Iker Krum would no longer be a problem. The problem lay on his friends, in whether or not they were ready to accept not everyone could be saved and few deserved a second chance. Were they ready to go to the great lengths the previous Guild went to? The only way to know was by acting, telling the new members how far they went and how much further they were willing to go.

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The six champions were led back to the school before any of the students, thus they were received by the eerie silence of Hogwarts' halls. Before the professors could give them further instructions, Mrs Norris arrived, followed by a smiling Mister Filch. The cat approached Harry, who lowered himself and began petting the purring cat.

"Good evening, Mister Filch," the youngest champion greeted the man once he was close enough and his companions followed his example.

"Yes, good evening children," the usually sour man greeted in an amicable way. "Lunch is still being served in the Great Hall, but Professor McGonagall told me you can eat in your rooms."

"I think we will be eating in our rooms. Thanks for telling us, Mister Filch," Fleur told the caretaker, giving him a small smile.

"I'm just doing my job," the man responded. "Mrs Norris, let's go! We have the whole evening to ourselves," he said and started walking away with the cat following close behind.

"I have never seen Argus acting so... polite?" Professor Munter muttered.

"I'll be going to my common room and having lunch there," Harry said, looking absent.

"Have a restful evening, Mister Potter," Professor Kowalski told her student, who nodded at her before leaving.

Harry Potter was approaching the stairs when he heard three familiar sets of footsteps behind him but paid his pursuers no mind. He had questions that needed to be answered. Besides, the Yule Holidays would arrive soon and he had plans to make before that date. However, his meeting with Ragnok could no longer wait.

The moment the thestrals went through the outer barriers of Hogwarts, Harry felt the desperation Hogwarts was emanating... Someone managed to get in but left a short while ago. As he walked, he felt his heart beat faster, as if it wanted to leave his chest, drowning any other noise in the process. He knew the castle felt threatened, but her inherent magic was far

too weak and volatile to convey a clear message. Time ran out. The door of the Court's Headquarters opened automatically and Harry sat on the closest couch.

"Ella!"

"Master calls?" the serious elf said after appearing in a pop.

"Please, go to Gringotts and speak with Manager Ragnok. We need to begin moving sooner than expected and I need to speak with him as soon as possible."

"Yes sir, I will inform you about the date of the appointment," she said and left with a pop.

"Harry, what's going on?" Cedric asked. His face was ashen and his hands were shaking slightly.

"You feel it, right?" Harry said as an answer. "Someone managed to get inside the castle... We don't know how, we don't know why, and we don't who. If that's not enough, Hogwarts can't communicate with us until we're able to restore the wards and she begins to heal herself. I'll speak with Ragnok about the donation, we need to arrange that as soon as possible... Also, we need to decide how we will remove Neville's parents from Saint Mungo's."

"We will talk about it when everyone is present," Viktor told his friends. Harry thought he looked as if he was expecting something.

"Before we do anything, we need to eat," Fleur reminded the group in a gentle tone, "I will go to the kitchens and ask the elves to bring enough food for all of us."

With those words, the girl left the room and an almost oppressive silence dominated the space. Harry was focused on what his next course of action would be. This continued until the door was violently opened and the other agitated members of the Court entered the room.

"What's going on?" asked a distressed Draco as he helped Blaise to guide an almost hyperventilating Luna to the nearest couch, forcing her to take a vial of calming draught.

"We know as much as you. What happened to Luna?"

"She was fidgety all morning. Then she had a panic attack of sorts and Flora gave her a calming draught," answered a frowning Fred.

"When we entered the castle we knew there was something wrong, but we didn't know what and Luna had another panic attack," added Hestia in a shaky tone.

"They want something," Luna gasped as she tried to control her breathing. "I don't know who they are or what they want; all I know is it's inside the castle and they're going to do anything to get it."

"I'm going to speak with Ragnok when he has time," Harry announced while looking at the agitated girl. "Neville, you should also come."

"Is it time?"

"It is," he confirmed, nodding at his friend. "George, Terrence, Theo, go to the Vault Rooms and begin analysing the runes in earnest. There's no time to waste before the experts come. Hestia and Draco, you-"

"Ehm, sorry to interrupt," Justin muttered and his cheeks acquired a red tint when the attention of the room was directed at him. "I spoke with my mum about receiving Neville's parents. She already has a room ready in our main hospital, but she wants more information about the Cruciatus curse and I found nothing in the library."

"Of course you didn't, those books were banned by the Ministry centuries ago," Daphne muttered, scowling at this new development. "I think most of our families will have something about the Unforgivables, but the classified archives in the Ministry will have what you're asking for."

"So we need to speak with Marcus," Blaise sighed.

The conversation was interrupted when the man in question entered the room along with Fleur as one of the tables was filled with different plates and drinks.

"Maxime is going to be extradited. Three of our Aurors and three French ones are escorting the woman and Moody isn't happy about it. We were unable to find an appropriate dose of Veritaserum because of her ancestry and we... I didn't want to overdose her and break her mind, losing our only source of information in the process. Not to mention the international incident it could create despite the French Minister not supporting her. I don't even want to think about paperwork. Anyway, the judges are surprised with the skills that Harry showed and Madam Bones had to restrain Moody from recruiting you," Marcus explained and took a seat at the table, filling his plate.

"I already told him about what happened," Fleur told her friends.

"Good, we need to organize ourselves... Before I forget, Marcus, what do you know about Isabelle Kowalski?" Harry asked, also taking a seat and filling his plate.

"Not much. She has a double mastery in Defence Against the Dark Arts and that's it."

"Well, she's American," Adrian commented with a shrug.

"I think we all knew that," muttered Neville, grimacing at the terrible attempt to alleviate the tense atmosphere.

"Never mind, we'll act sooner than expected," Harry sighed and rubbed his temples. "How's the map progressing?"

"Almost done, we only need to fix a few details," George declared.

"Good, we'll need it soon. We need to find a way of discovering what those strange rooms are hiding. Fairies can be bribed with different objects, but we need to find a way for them to hear our proposal without us being attacked. We could cast a wide-range petrificus totalus, but we need to be careful in case the different kinds of magic clash."

"Harry, do you remember about the dreams I had?" asked Luna in a whisper but did not wait for an answer. "They want peace."

"I've been working with the elves in order to find a way of entering the Department of Mysteries," Marcus announced, "but we have a big problem. Moody changed all the patrol routes in the Ministry and every Auror carries an emergency crystal. The moment one is attacked; a dozen Aurors will swarm the place. Also, none of the elves can feel the exact location of any of the rooms. According to Rome, the magic that's hidden there makes the place blurry - difficult to feel and impossible to pop into."

"So we need to create a diversion and then we can destroy the place," Harry muttered in acknowledgement. "I don't like this, but we need to wait and plan carefully... In any case Marcus, you need to find information about the Cruciatus curse in the classified archives of the Ministry. We need also need information about its defences. Ask Mars for help. If the defences and security are low then the elves can retrieve all the information we may need in the future. If not, we'll organize an incursion into the Ministry."

While each one of the members was lost in their own thoughts, they enjoyed the meal. There were so many puzzles that needed to be solved. Being a teenager in the magical world was far too tiresome.

"Master," Ella greeted Harry, startling a few with her sudden appearance. "Manager Ragnok will speak with you in an hour and I will take you to his office."

"Thank you, dear, I apologize if I was brusque before."

"No! Master is kind as always!"

"Do you want to join us?"

"No sir, I have a few things to do."

"Very well, I'll see you later." The small elf popped out of the room after giving Harry her characteristic toothy grin and he sighed once again.

"I didn't mention this, but congratulations for ending up in first place," Blaise said while looking at Harry.

"I did?"

"Were you not listening?" Theo asked his oblivious friend.

"No," Harry deadpanned, making more than one sigh.

"In summary, you were the champion with most points," Daphne began explaining before Harry lost his patience. "A total of a hundred and two points, including the ten extra for obtaining the golden sphere. Fleur is in second place with ninety-eight points, including the extra, and Iwan is in third with ninety-one. Viktor and Cedric share fourth place with eighty-three points; no extra were awarded despite obtaining the golden sphere. Valerie is in last

place with fifty. Considering she had a twenty point penalty and her poor performance, I'm surprised she managed to score so high."

"The judges didn't seem to agree on many things, but that was the final decision," Fred added.

"Being honest, the competition is the least of my concerns at the moment," Harry muttered while rubbing his throbbing temples. "Marcus, how are the creature reforms going?"

"No one bothered to check which reforms were being eliminated and which were being added. Andra is beginning with the most problematic ones and we'll announce the changes in a year."

"Why not sooner?" asked a curious Cedric.

"Because there is a law established fifty-two years ago which dictates that, if a reform, legislation, bill, and so on, isn't challenged within a year, it will be unappealable for five years. This is how so many anti-creature and anti-first-generation regulations were passed," Draco answered, grimacing at his own words. "Or at least that is what I learnt from one of father's multiple lectures."

"Wait, is this why-" Whatever George was about to ask was lost when Marcus took out his communication mirror and signalled his friends to remain silent.

"Madam Bones-"

"We have an emergency! Our Aurors were attacked, Moody just left with a few teams as a backup. I need you to come with me to check on the French Minister."

"I will be there," the man agreed and cut the connection. "I have to go. Tubby!" A house-elf appeared in the room and left seconds later, taking Marcus with him.

"What's happening today?" Neville groaned, burying his face on his hands.

Another mystery arose and Harry was sure he did not like what was happening one bit.

The rest of the meal went by in a tense silence and no one was willing to break it. Luna may be the only seer amongst them, but the foreboding that took hold of every member of the room was enough for them to know a storm was brewing on the horizon. The almost inaudible pop that signalled Ella's arrival resounded in the unusually silent room. Harry stood up and signalled Neville to follow his example. Without a word, the trio left the Court's Headquarters only to appear in a familiar office a second later.

"Thank you for seeing us so soon, Ragnok," Harry said to the goblin behind the desk as a greeting when Ella popped him into the office.

"That's no problem, though I'm worried. It's not like you to arrange a meeting with such short notice. I'm assuming we have an emergency," Ragnok answered, signalling the two chairs in front of his desk for the teenagers to sit.

"You can leave, dear," Harry said to his elf. "I'll call you when the meeting's over."

"Yes sir, have fun!" Ella exclaimed and waved at the three males, leaving the room in a pop.

"Someone managed to enter Hogwarts," Harry began explaining. "We don't know how, who, or why, and the castle cannot communicate with us appropriately. The Ward Stone Vaults need to be restored as soon as possible so the castle's energy is no longer be focused on trying to keep the shields up and we'll have more of an idea of what is going on."

"In other words, the donation needs to be done sooner," the goblin concluded with a nod and began writing in his book. "The proposal is already drafted; we only need you to review it, along with a few other documents."

"I want our people examining the castle during Yule," Harry muttered as he examined the folder he was given. "That way we have an idea of what stone wards, heart stones, and ley lines need to be established or fixed. Once the analysis is finished, two of your chosen rune crafters can begin their work. One of my elves will transport them in and out."

"Perfect," the manager agreed and once again wrote in his book. "Miss Blair already drew up the contract and, with the amount of money they will receive, neither complained about the conditions... Now that the urgency is gone, may I inquire about the identity of your friend?"

"Ah, of course," muttered Harry while reviewing the documents. "Neville Longbottom, a close friend. Manager Ragnok, also a close friend."

"A pleasure," greeted Neville, already used to the moments of strange obliviousness that his friend had from time to time.

"Likewise. I didn't know any member of your family personally, but Nadlirg still sings the praises of your late great-grandfather. According to him, Gilbert Longbottom was a natural in business," the goblin complimented the grinning boy.

"We need to add a few details regarding the improvements," Harry said before his friend could speak, not noticing he interrupted, much to Neville's amusement. "We need to put in different spots for the students to drink water. I always carry my water bottle, so I never thought about the problem until I heard a first-year complaining about being thirsty and having to wait until dinner... Also, the changes we talked about are a must and we will put that as a condition on donating the money. It's unlikely Madam Marchbanks will refuse the proposal."

"Indeed, the changes are long due," Ragnok muttered as he searched through a thick stack of folders. "Ah, here it is. A detailed list of all the stipulations, including the boats and the protection for the students during the train and carriage ride. In this other folder, there is a list of people that Miss Blair contacted. Three first generations and seven squibs, we have four psychiatrists and six psychologists. You will find their résumés along with a personal investigation we made on the candidates."

"Anyone interesting within the candidates?"

"All are clean and, considering they will act as counsellors rather than professors, I see no problems. Although there is a young squib that caught my interest. The man's charismatic and excellent in what he does. What interests me is how approachable he is and how well he works with teenagers. As a matter of fact, he works as a school teacher and is well-liked among his students. I suggest placing him in charge of the others and as a general counsellor," Ragnok informed Harry, who looked at the man's file with especial interest.

"If you see no problems then I don't either. When can the donation be announced?"

"On Monday, the representative of Mirror Summons can pay Madam Marchbanks a visit."

"I don't know what I'd do without you," Harry sighed and looked to the side, where Neville was looking through a folder with curiosity. "I have another reason to be here today. We need to move Alice and Frank Longbottom from Saint Mungo's."

"That won't be hard, but considering Madam Longbottom may not agree with your plan, we may need to take the less legal route," Ragnok smirked taking out a folder that contained a single paper. "This is the contract Miss Blair wrote for any of our enchanters who are interested in taking on the task, considering this may not be legal and Miss Pittsum would not help you in this situation."

"I should have guessed you had this ready," Harry muttered but did not look at the man; his eyes were fixed on the hopeful expression that Neville wore. "So we'll use the golems, the enchanter will be ready and the personnel can be dealt with through convenient memory charms."

"When can we do this?" asked Neville.

"Whenever you have the other location available."

"We already have it, now we only need information about the Cruciatus," Harry mumbled to himself, though the man's sharp hearing managed to catch the words.

"The Cruciatus curse was not born as such," Ragnok began explaining to the two surprised teenagers. "Crucio, as you may know, originates from the Latin word cruciatus, which means torture. However, its original purpose was not to torture. Before Rome fell, there was a witch who was called Spissamentum Mortis, or the stopper of death. She created this spell to wake a person who had just died, believing intense pain could break the grasp of death on the body. Its original name was Sucitatio Dolore. The problem with this spell was the amount of energy it took, so she worked to shorten the incantation until crucio remained. Then, another mage thought he could use her spell to harm a living person and popularized its use when he tried to rule Rome. When the witch discovered her creation was being corrupted in such a way, she began working on a counter. Unfortunately, she disappeared a short time later."

"How do you know that?" Harry asked his friend.

"Goblins love treasure, but few realize gold is just metal compared to how valuable information is," was the man's smooth answer. "My people collected information throughout



history. That's why we're the only bank that exists on a worldwide scale, and not even the dwarves could compete against us."

"Ragnok, I have a favour to ask," Harry said, choosing his words with caution in order not to give Neville any illusions. "Is there a possibility of you lending me the specific information about the Cruciatus? If we give it to a Muggle healer under a contract then maybe we can heal Neville's parents."

"While I have no problems sharing the information, it is written in my language and Latin," the man explained as he wrote in his book. "It will take a few weeks to have it translated into English."

"Thank you." Those simple words were uttered by Neville, his hope was almost a physical presence in the room.

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Justin Finch-Fletchley was a normal teenager. At least, he liked to think he was one. A normal teenager with more wealth than average and a group of friends who were rather unorthodox, though he just noticed how out of the norm he was.

He joined the Guild months ago, believing the group of friends who talked about big dreams were just normal students. Even when their real activities were revealed, Justin managed to pretend they were not involved in the frightening world of adults. This delusion was shattered when he took a real look at his friends while they waited for Ella to retrieve Harry and Neville.

The Minister's right hand was sitting near him, the future members of the Wizengamot were sitting beside him, and an international Quidditch player along with a beautiful female with a penchant for politics were across from him. Oh, and how could he forget? Harry Potter was part of the group. No, that was not right. Harry Potter was the leader of the group that was changing the magical world one person at a time. How could he be so bloody blind?!

The Court was not a joke; it was neither a club nor a simple group. The Court was important.

Justin was part of it and, even if this realization was somewhat staggering and a tad earth shattering, he was not going to leave his friends. Somehow, he was accepted by these extraordinary people and it was time he played his part and contributed to the group's efforts.

His family was wealthy, Justin was aware. However, this didn't mean he was wealthy. No, he would earn his position as the future head of his family, along with the privilege to use the money that his ancestors earned through hard work. It was time to make his contribution. The Finch-Fletchleys were known in the Muggle world because of their numerous hospitals and pharmaceutical breakthroughs. If his ancestors managed to do that without magic, imagine what could be done with her aid... Impossible would no longer be a term used in medicine.

All his life he was expected to become a doctor, but only now did he wish to become one. He would be the one to integrate magic with Muggle medicine. Healing magic and potions would be mixed with some Muggle medicine and miracles would be made. Likewise,

Muggle techniques and technology would be introduced to medicine and the magical world would be revolutionized.

This was his new goal, to be a useful member of the Court and leave his signature in the world.

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### **Dumbledore's Cottage, Godric's Hollow**

Albus sat on a dusty couch, observing the dilapidated living room of the abandoned place with nostalgia... His mother would be horrified at the state of their house, but why should he care? She was dead.

As he observed his desolate surroundings, he wondered why he came after so long. The cottage brought back painful memories of the family he lost and of one of his heaviest burdens. This place was a constant reminder of all his failures. Suddenly, he remembered why he had decided to pay his old house a visit... It was the sole place that reminded him he was a simple mortal playing god as he tried to save as many lives as possible.

Today he had an epiphany while he watched Harry Potter finishing the first task. As he compared the young boy to a young Tom, a forgotten memory assaulted his mind.

It was long ago, when he was still teaching Transfiguration and when Tom was still experiencing his first year in the magical world. He was walking through the dungeons, looking for any troublemakers, when he saw something he shouldn't have ignored at the time. Young Tom Riddle was being bullied by his housemates because of his blood but, instead of helping, as any decent teacher should do, he turned back. Albus believed the boy was beyond saving. Thinking about it now, the idea was ridiculous. What rational human being would accuse a child of being evil? Instead of trying to understand the reasons why Tom did those terrible things in the past, he condemned and judged him.

What would have happened if Albus helped young Tom that day? Perhaps he would be able to guide the boy and turn him towards the light, or maybe he would have raised an even more dangerous Dark Lord. However, the what ifs clouded his mind.

The pain of a cramping arm was enough to take him out of his reverie. He took some shaky breaths in an effort to ease the pain, but ended up resorting to the flask of firewhisky that he began carrying not long ago to numb his body.

Age was getting to him.

### **Chapter End Notes**

I know Thestrals are carnivorous, but I gave them apples because they are delicious ^.^

# Harrowing Reality of a Disturbed Heart

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Amelia Bones was a pragmatic woman who rarely allowed her emotions to take control, but situations like this broke her stoic façade and made her hands itch with a desire to cause pain. She became an Auror to protect her people and knowing that even her best efforts were not enough was a heart-wrenching reminder of how fallible she was.

The attack on Maxime was unexpected, but that was no excuse. She should know better and made plans for every eventuality. It was her responsibility. However, she failed again.

She opened her eyes and observed the scene she already etched into her memory. The French Aurors were dead, along with two of her own. One was missing. If that was not enough, Maxime was murdered. Amelia looked to the side and glared at the body of the woman. Olympe Maxime was not a simple headmistress. To be murdered in such a brutal way she must have done something terrible or consorted with the wrong people. Her whole left arm was obliterated thanks to multiple bludgeoning curses, not to mention her body was unrecognisable, and only the size of the maltreated corpse gave away its identity. All in all, Amelia would pity the dead woman if her people were not affected.

"Madam, we found him," Shacklebolt told Amelia, interrupting her moment of self-loathing.

Amelia closed her eyes as traitorous tears threatened to fall. She took a deep breath in order to ease the suffocating pain in her chest... If Shacklebolt's tone was anything to go by, three of her Aurors were dead.

"State," she whispered, not willing to open her eyes and see pity in the man's eyes.

"Dead. Moody is already analysing the scene."

The Minister took another deep breath, willing her throat to stop constricting and her eyes to stop prickling. *It's not time to mourn.* That was the phrase Amelia repeated until she regained a vestige of the composure she was known for. A gentle hand patted her shoulder and she opened her eyes. Marcus was once again supporting her. Despite his youth, he proved to be beyond reliable and efficient. Without anyone else noticing, she took the offered calming draught vial and downed it in one gulp.

"Show us where you found him," Amelia ordered Kingsley, who nodded and approached the pair.

With a swift motion, three people arrived at a small clearing, where Aurors were analysing the area. The tired woman took the scene in and closed her eyes, pretending her constricting throat was her worse problem.

"Situation report," Marcus told someone.

"The attackers captured and tortured Alder," Moody began explaining. His voice was rougher than usual and it wasn't hard to conclude the emotional state of the man was not the most stable. "He bit his tongue off. They wanted information."

"Any ideas on the identity of the attackers?" Amelia asked, composing herself.

"These torture methods belong to the Lestranges, but it lacked their finesse-"

"We can't begin conjecturing ideas based on that," Dawlish interrupted Moody.

"I know their methods. I even experienced them in person," Alastor said, not even looking at his subordinate. "I know their handiwork so well that I can even tell the three of them apart through it. But this time, it was not them... This was the work of five people, at least two of whom were trained by the Lestranges, but they are inexperienced if all the evidence they left behind is any indication... Although there is another possibility," the man said after a brief moment of indecision, "During the last war I wrote enough detailed reports about their methods for the Aurors to identify them through their victims and recognize the patterns of their attacks... The McKinnons were assassinated this way."

"Which means someone could have access to the classified archives in the Ministry and emulated the attack," Amelia muttered as her eyes widened at the realization.

"That's my worst fear," Alastor confirmed with a nod. "The McKinnons were ambushed thanks to a spy we had in the Order. Marlene was tortured and assassinated in another location... The way Alder was tortured resembles the way she was. However, these attackers were sloppy, which means they little to no practice. In any case, we're either dealing with new Death Eaters trained by the Lestranges or some copy-cats, and what worries me the most is that our main problem isn't related to their identities. We need information about Maxime because this wasn't random, Amelia. It was a well-planned ambush."

"This is a mess," Amelia sighed, rubbing her temples. "What we need to know is why their portkey transported them to this location. Then, we need to question all the people who were in contact with the object and find out who manipulated the coordinates. The French Minister is already moving and she will send her own Aurors to help with the investigation. Also, we need to collect information about Maxime, but we need our own source."

"If I may, Minister, I can ask Fleur Delacour for help. Her father is the-"

"I know who he is... Are you sure you can contact him?" Amelia asked, frowning at the young man.

"I can try and, for now, that's our best option," Marcus answered with a sigh.

"You're right... I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter, though we will need to increase the security in the archives. I can take care of it, but I will need access to the files of the current and previous employees of the place."

"You have it already," Amelia informed the surprised young man. "If you didn't have the same clearance as I do, I would have to take care of all my paperwork."

The Minister gave a weak smile to her undersecretary and sighed once again. The day was long and she still had much to do. She swore to find those responsible for this attack and ensure they paid in blood for harming her people. To think this morning she enjoyed the first task, and now another sleepless night waited.

At least Sirius would be waiting for her and she could allow herself to be simply Amelia and not the Minister for Magic... Even if it was for a few moments.

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Alastor Moody was not a man who lost his temper with ease. After all, an Auror incapable of controlling their emotions was a dead Auror.

He examined the crime scene and the corpses of his Aurors without complaint. He analysed the area for any evidence he could collect and aided the specialized healers to collect the bodies for examination. Once again, he did not utter a single word, but that did not mean he felt nothing.

Alastor entered his house after the torturous hours he spent observing the bodies of his fallen comrades. The man walked with silent, deliberate steps, despite the room distorting in a bizarre way and his legs threatening to give out. He walked until he reached the low table located in the middle of the living room. With a brusque movement, he threw the decorative vases off the table and proceeded to destroy his surroundings. The intense ire that was slowly consuming him turned into a sharp pain that made his heart constrict with every breath. Without noticing, Moody collapsed on the ground and silent tears streamed down his face.

"It's okay, I'm here," a soothing voice whispered and the Auror noticed that a familiar person was hugging him. "You're home. You're safe," the voice whispered in an effort to comfort him.

"Three of the kids were murdered today," he murmured after what could have been hours or a single second. The person remained silent, but the embrace tightened. "It's my fault... I should know there would be an attack!" the man yelled as his breath quickened, the first sign of another anxiety episode about to take place.

"It's not your fault. Alastor. Look at me. It's not your fault," the person whispered, willing the other one to calm down. "You saved so many lives, don't forget that."

"I should have known," the Auror whispered to himself. "After what happened to you, I swore to never fail again, but here we are..."

"You are not God and you did more than enough," the person answered as Moody traced the visible scars Bellatrix left more than a decade ago. "You're training all those Aurors to survive, you almost died so many times to save your comrades, and you're the man who's captured the most Death Eaters. Alastor, you're going far beyond your duty."

"You always know how to calm me," the Auror said after a few minutes of silence, then winced when he looked at the mess he left behind.

"After being married for twenty-three years, it would be a disaster if I didn't know how," the person tried to joke, smiling at their partner. "Come on, I made your favourite for dinner."

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The days after the first task went by in a storm of emotions. From students ogling the champions and asinine rumours regarding the youngest competitor, to resentful glares being directed at the members of the Court. Overall, nothing new, but the intensity of this inconvenience escalated to the point the teachers decided to intervene. After all, what decent educator would watch from the sidelines as their charges were harassed?

Minerva McGonagall stared at a group of her lions, who were gossiping animatedly with each other while casting quite blatant glances at the Slytherin table. Well, to be specific, they were looking at Minerva's favourite student and his friends, something she was not willing to tolerate. Ridiculous and borderline malicious rumours began surfacing after Harry Potter accomplished magnificent feats of magic. All the teachers decided to intervene because peer pressure was a lethal weapon and even the most resilient person could break while facing it. The boy was an exemplary student and it would be a crime to allow the banality, and dare she say envy of his peers to affect the innocent boy.

One of the gossiping girls noticed the professor's stare and urged her friends to shut up while the colour drained from her face... Good, it seemed the Gryffindors took her words to heart and, in that way, avoided the punishments she would hand out with a pleased smile.

Minerva observed the other tables and sighed, having to suppress a proud smile from surfacing and trying to ignore the sharp twinge of guilt.

The students no longer sat with their respective Houses during all meals as they once did. Now, you could see members of different Houses sitting with their friends, no longer secluding themselves with the people of their own House... This sight was something she wished to see for decades, but had no hopes of it happening until Harry Potter appeared. That young boy wrecked Hogwarts' status quo, moulding it into what it became and would hopefully continue.

She would never forget the day the Weasley twins began sitting at the Slytherin table. As a matter of fact, she doubted anyone in the school would ever forget. Gryffindors sharing with Slytherins - the notion was as ridiculous as acromantulas and basilisks cuddling. However, what was even more surprising was the way Slytherins reacted - as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Professors stared, speechless, and students pinched themselves in disbelief, but that group remained unaffected.

Nevertheless, that was not her greatest worry. Fred and George Weasley were the biggest troublemakers the school had the misfortune of having, giving the Marauders a run for their money despite being half the number and a year younger. To her great shame, Minerva admits being worried about them leading her prized student astray. Now, despite their youth, George Weasley received offers for apprenticeships from Head Healer Abbot and Professor Dobrev, and Fred Weasley had an offer from Master Hira, the personal brewer of the Asian

Emperor. The troublemakers she remembered with fondness and ever-present exasperation matured into dependable young men with a promising future waiting for them.

Minerva McGonagall was a proud woman, which she admits as her greatest flaw. For a long time, she knew of the prejudice and borderline harassment the Slytherins suffered. However, she pretended it didn't exist because, if it did, she would become the villain of the story. Her eyes were violently opened when Harry Potter was sorted into Slytherin.

She expected him to be a troublemaker and a lacklustre student in the best of the cases... Reality slapped her back to her good senses during that first class, however, when Lily's eyes shone through her son, channelling that unique spark that appeared in James' eyes whenever he encountered a challenge. Harry Potter proved that being a Slytherin didn't equal being evil. To this day, she felt shame for her harsh treatment toward all Slytherin students, but she would never commit the same mistakes again.

She looked at the young man sitting beside her and she had to smile. Marcus Travers was another troublemaker with exceptional grades Harry somehow managed to guide onto the right path. Now, he became the youngest undersecretary in history and Minerva was sure other impressive titles would soon join.

She eyed the throne-like seat for a brief second and sighed. Albus was not feeling well and, despite their friendship souring over the last few years, she still cared about him. Deciding to stop procrastinating, Minerva stood up and silence descended on the great hall with no need to call order.

"Good evening. You may notice we have a guest at the staff table and many older students may remember him. Please, let's welcome the senior undersecretary, Marcus Travers," she announced and waited a few moments for the applause to stop. "The reason why Mister Travers is here is to give a special announcement. If you would," she said, smiling at the student that turned into an exemplary man.

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall," Marcus said, his deep voice resounding through the hall. "As you know, the Trischool Tournament involves multiple tasks for the champions. However, there is a tradition within the competition. The Yule Ball. This event is meant to give the champions a night of amusement and frivolity. It will take place on the seventeenth of December, the day before you leave the castle for your holidays, in order to not interfere with any plans you may have during those days. All the students from fourth year up are allowed to attend as long as they wish to and the younger students will be able to attend if they are invited by any older student. However, let me say this: while the Yule Ball is a tradition, it is not obligatory for any student to assist."

"We're announcing this a few weeks ahead of the event so the ones who wish to attend have enough time to select their attire and, if they wish to, ask another student to be their date for the night," Minerva continued once Marcus nodded at her. "Another important detail I have to announce concerns all the students. Yule is a time for family, thus, Minister Bones arranged special portkeys for all those international students who wish to be with their families. All you have to do is speak with any of the Heads of Houses and your portkey will be arranged. Also, Madam Maxime returned to France for personal reasons. Her substitute, Professor Valentin Vaugrenard, will take her place and act as interim Headmaster. He will be

arriving today before dinner, so I expect all of you to help him in his new role and be on your best behaviour."

Once Minerva sat down again, whispers spread through the students like wildfire. She simply hid her pleased smile.

The old woman waited until most of the students were gone in order to bid Marcus a warm farewell, along with a few chosen words for the young man to take care of himself.

"Marcus became a great man," Filius commented, smiling at the retreating figure of the undersecretary.

"That he did," Minerva agreed, "I still remember when he flew like a professional in his first year."

"It would be more impressive had he not lost control of his broom and dived into the Black Lake," Rolanda commented, her usually severe expression softened with a smile.

"So many things changed," Pomona sighed, looking with fondness at the few students who were still in the hall. "If someone told me House rivalry would disappear, I would've slapped them to return them to their good sense... It's almost impossible to believe how different everything is."

"And we all know how it began," Aurora added, smirking at the Transfiguration teacher. "Minerva almost had a heart attack when the Weasley twins sat at the Slytherin table, speaking with Mister Potter as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Thinking about it, Severus' brain stopped working for a few minutes."

"Well, I think that day all of us reacted in a rather undignified way," Filius commented before the Potions teacher could. "In any case, that was the day students began experimenting and sat with their friends from other Houses. I still remember a little something last year; it was the day I noticed everything changed."

"So what happened, Filius?" Pomona urged her co-worker.

"Nothing scandalous, just a detail that made me realize animosity between Houses is a thing of the past," he commented, smirking when Pomona was about to ask for more information and deciding to continue explaining. "It was the second day of school and I had classes with the fifth-years. Miss Selwyn was late for class and no one saw her. When she arrived, she apologized and was willing to serve any punishment that I saw fit. As you can remember, she was never the meek kind, so I was worried and asked her to stay after class."

"What happened?" Septima asked as her eyebrows rose in curiosity.

"She was helping the first-years along with the Slytherin prefects who were assigned to that task for the day and lost track of time, as simple as that," Filius narrated as a fond smile spread on his lips. "I was surprised because no one had that idea before, so I spoke with the Head Boy and Girl in order to know what other things were implemented. Apparently, it was an initiative from the Slytherins because neither Miss Rivers nor Mister Boot had any idea of



what I was speaking about. Then, I spoke with the first years. I was pleasantly surprised and terribly ashamed when they sang the praises of the Slytherins because they were kinder than their own housemates."

"Thinking about it, I also noticed how the new students followed the Slytherins as puppies," Pomona muttered, furrowing her brow. "Miss Bones was also hostile towards the Hufflepuff prefects because they weren't doing their duty, though I believed she was exaggerating."

"Now that we're talking about it," Charity added, frowning at the table. "I noticed the Slytherin prefects, Miss Selwyn in particular, helping all the students who needed it. As a matter of fact, yesterday evening she was talking with Miss Brown in order to help her improve her grades."

"Who would imagine that capricious child would turn into the dependable teenager we're seeing today," Minerva murmured as her eyes softened.

"I'm sorry to interrupt this deep moment," Isabelle said after clearing her throat, "but you're making me feel old and I'm not even thirty yet."

"One day you'll be in our shoes, even if you don't continue as a teacher," Filius said, smiling at the young woman.

"Seeing that none of your Defence professors lasted more than a year, I'm willing to be the first one," Isabelle answered, smirking at her amused colleagues.

"You won't last long if we arrive late," Albee told the woman and signalled the clock.

Isabelle cursed under her breath and dragged her assistant with her to their next class.

"Things are indeed changing."

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Harry Potter collapsed onto the nearest couch and rubbed his temples. The last few days were harsh, to say the least. Between reviewing documents, planning his trip to the Potter Family Vaults, talking with Ragnok to see how the donation was going, discussing the improvements his businesses needed with Rome and Ploutos and what other ideas could be implemented... honestly, school was the perfect hobby to distract himself from all his duties.

"Here," Theo said, handing Harry a cup of tea.

"Thanks... Any new development on Maxime's murder?" Harry asked Marcus, who was reviewing a few documents.

"Nothing, but Fleur's dad managed to catch a few whispers from the Beauxbatons staff regarding how out of character Maxime was acting in the months before arriving at Hogwarts."

"I doubt there's a person powerful enough to cast a long-term Imperius on a half-giant," Cedric said, looking perplexed at the ludicrous idea.

"The possibility of loyalty potions exists," Viktor added, "though they would need to find a way of forcing her to consume it. There's also blackmail."

"Moody proposed all those theories and more," Marcus sighed and slumped on his seat. "He interviewed the house-elves in charge of her and examined every millimetre of her living space. Nothing. Well, that's not quite right... While he examined the fireplace, he found an almost completely burnt piece of parchment and it contained a single name: Alex Dumont."

"Isn't that the other person that judge sold information to?" Adrian asked, frowning at the strange enigma.

"That's the one," the eldest male confirmed. "We searched everywhere and Moody thinks it's an alias. There are no eyewitnesses or any further clues. Moody's frustrated because he thinks this will be troublesome... Anyway, now that I'm in charge of improving the security of the classified archives, I have free reign of the whole place. I'm using that to get the blueprints of the Department of Mysteries so we can plan a raid without endangering ourselves. It's going slow because the place is a mess."

"Mum received the information you sent," Justin commented. "She's fascinated with the Cruciatus and how it-"

"Do you remember the room I dreamt about?" Luna asked, not even noticing she interrupted her friend. "The room full of gossiping orbs. The one that tried to warn me is trying to warn someone else... It mentions a broken bond, but every time it speaks, it loses its light."

"How are we supposed to know the meaning of that?" George groaned in response.

"Divination was perhaps the most useless class we took," Fred muttered.

"We can worry about that later," Harry announced after taking a sip of his tea. "We have enough to do as it is... I waited for our new members to adapt to the Court before informing them about all our activities," he announced, earning the attention of the whole room. "I want you to know no one is forced to participate, but we appreciate discretion. As you know, the Guild preceded the Court. As the original members, we had no great plans aside from making Slytherin the House of exemplary students and immaculate conduct. Somehow this evolved and our objectives extended beyond the walls of this school."

Harry looked at Daphne and she swiftly continued. "Perhaps it changed when we noticed how prejudiced the magical society is or maybe everything changed during the Hogsmeade attack last year, when we noticed we were the last line of defence. Or maybe it was sooner, when we realized we were more than willing to do what was necessary in order to protect each other."

"My father was a Death Eater," Adrian began explaining. "He's no Lucius Malfoy, but he has influence in the Ministry."

"Both of my parents are also loyal Death Eaters," Terrence admitted with a sigh. "They convinced my eldest brother to take the mark and my other brother fled the country."

"My parents are loyal Death Eaters," Marcus announced and no one seemed to be surprised. "As you may remember, there was a mass breakout from Azkaban the summer of 1993. My father was hosting two of the fugitives and even went so far to kidnap a healer I managed to rescue."

"As I said, you are not forced to participate," Harry concluded, looking at the new members. "You heard about our past actions and our plans for the future, but I will state them once again for all of you to know what you are getting into. During my first year, the Slytherin Guild was formed in an effort to change the House, something that worked remarkably well despite a few setbacks. During my third year, Dementors and Death Eaters attacked Hogsmeade. The only ones fighting back were the people who worked in my businesses but, because of the bystanders, their effectiveness was limited. Luna knew something would happen and we took the necessary measures to be able to evacuate the students in case of an emergency, not counting on the villagers being unable to defend themselves."

"That was the moment in which we decided to interfere. Honestly, we didn't have the necessary training and the only reason why all of us are here today is because we didn't hold back. We used curses that the Ministry classified as dark and that gave us the element of surprise against the attackers. A few months ago, Luna had a feeling and we knew something would happen. We took all precautions possible and our efforts paid off. We confronted Voldemort and his lackeys during the World Cup. It wasn't easy. The element of surprise and superior gear tipped the scales to our favour."

"You all know about the strange rooms in the castle," Luna began explaining once Harry looked at her. "Since that day I had dreams about the fairy hunts and the experiments the Ministry performed on them in order to create the time turners. Ever since, we've been trying to get more information about the Department of Mysteries. Once we have all the details, we will raid the Ministry and destroy the Department of Mysteries."

"We'll also oppose Voldemort in an active way, which means we will confront Death Eaters sooner or later. You must understand what you are getting into so I will not sugar-coat the truth: you will be in danger. I must ask you, are you willing to join?"

"We would have to be brainless dunces if we didn't notice," Fleur said after a few seconds of silence. "You told us what happened during the Quidditch World Cup and we all read the last Queen's journal. I know the Court will change the magical world and I will be part of it."

"I knew what I was getting into from the beginning," Cedric announced, wearing a smirk. "I'm not backing down."

"Yeah, me neither," Viktor agreed.

"I realized not long ago," Justin murmured. "I know our goals are ambitious and we may be in danger. Be as it may, there is no way I'm leaving the Court."

The tense atmosphere vanished and Luna giggled in delight.

"There's a specific reason I wanted to speak about this," Harry said after a minute. "We can free your mother."

Harry was not sure what he expected, but hearing Viktor's defeated sigh was not it. "She really loves father and I think he cares about her. I will talk with mum first."

"Just ask Professor Flitwick to arrange a portkey." Harry didn't even try to understand Viktor's complicated family dynamics.

"That means you won't spend Yule with us," Hestia accused the older student, probing his side with a finger.

"We will have many more in the future," Viktor promised, ruffling the girl's hair.

"Damn it!" Draco yelled, rummaging through his backpack in frantic movements. "Here it is!" he said triumphantly as a worn notebook was taken out. "I found some clues to open the Founders' chambers, but keep forgetting to tell you about it."

"That's something only your goldfish brain could forget about," Terrence sighed.

"Shut up," Draco muttered, blowing a raspberry. "Anyway, as we all know, what seems to be the strongest aspect of something may also be its greatest weakness. Rowena's door has a puzzle to solve and a question to answer, but I bet the answer is nothing complicated. The thing is people believe it would be because the woman was brilliant, hence, they believe them to be unsolvable."

"Your logic is sound enough," Harry agreed. "You can try it and if it doesn't work we'll help you."

"So how can we open the other Founders' rooms?" Neville asked with his eyes shining in curiosity.

"I'm not sure yet, but I have a few theories. Salazar's door has symbols I've never seen before, so I still have no idea. Godric's door has a sword engraving, so it's possible that his legendary sword is meant to act as a key..."

"The problem is the sword is lost to the world since the man died," George groaned.

"Yup, but there's the possibility of it being an entirely different thing," Draco muttered and shrugged at the incredulous look George was giving him. "The last one is Helga's room. The door is plain, there isn't even a handle or an orifice for the key so I'm utterly lost there."

"We still have time," Fleur reminded her fellow blond.

"Harry, who are you taking to the Yule Ball?" Luna asked, breaking the tranquil silence that settled in the room.

"I'm not going," was the boy's lackadaisical answer.

"You have to," Marcus said, making the youngest champion raise an inquisitive eyebrow. "Well, technically, you aren't forced to attend, but I'd appreciate it if you made an appearance. Madam Bones has been planning this event for all the students to have fun, despite all the tosh that is happening outside."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Not much. Open the Ball with your date along with the other champions, mingle a bit, hopefully enjoy yourself, and leave after," Marcus answered, looking at Harry with hope shining in his eyes.

"I won't be there long," Harry acquiesced with a sigh.

"So, do you want any of us to go with you?" Daphne asked.

"I'll ask Elizabeth, don't worry... I'm sure she'll enjoy being the centre of attention."

With those words, the members of the Court went back to their normal activities.

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Albus Dumbledore glared at the sunlight that filtered through the curtains... He knew he should have replaced them with drapes long ago, but for some reason, he kept forgetting about it. The man squinted his eyes and groaned when sharp bolts of pain penetrated his skull. Without hesitation, he drank the vial of foul liquid that, unfortunately, was the most effective cure to hangovers.

He dragged himself towards the sitting place of his room, ignoring the warm food on the table in favour of the Firewhisky bottles that were stashed in a cupboard in the corner of the room. The old man stopped in his tracks when he noticed the bowl of sherbet lemons. With weary steps, he approached the low table on which the candies lay... When was the last time he had one? Better yet, when did he change his loyal sweets for the bitter alcohol?

Fawkes thrilled and Albus sighed again.

The Order of the Phoenix was falling apart despite his best efforts. He planned to recruit more people and make it a cohesive unit, but how successful could that effort be when even the oldest members were unwilling to work together? Molly and Sirius were in a cold war. Their friction caused a rift within the group.

Arthur sided with his wife out of duty, but for some reason, William didn't and Dumbledore had the slight suspicion the boy wanted to leave the Order. On the other hand, Remus supported his best friend and was no longer willing to take dangerous assignments. Ah, Albus didn't even want to think about Minerva. The woman was cold to everyone aside from the last Marauders, not to mention that, from being a friend, she turned into what could be barely be called an acquaintance.

If this was the state of the Order, what hopes could it have of being effective against the next Death Eater attack?

Besides, Severus was unable to obtain information about Voldemort's movements. The man stopped calling anyone that was not amongst his most trusted servants and, despite all his efforts, Severus was unable to earn the man's trust. The only data Albus was working with was Tom needing a new body. While there were thousands of ways to make one, he knew Voldemort was dominated by pride and would choose the most complicated, yet effective

ritual; one that needed the blood of his greatest enemy: Harry Potter. This would also grant him the protection Lily left behind.

It made an awful lot of sense, unfortunately.

Otherwise, he doubted the Death Eaters in the Wizengamot would move a finger to allow the competition to take place and even less volunteer to pay for the expenses. In any case, he should be glad. Harry Potter participating in the competition was luring the man away from his burrow, which meant it was time to make his move.

Fawkes thrilled again. Albus could swear he saw pity in his companion's eyes.

He noticed a few months ago how his health began deteriorating. First, his motor coordination began failing to the point dizziness and tremors were now a common occurrence. Then, the weakness of his muscles turned day-to-day activities into harrowing chores. His vision and hearing also degenerated and his memory began failing... How pathetic. Albus was not considered old in the magical world, yet he felt as if he was. There was no time to rest though. There were Horcruxes waiting to be destroyed and he was the only one with the knowledge to do so. It was his responsibility and he would assume it.

With a sigh, Albus popped a sherbet lemon into his mouth and grimaced at the taste. It was too sour.

"So much changed," Albus whispered.

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Marcus arrived at his parents' house and the smile he wore all evening disappeared. He eyed with distaste the ostentatious decor of the place that served as his jail during his childhood. Now that his eyes were open, the memories of his childhood left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He wasn't allowed to go out of his room unless both of his parents gave him permission, because they always either had a guest or just wanted to be alone. Through painful lessons, he learnt to act as the pure-blood heir his parents expected. Marcus never really noticed how much he resented them until the time came to choose between his progenitors and his real family. Not for a moment he hesitated and even less regretted his decision. After all, real bonds were thicker than blood.

"Master Marcus! I was not expecting you here today," his house-elf greeted and the man had to smile at his little and loyal friend.

"It's time Tubby."

"I understand, sir, I will have everything ready."

"I trust in you, dear," the man told the smiling elf. "Give me a few minutes to speak with them and I'll call you."

"Yes, sir!"

Marcus patted Tubby's head with gentleness and walked towards the basement, humming a merry tune. When he entered the room, torches lit up, illuminating the eerie place. The light revealed two shackled people who were glaring at him. With a simple wave of his wand, a chair appeared from thin air and Marcus sat on it.

"You were both terrible parents, you know?" he asked rhetorically, his eyes focused on the metal cage that rested in the corner of the room. "Every time I did something wrong in your eyes, you would lock me up here for days. If Tubby wasn't there to take care of me, I wouldn't be here today. I was so scared of you, but I did my best to be a good son so I always wondered why you hated me so much," Marcus said, smiling at his parents.

He pointed his wand at his mother and her mouth was uncovered. The woman looked ready to yell but the look her son gave her was enough to stop her.

"We didn't hate you," she whispered in a flat, hoarse voice. "That is until you betrayed us."

"I guess clobbering me when I was a child was your version of a hug."

"You needed to be raised as a true pure-blood heir, but I see we failed in turning you into a decent human being," was the woman's toneless answer.

"You should know by now that being a Death Eater and a decent person are not synonyms. In any case, I came here to say my farewells."

"So you'll finally kill us..." the woman acknowledged as a hint of a smirk appeared on her face. "We know that you're a coward; there's no way you'll harm us. And even if you managed to, the Aurors would find out."

"Perhaps, or perhaps not. In the eyes of the law, I'm an exemplary worker and you two are simple Death Eaters. Tubby!" he called his elf, who popped into the room a second later.

"We're preparing the area, sir."

"Excellent, I'll take them and we can begin."

The elf disappeared and Marcus smiled at his parents. With a flick of his wand, his father's mouth was uncovered. The young man ignored the penetrating glare of the older man and cast a full body-bind curse on his mother.

"You were always a disappointment," the older man said in a raspy and almost unintelligible voice. "You think your position will protect you? Do you even think you have the guts to kill us?"

"I won't kill you," Marcus said, huffing at the ridiculous notion, an action that made his father tense. "You know how the Longbottoms were attacked - no need to dirty my hands when I can do something better."

The man's eyes widened at his son's blunt revelation, but before he could speak, the full body-bind curse also hit him and he could only watch as his only son levitated him and his

wife to their terrible fate while the boy hummed that merry tune that he sang to himself when he was a child.

## Chapter End Notes

I loved this chapter! I have so many plans for Dumbledore and other thingies. Can't wait to reveal everything, hehe ^.^



# Yule Upheaval

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry Potter walked towards the great hall at a steady pace, ignoring the intense stares and giggling students. Today, he took the stupid decision of going alone to the library and, of course, he was regretting it already.

From the moment the ridiculous Ball was announced, his admirers redoubled their efforts to woo him. Honestly, the situation would almost be hilarious if he was not affected by it. Many people tried to approach him, but considering he was always surrounded by his friends, few had the guts to actually talk to him. Unfortunately, this did not mean he was left unharmed.

Dozens of letters were sent to him every single day and they all met the same fate: feeding his fireplace and keeping the common room warm all day. However, the brainless students kept pursuing him through even more letters and crass gifts, not having the decency of leaving him be. Harry swore by his sister that, if this situation continued, many people were going to discover why you didn't mess with Harry Potter. As his thoughts took a more violent turn, a curious sight stopped him in his tracks.

Emilia Selwyn was standing in front of a Gryffindor boy. One of her arms was pushing the boy behind her while the other held her wand, ready to take action. In front of her were two older Gryffindors and a Hufflepuff, cornering her.

"You weren't so bad, once, but look at you now! Protecting a disgusting mudblood!" the Hufflepuff sneered at the Slytherin prefect.

"I opened my eyes. Too bad you didn't do the same, Corbin," Emilia said in a deceptively calm tone.

"You turned into a disgusting blood traitor!" one of the Gryffindors hissed.

"And what will you do about it? Insult me? How original, Richard." Considering the situation Emilia was in, Harry considered she was acting a tad too reckless. He liked it though.

"I personally find curses more amusing than insults," the Gryffindor girl spat.

"Oh my, Sarah! Are you finally able to cast those curses you dreamt about? Good for you! I'm sure your parents' will no longer call you their shame," Emilia taunted the Gryffindor girl, who turned a violent shade of red.

"You will pay for that, you disgusting blood traitor!"

"Do whatever you want to me after the child leaves," Emilia said, not even flinching at the wands directed her way.

"See? You were corrupted, but I can guide you on the right path," the Hufflepuff student said as he neared the girl, only to be pushed back.

"Not even in your wildest dreams, Corbin."

"Hmm, then I think the time to teach you a lesson arrived, though it's a shame to mar that pretty face of yours."

The student raised his hand to hit Emilia, but the expected slap didn't come. Harry watched from the sidelines out of curiosity, but he wouldn't allow anyone to harm those who were under his protection. The group seemed surprised by the sudden interruption, but Harry paid them no mind and placed himself beside Emilia.

"For your own good, leave," he sighed, already feeling tired by the interaction.

"And what will you do, boy?" Corbin asked in a taunting tone. "Call the teachers? Just because you cheated to become a champion doesn't mean you can challenge us."

"You, leave and call a teacher," Harry told the cowering Gryffindor student, who seemed to be paralysed in fear. "Don't worry, nothing will happen to you," he promised, smiling at the young student, who hesitated for what felt like an eternity. At last, he nodded and scattered out of the hall.

One of the bullies tried to curse the boy, but the spell was stopped by a shield. Harry eyed the students in front of him with distaste and could understand at last why the castle was so agitated before. *So that's why I felt so uneasy*, he thought, wondering if that was how Luna felt every time she had a presentiment.

"Your fight is with me."

"And what can a mudblood do? We're Gryffindors - the teachers will never choose a slimy snake over us."

Was it wrong to pray for patience when you didn't believe in a god? Perhaps it was more hypocritical, yet Harry prayed for patience or may Mother Magic forgive him because he was about to snap.

"Remember you forced me," Harry told the group with a heavy sigh.

Two of the harassers watched in horror as their friend fell to the ground and began thrashing about as if she was possessed. The Gryffindor girl did not utter a single sound, but it was unnecessary. The pain was etched on her expression.

"What are you doing?! Stop now!" Corbin demanded and pointed his wand at the youngest Slytherin. He was unable to hide the tremble of his hands.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, sporting a pleased smirk. "It's your friend who's torturing the girl while you silenced her."

Harry sighed as the Gryffindor student hastily threw away his wand when he noticed he indeed was the one torturing his friend and fell on his behind, scrambling away from the wand as fast as possible. The student began heaving and Harry looked away in disgust, wrinkling his nose when the sound of liquid falling into the ground reached his ears. The girl on the floor stopped moving, but her ragged breaths reverberated in the corridor. Perfect, two were neutralized and only one threat was left. Harry noticed the Hufflepuff's expression morphing and an almost crazed glint reaching his eyes. That was the look of a cornered beast that was about to do something stupid. Harry knew that expression too well.

"What did you do?!" Corbin yelled as he took a few steps back, wand still pointed at the Slytherin duo.

Without thinking twice, the boy sent a curse that was intercepted by a shield. The three bullies were petrified and a furious Pomona Sprout stomped towards the students, with the young Gryffindor boy hot on her heels.

"What is the meaning of this?" the professor demanded after casting a patronus.

"I'm not sure of that myself, ma'am," Harry told the angry woman, giving her the most innocent expression he could manage. "I was walking to the great hall when I heard them insulting Emilia and decided to intervene."

The slightest of the smirks was directed at the students as the professor took their wands. "I cast a confundus charm on them and that boy crucioed his friend while the other silenced her... I wonder what would have happened to us if I didn't act so quick."

"Give me your wands," the professor ordered after taking the wands of the three bullies.

Without hesitation, the two Slytherins handed over their wands. That was the moment at which the other Heads of the Houses plus Professor Kowalski and Madam Pomfrey decided to appear, approaching the group in hurried steps. Paying the newcomers no mind, Sprout cast a *Priori Incantatem* on Harry's wand. A *confundus* and a *protego* appeared in thin air, only to vanish when the woman lifted the charm. The process was repeated on Emilia's wand with similar results. The silence seemed to drown the hallway as the minutes stretched on.

"What's going on?" McGonagall demanded while Madam Pomfrey examined the two downed students.

"Those three were harassing Mister Creevey when Prefect Selwyn intervened," the Head of the Hufflepuff House began explaining after taking a deep breath. "They began insulting and threatening her. Seeing this, Mister Potter intervened. Mister Potter, Miss Selwyn, if you could fill in the gaps."

"Of course, Ma'am. I was patrolling when I heard a few Gryffindors speak about... They were talking about blood-purity and how a Muggle-born was finally going to be punished," the girl said as her jaw tightened. "I immediately questioned them and searched through the castle until I found Richard about to curse Mister Creevey, so I cast a shield around him and tried to reason with them. Corbin was going to attack me when Harry intervened," she finished and her cheeks gained a pink tint.

"I was going to the Great Hall for dinner when I noticed those three cornering Emilia," Harry continued, not even reacting to the glare that Snape was giving him. "I cast a confundus charm while I stopped... Corbin, was it? From slapping Emilia. I was really surprised when he silenced his friend and the other cast a crucio on her."

"That is a grave accusation, Potter," Snape almost growled as his sneer got more pronounced.

"Isabelle, I think you should be the one to analyse their wands," Minerva muttered as the emotion drained from her visage. "Neither Pomona nor I should intervene."

"Very well," the woman agreed in a glacial tone, taking the three offered wands. "Proigoumeno Xorki," she muttered, and a list of spells appeared above each wand.

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes and Professor Sprout gasped, covering her mouth in horror. Flitwick's expression hardened and Kowalski followed suit.

"This is no longer under our jurisdiction. I will contact the Aurors," the youngest teacher muttered. "We should also speak with the Headmaster."

"Albus has not been feeling well, but please ask one of the elves to inform him after speaking with the Aurors," Minerva said in a toneless voice.

"Miss Glashow shows the signs of someone who was under that curse. I will take her to the infirmary for treatment. After resting for a few hours, she will be more than capable of answering questions," Pomfrey announced as she levitated the student and left the hall.

"I think you had enough for today," Flitwick told the two Slytherins and the youngest Gryffindor. "Go to the hall and enjoy your dinner. We will take care of this." The man promised, with a forced smile plastered on his face.

"Yes, sir," Harry told Flitwick, uninterested on the outcome of the situation. "Let's go."

The unconventional trio walked in silence until they reached the doors of the great hall, where a cacophony of voices could be heard from outside. While Harry was lost in his thoughts, his companions were too busy blushing, though not for different reasons. Absentmindedly, Harry opened the heavy doors and the attention of the students was once again centred on him.

"Thank you for protecting me!" the Gryffindor boy yipped as his ears turned even redder, proceeding to run away without waiting for an answer.

"He's quite excitable," Harry commented as they walked towards their table. "Good job, Emilia."

"It was an honour," she answered in a hurried breath.

Harry nodded at the prefect and sat in his usual place at last. He shook his head slightly when he noticed the inquisitive stares of his friends. The dinner was spent in companionable silence and the Court left for their headquarters, ignoring the ever present unwarranted attention.

"So what happened? The teachers bolted out of the great hall when a patronus arrived," Daphne informed him while sitting on her favourite coach.

"Nothing much," Harry muttered as he glared at the pile of presents in the middle of their sitting room. "Three morons were trying to bully Emilia and a Gryffindor kid." Everything else went unsaid.

"Should we expect any surprises?" Fred asked with a tired sigh.

"One of them will be expelled, if he's not sent to prison," Harry answered, sitting down beside Adrian and laying his head on the backrest. "Never mind that, there are more important matters to take care of. I realized our tactic of having the Slytherin teach our ideologies is perfect for the long-term, but we need a plan that has an immediate effect. If the book about the Founders isn't enough, then we'll have to take an active role."

"I believe the first step is identifying the students who believe in that dogma," Neville began saying, a prominent frown on his normally calm expression. "But no matter what we do, change will take time. Harry, there are some things we all grew with and others we ignored until we met you. It will take time for people to-"

"It's not a lost cause, but it will take time," Luna agreed, sharing a look with Neville.

Harry stayed silent long enough to make the others uncomfortable. With a sigh, he abruptly stood up. "I'll be in my room."

There were moments where he needed to be alone and this was one of them. He would apologise tomorrow... Maybe.

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The Court watched Harry leave without uttering a single sound. Luna shook her head when Fleur tried to stop Harry, putting an end to any kind of protest the others may have.

"Elizabeth is the only one that can calm him whenever he's in one of his moods," Blaise explained to no one in particular after long moments of tense silence.

"He'll be okay, right?" asked an anxious Justin.

"Eventually," Terrence sighed, "just don't ask him about how he's doing or talk about what happened today. Harry sometimes has these moments and he just goes to his room until the next day. Tomorrow he'll be fine."

"And here I thought Harry was the emotionally stable one," Viktor tried to joke, but ended up grimacing at his words.

"He is," George agreed, "the thing is that he's... ehm, Harry is not..." the boy stumbled on his words and looked at his brother in search for help.

"Harry's different from us," Fred said and raised his hand when he noticed the number of people who were about to protest. "He normally doesn't show much. However, there are certain topics he is... intense and a tad too sensitive about."

"Fanatic," George muttered, not nearly soft enough, earning a disproving frown from Cedric.

"Equity. That's the real reason why he's doing everything in his power to change the magical world," Neville muttered in an almost inaudible tone, looking at Theo intently.

Theo sighed, knowing he had to be the one to explain it. Curse his friends' lack of adequate vocabulary and curse Harry's overly complicated personality.

"Perhaps it's the way he was raised or all the things he went through that made Harry the way he is. He mellowed over the years, but he's still... ruthless and quite fervent regarding his ideologies," Theo explained as a sad smile spread upon his lips. "He trusts us with his life, but not with his heart."

With simple words, he tried to describe one of the most complicated human beings he's ever met. The boy who entrusted delicate details to his friends, but never told them about his life. The boy who held all of their secrets and offered none of his own. The one who knew their hearts inside and out, yet never revealed his... Perhaps one of the most ruthless people in the world and yet the kindest Theo met. Unmerciful yet caring, passive yet violent, persuasive and charismatic yet aloof and cold... Such was the dichotomy of Harry Potter.

The boy who emulated Icarus in the zenith of his flight. Thriving, going higher and higher, until the adrenaline clouding his sight made him forget how far was he going, until it was too late... And just by looking at the way Harry was acting lately, it would not take long for the wax to melt off his wings.

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The next day, a tense atmosphere dominated the great hall. Students were whispering amongst each other, casting furtive glances towards the staff table, where some well-respected figures were conversing with the teachers. On his throne-like chair, the Hogwarts headmaster was resting. His wispy white hair looked dull, the bags under his eyes betrayed his lack of sleep and, if one paid attention, the crevices of his face looked even more pronounced on his almost skeletal face. It was quite shocking to see the formerly jovial Albus Dumbledore being victim of the ruthless Father Time.

Beside Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall looked as severe as ever while conversing with an old woman. The old woman, in question, would appear to be McGonagall's age if it was not for her snowy white hair and pronounced wrinkles. Besides the formidable women, a scarred man was talking to Professor Flitwick while his magical eye examined his surroundings.

Mad-Eye Moody, the infamous Auror and current head of the DMLE was in the school and, if the dour expression of the adults was anything to go by, some terrible occurrence took place. Professor McGonagall stood up to give the announcement and a heavy silence descended upon the room.

"Good morning, students," McGonagall greeted. Her grave expression did nothing to appease the children's anxiety. "It is a shame to begin the day with this news, especially for us, teachers, because we did nothing to prevent this from happening."

The woman stopped talking and closed her eyes. The room was so silent a graveyard would resemble a party in comparison.

"Before we begin, let me introduce you to Auror Moody and Madam Marchbanks. Both of them have important news to deliver," Flitwick said, his face lacking the amicable smile almost everyone was used to seeing the man wearing.

"Today, three students were expelled from Hogwarts," McGonagall announced and ignored the surprised gasps that echoed in the room. "Corbin Beaufort, Sarah Glashow, and Richard Partridge, as of today, are no longer students of this institution." The woman's word's resounded throughout the hall and many felt a chill down their spines. "The reason for their expulsion is simple. They were bullying a student until a prefect intervened. However, this is not what surprised us from this event. The reasons behind the attack did. As we all know, pureblood superiority is an ideology most families follow despite not being amongst the Sacred twenty-eight. For all of those who don't know, the sacred twenty-eight refers to the families that are truly pureblood, or at least that is what the author believed.

"However, this title means nothing in the real world. Many of the so-called purebloods resorted to inbreeding in order to maintain their status, which only resulted in extinguished families and... less than desirable traits being passed down to the future generations. The ridiculous ideology of purebloods being superior ran rampant for so long we grew immune to all the problems it causes. This means we failed all of you by pretending everything was fine and, for that, I apologize. We allowed this ideology to harm innocents for far too long. This ends today," the woman stated, signalling to Professor Flitwick.

"Indeed, this ends today," the man agreed. "From now on, the words mudblood, blood traitor, or any insult related to blood superiority will earn you an immediate suspension. Bullying, of any kind, will earn you an expulsion. These are measures we should have taken long ago, but believed them to be far too harsh. However, the event that took place yesterday proved us wrong. From now on, Hogwarts has a zero-tolerance policy against bullying and the punishments will also become more severe. Our eyes were opened and we hope to change this school for the better. Madam Marchbanks, if you would be so kind as to explain all the changes that are going to take place."

"Of course," the old woman agreed while she examined the students. "For all of those who don't know, I am the Head of the Education Regulation Department, which means that I, along with select others, am in charge of Hogwarts' curriculum and many other details.

"First of all, after the Yule break, two counsellors will be assigned to each House. They will be available 24/7 to all students. If you need to talk or have doubts about any subject, not necessarily school related, go to them. They aren't allowed to reveal information unless you give them permission, so don't worry, your secrets will be safe with them. In the past, the prefects were supposed to fill this role, but we know this position was perverted and, on many occasions, used to prove individual superiority rather than provide help. Therefore, the criteria for all the prefects, including the Head Girl and Boy, will change. These requirements include: A minimum average grade of Exceeds Expectations in the end of year exams with a maximum of one Acceptable, passing an evaluation in defensive magic and basic healing,

and clean disciplinary records." As Madam Marchbanks listed the new criteria, most of the prefects groaned at the extra work that was thrown at them.

"This means all the current prefects will be tested," Flitwick announced and the mutinous students decided to stay silent when they caught a glimpse of his expression. "But these are not the only requirements. Being a prefect is an honour granted only to the best students. They are given more privileges and responsibilities, which means they are held in higher regard. Students from all houses will be interviewed in order to give us feedback about how the prefects are carrying out their roles. If we catch any irregularity, the perpetrator will be disciplined. This said; if anyone wishes to give up their badge, don't be afraid. It is a quality to recognize your limits."

"This leads us to our next point," McGonagall said and the angry glint of her eyes dulled, leaving a tired woman behind. "The Heads of the Houses are also held in higher regard, but few of us have took our responsibilities to heart. It causes me great pain to know my inaction harmed you and I apologize once again for failing you. All students will be interviewed in order to find out how you feel about your current Head and whether you wish for another professor to take their place. Aside from that, the curriculum will be subject to a few changes, but Madam Marchbanks will be explaining this."

"There will be changes indeed," the old woman agreed. "As we all know, Muggle Studies is an elective subject once you reach your third year. However, few know how important Muggle cultures are and how much can they affect us. Therefore, this subject will become compulsory for the first and second years, along with a few others that will be added. Muggle-born and half-blood students tend to have less knowledge about the magical world and our traditions; hence, we found a way of helping them. Similar to Muggle Studies, Magical Studies will teach the young mages the basics of our society. If you don't wish to take either of these courses, then you will have to take a test after the Yule holidays and your final score will decide whether this subject is compulsory for you or not."

"Through our research, we found different ways of remodelling Hogwarts' curriculum, following the examples of other countries. Mathematics will be taught from the first year until the third. This subject will give you the basis for different magic branches such as Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Alchemy. Also, different professionals will be visiting the school in order to give you an idea of what their careers consist of. We are hoping to enlighten you about all the possibilities you have in our world and, if possible, motivate you to find your path in life. This is the beginning of a new era for Hogwarts, and I am eager to see the fruits of our labour reflected in you!"

As inspiring as the old woman's words were meant to be, few students applauded the initiative of having even more classes. The half-hearted applause suffered an early death when the head of the DMLE stood up.

"This school is partially under the jurisdiction of the Ministry," Auror Moody began explaining, "however, no official has the authority to intervene in Hogwarts' affairs unless there is an internal problem that directly affects the students and, thus, the future generation. For many years, this school was in the eye of the storm because of the multiple scandals. Minister Bones decided it is time to intervene."



"From tomorrow onwards, Aurors, along with other professionals, will be inspecting this school. They will examine every millimetre of this castle, searching for any possible dangers and finding ways to improve it, so don't worry when you see a group of Aurors patrolling the grounds. Also, while speaking with the teachers, I found a problem that will be treated as the crime it is instead of the 'natural mischievousness' many believe it is," the man pronounced those words as if he consumed something particularly nasty. "Love potions. I am sure you all heard about them. Almost as brutally effective as an Imperius and just as lethal."

This comparison caused many gasps within the students, and more than one paled at the brutal fact that was thrown at them.

"You heard me alright," the head of the DMLE barked, "those potions are dangerous so, from now on, their use is banned in the school. They will be classified as a type of magical rape, and the crime will be treated accordingly, age notwithstanding. So I advise you to think twice before doing something stupid and losing far more than what you will ever win."

At the scarred man's words, many students would put ghosts to shame with how pale they were. The professors watched in silence.

"On a much merrier note," Madam Marchbanks said after clearing her throat, breaking the tense silence of the great hall, "I have a few announcements regarding the Yule Ball. As it is a night for the youngsters, different bands will be playing that night. The most notable are: DRAK, System of an Up, and the Bulletproof Scout Boys."

The woman's announcement served to break the tension. Excited students whispered amongst each other and more than one high-pitched squeal could be heard from delighted fans.

After waiting for the commotion to pass, Madam Marchbanks continued. "I know you're excited, but I must ask you for some restraint. The way you carry yourselves is the way the artists will remember you and, thus, remember our country. Be on your best behaviour."

Despite the merry announcement, the penetrating gaze of Auror Moody did nothing to ease their nerves. There was no doubt change would take over Hogwarts and would destroy the system like a devastating hurricane taking over a small village. Few of the previous ideologies would survive; of that, there was no doubt.

Yes. Everyone could feel the change coming, but only a few were able to understand how deeply the future was affected.

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The days before the Yule Ball were marked by excitement and furore which dominated the students and teachers alike. However, Theo could hardly see the appeal of the event. Sure, girls would look even prettier and guys would look somewhat decent for a change. All in all, free eye candy... Perhaps if he was any other teenager, he would be anticipating the night, but he was not a normal teenager. He was Theodore Nott, sole heir to the Nott family and a member of the Hogwarts Court. He was surrounded by good-looking people on a daily basis, so he developed some kind of immunity against beauty, unlike his less evolved peers.

Theo glared at the Ravenclaw who was eyeing Flora. Without hesitation, he placed an arm around the girl's shoulder and the other student looked away at last. Flora didn't even react to the contact, continuing her animated chat with Fred. He could always join in, but all the potions, phases, colours and Morgana knows what else made his head ache.

Theo looked to the front, and his neutral expression turned into a pronounced frown.

As always, Harry was busy reviewing a folder while his food remained untouched. Ah, this was almost the norm whenever possible problems were involved. Unfortunately, problems seemed to pour in every single year.

Harry was an enigma - of that, Theo held no doubt. However, there were a few simple things to unveil about the boy as long as one paid enough attention.

Harry always looked impeccable, annoyingly so, but if you paid attention, one could see the slight bags under his eyes and the ever-present empty vial of navitas potion resting on his night table. Everyone in the Court knew Harry Potter slept the bare minimum to keep functioning.

No matter how many times Theo tried to broach the subject, Harry would pay him no mind. "There are important things I need to take care of." That was the answer he was always given. The best he could do was try to help and hope the young Potter didn't burn out before his time.

Another detail few noticed about Harry was, to Theo, as obvious as the glaring sun: his eating habits. Few people were aware of this, but one of your first relationships is with food. Your preferences and habits in that area give away tons of information about a person. Knowing this, Theo paid special attention to the boy when their friendship began. The first thing he noted was that Harry had impeccable manners, but although his movements were graceful, there were certain occasions in the past where he hesitated slightly when manipulating a utensil. Harry Potter didn't have practice, but he had the knowledge. This was enough for Theo to know all those fantastic tales about Harry's adventures were that exactly - unrealistic stories.

Unlike most children, Harry didn't enjoy sweets and had certain abhorrence for meat. He also consumed only the necessary, never placing a single spoonful he wouldn't eat on his plate. Theo immediately knew his only friend had limited access to them, because their taste was more acquired than innate. *A deprived childhood*, Theo concluded. Sometimes, being able to see all this was more of a curse because he would rather not know his only friend at the time went through such hardships despite his tender age.

Through the years, Theo managed to compile data about Harry Potter. Was it enough to know him? Of course not. But it was enough to know about him, and that was better than nothing. The Court's King used language as a barrier. He was always formal and eloquent, only relaxing his speech patterns when Elizabeth was present or when he felt comfortable enough. Also, Harry tended to have unusual shifts of moods. One moment he could be playful and the next he would stop speaking with you, his eyes focused on something you couldn't see.

Perhaps the most worrying of Harry's habits were his coping mechanisms. They began training during their first year, but Harry pushed himself beyond his limits, harming himself in the process. It was nothing obvious, but Theo could notice the slight limps and sharp breath intakes, followed by the relieved sigh when the boy's magic healed his body. Physical exercise turned into Harry's outlet and Theo didn't know whether he should be relieved his friend hadn't found a more destructive hobby, or worried, because no one else seemed to notice how Harry was hurting himself.

Yet another coping mechanism Theo began to loathe with vehemence was Harry's way of dealing with stress. The boy would bury himself in even more work in an effort to feel in control. This was perhaps the most worrying habit Harry had. During these times, the bags under his eyes would be more pronounced and he would barely eat few spoonfuls of food. Also, Harry flinched at the slightest noise, acting almost like a paranoid war veteran instead of the student he was.

However, there was a single detail that worried Theo the most. Harry's habits worsened after summer. To be precise, after visited Manager Ragnok and the real identity of Voldemort was unveiled. Theo had multiple theories on how this discovery affected his friend, but without Harry's confirmation, they would remain theories.

"Ouch! What's your problem?!" Theo hissed at Neville, nursing his tender arm.

"You weren't listening," was Neville's simple response. "You should thank me, Daphne offered to snap you out of your trance herself." This last part was said in a whisper and Theo nodded, not thankful, but a bit relieved.

"We were talking about Yule," Hestia offered.

"Are you also obsessed about the blasted ball?" Theo almost groaned

"Nope, but we're curious," George exclaimed as a devilish smirk appeared on his lips. "We're betting on who will take who as dates to the ball."

"What are the pools again?" asked Adrian while frowning at the notebook that he was working on.

"Flitwick will take Sprout, Snape will ask Kowalski but will be rejected, and Kowalski will end up going with Mister Albee or some other handsome bloke," Fred provided, smirking at his brother.

"I wouldn't be so sure about the last one," Daphne muttered, looking thoughtful. "When I went to Hogsmeade last Sunday, she was eating with Sirius' friend."

"Lupin? Are you sure?" Draco asked, looking doubtful, though a slight smirk stretched his lips.

"Of course, they had tons of books on their table... I think Lupin was helping Professor Kowalski with her classes, so stop imagining things," Daphne muttered, then shrugged and kept eating.

"You are no fun," Draco huffed, a pronounced pout directed at her. "Whatever. Who do you think will take who? No, Luna, you're not allowed to answer," he said, making the girl frown at him.

"Honestly? Who cares?" Cedric said and raised his hands when the blond menace was about to complain. "Hear me out. We already know who the champions are going with, mainly because we're the champions. No one cares about Valerie, and Iwan invited our lovely Daphne," he explained, ignoring the stink eye the *lovely* girl was giving him. "All the people of interest are in our group, so who cares about the others?"

"How did Cho take the news?" Justin asked the Hufflepuff prefect.

"Not sure and don't care. I had a crush on her last year, until the entire bullying thing. Then, we barely shared two words. We were never really friends, just flirted around a bit. I doubt she cares either way."

"How did your housemates take the news?" Fleur asked, looking at Neville.

"Some older guys are trying to incinerate me through glares and others have a sudden interest in being my friends," the Gryffindor boy answered, smiling at his date for the ball. "To be honest, Davies is the one we should worry about."

"The captain of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team?"

"That one. He's been looking at me with murder in his eyes. Maybe he was hoping to be Fleur's date," Neville commented, smiling at the French girl.

"That... that... enculé has no opportunities with me, in this life or the next!" announced a scowling Fleur. Her loud declaration was enough to break Harry's trance, never mind the fact he was sitting beside her.

"Do I want to know what poor soul you're insulting in such a way?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow at the girl.

"Davies."

"And who's that?"

"The Ravenclaw who believes all girls are in love with him," Theo provided to his blissfully ignorant friend. Seeing Harry's confusion at the description he added, "An idiot."

Harry only nodded and went back to his work, much to Theo's frustration. Before he could argue though, a tired Viktor arrived at the table, collapsing on the nearest empty place.

"I guess Professor Kowalski's class was hard," Luna commented, handing the tired male a glass of water, which he took gratefully.

"Torture. That's what it was," Viktor groaned.

"We have classes with her after lunch, so I would appreciate it if you told us nothing of the torture that awaits," Draco said, a fake smile plastered on his face.

"You will be surprised at what she will teach you today."

"Whatever... You never told us who you're taking to the ball," Draco commented as his lips twisted in a mischievous smirk.

"If I tell you now, you will have to organize my funeral," Viktor deadpanned.

"But we need to know," Hestia whimpered, giving him her best puppy-eyes.

"And I need to survive," he answered, imitating the girl.

"I bet it's a girl from your school," Adrian said.

"It could also be a boy," Justin added, looking thoughtful.

"As long as it's human or humanoid enough, who cares?" snapped Daphne, rubbing her temples.

"We do!" Fred protested.

"We have bets to run, woman!" the other Weasley agreed.

During their banter, they missed how Luna winked at Viktor and the mischief shining in both of their eyes throughout the meal.

Harry ignored his friends' playful banter in favour of all the documents he had to review. The Yule Holidays were approaching fast and there were still matters to be sorted.

The changes in the school would be taking place soon, though he had to wait until the next term for all his conditions to be implemented. Nevertheless, the school was going to change for the better... Thinking about it, he didn't even know why he was doing so much to improve an almost hopeless place instead of changing institutions. Maybe because of his friends, or because of the trust that his House placed in him, or maybe because Hogwarts chose him as her protector. Either way, he saw it as his duty to better the castle.

There were a few times where Harry wondered what would happen had he not decided to emulate his mother. Would his life be easier? Perhaps. Maybe then his only worries would be school and his sister. Yet, he could not imagine that kind of life being fulfilling. He lived for the challenges. Otherwise, his existence would be quite pointless.

He looked up from his papers when he felt a burning glare on him. No one was looking at him, but his memory evoked blazing blue eyes, glaring at him. With a sigh, he relented and took a few bites of his food, not really savouring it. For some reason, he was never able to enjoy food while he was focused on other things. Maybe his brain could only focus on one thing at the time and his magic took care of the physical aspect. Or perhaps it was another curious habit he possessed.

"Let's go, we have Defence," Harry announced when he noticed Professor Kowalski and her assistant already left.

Followed by many groans, some chuckles, and the ever-present gaze of the student body, the group exited the great hall.

"You look tired," he told Daphne, noticing the bags under her eyes.

"Look who's talking," she answered, directing a half-hearted scowl at him. "I'm beginning to deal with my family matters with the help of Miss Blair... I don't know how you do it," she whispered, rubbing her temples.

"The key is accepting sleep can always come later," Harry joked, but placed an arm around her shoulders, guiding her.

"I really admire you. It hasn't been a week and I'm ready to keel over."

"You must be really tired if you're admitting that in broad daylight."

"Shush, you," she muttered, poking his side.

"Look over there; those Aurors are inspecting the moving stairs," Theo told the group, gesturing towards the red clad officials and a few more casually dressed people.

"Hopefully they get to fix them," Neville commented, frowning at the stairs. "Aside from us, all the students have problems with them."

"Yeah, especially the firsties," Theo agreed.

"Wait a minute. The Aurors are inspecting the whole school, right?" Blaise muttered as his eyes widened in alarm.

"What's the problem with that?" Neville asked, nearing his friend.

"That they are inspecting the school! What if they find the rooms?" the dark-skinned boy hissed, urging his friends to understand his dilemma.

The group went still. Daphne woke from her sleepy state and Draco from his food-induced trance, but before anyone could panic, Harry spoke.

"The castle won't allow them to," he said, looking around for any possible eavesdroppers. Satisfied with his search, he continued, "Hogwarts' magic may be unstable, but her will to keep those rooms hidden is strong. We would have never found them had the castle not accepted us as her protectors. There's no need to worry."

Harry offered a weak smile to his friends and kept walking towards their next class.

Lately, his lack of sleep began getting to him. Maybe he should enjoy a full night of sleep for a change. *As if!* The cynical voice in his head reminded him how hard it was to fall sleep,

worsening significantly whenever he was busy. Sleep deprivation was nothing new, yet it still managed to be annoying.

So lost in his thoughts he was, that Harry did not notice that they arrived at the Defence classroom, with Neville guiding him to their usual place. Professor Kowalski was having a murmured conversation with Mister Albee; both were frowning at the notes on the desk. The door was abruptly closed when the class began. Fortunately, all the students knew better than to arrive late.

"Good evening," the woman greeted, looking even more serious than usual. "For months, I wanted to teach you this lesson, but I was given permission to do so only a week ago. As we know, these are not easy times. A group of criminal extremists are waiting to wreak havoc, guided by the terrorist Voldemort. They are the reason for today's lesson. First of all, who can tell me who Voldemort is and how he rose to power... Yes, Miss Granger?"

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named identity is unknown," the girl answered in a rushed breath, looking at the stoic woman. "The first wizarding war began in the seventies. He recruited dark creatures and they took everyone by surprise. The government wasn't ready to react and that's why he had the upper hand from the beginning."

"Your answer is book perfect, Miss Granger. However, there is a reason why this subject has no particular guide book," Mister Albee told the girl in a gentle voice. "Most books are biased by the author and history is written by the victors, never forget this."

"Indeed," Kowalski agreed, "Voldemort never recruited dark creatures. He recruited the people British society shunned, promising them equity."

"A dark creature, by the Ministry's definition, is a creature whose nature is to harm mages. By the ICW standardized definition, a dark creature is the one that has an affinity for the plane of shadows, that being its natural habitat. There is an obvious difference, but we're not going to discuss that today," Mister Albee explained.

"To answer my own question: Voldemort is a simple man whose name is forgotten. Had he something to lose, he wouldn't have left his life behind. He rose to power by promising equal rights to the outcast members of society, by promising superiority to the power hungry, and by making people believe he was unbeatable. There is another factor that contributed to his rise; do any of you have any idea of what it may be? Miss Granger?" the woman nodded after noticing no one else wanted to answer.

"He had many powerful followers and the element of surprise."

"Wrong and right. In the beginning, he barely had two dozen followers. They would have been easily subdued by Aurors had it not been for this detail. Does anyone have any ideas?" The teacher waited a few moments before nodding at Daphne, "Miss Greengrass, if you would."

"He used the unforgivable curses."

"That's right. Now let me ask you, how did this give Voldemort an advantage?"

The adults gave the students time to think, but Mister Albee signalled a Gryffindor student when the boy seemed to have realized what the answer was.

"Do you have any idea, Mister Thomas? Your analyses tend to be quite good."

After taking a deep breath, the boy answered. "Aurors weren't allowed to use unforgivables and there's no magical shield against them, so they were more worried about dodging and protecting themselves than attacking."

"Excellent, five points to Gryffindor!"

"Now, can anyone tell me what the three unforgivables are and why they are classified as such?" Professor Kowalski asked.

Harry's lethargy disappeared as the class advanced. He observed with distaste the students who flinched at Voldemort's name and with certain curiosity those who seemed fascinated with the topic. The bushy-haired girl's efforts to make the professor call her name grabbed Harry's attention as well, and he wondered what need the girl had to prove her knowledge. Maybe she loved the attention. How could he blame her? Years ago, he did too. Although, he would have never sacrificed his image the same way the girl did.

"Mister Longbottom," the teacher called when Neville raised his hand.

"The cruciatus, the imperius, and the killing curse."

"Excellent! Can you tell me why they were outlawed, Mister Weasley?"

The boy in question looked like a deer caught in the headlights, but his eyes adopted a determined look once Professor Kowalski encouraged him with a slight smile.

"I read a book that said it was because the people abused its use during the dark ages... I... My oldest brother is a curse breaker, and... Well, according to him the reason was different," he answered, his face contorted in a strange way and his ears turned red at the attention he was receiving.

"Go ahead, Mister Weasley," Mister Albee encouraged his student.

"Well, he said it was because not every wizard can use the curses and the Minister of that time was afraid to be removed from power."

"Your brother is right," Kowalski nodded. "That is the real reason why they were deemed illegal, along with a few technicalities. Five points, Mister Weasley."

"But they're dark magic, that's why they were outlawed," protested a Gryffindor girl whose name Harry was unable to remember... It had something to do with colours or maybe it was flowers?

"Actually Miss Brown, we don't know what branch of magic they belong to. According to the official reasons the ICW gave after the Global Wizarding war in order to make the unforgivables illegal on a worldwide scale, only the cruciatus is dark in nature, the others are



pretty neutral. To explain myself better, the Imperius was banned because it robs someone of their free will, which is a human right. Likewise, the killing curse violates the right to life that every human has," Mister Albee told the girl.

"But the unforgivables are only able to be cast by evil mages," the Gryffindor protested.

"All Aurors are required to learn the three curses before being let out into the field, no exceptions. The bad reputations of these spells came from their misuse."

"This is what we wished to discuss today," the woman said. With a wave of her wand, papers flew across the classroom towards each student's desk. "I compiled this information through different sources, along with the help of Auror Moody and the consent of Minister Bones.

"According to different records, the imperius was created centuries ago by the chief of a wizarding community to transport prisoners. Later on, its use was popularized by Alfred the Strange. The exact roots of the cruciatus are unknown; some believe the Romans created it, others blame the northern Vandals. In any case, it was first popularized by Parvus before the fall of the Roman Empire. Later on, it was popularized in Britain by Motto the Inadequate. The killing curse, however, has the most curious origin. Can anyone tell me what Avada Kedavra means? Yes, Miss Patil."

"Abracadabra means I will create as I speak. Avada Kedavra is its direct opposite. It means I will destroy as I speak."

"Indeed... I know most of you were told this curse was created by dark mages during the dark ages. They're wrong. Does anyone have any theory? Mister Malfoy."

"I read in one of my ancestor's diaries that isn't the original incantation, am I right?"

"You are," the woman nodded, "can you tell us what else you read?"

"Extinguo misericordeae. Kill for mercy," Draco announced, looking at the adults. "First, this spell was created to kill different animals without damaging the leather or fur. Then, merchants began using it when their horses got too hurt during a trip, in order not to prolong their suffering."

"Five points to Slytherin," Kowalski announced. "Your information is right, anything else you can tell us?"

"My ancestor's youngest child was killed with this curse when some Dark Lord popularized it. All I know is he did his best to outlaw it."

"Rodin the Bald. He's the one who began misusing this spell. However, he changed the incantation. Never forget that words have power and intent is the real force behind any spell. This spell was meant to kill for mercy, not for pleasure. Therefore, many times, it didn't work, and magical shields could block it. In that way, the incantation morphed to what we know today as Avada Kedavra," Mister Albee explained.

"As you can see, none of these spells have an evil root. What made people believe they are dark is the misuse and the intent behind them," Professor Kowalski explained. Pointing her wand at the blackboard, where different charms began to appear. "Magic is guided by intent, as simple as that. Can anyone give me an example of how using one of these curses would end up being beneficial?"

The silence seemed to stretch for far too long. At last, someone spoke.

"My da is a Muggle, so I lived most of my life in the Muggle world," a scruffy Gryffindor boy began explaining as his skin acquired a chalky tone. "Muggles have this cruel side... When I was young, my da and I went to the forest. We found a skinned fox that was still alive. Da took pity on it and killed it. The killing curse would have been much kinder for the animal."

Harry observed the boy. There was a slight sheen of sweat on his forehead, his fists were clenched, and his eyes unfocused. The image reminded him of his past. The first time he realized people were the scariest monsters. Perhaps he should take pity on the boy, but Harry couldn't bring himself to care. The only thought that ran through his mind was whether Elizabeth would one day wear the same expression.

"That's an excellent example, Mister Finnegan, and its original purpose," the woman agreed. Her expression was much softer while speaking to the boy. "You may not know this, but the Imperius was used to treat patients that had a certain addiction to different potions. However, this practice was discontinued when the Healers realized the patients got addicted to being under the curse instead."

"How is that possible?" a Slytherin girl that had particularly broad shoulders asked.

"Well, that's harder to explain. I doubt many of you heard about neurotransmitters," Mister Albee said and grimaced at the confused expressions that most of the class gave him. "Mister Potter, do you have any idea of what they are?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at the pleading look the man was giving him and acquiesced with a sigh. "They are endogenous chemicals that enable neurotransmission." The boy felt an unnatural urge to face palm at the blank expressions he received from his classmates, but decided to try again. "The molecules used by the nervous system to transmit messages between neurons, or from neurons to muscles."

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, willing himself to remain calm. Many dared to look at him as if he was spurring nonsense. The nerve! Professor Kowalski had a glint in her eyes that made Harry feel suspicious and Mister Albee looked quite satisfied with himself.

"How do you know that?" the bushy-haired Gryffindor demanded, annoying him even further.

"School," Harry almost snapped. His tone implied how ridiculous the question was.

Mister Albee decided to intervene before an argument began. "That was the correct, if a bit too technical answer. Going back to the theme, the Imperius makes you feel happy, extremely

so. People get addicted to the feeling and face violent after-effects when they're lucid once again... How to put this? It's like if a person was doused with cheering potions every two hours for three months, what would happen then?"

"The person would be really happy for three months, but then he would barely be a person," the younger brother of the twins answered, his jaw remained slack at the surprise. "Bloody hell..."

"Then we have the cruciatus," Kowalski said, "Although there are few cases of long-term exposure, the evidence is clear. It's able to break the mind, leaving the victim with permanent damage. The process and after-effects are nothing you will be able to understand unless you're interested in becoming Healers. At last, we have the killing curse. Despite it having the worst reputation, it still may be the most merciful one. After all, it grants immediate death and, many times, that's kind compared to the alternative."

For a brief moment, the woman looked far too old. As if she had seen too much and held knowledge she didn't wish to possess. The moment was broken when Kowalski's eyes focused on her class once again.

"In summary, the unforgivables are simple spells people hail as the most powerful and evil when they are not. They are the result of ignorance spread. I'll give you a simple example, what is levicorpus used for?" the woman asked.

"Lifting a body," muttered a confused dark-skinned girl.

"Right, now tell me. Is it entirely harmless? I can cast it on any unsuspecting person and then cancel the spell when they are high enough," professor Kowalski explained, making many gasp. "Does anyone have any examples? Miss Patil."

"I don't know if this counts, but in India, Healers use the blood boiling curse on people who received bites of venomous animals, though only a specialist is allowed to cast it."

"An excellent example indeed. It shows that every spell requires control and the intent for it to work. That will be your homework for the holidays. I want each of you to write five ways in which different curses can be beneficial and five ways in which apparently harmless charms can be misused," Mister Albee said, making more than one groan.

"Now, onto the practice for the day," Professor Kowalski announced. "As we're discussing control, we're going to practice each charm that you learnt so far. Let's see how much control of each spell you have and how much you need to improve. Come on!"

The students were led to the practice room, where different objects were waiting. Mister Albee placed each student in front of a small rock that lay on the ground. Thanks to the room's size, there was more than enough space between them.

"Wingardium Leviosa is one of the first charms you learnt. I want each of you to levitate your rock until it meets your eyes, no lower or higher, then we will be increasing the weight and maybe even the number of objects you can lift. Begin!"

If Harry was honest, the class was not bad. But then again, classes with Professor Kowalski rarely were. The woman had talent to teach, he would give her that. However, despite his growing apathy, he enjoyed the lesson.

He didn't really pay attention to the practice as he was far too focused on his own exercise to care about the others, but for some reason, he felt as if someone was glaring at him the whole class. How curious was that?

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The members of the Court made their way back to their headquarters with dragging feet and loud complaints, leaning on each other in order not to fall.

"I told you to take it easier," Harry reminded his complaining friends, who, for some unknown reason, decided to push themselves past their limits.

"How were we supposed to know that we would end up magically exhausted?" Theo asked in a whiny voice.

"Maybe thanks to all the hours we dedicate to practice," Neville answered.

"Or perhaps through all the lessons that Professor Flitwick gave us on magical exhaustion," Daphne added.

"Not that any of you are doing better," Blaise snapped, adding fuel to the fire.

"What's that?" Draco asked as his face contorted into a mix of surprise and mild disgust. Without knowing, the boy effectively put a stop to the oncoming discussion.

"A cat, obviously," Daphne told her fellow blond in a condescending tone. "As misshapen as the creature is."

While his friends were busy arguing, Harry eyed the curious cat in front of them. Quite large for it to be a normal cat, lion-like ginger mane, and yellow eyes that were far too intelligent for someone to feel comfortable with. Yes, the cat's face may not be the most adorable one, Harry acknowledged without hesitation. But for some reason, the boy felt a strange surge of warmth in his chest when he looked at the creature.

With careful steps, he approached the cat. Unlike what Harry was expecting, it did not shy away; instead, its eyes were focused on him. First, he offered his hand for the cat to smell. Much to his surprise though, it bumped its head against it, as if asking to be petted. When Harry complied, the cat began purring and a small smile appeared on his face.

"Who are you?" Harry asked to the cat, while searching its neck for any kind of plaque or identification. Nothing.

"Harry, let's go," Theo said, signalling the way to their room.

"Do you want to come with me?" Harry asked the cat. As response, the feline stood on its hind legs, willing the boy to lift him.

"Aw, come on! Are we taking that with us?" Draco groaned, glaring at the cat.

"Well, maybe you can learn from it," Blaise remarked, mussing the blond's hair.

"Should we get you a snake to teach you?"

"As long as I'm not a Parselmouth, I'm not willing to engage with reptiles that are more likely to kill me," the Italian boy stated without hesitation.

"Where do you think the cat came from?" Daphne asked, nearing the cat in order to pet it and receiving a judging glance in response.

"Maybe it belongs to a student, or it may be a resident from the castle," Harry said with a shrug. "If no one is searching for it, then I'm going to keep him."

"You don't like cats," Theo said, looking confused.

"What gave you that idea?"

"You never get close to Flora and Hestia's little devils."

"They're too small; I wouldn't want to hurt them," was Harry's easy answer.

The moment they arrived at their room, they were received by curious glances. Many looked at the boys who threw themselves on the nearest couches, disregarding the people who were already using them. Of course, most were more interested in the cat than in the complaints surrounding them.

"Last time we saw you, you were only six," Fleur commented in a lackadaisical tone, poking a tired Neville in the side.

"So, where did you get a cat?" Justin asked.

"You do know that your sister is definitely going to ask for one, right?" Terrence commented.

"We're still not sure who the cat belongs to," Harry said, dismissing the questions. "He'll stay with us for the time, and if he has no home, then I'm keeping him."

"So, since when are you a cat person?"

"I've always liked cats, though I've never wanted to have a pet," Harry answered, petting the purring cat on his lap.

"So, is everyone ready for the ball?" Draco asked, deciding the cat monopolized enough attention.

"Astoria's pretty excited," Daphne told the boy, a smirk playing on her lips. "How gentlemanly of you to ask her."

"You bullied me into asking your sister. Whatever, at least Astoria listens to me and we can have decent talks."

"That is because she is as obsessed with her hair as you are," Daphne retorted with a defeated sigh.

"Will you meet Iwan during the Holidays?" Fleur asked, looking at the girl.

"We still don't know. It depends how things go during the ball I guess," Daphne said with a shrug, and then she smiled at her friend. "I am glad you're going to join us for Yule. Honestly, Hwasa is a bit too outgoing and when she's with Elizabeth... They're chaos personified."

"Not to mention when Flora and Hestia join them," Adrian said, shuddering in an exaggerated fashion.

"Yeah, the castle gets pretty chaotic during Yule," Blaise agreed without hesitation. "Though we have loads of fun."

"True enough... So, what are the plans for the holidays?" Theo asked, looking at Harry.

"I'm going to travel with my sister for a few days. Aside from that, Lizzy wants all of us to visit the Muggle world, so be ready for whatever she's going to introduce you to," Harry warned, not looking worried in the least.

"I've always been curious about their world," Adrian commented. "What does she want to do?"

"I don't know and don't want to know."

"Well, this Yule is definitely going to be an adventure," Neville commented.

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From the moment Moody entered her office, Amelia knew nothing good was going to come. The man rarely bothered with social niceties, such as knocking or announcing his presence. She eyed the man in front of her and sighed. *It's not like I enjoy resting either way*, she thought, sarcastically, waving goodbye to her early dinner.

"Whatever happened just spit it out," she ordered the scarred Auror.

Another chill slithered through her spine when the man closed his eyes, looking defeated. Without any word, he produced a folder from his trench coat and handed it to her. Amelia opened the folder; the gasp that escaped her lips was the only sound in the room.

"They were attacked approximately three weeks ago," Moody began explaining. "A week ago, the Carrows complained about not being able to contact Travers senior or his wife, and their house being empty. Considering who was making the report, we didn't bother with it until one of my Aurors heard Travers' secretary complaining about her boss not coming to his office for more than two weeks. We decided to take action. Kingsley led the inspection and that's what they found. Both were tortured with the cruciatus, the exact same way Alice and Frank were."

"Did you find any other clue?"

"Absolutely nothing. For a moment, I thought the Lestranges were responsible, but the crime scene was much cleaner than what they would have left. The copycats are getting better, and much bolder... We no longer know what to think about them," Alastor admitted with a heavy sigh.

"Why's that?"

"Look at the last pictures."

Amelia did so, turning the pages until the last pictures were shown. Emotion drained from her visage, leaving behind a serious and somewhat pale Minister.

"That is right, Travers senior and his wife were Death Eaters," Moody confirmed, allowing his posture to sag, revealing how tired he was.

"We need to keep this quiet," Amelia muttered. "This scandal could harm Marcus' career even though it's just beginning... How many people are aware of this?"

"Of the crime, pretty much the whole department. Of the mark, Kingsley and the two of us. The bodies were already transported to Saint Mungo's, but no healer is allowed to examine them until I arrive."

"Great, I'll contact John so he examines them in person. Whatever the results are, we're going to hide their allegiances," Amelia said, closing her eyes afterwards and waiting a few moments before speaking. "I don't know how to tell Marcus."

"He's a good kid, but overall, he's a responsible adult. He needs to know the whole truth, Amelia."

"I know... It's just – he's so young and already deals with so much bullshit. He doesn't deserve to go through this."

"No, he doesn't. But then again, good people rarely deserve what happens to them," the man muttered, looking grim.

"I'll call him, but please, you tell him."

Without waiting for an answer, Amelia cast a patronus. The adults waited in silence, unwilling to start any further conversation. Minutes seemed to stretch for too long until; at last, the office's door was opened. Marcus entered the room with quick steps, wearing a slightly worried expression.

"Is there a problem?" the anxious male asked, looking ready to take action.

"Take a seat, Marcus," Madam Bones told the newcomer, unable to look into the boy's eyes.

"Did I do something wrong?" Marcus asked, tilting his head in confusion and sitting on the closest available space.

"Not at all, lad, but there's news that concerns you," Moody began, eyeing the thick folder in the woman's hands before looking away. "There's no gentle way of saying this, so I'll tell you without sugar-coating it. Your parents died approximately three weeks ago." The young man's eyes widened at the news, then his brows furrowed in disbelief. "We believe the attacker is the copycat who is giving us so much trouble lately."

"Is there any particular reason why they were attacked?" Marcus asked in a raspy voice. His unfocused eyes made Amelia itch with the desire to comfort him.

"Both of your parents bore the Dark Mark," Moody stated with no hesitation, observing the young man's reaction. "You knew."

"I had my suspicions," Marcus agreed, not moving a millimetre.

"I guess that's why you cut almost all your contact with your parents."

"I tried to lead them through the right path and they tried to lead me through the path they chose. In the end, our distance was inevitable. The last time I spoke with them was almost two months ago," the young man admitted with a sigh.

"We will keep this as quiet as possible," Amelia announced after a brief moment of silence. "Unless you want the details to be public."

"Even though we became almost strangers, they are... were my parents," Marcus muttered, still looking perplexed by the news. "Though I want to keep all the shady details far away from public knowledge... Moody, what are your suspicions about those criminals?"

"I'm no longer sure about what it is that they want," the man admitted as a scowl marred his features. "They seem to be a group of extremists with an unknown goal. Maxime's attack was brutal and this one was no kinder. First, they followed the pattern of the McKinnons' massacre and then of the Longbottoms. If it wasn't because of the Aurors who were killed and how organized they are, we would believe them to be lunatics who admire the Lestranges."

"Did the Aurors find anything in my parents' house?"

"Kingsley didn't allow them to explore, using the lack of a search warrant as an excuse. We won't touch a thing if you don't want us to, lad. It's your house after all."

Marcus nodded at the man, but remained silent for a few moments. "Please, search the house. We might find information about Voldemort and his movements."

"I will only take my most trusted Aurors," Alastor promised, knowing the boy would not change his decision.

"Take the week off," Amelia said after a prolonged silence, her tone leaving no room for arguments. "I'll help you organize the funeral, don't worry about the details."

"Thank you, Madam, but I don't think it would be wise for me to have much free time in this situation," Marcus answered, giving his boss a forced smile. "I'll do some paperwork in my



office before heading out. Besides, what would you do without me?" he tried to joke, but ended up grimacing.

"Marcus, you know that you can count on me, right?" Amelia asked when the dispirited boy stood up.

"I do, you've been really kind to me... I just need time alone to assimilate the situation."

Amelia hugged the young man, perhaps applying too much pressure, but it was her way of showing affection. Marcus accepted the hug and the woman's heart broke at how unsure her young friend seemed to be.

"Whatever you need, my doors are always open," she whispered. Squishing him one last time, she let go and watched the young man who experienced far too much leave the office.

"He reminds me so much of you," Alastor commented, his posture looking relaxed, for a change. "You were also very young when you lost your family. Only twenty-four when you began taking care of your niece. No one was expecting you to, yet you did. I remember it took you a while to recover."

"Well, you were a great support. It was hard to go on without the family that loved me so much," was the woman's monotonic answer. The 'unlike Marcus,' was easily inferred from the way she was glaring at the pictures of the folder.

All the pictures from that page showed the same thing from different angles, which perhaps made it even more disturbing. A cage. Nothing big or special, but it was swarmed with numerous scribbles. Some were about to fade while others looked as fresh as if they were just written.

I am Marcus. That was the phrase that was repeated over and over again with different degrees of penmanship. In a way, it was a horrific yet heart-wrenching piece of art, depicting the pain of a young child who turned into an adult.

"If they weren't dead, I would have killed them myself," Amelia muttered as a lone tear fell down her cheek.

"I would have helped you. Knowing they suffered until the last second isn't enough punishment compared to what those monsters did to their child."

"Alastor, get rid of anything that may harm Marcus," the Minister stated without hesitation.

"Will do."

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It was a normal day at work for Marcus Travers. Go to the Ministry's archives in the morning in order to speak with the elves organizing the place in case they had found anything interesting. Among the dozens of forgotten books and strange manuscripts, the blueprints of the Ministry were yet to be found, much to his distaste. Then, the customary meeting with the Minister took an awkward turn.

Yes, Marcus knew about his parents'... demise, per se. The awkward part was utterly forgetting about the incident. Well, at least he wouldn't need to worry about any suspicions falling on him. He opened the door of his office and raised an eyebrow at the intruder sitting on his couch, sipping tea as if they owned the place.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, not even pausing to glance at the trespasser.

"How cold," a sultry voice muttered. "Not even a greeting or a 'how are you, Camille?'"

"Well, considering how much you seemed to hate me the last time we met, I think it would be pointless. Besides, you're still alive, a sign of decent health. Now leave before I call the Aurors."

"But I guess you want to do the honours yourself," the woman snapped, frowning at him. "You changed so much. Before, you were the perfect gentleman, and now..." she left the phrase lingering, pouting in an effort to convey her disappointment.

"If you have something to say, speak before I kick you out. Unlike you, I have things to do," Marcus told the woman, taking different folders from his desk and not even gracing her with a look.

"I came here to give you my condolences."

"So you heard," Marcus commented while concentrating on a paper.

"Of course I did, I'm training to be a healer, after all... I know you had something to do with their deaths." This declaration only earned a raised eyebrow. The man kept working, ignoring the intruder without problems. "There's nothing you want to say?"

"Why should I?"

"So you're admitting it," Camille accused, scowling at him.

"When did I say that?" Marcus retorted, riling up the female.

"Your mum was acting weird lately. From talking about how disappointed she was in you, she began praising *her darling son*. Your dad was no different. Suddenly, he began doing things no pureblood would ever do. I know you did something to them," she hissed. The young man didn't miss her tense posture or that she seemed to be holding something in her pocket.

"Perhaps they changed."

"They didn't!" she screamed at last, rising to her feet. "You did something to them!"

"Why don't you think they changed? Is it because of their attitude or because of their allegiances?" he answered, almost smirking at the comic way in which the intruder's eyes widened. "We both know who they served. Now tell me this, dear Camille, why are you so interested in my parents' deaths? Who sent you?"

With every word, he approached the woman, who lost all her colour.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she whispered, taking a step back.

"Bingo," Marcus muttered, smirking at her. "Did your father promise you the Mark in change of some kind of blackmail material over me?"

"I have enough evidence to prove you did something to your parents," Camille wheezed, trying to look intimidating.

"Then go ahead, present it to the Aurors. I really want to see what happens."

Marcus sighed when Camille clenched her jaw. The room went silent.

"Why are you so cruel to me?" she asked at last, collapsing on the couch. "You used to be so kind, always taking care of me."

"People change," Marcus said with an uninterested tone.

"You would have never spoke to me this way if it wasn't for Potter!" she accused him, recovering her anger.

"My parents would have killed me."

"You used to love me until he came along!"

"Seriously? Can't you just say why you are here instead of throwing a tantrum? I really am a busy person."

"Let's date again and I won't present the evidence I have against you," she stated, trying to look calm.

"Ah, so that's it," Marcus acknowledged, somewhat amused at the situation. "My parents promised something to you while we were dating and now you still want it."

"In a way," Camille admitted without the slightest hint of shame. "But I also want you."

"We broke up years ago, get over it."

"I didn't want to break up!" she growled in frustration.

After taking a deep breath, Marcus decided he had enough. "Dear Camille, I don't think you'll ever be able to understand. Harry opened my eyes and now I'm able to see the truth. I tried to do the same for you, but you refused to see the reality and decided to continue believing in the stupidity of pureblood superiority. Honey, that alone would have made me leave you for your ignorance makes you – what's the word? Unappealing, disgusting, revolting, abhorrent... abominable, that's it," he said with a smile, while delicately lifting the tearing girl's chin. "Let's not forget about my parents forcing me to date you."

"You loved me," she whispered, her voice breaking in the last word.

"We had fun," Marcus admitted, smiling at her. "However, you have nothing to offer me to make me want to be with you. You're the perfectly-bred pureblood wife, nothing a real man would ever want... You are nothing for me, dear." With those words, tears began falling down the woman's cheeks and a ragged sob escaped her chest. "Go back to your father and tell him he should find an easier target," Marcus whispered into her ear.

The man walked to his desk and grabbed a few folders before walking towards the door.

"I will give you one last piece of advice," he said, not reacting at the woman's state. "The path you are walking on will only destroy you. Open your eyes before it's too late."

Marcus exited his office. After taking a few steps, he heard a pop and looked to the side.

"Why did you let her in?" he almost whined, scowling at his elf.

"Master didn't eat breakfast again, so I thought it would be a good lesson," Tubby answered, a cheeky smile plastered on her face.

"Allowing my crazy ex to try to blackmail me is not beneficial."

"Don't worry, master, I deactivated the listening device she was carrying and she has no access to any of your documents."

"I meant it for me," Marcus muttered with a slight pout. "Never mind, let's go to the castle. Aunt Eleadora will be happy to have us early, for a change."

## Chapter End Notes

If you know what the bands are, don't say their names. I wanna read some nice references 🤔🤔🤔

# Cataclysmic Ball

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Rita Skeeter analyzed her new article with care. Despite spending weeks on it, she still felt dissatisfied with the result and she was only working on the introduction! Yes, it was perhaps one of her best pieces, but it still needed more work. Much more work. The woman took a sip of her already cold coffee, grimacing at the taste. With a tired sigh, she stood up, her back popping when she stretched, and walked towards the kitchen for a new mug of coffee. As she looked around, she couldn't prevent a wide smile from appearing.

Two weeks ago, she was relocated to a safe house in a Muggle neighbourhood. She was ready to live in a small place, not much different from her own. Not in her wildest dreams she ever hoped to own such a marvellous place. Well, technically, she didn't own it, but if she kept up the good work she might be rewarded.

Rita pressed the button on the coffee maker, smiling at the fascinating invention that made her life easier as she reminisced the day she met Harry Potter.

His features were one of the things that she remembered the most. It was like seeing a young, male version of Lily Potter, with a little bit of James in the mix. With certain shame, she remembered her poor reaction when meeting the young boy. Yet, what she would never be able to forget was the almost animalistic instinct that begged her to either run away or bow her head and comply. And, if Rita was anything, it was an ace in the survival game.

Harry Potter possessed that indescribable aura of power around him. Even as young as he was, his magic was powerful - oppressive yet alluring. Accepting his offer was the only option she saw at the time and doing her best was the logical path... but becoming loyal to him? Oh, that was her decision and not once had she regret it.

Emitting a low groan, Rita went back to the table she was working on. She glanced at the book resting on the couch and, with nimble hands, she grabbed it. The Truth Behind the Founders. With a finger, she caressed her name printed on the cover. Finally, all her dreams came true.

Ever since she could remember, she was enamoured with books. To write one was her greatest dream and ambition. That is until her education began.

Being the clever young witch she was, Rita was sorted into Ravenclaw. She was a dedicated student who stood out in almost every class, being exemplary throughout her seven years in Hogwarts. That was the surface.

The House of the Ravens tended to be ruled by jealousy. If you couldn't be the best, then at least you could make the best feel worthless. Considering how cruel children could be, her teenage years were hell on Earth. Nonetheless, she learnt to survive and thrive in any

environment. She learnt from their cruelty and returned it in earnest. Thinking about it, that may be how her mean side was born...

In order to survive, Rita began compiling delicate information about her worst aggressors, biding her time and spreading rumours when they were at their weakest. During her sixth year, everyone knew that whoever messed with Rita Skeeter was going to become a social pariah sooner or later. Therefore, the last years of her education were the most peaceful and perhaps the loneliest she ever lived.

When graduation came, she forgot about her dream of becoming an author after discovering the satisfaction that manipulating the masses brought. That is how she ended up as one of the most famous, or infamous, depending on whom you asked, reporters of Magical Britain. A great accomplishment indeed, but it was built on sand - sooner or later, her career would flop. Rita was always aware of that.

Now, though, her standing in the community became more stable than ever and her reputation was somewhat cleaned. This book, however, would be the one that cemented her career and the article... Oh, Merlin! This article was the one that was going to put her name in history!

The Man Behind Voldemort - the simple title that would shake the whole magical community.

Well, she acquired none of the information herself and needed to sign far too many documents to have access to it. Not to mention the Unbreakable Vow she swore.

"It's all worth it, Rita," she murmured, needing the reminder.

She was only told to write the article, but she would be damned if it was published under any name that wasn't hers! Of course, she would have a psychotic Dark Lord calling for her head and Death Eaters hunting her down, but that was a mere occupational hazard. Nothing she couldn't deal with as long as Harry Potter supported her.

A cynical huff escaped her lips when she remembered those times when the sheer mention of Voldemort's name made her flinch. Perhaps knowing the man's real story turned him into a simple mortal instead of the demon most thought him to be. Then, she grimaced at the idea of talking with her fourteen-year-old boss about publishing her best work under her name. What a nerve-wracking meeting that one was going to be. But on the positive side, Rita doubted the boy cared whose name appeared on the papers as long as it was published.

She took a sip of her coffee, enjoying its warmth, and went back to work. After all, Rome was not built in a day.

"... but it burnt in one," she reminded herself.

And what a beautiful fire that would be.

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Harry Potter examined his reflection in the mirror. For the first time, he realized how much everything changed. His life, for starters, was totally different from what it was five years

ago.

Throughout the years, he noticed the small changes in the people close to him, but for some reason, he disregarded his own. Of course, it was hard to notice change when you saw yourself in the mirror every day. The epiphany that came over him while he examined his reflection felt as if he was comparing two pictures. One contained the reserved eleven-year-old who only trusted his sister and ignored the rest of the world. The other contained a fourteen-year-old teenager who somehow opened up to others, creating his own family in the process. Then, there was the physical aspect.

Both were tall for their ages, but while the younger one possessed delicate features and what appeared to be a frail physique, the other possessed sharp features and an athletic constitution. Harry may not have the same burly physique Viktor did, but he was healthy and strong enough.

"Are you really going to wear that?" Harry heard Draco ask, pointing at the red fur cloak Viktor was wearing.

"Yes," the male deadpanned, "it is the formal wear of my country... And my mum asked me to wear it," the last part was uttered in an almost unintelligible way.

"Yeah, yeah, is everyone ready?" Blaise asked in a lackadaisical tone, not really interested in the answer.

"I think we all are," Neville answered when he saw Harry walking towards the group, fixing his cufflinks.

"You look great," Justin complimented him.

"I would say thank you, but you should compliment my sister, she chose... this," he muttered, eyeing his clothing with the slightest of the scowls.

"You don't like it?"

"It confuses me," Harry admitted, taking a last glance at the mirror. "I'm not sure what colour I'm wearing or what style of suit."

"Well, it looks like a really fancy suit with a fancy robe... in a shiny grey?" Justin almost ended up asking.

"I really like the suits your elves designed," Theo commented, looking at the mirror. "They look much better than the traditional ones."

"And are much more comfortable to wear," Cedric added, still looking sluggish after his nap.

"If we don't get out soon, the girls will be waiting and Daphne will kill us," Neville reminded the group.

"Daphne will be too busy with Iwan," Theo reminded him but walked towards the door nonetheless.

"While I acknowledge the fact Daphne doesn't need protection, I think we should all keep an eye on her for tonight," Adrian told his friends.

"You just want to eye her up without being cursed," Terrence retorted, dodging the pillow that was thrown at him.

"So where are we meeting George and Fred again?"

"In the entrance of the great hall. Susan and Andrea will also be waiting there," Justin answered, looking at Blaise.

"Sure."

"You better change that funeral expression of yours before we arrive at the hall," Cedric snapped at Blaise. "Andrea's a really great girl and you invited her."

"Don't mind me, I'm just tired," was the apathetic response the Hufflepuff prefect received.

Harry observed this interaction and put a finger on his lips, signalling Cedric to leave the subject alone.

It was almost common knowledge among the Court that Blaise had a crush on Luna. It was also common knowledge he was unwilling to act on it. Therefore, he did not ask the girl to be his date for the Yule Ball, but Cedric did. Then, Blaise asked out Susan Bones' best friend. On the surface, everything seemed to be fine, but Harry knew better.

Blaise was jealous of Cedric and Cedric was somewhat angry with Blaise because he thought he asked the girl out of spite. He was not wrong, but that was not the point. The tension between the two of them began rising in an almost imperceptible yet gradual way, and that was the exact same reason why Harry was not interested in romance - it complicated everything. If their cold war didn't stop, he was going to put an end to it for the sake of their friendship.

It was good he had a sister to rely on for this kind of situation. Asking Professor McGonagall for permission to bring someone who was not a student of the school as a date was almost too easy. If anything, the woman looked disturbingly gleeful while she gave him authorization to use the Floo in her office. Being the smart person he was, Harry remained silent as the woman arranged the details with Sirius, an almost manic grin plastered on her face.

The group arrived at the Slytherin common room after a silent walk, but Harry had no time to wait for the rest of his friends.

"I'll be going to McGonagall's office," Harry announced, not even stopping to see his friends nod.

"I'll go with you," Viktor said, making him stop on his tracks. "My date will be waiting in the great hall either way," the tall boy explained, shrugging off all the inquisitive looks.

Harry only tilted his head but decided to comply. The pair walked in companionable silence for a couple of minutes.



"Won't others notice Elizabeth is your sister?"

"She'll change her hair for the night," Harry murmured with a slight smile. "Sometimes, she misses being blonde."

"I guess no one will link you two as siblings then."

"I hope so," Harry said, "I would prefer her to be out of the eye of the public for as long as possible... Will you tell me who your mysterious date is?"

"You will have to see it for yourself," Viktor answered with a grimace.

"I really am curious," Harry muttered but did not push for an answer.

They stopped before McGonagall's office and Harry knocked on the door. Steps could be heard inside, along with different voices murmuring amongst each other. Quick steps approached the door and it was almost yanked open by McGonagall, a knowing smile plastered on her face.

"Mister Potter, Mister Krum, you are just on time," the old woman said as a greeting, signalling her students to enter the office.

"You both look dashing," Sprout complimented the boys.

"Thank you, ma'am. Though, if you allow me to be bold, you look breath-taking," Harry told the woman, a slight smirk adorning his face.

"Such a charmer, I hope you don't take too much after your father."

"Don't worry, ma'am, I will undoubtedly follow my mum's footsteps, though I'm willing to take after Sirius for certain moments," he responded, a cheeky smile directed at the surprised teachers.

"Actually Harry, Sirius only had one girlfriend during school. His casanova reputation was because of your father," Filius told the boy, laughing heartily at his confused expression. "Not that James did any better in the romance department. He was besotted with Lily; all the girls he went out with left him after the first date because of it."

"What about Remus?"

"Well, his love life was almost non-existent for another reason whatsoever. But," the man said, dragging the word, "as with every teenager, he had his fair share of fun. They all did and you should also consider it."

"I'm fine for the moment," Harry said, deflecting what the man was inferring.

"So who are your dates?" Professor Sprout asked eagerly.

"A friend I met by coincidence, but we kept in contact. She wanted to see Hogwarts so I invited her," Harry answered with ease, though Viktor refused to follow his example.

"I'm guessing you're close then," McGonagall inquired, a wide smile on her lips.

"Close enough to be considered family," Harry agreed, making Flitwick chuckle.

At twenty to eight on the dot, the fireplace was lit by a bright green flame from which a person emerged. The conversation was swiftly interrupted. Harry looked at his sister and smiled. As red was her favourite colour, he was not surprised to see her wearing it, though her appearance did somewhat surprise him.

For years, Harry was used to seeing Elizabeth as the child he cared for and refused to see her as the teenager she became not long ago. Her blonde hair was held back by some kind of accessory he did not recognize and her light make-up emphasized her features. However, what surprised him the most had nothing to do with her looks but with her actions.

Elizabeth nodded to the professors and walked past him, towards Viktor. The fireplace glowed bright green once more.

Harry stared at an expressionless Hwasa and contained a sigh. Count on Elizabeth to find a way of involving the wayward princess without asking for his opinion. He shot Viktor an accusatory stare and only received a sheepish grimace in return. *So that's why he was so silent, the traitor*, was the only phrase that his mind could conjure at the situation. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, deciding he could always kill his sister later. Without wasting more time, he offered his arm to the girl.

"I'm glad you arrived safely," he said in an effort to distract himself.

"Sirius was really helpful, for a change," Hwasa stated while glancing around the room. "Good night," she greeted the professors. "My name is Hwasa Nur Wu."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, dear. I am Professor McGonagall, this is Professor Sprout, and this is Professor Flitwick," McGonagall said, a bright smile directed at the girls.

"Sorry for not greeting," Elizabeth announced with a heavy accent, claiming the attention of the room. "My English is no good."

"Let me introduce you to my friend, Eliza Petrova," Viktor said when the young girl looked at him.

"Well, now that we have you here, it's time to go to the great hall," Flitwick said, smiling cordially at the students and newcomers, trying to hide his amusement at the situation. "We will be going first to help with any last-minute preparations. You can wait in-"

"Here," an eager McGonagall interrupted her colleague, surprising everyone who knew her. "You, children, can wait here. Don't forget the champions open the ball, so be there at five to eight. And about tonight, as long as you escort your dates, my office will be open the whole night. After all, this ball is meant for you to have fun and curfews can ruin that."

"Ah, thank you, Professor," Harry said when it became apparent no one else was going to answer, though he was confused at why the woman seemed so more excited than them about

the ball.

The youngsters observed as the adults left the room and an uncomfortable silence settled for a few seconds.

"Before you kill me, you have to hear me out!" Elizabeth demanded, using Viktor as a human shield, ignoring his protests.

"Speak, then!" Harry and Hwasa snapped, looking at each other for a brief moment and proceeding to glare at the youngest person in the room.

"Harry, you're the one who doesn't want me to be linked with the Potter Family until the situation in the magical world is more stable," she began explaining, mashing her words together with how fast she was mumbling her excuses. "So I did just that. When they see me with Viktor they'll immediately assume I'm a foreigner."

"And since when do you speak with each other?" Harry asked in a deceptively calm tone.

"Luna gave me her communication crystal and your sister involved me in everything else," Viktor explained, raising his hands in an appeasing way, ignoring the betrayed expression Elizabeth was giving him.

"So what's your excuse?" Harry asked the girl beside him, giving up on trying to understand his sister's twisted schemes.

"Your sister threatened to tell grandpa about my secret sweet stash," the girl snapped, emphasizing the first two words.

"Stashes, actually," Elizabeth corrected, earning a glare from her friend.

"Didn't you consider telling me?" Harry asked Elizabeth.

"I wanted to surprise you," the girl answered with a slight pout. "I'm sorry."

The only thing Harry could do was pinch the bridge of his nose and sigh to contain the frustration that coursed through him. Of course, Elizabeth would not tell him in case he refused, which he would have done. While he liked Hwasa, he didn't fancy all the rumours that would flood the school regarding their relationship. If possible, Harry preferred to remain in the background as a silent observer. Unfortunately, that was a luxury he could not afford since his first year at the school.

"How's Aunt Eleadora?" Harry asked, deciding to leave the discussion behind and save himself the imminent headache.

"She was really excited-"

"You're watering it down. She took pictures of us from every possible angle and sent one of your elves to do the same during your ball," Hwasa corrected, collapsing on the nearest couch.

"Well, she only has Harry and me," Elizabeth said, shrugging. "By the way, it's nice to meet you at last, Viktor."

"I would say the same, but your brother is glaring at me," the male answered, shaking the hand that was being offered.

"Honestly, I'm excited to see Hogwarts at last!"

"Your professors seem kind enough," Hwasa agreed, "if a bit strange."

"So, what are we supposed to do tonight?"

"Well, we have to open the ball, then we'll have a late dinner," Harry muttered, sitting beside his unexpected date for the night.

"There are going to be different bands playing," Viktor supplied.

"I honestly don't know what to expect. Music in the magical world is so strange, but there are a few catchy songs," Elizabeth said, looking thoughtful. "Are there any good bands coming?"

"One from the Empire, they aren't well known, but grandpa believes they'll be great in the future."

"Well, I'm not expecting much," the youngest girl answered.

"Oh, before I forget!" Hwasa exclaimed, revealing a hand-sized box that she produced from heaven knows where. "Put this on."

Harry took the box and examined its contents. An extremely well crafted insignia lay inside, the Royal Family emblem shining proudly in the middle. The boy raised an inquisitive eyebrow, tacitly asking for the meaning of it.

"It's all political," the princess answered without a hitch. "This insignia basically means my grandpa gives his approval, so there won't be any major rumours flying about you, or more importantly, me."

"Doesn't it mean the two of you are courting?" Viktor asked, looking genuinely curious. At his side, Elizabeth looked ready to burst into laughter.

"Of course not!" Hwasa snapped, looking horrified at the idea.

"This one basically means mutual friendship and cordiality between families. The one that you mean has a white dittany on the left side," Harry informed his friend, feeling already drained.

Without asking for permission, Hwasa took the insignia and placed it on the lapel of his suit. Harry did not even move; after all, it was easier when someone did it for you.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the princess while the other two occupants of the room were too busy talking with each other.

"And why is that?" she asked, tilting her head.

"I don't have any present for you."

"Only you would worry about that in this kind of situation," she muttered with a huff, smirking playfully at him.

"Only you would allow a thirteen-year-old to blackmail you with candy." This remark was rewarded by a slight pout and an intense glare.

"You know my grandfather; he's more likely to hide my sweets only to nag me."

"And what makes you think that he doesn't know about them already?"

"My stupid blind hope and that all of my precious are still accounted for," was her cheery response.

"Idiot," he muttered, poking her forehead.

"Look who's talking," the girl retorted.

"Let's get going or we'll be late!" Elizabeth announced but waited for no response.

The group walked towards the great hall in companionable silence. Harry took the opportunity to appreciate the decor of the castle, something that he ignored on his previous trip. The first impression he got was that perhaps whoever was in charge of the decorations should find another job. Don't get him wrong, the place didn't look terrible, but it was below par for the occasion. It was a school ball, understandable, however, there were many international guests and their impressions of the school would be the impression of the whole country.

Harry almost grimaced when the cacophony of conversations reached his ears. This was going to be a really long night...

"There you are! It is about time you arrived!" Fleur exclaimed, stomping towards the newcomers with Neville hot on her heels.

"We still have time," Neville told the agitated girl in an appeasing tone.

Ignoring all this, Harry decided to introduce his sister and her friend. "This is Elizabeth, and this is Hwasa," he said, signalling each of the girls. "This is Fleur, this is Cedric, and this is Iwan. You already know the others."

"Sorry for that, I was worried," Fleur said after noticing the two girls.

"She was nagging me before you arrived, so thanks," Cedric told the newcomers, though his eyes were resting on the princess.

"Ehm, nice to meet you," Iwan said, touching his neck and looking self-conscious for some reason.

"Likewise," Hwasa greeted, giving the strangers a polite smile.

"Harry told me a lot about you," Elizabeth announced, smiling brightly. "... Well, not so much about you - Ivon, right?"

Harry could only just contain his need to facepalm at how frank his sister tended to be. Suddenly, he remembered why only his friends were introduced to her and pitied the poor souls who were trapped with the girl in her school.

"Where is Valerie?" Viktor asked out of the blue.

"Who cares?" Cedric muttered in an almost apathetic tone.

"Professor Valentin went to look for her," Fleur commented, finding a sudden interest in fixing Neville's bowtie.

"There she is," Luna said in her usual dreamy tone, though her gaze was focused on the snowflakes that were decorating the ceiling.

Harry looked to the side, where three people were approaching the hall with fast steps. Leading the group was a tall man with youthful face but hair as white as snow, clearly admonishing the two teenagers who were following him with their heads bowed. *How curious*, Harry thought, not remembering seeing the man before. Yes, he still remembered the day he arrived and how much more disciplined the Beauxbatons students behaved in his presence. However, he never caught a glimpse of the man's features... Not that he ever tried.

While the man himself was not of interest to Harry, his apparent penchant for equity and discipline did call his attention. Not to mention Fleur seemed to be more at ease in his presence than she ever was with Maxime. Ah, Valerie also mellowed a bit... At least that is what his friends told him because his interactions with the girl were null.

"Goodnight," the man greeted in a surprisingly deep voice. "I see everyone is present, good."

"Professor Kowalski was looking for you, sir," Fleur informed the man, smiling slightly.

"Ah, yes. Do remember to behave. Now, if you'll excuse me." After giving Valerie a stern gaze, he left the hallway.

"When are we supposed to enter again?" Daphne asked after a brief moment of uncomfortable silence.

"When McGonagall comes to get us," Neville answered with a sigh. "Does anyone know why the champions are opening the ball?"

"Well, formality calls for the organizers or celebrated persons open the event," Hwasa told him.

"Yeah, but we were not supposed to. According to Marcus, we just had to show ourselves for a while and then leave," Viktor informed the princess.

"According to Susan, it's because all of the champions got dates for the night and her aunt thought it was a great idea," Cedric told the group.

"Actually, it's because the teachers betted on who has the best chemistry with their dates for the night," Luna announced in a singsong voice.

At the young girl's declaration, most of the champions were left speechless.

"Well, one of your teachers sort of revoked the curfew for us so it's not that unbelievable," Elizabeth muttered, looking thoughtful. "I think they're going to be bitterly disappointed."

"It's time!" Professor McGonagall announced, approaching the group. "This is how we'll do it. I will enter the hall first to give the announcement, then each of you will enter in the order in which you were chosen to be champions. Count until ten before following. Afterwards, you just have to dance to a song and you can proceed to your tables and have dinner. The bands will begin playing at nine, so there's no hurry. Overall, don't forget to have fun tonight!"

Just as the woman finished her speech, the bell of a nearby clock chimed, signalling it was time. McGonagall nodded at the champions in an effort to encourage them and entered the great hall with her head held high. The cacophony that flooded the room was silenced.

"Let's organize ourselves," Harry stated. Not waiting for the people surrounding him to answer, he offered an arm to Hwasa, who took it gracefully. The other champions followed his example, though one did it with more reluctance than the others did.

The Yule Ball officially began.

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As Minerva McGonagall entered the great hall, the students stopped talking. The woman allowed a small smile to grace her lips, only for it to vanish when she saw Albus. Her old friend looked haggard, to say the least about his terrible state.

For some reason, he wasn't eating in the great hall for the last month. If that was not enough, the man barely left his office. The only time she tried to drag him out, kicking and screaming if necessary, she was quickly dismissed. Any other time, she might have put up a fight. However, she was far too shocked with all the maps, books, and notes that were strewn around the once pristine office. *Albus must be working on some more research*, is what Minerva told herself in efforts to excuse his recent behaviour. If the situation continued, she would contact Aberforth, consequences be damned!

"Good evening, students!" she greeted, ready to give the speech that she knew by heart, which was surprising considering how much she had invested in it. Namely, less than five minutes, but she had a great memory. "Tonight, we are celebrating Yule, or as Muggles call it, Christmas or Hanukkah. This ball is for all of you to enjoy, and more importantly, to remember the reason why the Trischool Tournament is taking place: to forge friendships. You are all given the chance to meet new people with different backgrounds and cultures; enjoy this opportunity to make friends that may turn into life-long confidants.

"You are all young," the woman announced, a mischievous smirk stretching her lips. "As youngsters, I am aware there will be misbehaviour. All I'm asking is to use your common sense and be safe. In any case, you will have more leeway for tonight, but the teachers will be patrolling the grounds just in case. Now that formalities are out of the way, our champions will open the ball!"

As the doors of the hall opened and the champions entered the room with their dates, Minerva couldn't contain the content and somewhat nostalgic sigh. Yet another generation came and would soon leave the school.

She watched as Harry Potter guided his date, whispering something into the girl's ear, making her smile. It was endearing to see yet another Potter in the process of courting, or at least that's what she hoped.

The day the boy asked her permission to invite a person who was not part of the student body, she was speechless. Minerva never expected him to date outside the school, but then she realized that is the only situation in which he would actually date. Much to her chagrin, she admitted Hogwarts was filled with either his fans or haters; there was no in between. It was a shame the youngsters didn't realize Harry Potter was not perfect and that fame came at a much higher price than any human could really afford.

In the eyes of the public, the poor boy had to be perfect and, if he committed even the slightest mistake, people would crucify him for it. He was not allowed to date or even be too close to any female, lest outrageous and ridiculous rumours would be spread. Once again, Minerva thanked Amelia for accepting the position of Minister. She heard from Filius the stupid articles the Prophet wanted to publish about the last Potter. Only Amelia's iron control over it and perhaps some intimidation techniques, courtesy of Moody, kept the worst of those slimy leeches at bay.

Better than anyone she knew how much words could hurt and how many lights were extinguished because of blind hatred. She took a minute to remember all those promising individuals who were long lost to pain. When she opened her eyes, her gaze focused on her favourite student.

It was almost eerie how similar the boy was to his mother, following her steps as if they were written directions. Both were excellent students, but overall, kind souls. Not to mention they had similar tastes... Far too similar for it to be a coincidence.

Sometimes, she wondered if a little bit of Lily was still alive in her son. After all, magic worked in mysterious ways.

More than a decade ago, Minerva had the opportunity to meet young Lily Potter's beau during one of the Hogsmeade visits. Yes, much to her growing frustration, the boy seemed to fit better with her than James. The boy respected her and her decisions, something a young James was never able to do. And yes, Minerva begrudgingly admitted the boy was so good looking that Lily and he made what looked like the perfect couple.

She thanked whatever was controlling this life for allowing James to become Head Boy. That year was pivotal for him to understand that his last name did not grant him superiority over



others. She also thanked Dorea, for disciplining her son in time. Until this day, Minerva had no idea why Dorea stormed into the great hall with her husband in tow during the boy's fifth-year, both looking at James with an inscrutable expression. For a week, James didn't attend classes. Afterwards, he acted like a different person. The pranks the Marauders pulled changed in nature; no longer were there crying victims. Sometimes, she wished she knew.

A peal of soft laughter interrupted her train of thought. The Asian girl was smiling as Harry lifted her, a slight scowl on his lips. Minerva took the moment to examine the girl further. The woman's first impression of her was simple, her brain shut down for a moment in order to try to assimilate the girl's exotic beauty. Her dark caramel skin contrasted with the pearly white dress she was wearing, her black hair was fashioned in an intricate style, held back by an ornate comb. Now, she could observe the girl acting as a teenager rather than the perfect doll she appeared to be in her office.

The girl was graceful and moved with Harry as if they danced a hundred times. There was also certain familiarity in the way they held a whispered conversation while ignoring the world around them. Yes! Minerva was certain that she would win the bet before the summer; she could almost savour all the sweets she was going to enjoy during her vacation.

"Don't even think about it, the pot's mine," Filius warned her, an amused smile adorning his face.

"Just look at them!" she grumbled, signalling the pair.

"Exactly, I am looking and that's how I know that Harry won't have a girlfriend this year... or in the near future," the man said with a sigh, the amusement vanished from his visage, leaving behind something that Minerva was unable to decipher.

Sometimes, she really wanted to see what Filius did, but she knew that her sanity would be obliterated by the knowledge. So she only smiled and placed a comforting hand on her colleague's shoulder.

Sometimes, it was better not to know.

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"They're looking at you," Harry whispered to Hwasa as they walked onto the dance floor.

"Who wouldn't?" was her easy response, a smirk pulling on the commissure of her lips.

For some reason, the student body was left speechless at the sight of the six champions entering the room, their eyes never leaving the group. Harry could understand them to a certain point. Fleur was leading the procession. While the girl looked stunning on daily basis, she put especial care into her appearance for the night, looking even more beautiful. Also, it was a surprise for the students to see Neville Longbottom, the quiet Gryffindor boy, as her date.

There was also Daphne. The girl could punch most male students and they would thank her. Tonight, she looked like a real ice queen - as beautiful and untouchable as ever. Not to mention the tiny, but considerably important, detail of the popular Cedric Diggory having

Luna as her date for the night. If that was not enough, two of the most popular champions had unknown people as companions.

Harry looked at his sister, walking in front of him, giggling at something Viktor said. That was the moment he decided that he really cared about the Bulgarian boy. However, if he got too close to his sister, then he would personally apologize to the Krum matriarch because her son would never be able to give her grandchildren.

"You're glaring," Hwasa admonished him in a whisper as they got in position to dance. "If you continue looking at Lizzy people will think that you like her more than me."

She used her nails to caress his neck as the music began playing and he had to use all of his self-control to not react. He did not want her claws anywhere near his body. While life was hard, Harry enjoyed living it, thank you very much.

"I like her more than you," he stated without hesitation.

"How dare you!" she hissed in faux indignation.

"Get your claws away from my jugular, woman," Harry said in the most even tone he could muster.

"You're no fun."

"I have literally seen you attack people with those," he deadpanned.

"Only a few... Okay, yeah, more than a few. That's the reason I keep them long," she whined, clearly wanting to make some kind of childish face but unwilling to do it in front of so many people. "Whatever, the old man wants to talk with you during the holidays."

"Did he say when?"

"He only said you should visit him. Don't look at me like that, I'm just the messenger."

They continued to dance in silence for a few moments. The song picked up in intensity.

"Are you sure you're going to be able to lift me?" the girl asked, a teasing edge on her voice.

"I don't mean to compliment you, but you don't look heavy."

"I do mean to offend you, but you look weak."

Harry scowled at her and lifted her without problems when the time came. However, he had to admit that she was heavier than he expected. How could something so small weigh so much? He kept all these thoughts to himself; otherwise, more than his pride would end up bruised before the dance was over.

"When did you have the time to rehearse this dance?" Harry asked instead. A heavy sigh was the only answer he received.

"Your aunt was really excited, she sent Ella to teach me," she reluctantly admitted.

"My apologies, Ella can be quite intense."

"She's a sadist," was the cheery response, a somewhat pained smile plastered on the princess' face.

The music stopped and the hall was filled with deafening applause. The champions gave a slight bow to the students and then proceeded to their table.

Harry took advantage of the moment to look for his friends. There, at a secluded table were the Weasley twins, talking animatedly with their friends. He could only recognize a few of the Gryffindor Quidditch team and a dark-skinned boy who tended to help them with their experiments. On a nearby table, Justin, Draco, and Blaise were talking with a group of people. Of them, Harry only recognized Daphne's little sister and Madam Bones' niece, yet he guessed the older girl who was sitting beside Blaise was his date. That said, this conclusion had little to do with his prodigious brain, as he liked to call it, and more to do with the blatant flirting the duo was engaged in.

On the other side of the room, there were the rest of his friends, sitting with older students. Adrian and Flora were laughing at something the guy beside Terrence said. Perhaps the same thing that made the boy blush a fiery pink. For some reason, Theo and Hestia were sitting with another group, too engaged in conversation to even look at the dance floor.

Seeing his friends interacting with people outside of the group made Harry smile. It was good their circle of friends and acquaintances extended beyond the limits of the Court. Humans were social animals and even the most solitary ones needed to interact with others every once in a while. Besides, he would feel guilty and mildly worried if their social lives circled around him.

"So, we're supposed to enjoy a late dinner and then dance some more?" Elizabeth asked of no one in particular as she eyed the champions' table, clear distaste in her expression.

"That's basically what a ball consists of," Daphne told the girl, though she mirrored her expression.

"At least we don't have to deal with pompous boot-lickers," Cedric provided cheerfully.

"Don't be mean to the boot-lickers," Luna admonished the prefect. "They like the taste of dragonhide. The ones you mean are called politicians."

Harry had to bite back the smile that threatened to appear. Count on Luna to animate the situation. When they were all in their places, food appeared in the middle of the table. With a sigh, Harry remembered why he didn't enjoy the food at school. Ignoring his plate, he filled his goblet with fruit juice and hoped Dudi was the one to make it; otherwise, he would stick with water for the night. He was not surprised when the princess and his sister were the first ones to dig into the desserts, followed closely by the other females. *What is it with the double X chromosome and the constant craving for sugar?* Harry wondered.

"What?" Hwasa asked in an innocent tone while she ate her ice cream.

"This is meant to be a late dinner."

"You're the one who hasn't even touched the food. Besides, it's far too late to have dinner."

"You're eating ice cream," he deadpanned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Your point is?" she asked, taking another spoonful.

Harry decided to ignore the girl in favour of his sanity. From a distant corner of his conscious mind, he heard his sister, Fleur, Daphne, and Hwasa having a heated debate about ice cream favours, with Iwan and Viktor being active contributors. Neville and Luna were having a calmer conversation about different types of plants and animals. He opened his eyes when he felt someone poking his side.

"At least I'm not the only one who isn't a fan of ice-cream or a nature connoisseur," Cedric joked, smiling slightly.

"Never say that in front of them, they'll try to exorcise you," he warned his friend, not entirely joking. "So how did the Quidditch match go?"

"Right, you were duelling with Flitwick," the prefect murmured. Harry wondered if he asked the right question when he saw the fanatic glint on the boy's eyes. "It was a tie. Tough match, that one, the three Gryffindor chasers recruited players from different houses. Honestly, Angelina has an eye for talent! If Fred hadn't asked her out then I would have."

"I'm guessing they're your toughest competition for the cup."

"Yeah, Fleur will make us train until we drop, she wasn't happy with the results."

"Your fault for making her the captain," Harry commented, amused at the pained expression of the older.

"We didn't make her the captain... Well, yeah, we sort of did," Cedric admitted sheepishly.

"Are you staying with us during the holidays?"

"I want to, but my father didn't like the idea," was the dejected answer he received.

"Are you coming to visit us then? One of my elves can pop you to the castle whenever you want."

"Really? Then yeah, I would really like that. Thank you, Harry."

"Don't worry about it; you're always welcome at my house. Besides, my elves need people to take care of or they'll rebel."

The conversation died there and they settled into a comfortable silence while Cedric ate his meal and Harry took sips of his juice. The latter lost his sense of time, far too consumed in

his own thoughts to pay attention to his surroundings until something ice-cold was placed on his neck. The boy resisted the urge to flinch, though his back stiffened. Without any hesitation, he grabbed the princess's gelid hand and placed it in her lap, glaring at the smiling girl throughout the process.

"You weren't paying attention to me," she said in a singsong voice.

"That's not a good reason to attack me."

"What do you mean? I was just fixing your tie."

This lie was delivered so swiftly that, if Harry didn't know her as well as he did, he would have believed her. Giving up on the subject, he looked around only to notice that the table was empty.

"And the others?"

"You were so distracted that you missed the speech of one of your professors. She also invited all the students to dance, so they went to have fun."

After her explanation, he noticed all the people crowding the dance floor. However, the music that made the floor vibrate was so soft it could be dismissed as white noise. For a moment, he wondered how the professors managed to do it. This did not last long, as he could almost hear Aunt Eleadora nagging him for not treating his date right.

"Do you want to dance?" he offered to his date, extending his hand.

"Oh my! And here I thought you would never ask," she muttered in faux surprise.

Hwasa moved her hand, not towards Harry, but towards the hem of her dress. She lifted it until her ankles were visible.

"I can't dance in these."

"You did just fine the last time," he pointed, but internally agreed with her.

No wonder she was almost his height, the woman was wearing stilts instead of shoes.

"But it's painful," she almost whined, a slight pout on her lips.

"You forget a really important detail," he murmured, nearing her. "We have magic."

With a swift motion, Harry produced his wand from its holster. A graceful wave of it and the girl's shoes turned into plain flat shoes.

"You just ruined my style for the night," she sighed, "but thank you. Now, if you don't mind, we have to dance unless we want your sister to nag us for the holidays."

Harry huffed, but offered his hand once again. The pair walked towards the dance floor, ignoring the eyes that followed their every movement. He closed his eyes when the music

suddenly changed from a soft background tune to whatever the band was playing. For a few seconds, he weighed the pros and the cons of losing his hearing to blasting music or losing it to his aunt. In the end, the former won by a wide margin. In his humble opinion, this torture would only last a few hours; his aunt would bother him the whole holidays. The woman had an obsession for making Harry experience what she called *what every teenager should try at least once*.

They settled into a semi-free spot... Well, it was more one of the few places where people were not crammed together and it was the best he was hoping to get. They began dancing.

"You're too stiff," Hwasa yelled in his ear, though her voice was almost lost to the music.

"I don't know how to dance to this," he admitted, begrudgingly.

The beats were contagious but utterly unknown. He was totally lost in this new territory.

"Oh, so there is something the great Harry Potter can't do! And it's simply dancing!" Hwasa covered her mouth, holding his shoulder to steady herself for her laughter made her lose her balance. He was not amused at her reaction.

There are many things Harry could tolerate, but having his pride harmed was not one of them. He silently bade farewell to his stoic image. However, if he was challenged to do something, he would do it. He was challenged to dance, so he would dance. Hwasa yelped when Harry suddenly twirled her around.

"You shouldn't have said that," he whispered into her ear as she glared at him.

For a reason he was yet unable to understand, the tight control he kept over himself dissolved. For the first time in many years, he allowed himself to let go of his inhibitions, even if it was just for a few hours.

Harry didn't know how much time passed, but he guessed it was way past midnight. Music changed according to the bands that were playing. Likewise, his dance partners changed. While Hwasa and he were taking a break, grabbing drinks from the enchanted armour that acted as a waiter, Luna took the opportunity to snag his date away. From there on, he danced with most of his friends and their dates.

In the end, Harry guessed it didn't really matter who his dance partner was, as long as they were not too clumsy. Through many stepped-on toes, he learnt that Susan Bones was not a gifted dancer, though she had a dry sense of humour to match his own. He also discovered Neville was an excellent dancer... However, he further learnt the boy should be kept away from the punch some students managed to spike.

While Neville had to be kept away from the punch, Blaise had to be kept away from the female population in general. All Harry knew was that his friend and his date disappeared somewhere a while ago. He only hoped Blaise respected the sanctity of the Court's Headquarters, for his own sake. On a brighter note, Harry discovered Adrian was a really emotional drunk, which was quite amusing, especially considering the boy's tough image. Terrence was also a surprise, shamelessly flirting with his date, making him blush profusely.

Quite the surprise, especially considering Terrence's shy nature. Thinking about it, those two also disappeared a while ago.

Through careful observation, also known as blatant staring while you pretend to look at the wall, Harry concluded the professors were responsible for the spiked punch. Galleons were passed from one adult to another when different students reacted to the alcohol they consumed.

In spite of all of this, or perhaps because of it, Harry enjoyed the night.

"So here you are!"

Harry looked to the side, towards the approaching princess. Her hair no longer looked immaculate, though her makeup was as perfect as ever. The wonders of magic.

"You abandoned me for Luna," he accused her when she collapsed on the chair beside him.

"Of course I did," she stated matter-of-factly. However, Harry was not concentrating on her words, but on how close she was.

"You drank that punch," he sighed, wrinkling his nose at the stench of alcohol. Suddenly, his head snapped towards the dance floor, searching around for a familiar figure.

"Lizzy didn't have any of it, don't worry! Besides, she and Viktor left a while ago."

"I don't think I'm willing to trust you with that..."

"Daphne saw how your friends were acting after drinking the punch and got rid of it. Although Fleur doesn't really mind, she's having fun," she commented, pointing at the dancing couple almost eclipsing the floor.

"Do eat something before you leave, I don't want you arriving at the castle smelling like alcohol."

"Getting drunk while being underage is something everyone does, Harry. It's part of being a regular teenager."

"Excuse me if I love myself too much," he retorted, handing her the closest pastry he could find.

"You're boring," she said but took the offered treat without hesitation.

"I'm smart enough to know that consuming a depressive drug while I'm young, not to mention stressed out, can only bring negative consequences."

"You're such a spoilsport. I'm sure neither your aunt nor Sirius would mind if you indulged at least once before being a real adult."

"I agree with you. Thinking about it, Sirius would even try to encourage me. But I just don't see the point of it," Harry said, trying to find a way of explaining his perspective. "You can

have fun without alcohol. If you don't, then you aren't really having fun."

"Well yeah, but it doesn't feel the same. I'm not talking about getting drunk to the point of forgetting your name, but about getting a little tipsy. You just forget about everything and it feels good."

"Are we really going to have a debate about drugs while you're under the influence of one?"

"Okay then, we'll do it some other time," she conceded, taking a large bite of her pastry to emphasize her indignation. Yet, she was unable to suppress her smile. "Be a good host and show me around the place," Hwasa demanded after finishing her food.

"Why?" Harry was genuinely confused at the strange request.

"This school is infamous and I, for one, am really curious. Besides, when am I going to get another chance to explore the place? Come on," she almost whined, looking at him with pleading eyes.

"Sure," he muttered with a sigh.

They walked out of the great hall in silence. Harry wondered where to take the princess because, while Hogwarts had a variety of places to explore, at this hour they were normally out of bounds, and the places that were available were far too important to him to show to any stranger. In the end, he chose the inner court.

The donation he made rendered results faster than he was expecting. The members of the Educational Board almost deemed the school unfit when they felt the gelid temperature of the hallways and some classrooms. Therefore, while they finished their inspections, they constantly cast spells to make the place habitable. This, however, had an unintended side effect. The castle's inner courtyard was also affected by this temperature change, resulting in an almost spring-like atmosphere. Considering it was still snowing and the ice melted, it was not an ideal situation.

Professor Dobrev tolerated it for exactly two days, until she almost slipped on the wet grass. The next day, multiple runes were etched on different surfaces and, although the snow kept falling, it never reached the ground. Harry guessed the elves were thankful towards the woman, if the special food she was served during meals was any indicator. At least they no longer had to clean all the mud from the hallways.

Overall, it was a pretty decent place to see, not to mention the only one he was willing to take her. Besides, Harry was not willing to walk outside the castle and the astronomy tower was too far. He had no idea how much of that hellish punch she consumed and stairs tended to not sit well with drunks.

They walked towards one of the gazebos in the place and sat on the closest bench.

"This place is pretty," she muttered, staring at the multiple lights illuminating the place.



Harry had to agree with her. At least whoever decorated the place had much better taste than the person in charge of the hallways did. But then again, it was not saying much. He turned around when he saw an enchanted suit of armour approaching them, tray in tow. It laid two cups in front of them and then walked away, finding a visible place to lean on and falling still.

"I guess this is how the teachers are preventing the students from having too much fun," Hwsa commented between giggles.

"Considering how it's looking at us, I agree."

"Will you tell me what's bothering you?" she asked at last, examining the contents of her glass before sipping on it and smiling at the taste.

"What makes you think there's something bothering me?"

"Seriously," she deadpanned, sighing heavily. "Your makeup doesn't entirely cover the bags under your eyes. Also, you're much more quiet than usual and that is something. Besides, Lizzy is worried. She can read you better than anyone else and if she thinks that there is something to worry about, then there is something to worry about."

Harry didn't answer. Instead, he took a sip from his cup without checking the contents. Much to his relief, it was simple tea with a bit of honey and lemon. This was a subject he was not willing to speak about with his friends, much less the princess.

"You've been acting this way since the summer," she muttered, changing strategies when she realized how unwilling he was to talk. "Do you remember the chat we had during the Cup? I guess I have to tell you this again: I'm not your friend or your family. I care about you but I won't interfere in your life."

"I know," he whispered, having an inner debate on whether to share the information or not. In the end, he gave up. The burden he was carrying was getting too heavy, and while he loathed showing his weaknesses, he also knew that it would end up consuming him sooner rather than later. "Do you remember Voldemort?"

"Ah, so it has to do with your mouldy thing," she acknowledged, making him huff.

"In a way it does... Remember I told you about our similarities?" She nodded in response and Harry took a deep breath before explaining. "There's much more I learnt from him. Pureblood mother, Muggle father. The woman apparently enchanted the man to marry her. In the end, he abandoned her while she was pregnant. She died during childbirth and that's how he ended up being raised in an orphanage... I know this sounds stupid, but I really wonder what would have happened if the man assumed his responsibilities. Maybe if Voldemort didn't exist I could have a normal childhood. I've been pondering the what if's. It's disturbing to know how much I crave the life I almost had."

"Moments like this remind me you're younger than me," she murmured, her expression blank. "You know? For a time, I also wondered what would happen if the Muggles didn't have that stupid war. Then, mum would still be alive. That's part of growing up, Harry. Accepting you

cannot control all the factors in your life and learning to adapt and accept it. I know that you love your mother and it's inevitable for you to want to meet her. You don't talk much about your father. I have no idea why and I am not going to ask. In any case, I only have to tell you one thing. It's time to grow up and stop believing you can control everything."

Harry closed his eyes. "You don't understand," he whispered. "You really don't understand how similar Voldemort and I are. I distract myself with the what ifs because that's better than losing my mind. If that man hadn't left that woman-

"You're being childish again," Hwasa interrupted, scowling at him. "You told me the woman enchanted him. In any case, he was a victim of the circumstances."

"He left a pregnant woman alone," he repeated, emphasizing his words with a fierce glare.

"Pregnancy does not equal weakness," she snapped, returning his glare in earnest. "The man somehow got free from her clutches and took the opportunity to be free. Imagine waking up only to realize you're married to a woman you don't love or even appreciate in the slightest. Maybe he didn't know she was pregnant or maybe he was too scared to be forced into submission again to really care, or maybe he was really trash. Who knows? Harry, you're one of the greatest supporters of equity I know, so it's time to realize women aren't inherently white doves and men aren't necessarily the villains of the story."

Harry did not answer. There were many things he would rather not speak about and this one was amongst them. Of course, he intellectually knew Merope Gaunt was not the real victim of the story, but it was easier to blame Riddle Senior for multiple personal reasons. However, he could not deny Hwasa's harsh words. It was time to stop trying to be a god and grow up. Neither of them spoke for a while, the air around them was charged with tension.

"Are you angry with me?" she whispered at last.

"Not really. I'm frustrated with myself, that's it."

"You know the real reason why I'm here tonight?" she asked. Harry looked at her and tilted his head, waiting for her answer. "It's because of you. Lizzy asked me to speak with you as soon as possible. She was really worried."

"I should have guessed that," he grunted, the tension dissolving from his shoulders.

"She knows that you don't tell her everything because you don't want to worry her. You should really consider speaking with her."

"Maybe one day."

Silence descended once again, but this time it was comforting instead of nerve-wracking. They engaged in a silent game of rock, paper, and scissors. That was the moment Harry realized he was terrible at fortune games. At last, they decided to call it a night when they noticed their drinks turned cold long ago.

"I had fun," she told him once they arrived at the professor's empty office. "I bet your teachers are hunting down the deviant students," she said, nudging his side with her shoulder.

"Aren't we amongst that list?"

"Well, it's almost five A.M. so I guess we are. But, the most we did was dance."

"That's before you left me for my friend."

"True, and that's why we aren't on that list."

"Whatever, get going now," Harry sighed, signalling the fireplace.

"Are you kicking me out?" she asked, giving him an exaggerated offended expression.

"I am, now leave. Unlike you, I have to wake up early tomorrow to catch the train-"

"And arrive to your house. Seriously, with so many transportation methods, it's almost offensive to use an antiquated train," she huffed, expressing her indignation with vivid hand gestures.

"Yeah, you're right, now leave."

"Without a goodnight kiss?" she asked, batting her eyelashes at him.

"Preferably," he stated, not even reacting to her blatant flirting.

"Do you think I'm not pretty enough?" she asked, a mischievous glint shining in her eyes.

"You're right," he answered back, a smirk adorning his lips at the sight of a speechless girl.

"I feel offended. Insulted. Affronted!" she huffed at last. "Just so you know, I have tons of suitors."

"As do I."

"Hmph, I'm leaving," she snapped and stomped towards the fireplace, blowing him a raspberry before disappearing in green flames.

"And that's it for tonight," Harry muttered, a small smile on his lips as he walked to his room.

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The next day, or better said, a few hours later, the members of the Court were having breakfast in the great hall. Some looking in a much better state than others.

Neville was eating a full English breakfast. An amused Fleur was pushing a cup of fragrant tea into his hand. Adrian was sitting still, with his face buried in his arms. If it was not for the occasional pained grunts that the boy emitted, one would think he was sleeping. An exasperated Justin fed Terrence some broth, trying to bring the boy back to life. As amused as Harry was with the situation, he had a very important question that needed to be answered.

"Where's Blaise?"

"Well... he was in his room this morning," Theo muttered, his ears turning a bright red as the boy covered his face.

"And he wasn't alone," Draco added, a sly grin plastered on his face.

"You're a voyeur," Daphne stated, scowling at the blond.

"Who's a voyeur?" Fred asked enthusiastically, plopping down beside Daphne while his brother sat near Terrence.

"Why are you so alive?" Adrian groaned, covering his head with his arms.

"Ah, I see that our little prank affected you," George said with unnecessary dramatics.

"Pray tell me why did you not warn any of us?" Daphne asked in a deceptively calm tone, smiling at the redheaded twins. Fred went stiff, looking at his brother in panic.

"We weren't planning to do it," George began explaining.

"But we went to the kitchen and there were all these bottles of firewhisky near the punch," his brother continued.

"So we decided to pour a little in it, for old time sakes. Actually, we were surprised the elves didn't kick us out."

"Those little devils ended up adding more firewhisky and even thanked us for the help!"

"We swear!" they exclaimed in unison after noticing the doubtful looks.

"Whatever, most students enjoyed it and there was no real harm done," Fleur said in a dismissive tone, taking advantage of Viktor's grogginess to steal his sandwich and helping herself to a large bite.

"That's mine," the boy in question complained, but did nothing in retaliation.

"Why are you so tired? You left the party early," Cedric told the boy.

"One in the morning is not exactly early... I wanted to sleep, but Lizzy gave me these books as a thank you present. They sounded interesting so I began reading one and couldn't stop myself," Viktor groaned, his eyes almost closing as he unsuccessfully tried to spear the food on his plate with his fork.

"Morning," Blaise grumbled, taking the closest available seat and filling his plate with enough food to feed two people.

"So what happened last night?" Draco asked, giving the newcomer a teasing smirk.

"The Yule Ball, obviously," was the boy's lackadaisical response between bites.

"Nothing you want to tell us?" Justin pressed, winking at him.

"Nah."

"I think you should get some hangover potion from the hospital wing," Luna suggested to the mischievous males.

"Why us? We aren't the ones who drank the punch."

"Because Luna says so," Hestia snapped at last.

"To be fair, I don't think Madam Pomfrey will question you about it," Flora said, looking at the many students who appeared to be in a similar state to her two wayward friends.

"And we don't want them throwing up in the train," Theo added.

"It's not my fault," Neville grumbled in an effort to defend himself. "I had no idea it was spiked. I was drugged against my consent."

"Just go," Harry told the boys. It would be better for them to calm down a little and give Blaise some space.

The rest of the breakfast was a tranquil affair. The two boys came back with the potion vials in no time, though they sported bright red faces and refused to talk about what the nurse did to them. At least in that way Harry could enjoy the quiet conversations instead of the public spectacle.

As Harry was enjoying the carriage ride, he was once again hit by nostalgia. Not so long ago, he was a first-year student, new to the world of magic. Now, he had almost lost touch with the Muggle world. It was bizarre how easy it was to lose the perception of time when you lived day by day. One day you just realized five years went by and you changed so much, yet somehow, everything seems to be the same. He allowed a small smile to grace his lips; it was not normal for him to allow his thoughts to wander to a territory he couldn't control.

He felt a warm paw on his cheek and looked at his lap, where the cat he found a while ago and almost adopted was looking at him as if he knew what he was thinking about. Harry only smiled at the cat and adjusted his position to protect his new friend from the unforgiving winter chill. It started purring and Harry allowed himself to relax. The carriage eventually stopped and they walked towards their usual compartment.

"Harry, can I talk with you?" Blaise whispered to him when the others were far enough.

"Of course."

"Not here though, in your house."

"Do you have time today, after we arrive? We can have dinner then."

"Yeah, I'd like that. Mum went on a trip with her new husband and I have to take a portkey to my grandparents' house."

Harry smiled at the boy; he knew how much Blaise simultaneously loved and hated being at his grandparents' house.

"One day I have to meet them."

"Sure, Grandma will accuse you of being too skinny, so say goodbye to your lithe figure," Blaise joked, knowing Aunt Eleadora had the same obsession with feeding everyone until they reached what she considered a healthy figure.

"Fine by me, I'm eager to try real Italian cuisine."

"Grandma will love you; both of you have similar mindsets."

"Who doesn't love me? By the way, if you want to invite your grandparents sometime is fine by me. You know how my house has turned into the communal meeting point of the Court," Harry said with a sigh.

"True enough... Do I have to keep consuming the mandrake essence?" This was asked with the best puppy eyes Blaise could give. It was good Luna had yet to learn that trick.

"Yes, according to my mum, consuming mandrake essence while training to be animagi makes it easier to fuse your inner animal with your soul. Besides, it makes the process less painful."

"Okay, okay, I get that, but it tastes like troll dung."

"I wouldn't know, I've never tasted it," Harry teased his friend, being careful as they entered the last wagon. "In any case, we'll stop consuming it once the full transformation is no longer painful."

"At least we aren't that far off," Blaise muttered, pouting at the door of their compartment, closing it behind him.

"Well, less than half of us have really been able to do it."

"What are you talking about?" a curious Fleur asked.

"Becoming animagi, though some don't need it," Blaise said, glaring at the woman who had the gall to pinch his cheek.

"Not my fault you were not trained," she retorted. "To be fair, it becomes more complicated as you grow older. Think about it like ballet, it is not as painful if you begin opening your joints when you are still young rather than when you have lost all your flexibility. Mama trained me since I can remember, though she touched more the spiritual aspect than the transformation itself. When you are not in tune with your inner animal, you simply lose the connection as time goes by."

"That's true. In many countries it's still a ritual that signals you've stopped being a child," Cedric explained, looking no less tired than he did during breakfast. It was obvious he enjoyed the ball a tad too much.

"Why would becoming animagi signal the end of your childhood?" Theo asked, joining in the conversation and taking a seat on the plush carpet.

"Well, that is because your soul settles, in a way of speaking," Fleur said after waiting for Cedric to answer, but the boy fell sleep. "I am not really sure how to explain it," she muttered in an apologetic tone.

"Basically, that's it," Harry said when Theo looked at him, wondering if he was the communal walking encyclopaedia. "The first experiences are what shape a person. The first ten to twelve years of someone's life are definitive in settling what kind of people they will be and how they will behave. In theory, everyone should inherit one of their parents' inner animals, but it's not so simple. What you experience as a child changes your ties to the animal that represents you or captures your essence the most. There are also cases where people are born without a spiritual connection."

"That's fascinating, where did you read it?" Blaise almost demanded to know.

"My mum's journal. Honestly, that's all I know and everything she could gather about the subject. The North American Tribes is the country where all of this began, but since the colonizers invaded their land, they've become really reclusive. They only began accepting foreigners a few years ago and they have really strict policies."

"Not that anyone can blame them. I mean, they were killed by the millions in the name of civilization," Theo commented, frowning at the floor.

"That's what fear and ambition do," Fleur told him in a gentle tone. "They were people with different appearance and language, with perspectives and beliefs that still are far beyond the invaders' understanding. That is what happened all over the world and is still happening now."

"That's what we call human nature," Harry said, a sardonic smile on his face while he petted the purring cat.

## Chapter End Notes

Hey, I just noticed I no longer have a posting schedule... I guess it is convenient considering I have not really been feeling like writing for a while. Fortunately, I still have some back up chapters ^.^

I hope KARD's new album gives me some dearly needed inspo. Check out "Gunshot" for clear skin ;)

# Connotative Holidays

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part of the Court sat in the last compartment of the last wagon of the train, the one they claimed as their own years ago. A lethargic atmosphere dominated the place, the few who weren't as affected by the lack of sleep were holding hushed conversations.

Harry observed his book for another moment before deciding to give up. Carefully, he placed the book in his backpack and closed his eyes. For the first time in a while, he noticed how tired he was. His brain felt like cotton, unwilling to cooperate with him. His eyes watered constantly and only eye drops kept them functioning on a decent level. If that was not enough, his body felt like a soggy noodle. It was strange to feel weak, in every sense of the word. Even his magic felt somewhat sluggish. *Maybe it really is time to take a break*, he thought.

Almost everything was moving smoothly, his hard work was slowly but surely paying off. There wasn't any move he could pull until the book was released for the public in a few days, and even then, he would have to wait until they were back in school. Almost everything related to Hogwarts was put on hold until Harry received the reports from the examiners and rune specialists, which would be delivered tomorrow morning. Besides, Marcus was having a tough time dealing with the Ministry's archives. The place was in such a state of disarray that not even the help of a hundred elves was enough to find the blueprints of the department of Mysteries and other important buildings Harry wanted to examine.

There was also the Second Task, but who cared about it?

At least the ridiculous competition was useful for Harry to test the limits of their protective gear and find ways to improve them, so not everything was lost. Thinking about it, he totally forgot about the golden sphere he won during the first task, Harry wondered where it was. According to Marcus, it held clues for the next event, but hearing said clues from the creator himself was far more productive. He wouldn't waste those precious free moments on the Tournament when he barely had time to sleep.

All in all, Harry just had to wait for his plans to begin working so he was free for these couple of weeks... Well, he would visit the emperor and he had a trip planned with his sister, but nothing else.

Harry sighed heavily, scratching the purring cat on his lap behind the ears. *It is time*, he decided. For months, no, that was not right. For years, he avoided this subject, but it was time to talk about it with Sirius. Hwsa was right, it was time to grow up and that would be impossible if he ignored the neon pink elephant in the room. As reluctant as he was to have this conversation with his godfather, he knew it was necessary.

The man changed for the better after he began dating Amelia Bones. The woman was wise beyond her years, but overall, she was observant and had a kind heart. She was the only one



to notice the severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorder that Sirius was dealing with. Basically, she forced him to be treated by a mind-healer and a squib psychiatrist. The therapies were doing wonders for Sirius and, sometimes, Harry felt really guilty for how harsh he was with him.

That is how he learnt mental illnesses were the most sadistic silent killers. He would never notice there was something wrong with his godfather until it was too late.

The cat began licking his hand and Harry sighed. It would be good to give his new friend a name, but he was still not sure on whether he should do it. It was scary to name someone and love them, only to lose them. The cat began purring louder and Harry allowed the sound to lull him into relaxation, falling deeply asleep in a matter of seconds.

Harry heard someone whispering his name. However, no matter how hard he tried, he could not match any face to the familiar voice. It was frustrating, he decided, knowing something and yet being unable to use that knowledge because his brain refused to cooperate.

“Harry...”

He heard the voice again. It was so familiar he could swear he heard it before, but had no idea of who it may belong. His brain suddenly conjured a face. It was blurry, so much that the features were rendered unrecognisable sans for one: a warm pair of emerald eyes. They reminded him so much of his own yet they were so different. While his eyes leaned on the dull side - so much Harry sometimes compared himself to a porcelain doll - these eyes were warm. He could almost feel the affection oozing out of that person through those eyes.

Harry woke up with a sharp intake of breath and looked around. Luna was beside him, hand gripping his forearm.

“Harry, we are going to arrive at the station soon,” she whispered, smiling at him. He only nodded in response and tried to calm down the rapid thump of his heart.

He petted the still sleeping cat absentmindedly. The person in his dream also had long, red hair. It was not the ginger tone of the Weasley twins, it was actually red. A really strange shade, if you asked him. Deep mahogany that clashed intensely with the vivid green of the eyes. Curious, it was the first time Harry dreamt about any of his parents.

Until the moment, he avoided looking at the pictures his mother had left behind. It was already painful enough to dream about the life he lost, he didn't need to feed his brain with more information to make his fantasies much more vivid and a hundred times more painful. Maybe one day he would be ready to look at the pictures with fondness instead of mournful wistfulness, but that day was not close so he decided to ignore the dream for the foreseeable future.

“Hey, are you okay?” Neville whispered on his ear.

Harry turned his head to face his friend and nodded, deciding to open his eyes at last. Neville was sporting a slight frown, concern was written all over his face. He patted the boy's knee in an effort to ease his worry.

“I’m fine. But I have a really important question that needs to be answered, why is Fleur allowed to continue sleeping?”

“Because she growls at anyone who tries to wake her,” Neville answered merrily, smiling with fondness at the girl sleeping on his shoulder. “... Harry, I don’t think you realize this, but your magic can become a bit oppressive sometimes. I don’t know how to explain this. It kind of feels like something is pressing your chest and stealing your air, sort of. You kind of lost control while you were sleeping and Luna decided to wake you before the others noticed.”

“I’m sorry,” he muttered with a sigh.

He would look into this subject as soon as possible. It was counterintuitive to lose control in such a way, especially when he affected his friends. He looked to the side in order to apologize to Luna, but she was far too lost in the book he clearly remembered putting inside his backpack. Harry decided to just give up on the subject, he was not in the mood to banter.

“Don’t worry about it. So, any plans for the Holidays?”

“Not really. I will travel with my sister after Yule and pay a short visit to the emperor in a few days. I also asked Leah to be with you for the holidays, so you can visit your parents every time you want.”

“Thank you, I mean it,” Neville told him and Harry smiled in response. “You know that you can come with me if you want to, right?”

“I would like that. It will be good to meet my godmother at last... Did you read the papers that Justin gave you?”

“Well, I tried,” Neville muttered with a grimace. “To be honest, I understood almost nothing. Justin explained to me the basics and gave me all these muggle books to read. I never imagined they could know so much about healing. It would be far more interesting if all the words didn't give me a major headache.”

“That, my dear friend, is the beauty of science,” Harry joked, amused at his friend’s plight, but sobering immediately. “The doctors are running more tests on your parents.”

“I know. Justin told me all those tests had normal results so my parents should be fine, but they aren’t. His mum is doing her best to find the reason why they are acting that way. I would have questioned her methods before because I already know the Cruciatus is the reason why my parents are in that state, but that information was useless for the healers,” Neville mumbled, almost mashing his words together in an unintelligible way.

“Calm down, the doctors will find a way of making sure your parents recover. Also, I am going to ask the emperor for one of his most trusted healers to work with Justin’s mother. We will find a way, I promise.”

Harry knew how dangerous it was to promise something that was out of his hands. However, he also knew Neville desperately needed his parents and he would make sure he got them. At

least in that way one of them could enjoy the life they were supposed to have. He was rewarded with a smile, one of the brightest he ever saw his friend wearing.

“I want to visit my parents tomorrow, want to come?”

“I have to go to the bank in the morning, but I will try to be there in the evening. You should tell Justin though; he might have some free time to join us.”

“I’ll call him later,” Neville said, looking at the boy in question with a playful smile.

Justin was totally absorbed in a thick tome, taking messy notes on a notebook that had seen better days. Considering the notebook was not even a month old, Harry wondered how much time his friend dedicated to his newfound passion.

“It will be better,” Harry agreed at last. “Be sure to visit the castle every couple of days.”

“Of course, I still have to practice and Fleur sort of threatened me to visit her every day. She is really excited.”

“She is not the only one,” Harry groaned, “Rome began crying when I told him more people would be coming to the castle. I have never seen him so happy.”

“It’s a shame that I won’t spend the Holidays with you, the castle will be full of life these days. But I really want to go to the Titicaca Lake. Daddy thinks we’ll find grindilops in there,” Luna commented, smiling at the duo before going back to the book.

Seeing Harry’s pained expression, Neville patted his shoulder but offered no comment. Everyone knew the last Potter was not a fan of socialization, coming off as aloof in the best of the cases and awkward in the worst.

“Fred, George, do you want me to send one of my elves to bring you to the castle? Ella will be pretty busy,” Harry offered to the twins, reprimanding himself for not thinking about it earlier.

“Uhm, sure,” a sleepy George agreed.

“I honestly don’t know how the Holidays will go. Our dear mother kind of left us alone, but now that perfect Percy has a job in the Ministry she will probably try to nag us to death,” Fred commented in a nonchalant tone, as if speaking of the weather.

“What about Bill?”

“He and Ginny are the reason why we are going back. I think Charlie is coming too, but I’m not sure. Don’t worry, it’s not that bad.”

“Did she see your grades?” asked Daphne, narrowing her eyes when Fred’s shoulders sagged.

“Not really,” George admitted, now fully awake. “Mum was too busy worrying over Ron and Percy. To be fair, she didn’t even check Ginny’s grades. As long as we don’t fail, I think she’s fine with whatever we got.”

“That woman-”

“That woman is our mother,” George interrupted Daphne’s tirade with a heavy sigh. “I won’t pretend to understand her or that we are okay with it, but she’s our mother. We can deal with it until it’s time to leave.”

“I’m sorry,” Daphne muttered after a brief moment of silence.

“Did you know that we are beginning out apprenticeships on Monday?” Adrian asked to no one in particular in an effort to break the tense atmosphere.

“We only heard you whine about it for the last month,” Terrence retorted playfully.

“Well, he is training under Moody while we only have to be in the hospital a few hours a week,” George commented.

“Exactly, we are the ones who got the raw end of the deal! We have to deal with whining brats and annoying old blighters while he learns cool spells from one of the best Aurors in history,” Terrence complained, glaring at a smiling Adrian.

“And don’t forget I get to enjoy tea with Edgar in the evenings,” Adrian gloated, smiling impishly at his friends.

“See? It really is not fair, Edgar makes the best scones in the country!” Terrence whined, giving an accusing glare at his friend.

“Who’s Edgar?” mumbled a half-asleep Fleur, looking around with almost closed eyes. At last, her eyes focused on the small group near her. The only ones who were awake for that matter.

“Moody’s husband,” Fred explained to the girl.

“And who’s Moody?”

“Do you remember the scarred Auror that gave a few announcements before the ball?” Neville asked the girl sitting beside him, receiving a nod in return. “That’s him.”

“I didn’t know he was married,” Harry muttered, earning many curious glances.

“You didn’t know? It’s kind of common knowledge,” Adrian asked, genuinely curious.

“Why should I? His marital status doesn’t affect his job,” was Harry’s lackadaisical answer.

Fred exchanged a look with his brother. “The thing, Harry, is that it did affect his job,” Fred explained, his brow furrowed and a slight scowl appeared on his usually cheerful visage.

“The reason why he was never ascended to Head of the DMLE or any other position was because of his husband.”

“All I know is that it was a big scandal when they decided to get married,” Daphne provided, looking thoughtful. “Even my parents used to whisper about his marriage although it

happened before any of us were born. The only reason why he was not kicked out as an Auror is because he is one of the best and all the friends who vouched for him.”

“So muggles and magical are not that different,” Harry said, a sardonic smile on his lips.

“What do you mean?” A somewhat wary yet curious Neville asked.

“For some reason, muggles and magicals share the same prejudices. I really don’t understand. If you don’t like something, then you don’t do it and allow others to live in peace. As long as you are not hurting others and being a productive member of society, why should others mess in your life? It is ridiculous to try to preach your opinion as if it was a universal truth.”

“It is, but isn’t that what makes us humans?” Luna asked, smiling dreamily and going back to the book.

What was left of the train ride was spend in silence, with a few whispered conversations here and there. Everyone was far too lost in their own thoughts to worry about waking up the sleeping members, so when the elves popped in the compartment to pick up their respective children, it was a chaotic affair of hurried goodbyes and last-minute conversations.

At last, Harry Potter and his friends arrived at his house. From the living room, one could smell the food being served in the dining room. As always, Elizabeth hugged him to almost the point of suffocation as Eleadora watched.

“You all look tired so I’m guessing that you enjoyed the ball,” aunt Eleadora commented while hugging every single one of the newcomers. “Blaise, I was not expecting to see you so soon!”

“I’m only staying for a few hours; my grandparents are waiting for me.”

“A shame, you have to visit more often, young man. And I guess you are Fleur, it’s a pleasure to meet you at last, dear.”

“I heard many good things about you, madam,” Fleur answered politely, though she was smiling warmly at the woman.

“Just Eleadora will do, or aunt Eleadora if you want to. Now kids, time for dinner, we can talk over there. Sirius will be joining us later on so we must take advantage of these moments of peace.”

“We’ll join you later,” Harry told the group, pushing Elizabeth towards the others and signalling Blaise to follow him.

No one questioned the pair as they left the room, but many curious glances followed their wake.

Harry walked towards his room and Blaise followed without a word. After a silent trip, they arrived at last. Harry threw himself to the bed to his bed after kicking his shoes off and lay down with a tired sigh, patting the empty space beside him.

“So are you going to tell me what is bothering you?”

“A lot, really,” Blaise muttered, collapsing on the bed and burying his face on a pillow. “You know Andrea was my date for the night. To be honest, I didn’t invite her because I liked her or anything. She was just available. I wasn’t expecting to get along with her so well.”

“Are you feeling guilty?”

“A little,” Blaise acknowledged after a moment. “But that is not what is bothering me right now... Last night we left the ball after she noticed that I was slightly tipsy. She escorted me to the common room because, according to her, I was not even able to walk a straight line,” he narrated, a slight smile adorning his face. “I didn’t complain, you know, because I really like her. She somehow ended up in my room and we talked all night long.”

“Is that all? You look far too miserable for only talking,” Harry commented offhandedly.

“You are not good at being supportive, you know?”

“At least I’m honest,” he retorted, but waited for his friend to tell him what was really bothering him.

Blaise snorted and then sighed heavily. “We only talked and that is the problem. I’m not kidding when I say I like her, I really do. I have never gotten along with anyone so well this fast,” Blaise grumbled, looking at the ceiling with intensity. “I asked her out. We agreed to exchange letters during the holidays and try dating when I come back from Italy.”

“So you are feeling guilty because you also like Luna or is it something else?”

“...Because of Luna, and maybe a little because the guys will try to tease her,” Blaise admitted after a minute of silence. “I don’t want to ever make her feel as a consolation prize or a convenient second option.”

“You really like her, right?”

“I do.”

“Then she is not your second option,” Harry said, smiling at the confused boy. “You had many opportunities to ask Luna out, but you decided not to. You already decided that friendship is the only thing you want from her. However, you really like that other girl-”

“Andrea.”

“That other girl,” Harry repeated, smirking at an annoyed Blaise. “You asked her out and I’m sure that you will give your best efforts for any kind of relationship that the two of you decide to have. In the end, you chose her over Luna.”

“But I also like Luna, a lot.”

“I know, but you decided she would only be your friend. Can I ask you something? It’s merely out of curiosity, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“Shoot,” Blaise nodded.

“What would you do if Luna asks you out?”

“That will never happen-”

“But what if it did, what would you do then?”

Blaise remained silent after that, he licked his lips before opening his mouth a couple of times, as if wanting to answer but he remained silent. Harry decided not to pressure his friend and was about to suggest for them to go and join the others for dinner until the silence was broken.

“I would reject her,” Blaise whispered, looking resolute. “It would be hard, but I would reject her. I love her as a friend, I hope we always remain as close as we are, a romantic relationship would definitely complicate everything and I am not willing to risk it. Being totally honest, I don’t think anyone in the Court is willing to risk it.”

“Who knows? Everything can change.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?” Harry asked back, tilting his head in confusion.

“What is going on with Hwasa? The two of you are always together.”

“Lies,” he denied swiftly, swatting away the accusatory finger pointing his way. “There really is nothing going on.”

“Sometimes you are really observant, others, you are as dense as a concrete block,” Blaise stated, massaging his temples. “I don’t know how to explain it, but when the two of you are together, you ignore the whole world. It is rather uncomfortable to be with you.”

“I guess that it has something to do with the fact that we rarely speak English when we are together,” Harry commented, smirking at his friend’s obvious exasperation. “I like her, but not in a romantic sense,” he admitted, “We get along surprisingly well and we have known each other for years... Maybe in a distant future we could even have a closer relationship, but I really don’t see that happening, we are like water and oil. Besides, I have my priorities set and a relationship is something I really don’t want to even consider until I am older. Much older.”

“If you say so,” Blaise muttered, his chagrined expression was replaced by a mischievous one. “But even if you don’t like her that way, you can’t deny the princess is damn fine.”

“Keep saying those things and I am accusing you with that other girl.”

“For Morgana, shut up!” Blaise exclaimed, his skin tone concealing his burning face.

After an epic pillow battle, the duo lay panting on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Let’s go to have dinner already, I’m hungry,” Blaise declared between ragged breaths.

“What hour do you have to arrive at your grandparents’ house again?”

“Bloody Merlin’s beard! My nonnina will kill me,” Blaise groaned, covering his face with a pillow after taking a look at the clock in the wall.

“She won’t have to bother if you continue trying to auto-asphyxiate,” Harry muttered, taking away the pillow Blaise was using for this purpose. “Go to my studio and use your portkey there, I will just tell the others you had to leave.”

“Thanks! I’ll call you soon!”

Harry enjoyed lying down for a few moments before going downstairs, only his hunger motivating him to socialize.

“Where’s Blaise?” Elizabeth asked him once he entered the dining room.

“He had to go take his portkey before it went off,” Harry lied with easiness as he took his usual seat. “And the others?”

“In their rooms, almost everyone was half-sleep after dinner. Auntie just left with Fleur to show her around, they were waiting for you but you took too long,” his sister accused him.

“We didn’t take that long. The others were hungry because they skipped lunch in favour of a midday nap,” he explained with a sigh and began eating his soup.

“By the way, I wanted to ask about your new cat.”

Harry only raised an eyebrow as response, feeling slightly guilty for leaving his new friend on his own. Then again, what the cat lacked in looks was more than overcompensated in intelligence.

“It is not fair that you are allowed to have a cat. Even Flora and Hestia have cats!” Elizabeth whined in protest.

“You have three murderous fowls,” Harry deadpanned, thinking on the contrast between his lovely Hedwig and Elizabeth’s baleful birds. Though he admitted, albeit begrudgingly, that they were useful.

Hades, the Andean condor with no aesthetic appeal whatsoever, was quick and efficient in his deliveries. Apollo, the somewhat plain yet overly large owl, had an eerily accurate memory and understanding of the language, only delivering the letters to the people they were intended to and destroying it otherwise. Considering the latter dealt with the businesses rather than Gringotts, he had to be clever unless he wanted to be disposed of by Harry’s competition in a futile effort to gain inside information... He wondered why he had decided to follow this particular train of thought, was he that tired?

“Don’t call my babies that!” Elizabeth complained, directing an accusing glare at him. “And we were not talking about them. You have a bird and a cat, I also want one.”



“You are only allowed to have one pet in school,” he reminded his pouting sister. “Besides, the cat is not mine. I found him in the castle, we are trying to find his human, but until now no one claimed him.”

“So he’s already yours,” she muttered. “For some reason, aunty almost cried when she saw him. She took him with her so I think you don’t have a say on the matter.”

“Did you enjoy the ball?” he asked, not really wanting to know why aunt Eleadora kidnapped the poor feline and having an uncanny interest on how had Viktor behaved last night.

Dinner went by with Elizabeth telling him about her night with far too much excitement. He nodded and hummed here and there while he enjoyed his meal. Now, he felt a sliver of pity for Viktor, who had to deal with his over-excitabile and hyper sister. For a second he wondered who this Boy Scout band was because his sister was gushing about them as one of those rabid teenage fangirls. Harry suppressed a shudder and decided that ignorance was sometimes the best policy.

“Harry!” Sirius yelled from the doorway, approaching the two teenagers.

Immediately Harry took notice of all the changes in his godfather. His posture, for once, was not sagged. His shoulders were relaxed but his back was straight. Also, the dark circles that he once assumed were a genetic trait in the Black family were absent from Sirius’ face. His godfather no longer looked as if he was carrying the weight of the world and, even though all those years in Azkaban had taken their toll on the man’s appearance, the lines of his face were no longer as pronounced as they were a few months ago.

“You are looking good, Sirius,” Harry complimented his godfather, accepting the hug the man was giving him. “Want to have dinner?”

“Nah, I had dinner with Amelia and Susan. Talking about that, I was going to ask you when you have a free evening because Amelia and I were thinking about beginning to know each other’s families a bit better and she already knows Remus. Not that you don’t know her already, but it would be nice-”

With a sigh, Harry decided to interrupt his godfather before he began monologuing. “Choose whatever day you want after my trip to the empire and before the twenty-seventh.”

“Oh, we are travelling! I already made a list of all the places we should visit while we are in the Tribes. You’ll also meet my friends!” Elizabeth informed him with far too much cheerfulness. “I’m going to bed now because I have to help aunty with the book delivery that is arriving tomorrow.”

“I am going to the bank in the morning, want to come?”

“Nope,” Elizabeth answered while grabbing a spoon. “We have to catalogue and organize the books so there will be no time... Besides, I already had tea with Ragnok yesterday,” she said before pecking his cheek and fleeing the room before he could stop her from taking the whole pudding bowl.

“She stole my manager,” Harry grumbled.

“That is not important, she stole my pudding!” Sirius complained, holding an empty cup and looking as if his sister stole his first-born instead.

Harry only patted his godfather’s shoulder and filled his favourite mug with the much-needed beverage, taking a second to appreciate the strong scent of a good black tea before taking a sip.

“Want some?” Harry asked his godfather when he noticed the man’s gaze.

“I want to talk with you about a few things,” Sirius muttered, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

“Go ahead then, we have all night and it is barely seven.”

“Okay then,” the man grunted, playing with his empty cup in an effort to ease his nerves. “I should have talked with you about this a while ago, but this is something I never thought I would be preaching about. Argh, Remus should be here!”

Harry waited patiently as the man rambled, curious about what was so urgent that had Sirius acting as an inarticulate teenager about to ask out his crush. Also, he was deciding whether it was a good time to speak about the matter that was bothering him. Unfortunately, he knew himself too well. He would avoid the topic for as long as possible until it became such a heavy burden that needed to be vented, and even in that situation, he would be reluctant. No better moment than the present, right?

“I noticed Hwasa arrived really late, or really early, depending on your perspective,” Sirius began, giving him an inquisitive look.

“I showed her around the castle and then we chatted a bit, we didn’t notice the hour. Sorry if we worried you, Sirius,” Harry apologized, wondering if he would be grounded.

“Ah, there is no need to apologize. I was a teenager so I know how it is,” the man muttered, not even looking at him. “I just hope that you were both careful... Well, I know that you are really mature for your age, but still... Ehm, no, that wasn’t what I was going to say. You know what happens when a girl and a boy are together alone and when they like each other. Oh Merlin, have mercy on me!” Sirius whined, covering his flaming face with his hands.

“Are you okay?” asked a confused Harry Potter.

“I should have listened to your mother when she tried to make me read all those parenting books,” the man complained but steeled himself. “You are a teenager and have urges, I know, I have been there and it is totally natural. Your body is changing and also is your mind. It is totally understandable that you begin to feel attracted to girls – or anyone, it doesn’t really matter... Well, it kind of does, actually. Being with a girl is different from with being with a bloke and the process is different but also similar, I guess... Well, of course it is different because girls and boys are different but it has the same procedure and of course, you have to use protection in both cases. Ehm, even if a boy can’t have-”

“Are you talking about intercourse or physical changes?” asked a frowning Harry, trying to understand where was his godfather going with all his blabber.

“Thank you so much, Merlin,” Sirius muttered, heaving a relieved sigh.

“You should thank muggle sex-ed and aunt Eleadora.”

“Sorry about that, you have no idea of how uncomfortable it’s to give the talk to a godson who already experienced the act,” Sirius said, apparently, all the embarrassment had drained from the man.

“What gives you that impression?” asked a somewhat offended teenager that internally asked himself if he looked that easy.

“Oh, come on, Harry! I was once a teenager. Your princess arrived really late and the ball ended at midnight, maybe a few hours more but that is it and the castle is not that interesting.”

“We left the ball pretty late,” Harry explained, “and I did show her around. The inner courtyard was adapted to a spring-like temperature for many complicated reasons that I don’t want to talk about and I took her there. We really talked.”

“Until five in the morning?” asked an incredulous Sirius.

“I thought it was only until four,” the teen muttered and then shrugged. “We caught up, talked about school and what is going on in general. Mainly she nagged me for not taking care of myself.”

“You’re being serious, aren’t you?” groaned Sirius, his face turning into a hot pink once again. “I can’t believe I went through all of this embarrassment only for that.”

“If it makes you feel better, I have never been intimate with anyone and am not planning on doing so. Also, Hwasa is only a friend.”

“It really doesn’t, but at least I know that I don’t have to go through this again.”

“Aren’t you planning on having children?”

“Amelia will take care of it,” Sirius snapped, pouting at his godson until he realized what he had said, then proceeded to blush intensely.

“That is a wise decision,” Harry agreed, ignoring the spluttering man in favour of his tea. “I also wanted to talk to you about something,” he said, at last, steeling himself.

“Go ahead, I have nothing left to be embarrassed about,” Sirius groaned.

“If you say so... I wanted to ask you about my father,” Harry blurted after taking a deep breath. Sirius immediately raised his head; the blush had yet to disappear.

“I thought you were going to ask me about my experiences with – never mind, what do you want to know about James?”

“What kind of person he was? My mum wrote a lot about him, but mostly about their school days so I want to know what kind of man he became.”

“Well, I don’t know where to start,” Sirius muttered, there was a slight smile on his lips though his eyes spoke of grief not yet forgotten. “He was my best friend, my brother in everything but blood. James was really kind and thoughtful; he always had kind words to offer and a shoulder to cry on. He was a tough nut to crack, just like Lily. He didn’t like to accept when he was wrong, especially when we were young, but he recognized his mistakes... eventually.

“The war changed him, Harry, it changed us all. James changed for the better. I think it’s a Gryffindor trait to be brash and impatient, he also was, but he learnt the hard way to eliminate those traits. We all did. He became even kinder, always offering help to the many families that needed it and even going as far as hiding muggleborns and forging documents... He saved many lives that way. He was far from being perfect, but James was a really good man, Harry, and he loved you unconditionally.”

“Do you know how mum and he got together?” Harry asked in a quiet tone, trying to hide how much Sirius last phrase was affecting him.

“I am surprised Lily didn’t write about it.”

“She did, I just want to know how it happened from another perspective.”

“Well, where to begin? James fell for Lily from the moment he saw her in the sorting ceremony. It was really funny, the notable Potter heir becoming a blushing mess when Lily told him his robe was backwards and proceeded to ignore him. He tried to gain her attention ever since. We were young so we had no idea of what to do to gain a girl’s attention and the only thing that came to our minds were pranks. That is how the Marauders were born, all because of a girl that didn’t pay attention to the Potter scion,” Sirius explained, his wistful smile being replaced by a stony mask when he continued talking.

“Lily was really close to Snivel- Snape. She was close to Snape. They were best friends, even when she was a Gryffindor and he a Slytherin. No one really understood that friendship, especially not James. He was really jealous so we kind of began playing pranks on Snape. Now, Harry, I want you to understand something. I know we were wrong for acting that way and turning Snape in our victim, but we were young and immature. In the beginning, it was a way of warning him to stay away from Lily, but after a while, we forgot the real reason why everything began and lost our perspective.”

“I know, mum wrote about it.”

“She hated us, didn’t she?”

“A little, but she got her payback so you shouldn’t feel too guilty,” Harry answered, nodding at the man while he filled his mug with more tea.

“Ah, I always knew she was behind all our accidents. Never mind, neither of us understood our behaviour was what pushed Lily away... Well, Remus did, but we rarely listened to him. Anyway, this was sort of a vicious cycle. James asked Lily out, she rejected him, we took it out on Snape, and Lily hated us even more. It lasted until fifth year. Lily and Snape had a bad fight after he called her mudblood, but James still hated him and Lily still hated us. I decided to play a prank on Snape, I thought it would be harmless, I really did... I told him that Lily went to the whumping willow, following Remus because she wanted to know his secret. It was a full moon night.

“He didn’t believe a word I said, but he still went in, just in case. I never thought he would. James saved him from being attacked by Remus... That was the day everything changed. I have never seen James so angry, especially not with me, Remus was terrified of what could have happened and Snape was on quarantine. Lily though, she was downright murderous. We had no small accidents during that month, but we heard the teachers gossiping about how your mother demanded Dumbledore for our immediate expulsion. I think that the only reason why she didn’t make it public was because of Remus, to not ruin his future and all that. But that doesn’t mean we got out unscathed. Lily sent a formal letter to James’ dad, as head of the Potter family, to inform him of his shameful behaviour. She documented proofs and names of witnesses.

“We were having breakfast when James parents stormed in the great hall. I have never seen aunt Dorea so angry. They took James away for a week, when he returned, he had none of the pride he left with. I decided to write to your grandparents, I loved them as my own so I really didn’t want to disappoint them, but I would rather have them disappointed at me than at James. In the end, we were both grounded.”

“You only got grounded? I read a copy of that letter and I would have disinherited any of my offspring if they acted... So that is what really happened,” Harry said, taking a sip of his tea as he took a moment to process the situation.

“Yeah, that’s what happened. Charlus erased James name from the line of succession until either he proved to be worthy of it or the next heir was born. The Potters have always believed in the Noblesse Oblige doctrine and you already know the family motto. So yeah, both were pretty angry with us. They normally bought everything we wanted, so we had no idea how much money was really worth. From that day, neither of us received a cent from them. You know? The Potters were more of a family than my own could ever be, I practically lived with them since I was thirteen, so knowing I disappointed them was a hard potion to swallow.

“I think that was the tamer year for us, no pranks, no bullying, no more ego bigger than our heads. But even then, Lily hated us. During our sixth year is when your parents' relationship improved, though not much. We had a Hogsmeade weekend and we went to buy a few chocolate frogs with the money we earned during the summer.”

“What did you work on?” Harry asked, curiosity forcing him to interrupt before he forgot.

“Well, that is a funny story. James and I were in charge of cleaning the sanctuary. Uncle Charles paid us a galleon a week,” he commented, smiling at the memories. “We thought he

was underpaying us so we searched for other jobs in the Alley and came back humbled and ready to shovel all that dung. Though aunt Dorea hired Remus to help her shopping.

“Yeah, either way, we went to Hogsmeade to spend our hard-earned money. I don’t think I will be able to ever forget that day. Lily was walking, holding hands with some strange bloke. James was confused, not angry or even jealous, just confused on why she chose that bloke over him. He decided to talk to her after dinner... It was not a nice chat, entertaining yes, for everyone who wasn’t James.

“Your dad told Lily that she should have said she had a boyfriend and he would stop bothering her. He was not the most intelligent guy around,” Sirius muttered when he noticed Harry’s grimace. “Even I knew that saying that was basically telling her that he did not respect her, only her boyfriend. So Lily ended up destroying what was left of his ego in less than five minutes. I think that was the dressing down that James needed to understand that his crush on Lily turned toxic.”

“Because being attracted to someone doesn’t translate into entitlement over that person.”

“Those were almost her exact words. After that day, she hated us even more but it was the last push that your dad needed to mature. He decided to write to his mother, risking another punishment for his behaviour. Thanks to Merciful Mother Magic, aunt Dorea was not angry with him... Or at least she gave him her opinion on the matter and didn’t punish him. James decided to apologize to Lily, for absolutely everything. Harry, when I say everything I mean everything. He wrote every single thing he should apologize for and used a whole roll of parchment.

“Lily didn’t immediately forgive him, though she no longer glared at us with desire to murder us in our sleep. They kind of agreed on a truce. Though your mother still wouldn’t even spit on any of us if we were on fire, except maybe Remus. This situation continued until seventh year, where James was named Head Boy. Trust me when I say that your father and your grandparents protested, but Dumbledore didn’t change his mind. Lily was also named head Girl, but even though he still liked her, James was still reluctant to accept the position so the two of them complained to the Board of Directors, the teachers, and the headmaster. In the end, they were dismissed but they made sure everyone regretted ignoring them... By the way, your mum was the mastermind.

“Lily became really cold towards the teachers. She had always had a closer relationship with them than any of the students so it was a shock to them, the sweet Lily Evans treating teachers as unwanted acquaintances was a sight to behold. Of course, Flitwick also helped her. If I am not wrong, she entered some kind of competition as Flitwick’s apprentice rather than representing Hogwarts. It was a bitch slap for Hogwarts in general to have the winner of the competition saying that everything she learnt was from Master Flitwick because, if she were to rely in the school education, she would have not even been able to qualify. I remember The Prophet trying to attack her for making Hogwarts look bad in an international level only to go silent and never breach the topic again. I still wonder what happened...”

“The emperor happened,” Harry said and began to explain when he saw Sirius baffled expression. “She was dating one of his nephews. The emperor really liked my mum, so he told the press what would happen if they kept talking.”

“The Emperor threatened the press because of Lily,” Sirius repeated dumbly.

“He never threatens; he just tells you what is going to happen.”

“Right,” the man muttered, deciding to forget that inconvenient piece of information. “Where was I? Ah. So, Lily and James became the nightmare of the whole school and they could no longer take their position away unless they wanted to face the Potters. All in all, it would have been an entertaining year had the war not turned more violent. When we graduated, Lily no longer hated us. It was a big improvement, but I guess no one really noticed. We were far too focused on trying to find ways of helping in the war efforts. James and I entered the Auror training, Remus began spying on the werewolves, and Lily entered the unspeakable training along with a Marlene and another friend of hers. We also joined the Order.

“The Ministry was filled with Death Eaters, so it looked like the Order was the only group doing something against Voldemort. Lily and James became really close during those times. They were normally paired together, just like Marlene and me. She got to know your dad as the person he had become instead of the egocentric brat that he once was. They fell deeply in love. They got married on December of 1979, and then you were born. You already know the rest of the story.”

“Mum wrote about the time she got pregnant,” Harry told his godfather when it was obvious the man would not touch the subject. “I want to know what was going on my father’s mind, Sirius. I know what happened... I just need to understand why he acted the way he did.”

Harry was not one to beg, yet he could hear the imploring edge on his tone. He needed to know the truth if he was ever going to forgive James Potter.

“Those were really hard times, Harry,” Sirius muttered, not gathering the courage to look at his godson. “We were living on borrowed time. Lily and James became main targets of assassination along with a few others. We were all sharing a house just to protect our families, us, Lily, Marlene, Frank and Alice, and other members of the order. Lily lost contact with her friends in order to protect them. Those were really hard times. Lily and James really loved each other, they were planning a future together after the war was over.”

“But they didn’t plan to have me,” Harry finished, not even bothering to look down at his hands, where the mug of tea was trembling.

“They loved you-”

“Sirius, I know my mum loved me from the moment she knew she was pregnant. What I want to know is why my father abandoned her for a whole month!” He clenched his jaw when he noticed he was losing control. His magic was thrumming in his veins.

“As I said, those were really dark times,” Sirius muttered after a moment of heavy silence. “James matured a lot, but he was still not ready to be a father. We were young, teens fighting an adult war. I will not try to justify him, he was a coward and chickened out. I just remember him entering our room, grabbing his bag and leaving. Lily was not the only one who didn’t know where James was. I tried to locate him many times, but all I know is that he took the

high-risk missions from the Order and the Aurors. He was suicidal for a whole month, it was his way of trying to cope with having another life he wanted to protect.

“Remus found him almost dead near a wolf camp. He brought him back to the house. The first thing he did when he woke up was ask for Lily and their child, that is how we knew you were on your way to this world, Harry. There was nothing elegant or romantic in the way Lily and James decided to get married, both were nineteen and prime targets in the middle of a war, but they loved each other. You have no idea of how hard James tried to end the war singlehandedly, only to give you a safe place to be born even if he was no longer alive to see you enjoy the times of peace. James loved you so much that he would have gladly given his life to protect you.”

Harry listened, and as he listened, he felt the knot on his chest unravel. For some reason, his eyes were prickling and his throat was constricted. Was it relief? Perhaps. He believed his father married his mother out of duty, even when she described the wonderful man he was. He compared himself to Voldemort, torturing himself for countless nights, wondering when he would become like him. There were moments where he felt like a monster, so hideous that not even his own father could love him. But James Potter did love him.

He only noticed his vision blurring and something wet on his cheeks. He wiped the liquid emanating from his eyes. It was a long time since he cried, far too long.

“Harry, both of your parents loved you,” Sirius repeated, encasing him in a comforting hug.

“I know,” he whispered and the knot on his chest totally dissolved. His magic no longer thrummed, begging for a violent release. Instead, it flowed gently, as if trying to soothe him.

*Is this what peace feels like?* he wondered as more tears escaped. His magic had never felt like this, so tranquil and compliant. It had always been comforting, but she almost had a mind of its own and begged to be free. Also, the voice in the corner of his mind that always reminded him of the monster he was quieted down for once. Maybe it would make an appearance when his emotions settled, but for now, he would enjoy the quiet.

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### **Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> of December, Hogwarts Meeting Room**

A tense atmosphere dominated the room. Teachers were looking at each other, some even engaging in small talk in efforts to ignore the anxiety that seemed to emanate from every single one of the presents. Of course, they would have to be fools in order not to be intimidated by the people who were attending the meeting but were not part of the school staff.

Sitting between McGonagall and Flitwick was Madam Marchbanks, looking far too pleased with herself. On the head of the table were Minister Bones and her undersecretary, talking with the head of the DMLE. Last but not least, the Hogwarts headmaster was sitting on the opposite side of the Minister.

Lucius Malfoy himself was feeling uncomfortable, not only because he had the misfortune of sitting beside Dumbledore. No, forget it. That was the reason. While he never liked Albus



Dumbledore, he respected the man. All in all, the Headmaster was formidable despite of being passed over his prime. Lucius never realized he was used to see Dumbledore as that constant and unmovable force of nature. It was a chilling realization to see him as the mere mortal he was.

He eyed wearily the old man beside him. Ghostly skin, sunken cheekbones, wiry hair. Albus Dumbledore no longer possessed that aura of power and omniscience that once surrounded him. He wanted to know if the man was sick, but for some reason, Lucius was not able to gather the courage to look at him full on, much less ask. However, he had to admire the old man's determination to keep his position. Any other person would be in intensive care of Saint Mungo's looking the way he did.

The door was opened and the last persons entered the room. A tall witch in charge of all the analysts that swarmed the castle for the last month along with the representative of Mirror summons and some squib builder Lucius had no interest on. The woman looked strangely grave as she laid a thick pile of strange-looking parchment on the table.

"I apologize for the delay, but we had a few last-minute matters to discuss with our boss," the woman said, not looking apologetic at all, and began distributing the parchments.

Lucius eyed with weariness the stack that was deposited in front of him. Years of experience taught him paperwork was one of the most terrible foes any person could face. Why had he come again? Ah, right. The moronic members of the Board chose him as representative and Sirius somehow convinced him to agree.

"As you will read in the index, the first part of your papers is dedicated to all the maintenance and repairs that the castle needs. The second part details all the expansion and building plans for the next term and the third part explains all the added fixtures and fittings inside and outside the castle. Mister Ferlet is in charge of the building crew, so if you have any questions on the matter, please refer to him," the woman explained.

"Thank you, Miss Adams," Minister Bones said before anyone else could speak. "I will remind you all these details are only being shared with the school staff in order for you to adapt your teaching methods to the new infrastructure. That is it. Hopefully, you will take full advantage of all the opportunities you will be given."

"Don't worry, Minister Bones. We, as educators, are extremely thankful," McGonagall told the woman, her smirk widening as she leafed through the last part of the parchments.

"If any of you have any suggestions, please contact either me or Mister Fogs, as the representative of our investor, he is in charge of this project," Madam Marchbanks suggested, signalling the dour man.

"That is all, Minister Bones."

"Very well, have a good day and don't doubt on contacting me," Amelia said, dismissing the trio of newcomers.

Lucius frowned, not understanding the reason why they came all the way to Hogwarts only to stay five minutes and deliver some parchment. That is until he looked to the side.

Dumbledore was reading the papers with an inscrutable expression, it was not hard to deduce he was not happy with certain things being proposed. So that was it. They came as part of a power play, how clever.

“Now that the matter is out of the way, I wish to discuss some things with you,” the Minister announced, giving no time to read the papers they were given. “As you were informed, the Ministry decided to take an active role in Hogwarts after certain events. Hence, we will be doing things in a different way from previous years.

“First of all, you have to choose the new prefects and Head Boy and Girl before the Holidays are over. They will all have to assist special courses in order to fulfil their roles adequately. Second, the counsellors will begin working right after the Holidays. Their duties are clear and every single student will be going through an evaluation for different reasons, the main one is to examine their mental state and to see if they need any additional help. They answer to absolutely no one else than the students. Not a single teacher is allowed to ask for personal information that the counsellors will be confided with and they are totally prohibited to share. However, if you have any concern about certain students, you are allowed to ask for their help.”

“Madam Bones, the meeting with the committee is starting in fifteen minutes,” Marcus Travers reminded the woman, who nodded in acknowledgement.

“Unfortunately, I have to leave. Madam Marchbanks will answer to any doubts that you may have and Auror Moody will be explaining the new security measures. Have a good day.”

The Minister and her undersecretary left the room with firm steps, not even bothering to look back. Lucius had to contain a smile that threatened to surface despite of his best efforts. Amelia was definitely something else. The woman imposed respect despite her youth, her mind was sharp, and she was beyond cunning. It was definitely hard to believe she was a Hufflepuff at heart.

“Excuse me, Madam Marchbanks,” Sinistra said, breaking the silence that was, once again, turning uncomfortable, “I have a question about my new classroom for the next term. Here says that this *planetarium* will allow me to give my classes during the day, but I have my doubts about it. Will it really be able to emulate the night sky?”

“Ah, I am glad that you asked,” Madam Marchbanks answered, her smile widening. “I also had my doubts until I was taken to one. I must say this *planetarium* is even better than watching the stars through a telescope. It's almost impossible to describe. If you don't mind, I can take you to one.”

“Yes, I would like that. However, that is not my biggest worry. If students don't learn from firsthand experience they will have a hard time trying to apply their knowledge in the future.”

“I agree with you, but you have nothing to worry about. Practical classes will also be given once a month, that way the students get some hands-on experience.”

“I have some concerns,” Dumbledore stated with a croaky voice. The old man cleared his throat and continued, “I understand the reason for so many changes, but I have to question a few. I don’t see a reason to have three greenhouses being built in the entrance of the Forbidden Forest. The Centaurs will take it as an invasion of their territory, besides, there are many dangerous creatures lurking in that place.”

“A sound observation,” Madam Marchbanks noted, her smile vanishing. “But there is nothing to worry about. The leaders of the two remaining centaur herds were contacted. They agreed on having the greenhouses built and even going as far as offering protection in exchange for some medicinal herbs and certain kinds of plants that don’t naturally grow in the forest.

“Also, as you are aware, Albus, purchasing different ingredients for potions is expensive, that is the reason why the students have to buy their own. However, you also know many families barely have the resources to send their children, much less pay for extra materials. Our benefactor decided to ease the economic burden on many families. By cultivating potion ingredients, we will be able to provide the students with the needed materials and also give the ones that are interested in herbology first-hand experience in dealing with different plants.”

“I am totally in for that idea,” declared a teacher that Lucius never saw before. “Many of my kids rarely have decent ingredients so their potions don’t always have good results. Of course, as they are in their first years, it would seem wasteful to give them first quality ingredients. But it can certainly affect their education if they don’t learn to distinguish between an acceptable potion and a successfully brewed one.”

“You are Mister Ramsey, right?” the old woman asked, receiving a nod in response. “My great-granddaughter is in your class, she told me you provided the ingredients for all the students who need it, is that right?”

“It is, as I said before, it can really affect their education if they don’t learn the basics.”

“Good, I would like to speak with you one of these days. Our benefactor has many suggestions and we need help with the Potion’s program. Wilhelmina, Pomona, you should also join us. We need to decide what plants will be grown and what animals will be raised to complement the students’ education.”

No one missed the way Madam Marchbanks blatantly excluded Severus from the planning, despite of him being the main teacher of that subject. Lucius would have pitied his friend, but he paved his way with all his bad decisions. It was time for Severus to reap what he sow, no matter how much the idea pained him.

“I am curious about the new security measures Minister Bones mentioned,” Lucius decided to say in order to divert the room’s attention from his friend.

Another tense moment passed in silence.

“The main gates will be replaced for sphinx iron,” Moody answered reluctantly, scowling at him and ignoring the reaction his declaration caused. “That is the best metal for rune wards.”

“And why should there be additional wards added?” Severus asked in that low tone of his, not even reacting at the glare the scarred man gave him.

“Multiple reasons.” Considering Moody's tone, it was obvious the man was not going to elaborate.

“Isn't that excessive? Alastor, I understand your fanaticism for security, but this is a school,” Dumbledore said, looking at the head of the DMLE with a disapproving frown.

“Exactly, Dumbledore. This is a school where part of our future generations resides most of the year, there is no excess in granting their safety. Besides, these are dangerous times and Voldemort has no problems with harming children.”

Lucius liked to think of himself as a sensible man, so he edged away from Dumbledore in case Moody snapped. Fortunately, the old man kept quiet, although he looked as if he ate a lemon. Once again, Lucius was forced to break the tense atmosphere.

“What is this suggestion of having teachers in the train? Wouldn't it be better if a few Aurors were assigned?”

“It is a tradition for a teacher to ride the train with the students,” Flitwick said, smiling brightly at Lucius. “However, I have to agree with Mister Malfoy. Most of the teachers are not combatants, just authority figures. If we are talking about the children's safety, it would be better to assign an Auror or two to each wagon.”

Moody grunted in agreement, or at least that is what Lucius understood. “My exact same suggestion, but we have a problem: the parents. Many won't want to have Aurors in the train so Amelia decided to make the transition gradual so they get used to the idea.”

“A really sound decision,” he agreed, looking on the index for any other important point to discuss.

“Does anyone else have any question?” Madam Marchbanks asked, looking at the silent teachers. “Very well, you can send me a letter if you have questions about the curriculum or how the new infrastructure will affect your classes. Take your time revising the information provided, but if you have any suggestions, send them as soon as possible because the building efforts will begin in March. Alastor and I will be taking our leave, please discuss all the internal matters and send the names of the possible prefects and the new Head Boy and Girl. Enjoy the Holidays!”

As Madam Marchbanks and Auror Moody left, the teachers relaxed. Lucius could fully understand the feeling, both persons were intimidating in their own way. Unfortunately, he had to stay until the meeting was over. Stupid Sirius that convinced him that being the stupid Board's representative was a good idea.

“I think it would be good if we began discussing the prefects and the future Head Boy and Girl,” McGonagall suggested, putting aside her parchments. “Let's begin with the future fifth-year prefects. Beginning with Gryffindor, it was decided Mister Longbottom and Miss

Granger will be the main candidates, if they don't want the position, then Mister Thomas and Miss Patil will be up to par for it."

"I understand why the candidates were chosen, but I'm not sure about Miss Granger," the runes professor that Lucius couldn't remember the name of said. "She is an excellent student in the academic sense, but there are times where her competitive nature clouds her judgement."

"I know, Nina, I really do. However, Benedict and I have high hopes for her. She's a really smart girl and I am hoping that having this new responsibility pushes her to mature and learn how to interact with her peers. If she is unable to do it, then I will take full responsibility," the woman promised.

"If I may, I suggest Mister Weasley," Dumbledore announced, earning many curious glances. "I'm sure he is a bright young man that is rough around the edges. If you don't trust me, look at how his brothers turned out to be."

"I won't deny he matured," McGonagall agreed, looking at the old man with an inscrutable expression. "However, he simply doesn't qualify to be a prefect under the new standards. His grades have been improving and, if he continues this way, he will no longer be in danger of failing like last year, but he still has a long way to go. Mister Weasley still has much to learn but I don't doubt he has a bright future ahead of him."

Dumbledore only sighed heavily and allowed the matter to drop, not without giving McGonagall a disappointed look.

"I believe it is my turn," Sprout said, wearing her usual cheery smile. "Miss Bones and Mister Finch-Fletchley meet all the requirements. If they don't want the position, then Mister Smith and Miss Abbot will be more than able to assume the task."

"For my House, I suggest Miss Patil and Mister Boot," Flitwick said after no one opposed Sprout's candidates. "As a reserve, I suggest Miss Li and Mister Corner."

A tense silence once again enveloped the room when it was the next person's turn to give the name of his prefects. At once, Lucius' lethargy disappeared when he noticed the hostility directed towards his old friend. What did he miss? While he was the first one to admit Severus had many flaws, he couldn't understand what he did to deserve such a treatment. That is until he remembered his son's hostility towards his godfather. Draco complained about the man hating Harry... So that was it.

Harry Potter was an incredibly charismatic boy, combine that with his almost perfect grades and the perfect student was made. So Severus obviously went overboard with his hatred towards the innocent boy, earning the dislike of his co-workers. *It is time for you to reap what you saw, my old friend*, Lucius thought grimly, looking at the potions teacher.

"I have-

"Malfoy and Parkinson," Snape muttered, not even bothering to mention other candidates and interrupting the blond beauty that was about to speak.

“I must disagree with that nomination, Severus,” Flitwick said, raising a placating hand towards the woman that was making an admirable effort to murder Severus with her glare. “On a merely logical perspective, your decision is not rational. Mister Malfoy has excellent grades, of that there is no doubt. However, Mister Potter is the undisputed owner of the title of the best student of his year. Also, Miss Parkinson’s grades leave much to be desired. Miss Greengrass would be the first logical choice, followed by Miss Bulstrode.”

“It is my decision as Head of the House-”

“Maybe we should have begun discussing that topic first,” McGonagall interrupted with surprising brusqueness. “Because neither you nor I are the current Heads of our Houses. Let’s not forget our duties ended the moment the students left the castle because of our own carelessness. I’m merely voicing Benedict’s decision because of his absence.”

“I don’t remember ever discussing my options with you, Snape,” the blonde woman snapped, even when her face was neutral, clear disdain could be seen on her eyes.

“I believe it would be good to take Severus’ suggestion. He has been the Head of Slytherin for almost fifteen years,” the Headmaster said in a placating tone. Obviously, that was not the right thing to say.

“Do you know why we were replaced, Albus?” McGonagall asked in a deceptively calm tone. “Me, because I was never available for my students. Severus, however, was ousted by his own House based on favouritism, intimidating younger students, and blatant disregard of his duties in general. Both of us lost any power we had over our Houses.”

“I believe it’s Isabelle’s turn to name her candidates, as the rightful head of the Slytherin House,” Flitwick suggested, looking impassive.

“If my opinion doesn’t count perhaps I should leave,” Severus said in a whisper-like tone.

“If you wish to do so, no one will stop you,” the blonde woman responded with a saccharine voice.

“Severus, stay,” the Headmaster commanded when the potion’s teacher stood up. “You are overstepping your boundaries, Isabelle. Don’t forget I am still the Headmaster of this school.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Headmaster. Professor Snape is the one who wished to leave, I just reminded him that no one would stop him.”

The woman’s smile was almost gentle as she delivered the answer in the most innocent tone Lucius ever heard. Yet, her eyes contained enough venom to make up for her polite words. He could see McGonagall failing to contain a smile and many other teachers doing an even worse job. He could see how Severus’ jaw tightened and his posture tensed. It was a shame to see such a bright man being wasted on a job he abhorred, all because of the mistakes he made during his youth. The man was playing a dangerous game while trying to redeem himself for causing the death of the only woman he ever loved.

Lucius knew Severus would snap sooner or later, having accomplished none of his dreams or achieved any of his ambitions. The worst part, perhaps, was knowing he couldn't help someone that didn't want to be helped so the only option left was to watch as his oldest friend threw his life away and hope he realized he was destructing himself before it was too late.

"As I was saying, my main candidates are Mister Potter and Miss Greengrass. The secondary candidates would be Miss Bulstrode and Mister Nott, although I believe most of the boys in that year could be exemplary prefects," the woman stated with finality, ignoring Severus' glare.

"I am afraid I have to disagree with your decision, Miss Kowalski." So that was the teacher his son talked so much about. When Draco described the new defence professor, Lucius imagined many things, but a fragile-looking beauty never even crossed his mind. "I believe Harry already has much to deal with, he doesn't need all those extra responsibilities."

"And I am afraid I will have to disagree with you, Headmaster," Kowalski said, giving the old man a soft smile. "Mister Potter already fulfils all the duties of a prefect with none of the recognition. Older students trust his judgement and younger ones look up to him. He and Miss Greengrass are the unofficial confidants of the House, they even set up a tutor system to help the students that struggle academically and offer support to those who struggle emotionally. It is time for him to receive the benefits of the position instead of the responsibilities only."

"I have to agree with Isabelle," Flitwick said, "and I am sure many of the present agree with me. Mister Potter is an exceptional student, but overall, he is kind. Knowing him, he would barely remember being kind to anyone because he considers it basic manners. There is no one else more deserving of the position than him."

"You forget he's also competing as a champion in a Tournament that he's not ready to face," Dumbledore retorted, ignoring the short man's words.

"A Tournament you personally pushed to be reinstated," Flitwick retorted and Lucius wished he had some snacks to enjoy along with the spectacle. "Harry is not alone for the competition, besides, he decoded the clues for the next task already."

"He has?" Sprout asked, looking incredulous. "Definitely inherited more than Lily's looks."

"I still don't agree with his nomination," Dumbledore insisted.

"Then it is good that you don't have to agree with my decision, Headmaster," Kowalski answered in a cheery tone, "because of the new reforms, at least five people have to disagree with my proposed candidates. Does anyone else disagrees with Mister Potter being a prefect?" she asked, waiting a few moments for someone to speak, only be answered with silence. "Excellent, then we have the Slytherin prefects. Now, it is time to discuss the new Head Boy and Head Girl."

Lucius was impressed, incredibly so. The woman had a silver tongue and the cunning to make use of it in its full potential. If he was not deeply in love with his marvellous wife, then his sight would be settled on her. As if sensing his thoughts, the woman looked at him, her

sharp steel eyes looking right into his soul. Thanking all his years of training, he continued looking at the same direction with unfocused eyes. The woman tilted her head and looked away, almost making him sigh in relief... There was something wrong with that woman, he didn't know what, but he knew there was something wrong with her.

"That is right! This year's batch is even more promising than the previous ones," an excited Sprout exclaimed.

"It is a shame that the new regulations dictate the Head Boy and Girl have to be from different Houses. Miss Selwyn and Mister Higgs would be the ideal choices for that position," McGonagall lamented.

"Emilia Selwyn?" Lucius asked with raised eyebrows. The last time he met the Selwyn brat, she was set on his parents' path.

"The one and only," Kowalski nodded, "I am new in the school so I have no idea what kind of person she was, I only met the girl she became. She is quite mature for her age and many of her peers look up to her."

"Especially Mister Creevey," McGonagall agreed.

"I see..." that was the only response Lucius could muster.

Creevey was not a known surname so he was most likely to be a muggleborn or perhaps a half-blood. How curious was that? He wondered if the Selwyns knew about their daughter's behaviour, hoping they never found out just in case they decided to punish the girl for fraternizing with impure ones.

"We have to decide which one of them will be chosen," the blond woman said, looking slightly troubled. "I believe Miss Selwyn is the best candidate. Both deserve the position, but she earned the respect of the whole Gryffindor House, thing that Mister Higgs has not."

"True enough," Flitwick murmured, "even when the rivalry between houses is almost nonexistent between the younger students, the older ones still cling to it. Miss Selwyn certainly has an advantage there."

"Does anyone disagree with the decision?" McGonagall asked and no one talked. "It is set then. Now, onto who will be the next Head Boy."

"What I am about to suggest is highly irregular, but it has been done before," one of the teachers said, what was her name again? "I want to propose George Weasley as the next Head Boy."

"That really is irregular," Flitwick said, looking disconcerted. "But you are right, Nina, it has been done before. First, tell us the reasons why you are suggesting him in particular."

"Bathsheda and I discussed this on detail. The Weasley twins matured significantly. I wasn't present during their younger years, but I was told of their pranks and general lack of motivation for anything related to learning. However, I think we all see how much they



changed. I know both of them achieved twelve OWLs last year and their grades are the highest amongst their year. Also, their conduct is nothing if not exemplary. Besides, both of them are well liked by the student body.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know Fred Weasley as well and perhaps I am a bit biased towards his brother. From my personal experience with George, I know he is extremely dedicated to his studies. But, as I said before, this is my personal bias and perhaps both are equally capable to assume the position.”

“Actually, Nina, that is not a bad suggestion at all,” McGonagall commented, looking thoughtful.

“I have to agree with you,” Flitwick nodded, “the problem now lays on which Weasley will we choose. Personally, I am closer to Fred. The kid is fascinated with enchanting so I give him extra lessons whenever possible.”

“I would commend both of them,” Vector said in an even tone. “Maybe we should vote on the matter. Those who agree on George Weasley raise their right hands and those who agree with Fred Weasley raise their left. I think that if any of us is unsure, it would be better to abstain.”

Lucius observed this new development with a bit of apathy. After all, his rivalry with Arthur Weasley was still going strong. However, he couldn’t deny those Weasleys produced surprisingly successful children. He allowed a sigh to escape as he drowned the discussion, not really interested either way and begging for the time to go faster so he could go back home.

*It is hilarious*, he noted with a certain degree caustic amusement. The feud between Weasleys and Malfoys began generations ago but it would end with him. He knew how close his son was with those twins and his grandchildren would see Arthur’s grandchildren as friends. Centuries of tradition ended because of a Potter, one of the families his family despised the most but was too afraid to openly confront. *I hope you are screaming in your grave, father.*

Lucius did not pay attention to the rest of the meeting, deciding to read the parchments detailing the remodelling of the castle. If that squib could really build what was proposed, then he would be forced to change his perspective, but until then, squibs would remain as disgraces in his eyes.

“Now that everything is settled, I believe is time to call the meeting adjourned,” the headmaster declared, breaking his trance with those magical words. “Happy Holidays!”

He nodded to the few persons in that room that had his respect and proceeded to flee before anyone could even think about engaging him in a pointless conversation. A few hallways away, he finally considered himself safe.

“Dobby!”

“Master calls?” the elf said, popping beside him.

Lucius took a moment to appreciate his elf's uniform and noted he should have given that clothes store a much better tip for their work. He heard the echo of conversations.

"Let's leave this place before someone talks to me," he almost begged.

"To the manor?"

He considered the question for a second before answering, "No. Let's go to Hogsmeade. They close the candy store early on the weekends and Narcissa has been craving chocolate."

"Young master is also arriving today! Can we get him something?"

"Of course, you should also get something for you and Kreacher."

Lucius winced when he noticed his elf began tearing at his proposal. It was hard to begin treating the creature as a person, but Merlin if it was not useful! Sometimes, it was still strange to talk with Dobby, but he changed and, if treating house-elves as people pushed him further away from the road he was treading, then he would do so without complaints.

## Chapter End Notes

There it goes! I remember many people criticised me for the way in which James was portrayed without knowing the reason why I was doing so. There is a method to my madness and this was planned while I was forming the story so long ago.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter! ^.^

# Transition

## Chapter Notes

Here is another chapter that, as the title implies, is the transition between the events and what are to come. Hope you enjoy it!

Harry Potter woke up feeling strangely tired. He rubbed his crusty eyes and looked around the room in an effort to orient himself. The drapes were shut, so he had no idea what hour it was but he hoped he didn't miss his appointment with Ragnok. With heavy steps, he walked towards the shower.

It was strange, he decided, to feel so drained yet relaxed. He barely had energy to get dressed, but the constant stress that was tormenting him for the last months disappeared. He felt light, almost giddy, with a strange sense of calmness that made him want to stay in his room all day long. However, he had things to do.

Harry walked towards the dining room, he could deal with the world after food. Much to his relief, breakfast was still being served, though a few people were missing.

"Harry!" Theo greeted enthusiastically.

"Morning."

"Hey, are you okay? You're always the first one to be up," Hestia commented, trying to look casual, but her pinched eyebrows betrayed her worry.

"I talked with Sirius until late. Where's Fleur?"

"She went out with Lizzy and aunt Eleadora, something about showing her around," a bleary-eyed Terrence muttered.

Harry allowed the conversations to flow around, deciding to focus on eating his breakfast instead. Though he was entertained by Flora stealing Terrence's pancakes and the boy looking confused every time he tried to grab food from his empty plate. It was a calm meal that only served to soothe him further.

"Good morning!"

The familiar voice made Harry look to the side. Ella was smiling at him, lifting slightly the tray of cookies she was carrying.

"I just finished baking this for you, try one!"

Harry resisted the urge to grimace at the offer. During his youth, he had a limited access to treats, which perhaps caused his dislike for them. The scent of ginger hit him when he reluctantly raised one, giving Ella a pained smile that turned more genuine at the memories this particular scent brought.

Since he met Elizabeth, she loved these cookies so Harry managed to buy her a few from a nearby bakery during the holidays. She would always try to share, however, he enjoyed seeing her happy much more than he wanted to try one so he rejected her offers. It was strange to have someone baking them only for him, it almost felt wrong. He noticed Ella's expectant gaze and took a tentative bite.

It was not bad, he decided. Actually, it was pretty good. It was not overly sweet and the ginger gave a pleasant bite to the treat.

"I really like it," he told his short friend, who beamed at him.

"I am so glad! I worked so hard in this recipe because Master dislikes sweets," Ella said, trying to hide her tearing eyes.

"Thank you, Ella."

Harry smiled at his loyal friend, who left after giving him a wide smile. He took a moment to enjoy his last minutes of peace before facing his responsibilities.

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Ragnok was reading the report Fogs handed him. Considering this was the full report and not the watered-down version that was handed to the Minister, he could announce with a certain degree of pride this was the second time reading the blasted thing. *Sleep is for the weak!* A phrase Ragnok liked to repeat whenever he was forced to forgo his invaluable slumber. Fortunately, goblins needed fewer hours of rest than humans did. Otherwise, he shuddered at how hard his already laborious work would become.

He shook his head and took another sip of his beverage to clear his mind. The results of the analysis of Hogwarts were quite unnerving, to say the least. Basically, the castle was defenceless against any kind of attack. The wards that once made the place famous wouldn't even be able to stop an idiotic troll! If that was not enough, there were more disquieting news. The castle itself was a time bomb.

Ragnok knew magic was sentient, however, not even he knew to what degree. Hogwarts was enchanted to protect the students, but what happens when all the capability to protect was taken away from her, by either time or ignorance? Simple, magic tried to compensate by overcharging the rune stones, which in turn caused the magic to be unstable. That was the same reason why the stairs would move, taking the students to a random location instead of their destination, disregarding their safety in the process. Also, the reason why so many incidents took place inside the castle. Sooner rather than later, the magic would be so unstable the castle would not be able to differentiate between friend and foe. No student would ever be safe inside Hogwarts. Fortunately, there was still time to fix the situation. Unfortunately, that was not his main concern.

There was something in the Forbidden Forest. Something dangerous enough to cause the inherent magic of the place to turn violent. This is what really worried Ragnok. What could have ever caused gentle Mother Magic to become violent? Decisions need to be taken soon because, whatever it was, it was lethal.

He was snapped out of his thoughts when someone knocked on his door, pushing it open. Was it nine already? Time flew by when one was frowning at headache-inducing information indeed. Ragnok nodded at Sharpclaw and was about to greet one of his favourite humans until he actually caught a glimpse of the boy. Harry Potter looked different... The boy's posture was far more relaxed, but that was not it. Aha! His young friend finally stopped putting on his face that strange concoction humans liked to wear in an effort to look less hideous. Poor creatures, they really were hopeless in aesthetical related matters.

"Hello, Ragnok, it is good to see you again."

"Harry, I would like to say the same, but most of your visits involve an awful amount of paperwork. So, how was your ball?" he asked, a smile spreading on his face when the boy grimaced.

"Sometimes, I really hate you," Harry grumbled, handing him a heavy sack of galleons. "One day, I'm going to find your informant inside the castle and win a bet for once."

"Someday. Hopefully, once you graduate," Ragnok retorted, tossing the bag into one of his drawers and gloating on his victory. "That is enough pleasantries, there are more pressing matters to discuss."

"I am guessing that the report was bad."

"Have a look." Ragnok handed the teenager the thick folder, only receiving an incredulous look in response. "There will be time for reading it later. Miss Adams gave me her personal recommendations on what should we take care of first, read this."

He handed his client a single paper where the two most important matters were written and waited for the boy to finish reading.

"Ragnok, send a group of your best curse-breakers and trackers to the forest," Harry said, frowning at the folder he was leafing through. "You know money will not be a problem."

"It will be done," he nodded, writing on his reliable black notebook. "I was wondering if you could perhaps donate some Madagascar Tree roots from your greenhouses, it will be offered to the centaurs as a sign of peace."

"You have carte blanche, no need to ask," Harry said absentmindedly, turning the pages of the thick folder until he reached the one he desired. "I think that whatever is hidden inside the forest may be related to that strange room I told you about."

"The one with fairies?"

"The same one. Luna believes time-turners have to be destroyed so we have access to that room and she has not been wrong before."

"And what makes you think the forest and that room are related?"

"Look at this," the boy said, signalling the graphic of magical wavelength fluctuations in the forest. Ragnok was about to ask for more proof until Harry turned the pages and signalled a similar graphic belonging to the restricted section of the library, where that infamous fairy room was found.

"Wait a minute," Ragnok muttered and his frown deepened as he frantically turned the pages of his own folder, finally finding the one he was looking for.

He didn't know why his heart started beating faster when the graphic on the page mirrored the previous ones, though it signalled a different place of the castle.

"I have never been in this part of the castle, but we'll see what is hidden there," Harry said, at last, eyeing the notes that the analysts wrote about the place. "I'm guessing that is one of the rooms that Hogwarts is trying to hide. What do you think, Ragnok?"

"...There have been rumours," he began explaining, still frowning at the folders. "These rumours have been circulating around for centuries. It is said that Hogwarts is not only used as a school, but also as some kind of vault for dangerous magical artefacts. Personally, I've never believed in them because the Department of Mysteries is used for that purpose, but I'm no longer so sure."

"And we are back to the Department of Mysteries," Harry sighed, "everything seems to be leading us to that place. In any case, I will tell you whatever I find in that new room. When will the runemasters begin working in the Rune Stone Vaults?"

"Once the Holidays are over. They would have begun working sooner, but they are taking their time to examine all the runestones you found. Good thing too, replacing all the stones the castle needs would cost a small fortune."

"Justin was the one who found them," the boy said, smiling a little. "I was just going to tell my elves to throw everything."

"Any other interesting things in those storage rooms?"

"Not really. There were many trinkets mixed with the stones, nothing interesting aside from a few old books."

"I guess that the only thing we can do is wait and see, Harry."

"So, how is the business going?" At the question, Ragnok perked up. Talking about money always raised his spirits.

"Exceedingly well, actually. The international branch offices of Mirror Summons are about to pay their investment and the ones in the Asian Empire and the Tribes are already generating profit. Everything else is going fine and I would even suggest expanding the other businesses

after a market analysis. However, I think it would be good starting in the countries that follow the same mentality as this one, that way we won't have much competition."

"We would need to talk about this with Ploutos and Miss Blair. If we expand ourselves we will need to find reliable employees and I don't feel comfortable with the idea of sending myself abroad."

"That is fine, this is a decision that should be considered carefully because it will be a heavy investment. I will make an appointment for this."

"Thank you, Ragnok... How are the talks going with the dealer?"

The man couldn't stop a wide grin from appearing at the question. "He owes Gringotts more than only gold so he is keeping his head down. My cousins in the Tribes are only waiting for you to arrive in order to finish sealing the agreement."

"I am trusting on their discretion, or else I might be banned from entering the country again," the boy commented, amusement sparkling on his eyes.

"Goblins are loyal and you were already declared a friend of our nation. Besides, my cousin is really happy with the small commission he is getting from the deal."

"So that is what they are calling it these days, in my times we called it fraud," the boy muttered with no real heat behind his words. "I guess that is all for today. Shame, I was ready to spend most of my day talking about the results of the analysis."

"Don't worry, once you read the full report we will have a meeting with all the staff," Ragnok commented, smirking at the boy's almost imperceptible grimace.

Harry's expression changed to a frown as he took out his communication crystal and activated it. How strange.

"Harry, there was an attack in Saint Mungo's, Sagrah is dead. Moody already closed off the hospital, no one can get in or out so I won't be arriving until late. You have to go right now to the classified archives of the Ministry. Tubby found what we were looking for but it can't be transported so find a way of copying it. I have a really bad feeling about this, please hurry up," The Minister's undersecretary almost yelled through the crystal and cut the communication.

"I guess you have to leave so the visit to your family Vault will be postponed. I will tell yourself about the upcoming meetings so don't worry about anything."

"Thank you, be ready for the twenty-seventh... Ragnok, I have the feeling our problems are just beginning."

"I do too, Harry. I do too."

Ragnok could almost feel it in his bones. War. It was looming on the horizon, and this time, the Goblin Nation would make a stand. He took out his reliable black notebook and wrote two words that would soon be read by all his kin.

To arms.

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Harry arrived at the Ministry Archives with a pop, holding Ares' hand. He looked around with wariness, frowning at his surroundings. The Classified archives looked as if a hurricane vandalized the place... And to think his elves helped organize it. He reminded himself to get them some nice presents for Yule.

"Mister Harry!" Tubby exclaimed, appearing from behind a bookcase. "Hurry up sir, you have to see this."

Harry and Ares followed the anxious elf without saying a word. They felt a chill running through their spines when Tubby led them through a narrow space between bookcases that had no apparent exit. Then, Harry felt the rotten magic emanating from an antique silver bell that Marcus's elf levitated towards the wall, which had engraved the image of a witch and where the bell fitted perfectly in its hands.

"Is that what I think it is?" Ares asked, frowning at the narrow entrance that the wall turned into.

"Aye, it's a Horcrux," the anxious elf muttered, not even looking back as she led them through the passage, illuminating the corridor with a ball of light that emanated from her palm.

Harry wished she led them through the dark.

The walls of the passage were filled with crude engravings, some places had deep scratches, and others seemed to be splattered with a maroon substance that had long dried. The place stunk of death. Something cracked under Harry's shoe and he looked down. A bone. A small bone weakened with time.

He only clenched his jaw and tried to ignore his surroundings. "What is this place, Tubby?"

"The root of the Ministry. A week ago, we found an old journal we sent to Gringotts to be cleansed. Master Marcus retrieved it a few days ago and began reading it. Apparently, it belonged to Ursa Black, one of the founders of the Ministry. The journal detailed how it was built and how many sacrifices were made in order to secure this place. You won't believe it, sir, it has the whole Alley, Ministry, and Hospital detailed... It also has Horcruxes, one for each of the founders."

Harry could only grit his teeth at the information. Should he be surprised? Of course not. Should he be disappointed? Not in the slightest, but he still was because one of his ancestors was part of the founding families. Well, every family had a rotten apple somewhere.

"What else is in the place?" Harry asked, his gaze fixating on a maroon splatter that looked far too fresh for his comfort.

"The room is also used for rituals."



"And the only ones that can actually do rituals inside the Ministry are the unspeakables," he muttered, trying to push aside all the dark thoughts that were beginning to invade his mind.

Harry lifted his eyes when they stopped walking. A room that could only be described as plain was definitely not what he was expecting. However, one only had to pay attention to it to stop being plain. Three of the four walls were decorated with detailed blueprints, each wall dedicated to a different place. Floating in front of the blueprints were twenty-one different objects evenly distributed. Curious, considering there were only thirteen founding families. Yet, all of this paled compared to what was in the middle of the room.

The whole floor was coated with that maroon colour Harry began to hate. A complicated inscription surrounding a pentagram was engraved in the middle of the room, where a grotesque body in an advanced state of decomposition was placed its centre. Or at least what was left of it.

Ares snapped his fingers and frowned, then he neared the pentagram and Harry placed a hand on his friend's shoulder, stopping him from advancing.

"Don't get close. Do you see that inscription? It is in the Pravus Runic Alphabet," he told Ares, who paled at his words. "None of you will get near it until I say so. Tubby, go and ask Rome for the best camera he can find, we will need to take pictures of the blueprints. Ares, bring aunt Eleadora, tell her this is an emergency and she needs to bring all the necessary materials to break an Impuratus Circle."

Harry glared at the floor, trying to control his magic that was almost begging him to destroy the place. After taking a few deep breaths, he raised his wand and a small fire basilisk emerged from the tip, racing towards the levitating objects. He listened with a certain degree of satisfaction the wails that flooded the room when the fiendfyre consumed each one of the Horcruxes, but didn't allow that to distract him from his main objective.

Someone that worked inside the Ministry had access to the blasted place... No, that was not right. That person not only had access but actively feed the magic in the room through sacrifices. The question was who. His first option was an unspeakable, but that idea was promptly discarded. It had to be someone belonging to the administrative labour of the Ministry, someone who would not seem out of place while visiting the Archives, someone utterly deranged hiding under an unassuming facade.

There were far too many variables and even more possibilities. Fine by him, nothing was easy in his life and this would not be an exception.

Harry would make sure to involve Auror Moody without revealing himself. Simple enough, a push here, a twist there and a little bit of a whisper campaign regarding a spy in the administrative body and it was done. The hard part would actually involve his little twist... Well, at least it would be fun.

He polished his plans even after his fire basilisk finished consuming the Horcruxes and the room went silent.

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"Ah, young Harry, it has been a pleasure to have you here," the Emperor said, smiling at Harry, who returned the gesture.

"It's an honour to be in your presence."

"Bah, we both know that you only come for my books," the old man retorted, a smirk plastered on his wrinkled visage.

"I would never deny that. And we both know that you sacrifice me to your heir in order to enjoy your peace and quiet."

"I would never deny that!" the old man exclaimed jovially, laughing at the tired sigh that Harry let out.

"May I know why you called for me, Emperor Shi Huan?"

"Just call me Shi Huan, boy, I told you many times that formalities were forgotten the moment my granddaughter invited herself to your house. Besides, what makes you think that I had another reason than the pleasure of your company?"

"Because the communication mirrors exist for a reason," Harry deadpanned.

The old man stroked his beard. "Ah, you're right, I haven't thought of that. Anyways, I wanted to ask what you think about Hwasu. She will be assuming the throne in only three years and she needs someone strong to support her."

"I'm sure she has enough supporters," Harry muttered, feeling a tad uncomfortable when the Emperor sighed heavily. Did he say something wrong?

"Yes, yes, of course she does. I meant she needs support outside of the family."

Harry cleared his throat with some tea. "She has many friends."

The Emperor sighed heavily once more and Harry felt as if he failed some kind of test. What did he do wrong? Considering the Emperor was pinching the bridge of his nose, he thought it was wiser to remain silent.

"Yes, yes. What I mean is that Hwasu needs a partner, preferably someone used to deal with politics and leeches. Perhaps someone with a title and from a good family. You know, just so he is used to this lifestyle."

"Ah, true." That was something he never considered, but it was logical. The politics inside the Royal House would eat alive anyone without the preparation to deal with it.

The Emperor sighed again. "I think my granddaughter deserves a talented mage, a young man who can deal with her and give her space."

Harry nodded at the old man, who massaged his temples.

"Perhaps a foreigner who doesn't see her as a princess and who can freely travel thanks to his elves..." Judging by the Emperor's expectant gaze, Harry considered that maybe he should have visited another time.

"Is that... Are you asking me whether I want to court her?" Harry asked slowly, hoping to have arrived to the wrong conclusion.

"More formal than that. An engagement would suit both of you to give you time to know each other."

"I will decline the offer," was the only answer Harry could muster at the strange request. Why did things like this always happen to him?

"Ah, a shame. I was really hoping to have you as part of the family," the Emperor said, nonplussed, as if he offered him another cup of tea instead of the hand of his heir. "I guess I will have to wait another generation and hope to finally have some of Lily's kin in the family."

Right, the old man loved his mum. Harry decided to take another sip of his tea and enjoy the cool breeze of the evening. However, a look at the old man told Harry he would soon reveal the real reason why he called him and it had nothing to do with Hwasa.

"How is your mark going?" the old man asked out of the blue. Harry was not even surprised.

"I finished it, but I want to check it again, just in case."

"Good, young Harry. Don't take too long though... Dark days are coming for Europe and you will need every tool at your disposal. I heard rumours, you see, and they are quite worrying. Your dark lord has been actively recruiting in France and in the Slavic regions, especially the Northern Union. I sent my people to investigate, but they didn't get much information. Apparently, your dark lord began using his brain for once and has been keeping a low profile. However, there is something you should know. My people captured one of his recruiters. This person was searching for metamorphmagi."

"How reliable was this recruiter?" Harry asked, feeling the blood leaving his face at the implications.

"A member of the Czar's inner circle. That is right, Harry, your dark lord managed to get powerful followers, so beware. One piece of advice, now that your mark is ready, assemble your own trusted circle. Soon enough, you will need it. Don't forget that outside of it, you cannot trust anyone else aside from your most loyal collaborators," the emperor said, his gaze fixed on the Yosei that were flying around in the gardens.

Harry only nodded at the man, not being able to speak. Only a few days ago he considered taking a break, but now he had many matters to take care of. Beginning and curiously ending with the same matter: Tom Riddle.

The book about the Hogwarts' founders was published the same day of his meeting with Ragnok and it created dissent between the British. Blood purists were declaring the whole

book a lie, claiming for Rita's head in the process. Their efforts were not really working. The evidence his reporter managed to compile, along with the Sorting Hat's testimony, were enough to convince most of the population. Still, there were divided opinions and much criticism against the book. The ones that were not offended by the origins of blood purity, felt affronted by the harsh truths about the four Hogwarts Houses.

Perhaps Rita could have concluded the book in a softer note, but then again, some people were denser than osmium. Only a harsh slap would be able to make them see the truth, and even then, they would try to close their eyes.

In any case, that was done. The book was the seed of doubt that needed to be planted. Harry would allow it to grow up for a few months and soon, the truth behind Voldemort would be revealed. No matter how many followers the man managed to get, the truth of his origins would be a fatal blow to his reputation and he would lose many people in his ranks. But there was still time for that to happen.

His main worry for the moment was related to the Ministry.

The room Tubby discovered in the Classified Archives was dealt with. Harry feigned an attack, destroying a part of the documents residing in the place. It was convenient, really. Besides, it was almost the perfect situation. The hospital was in a lockdown and Aurors were on high alert in the Alley, not the Ministry. It was quite unfortunate he wasn't the only one with that idea.

The Department of Mysteries was also attacked. Seven unspeakables were killed during the violent raid, other thirteen were sent to Saint Mungos. According to Marcus, Death Eaters stole a few cursed objects, but that was not their main goal. They tried to steal from the Hall of Prophecies but an unspeakable decided to destroy the room before they could take anything, in revenge, the man was taken. His body was left in the middle of the alley the next day, according to Auror Moody, the Lestranges were in charge of the man's demise.

Harry wondered what exactly was their main objective and faintly remembered the prophecy Luna mentioned a while ago, but it soon left his mind. Prophecies were unreliable.

With the attacks to the Ministry, the aurors were on high alert. The Wizengamot would have a meeting after New Year to decide whether Auror Moody would be given free reign to reorganize the whole DMLE and the security of the Ministry, something many people would actively oppose but it would happen nonetheless. He would make sure of it. However, Harry needed to do something before Auror Moody was granted carte blanche. His own raid to the Department of Mysteries.

Unlike the Death Eaters, his goal was not to take something, but to destroy everything in the blasted place. Luna had been right, its mere existence was an insult to Mother Magic. The whole department was dedicated to trying to decipher things humans were not supposed to fully understand. If that was not enough, the experiments conducted by some unspeakables made Bellatrix a saint in comparison. After the raid, Madam Bones would receive information about said experiments. Soon enough, the whole department would cease to exist.

At least the blue prints served its purpose. In less than a month, a donation would be made to build another hospital. Seriously, it was ridiculous and beyond dangerous to only have one hospital, no matter how large it was. Of course, the actual hospital would also be remodelled because far too many people were aware of its weaknesses.

Harry suppressed a sigh when his mind decided to follow that particular train of thoughts, which inevitably led to the attack at the hospital itself.

Jennifer Sagrav was killed the exact same way Dorcas Meadowes was. Two death eaters assumed the identity of a healer and a nurse, ready to take the woman off. The only reason they were found was because the Auror in charge of the woman's security was a werewolf. Their scents did not match their appearances and he managed to call for help before being dispatched. In the end, both death eaters were captured thanks to the lockout. Unfortunately, they were prepared for that situation and killed themselves before talking.

It was a mess.

The mind healer treating Sagrav was so close to unlocking the woman's memories, far too close, obviously. It was easy to conclude Voldemort had his spies in the hospital, or maybe he had other means. In any case, the whole hospital and its personnel were under the watchful gaze of the head of the DMLE, so at least Sagrav's death wasn't in vain. That didn't mean Harry was pleased. The information the woman had would have given some light to Maxime's murder, which could have helped find the real responsible for the whole mess.

Harry was still not sure whether he had to deal with yet another enemy or just Tom getting smarter. His brain told him to wait for more evidence before deciding, but his gut was screaming to take action before it was too late. Anyhow, there was nothing he could really help with until he had more information so he ignored his instincts. There were many things he needed to take care of before classes, he could worry about this later.

He took a sip of his already cold tea, not even bothered by the taste, his gaze was focused on the first stars of the night. He would enjoy the few hours of peace that he had left before he had to face his problems.

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Harry stared at the digital clock absentmindedly. Today was the last day of the year, it was almost insulting how fast time flew by. He couldn't believe so much happened in a two-week span and all the things that still needed to happen. It was overwhelming, he decided.

Christmas and Boxing Day came and left in a blur. The only remarkable event during those days was the dinner with Madam Bones and her niece. He bonded with Susan surprisingly fast, but it was understandable when the two teens were ignored the whole dinner by the adults, who were too busy staring lovingly at each other. The mere memory made him shudder. At least he didn't go through that trauma alone, it was a hollow comfort, but it was better than nothing.

His trip to the Tribes went surprisingly well, a success even. He acquired what he needed and met the goblins from the Gringotts branch in the country. Overall, he was not banned, detained, or discovered, so a success on his books.

The investment he made was not exactly small so he hoped it was all worth it.

"Harry, it is time to go if we don't want to be late."

He was snapped out of his reverie when a hand rested on his shoulder and he looked up. Neville was smiling brightly at the woman petting the cat on her lap. Justin was sitting beside a bed where a man was laying, talking to him despite of not receiving any response. However, the man's eyes were not glossy and Harry could swear the understood what he was being told.

"Fleur won't be angry if we are late," he told his friend.

"I know, but Gabrielle is more intense than her. Besides, Apolline is in charge of today's lesson and I kind of like to live."

"That's an excellent point," Harry conceded, "Fleur's mum has a temper."

He still recalled the altercation Apolline had with a random witch when he was giving them a tour of the alley. Yes, Apolline was in all the right to get offended when that woman insulted her daughters, but that was not the point. She showed exactly why no one messed with her. A sight to behold, indeed, one that Harry would be happy to never witness again.

"We have to go," Neville whispered to the woman, placing a gentle hand on her arm. "Mum, we have to go," he repeated in a whisper and Alice Longbottom looked up.

"Louie?" the woman asked in a croaky voice, still petting the purring cat.

"Don't worry, Aunt Alice, he can stay with you until he decides to leave," Harry told his godmother, smiling at the content sigh that escaped the woman's lips.

"I still don't know how you managed to convince mum to allow your fur ball in the hospital," Justin complained, glaring at the cat, who returned the gesture, much to the boy's indignation.

"Your mum said it will help with the treatment and it did," Neville answered, chuckling lightly at the glaring contest between the feline and the teenager, not something one saw every day. "It's unbelievable how you managed to reunite with your mum's cat, Harry."

"I know."

It really was unbelievable. The day of the meeting with Ragnok, while he was having lunch with his aunt, he discovered why his new furry friend was so comfortable in the castle. Apparently, it was his mum's cat. According to Aunt Eleadora, the cat disappeared after the attack and no one bothered to look for him when there were so many things to worry about. To think that, after thirteen years, the same cat found him in the castle and immediately recognized him was utterly unbelievable. If it was not for his elves also recognizing the cat and the pictures his mum left behind, Harry would believe the whole situation to be wishful thinking.

He was happy. Despite of his parents leaving behind so much for him to remember them, having yet another link to his family filled him with warmth.

"Hey, don't forget to tell your mum about tomorrow."

"I won't or she'll kill me," Justin muttered, sulking on his chair when he lost the battle with the cat. "Mum really wants to talk with aunt Eleadora about potions. Honestly, I think I'll have to join Fred and Flora with their potion obsession before mum forces me to."

"I think you will do great, I mean, you already do that magic thingy with really hard names so potions should be easy," Neville said in an effort to comfort his sullen friend.

"It is called chemistry, Neville," Harry corrected, smiling a little at the pained expression of the boy.

"That. Now we have to hurry up or we will be late."

"Good bye Aunt Alice, Uncle Frank. Louie, take care of them for me, okay? Go to the office if you want to leave, Justin's mum will call an elf," Harry told the cat, petting his head. "Ella!"

"You sure ugly will remember that?" Justin asked in a low tone, blowing a raspberry to the cat that managed to return the gesture. "Did you see that?!"

"Master, I brought these for Miss Alice and Mister Frank!" the elf explained, "Leah made their favourites."

"Thank you, dear," Harry told his elf, ignoring Justin's outburst. "Put them on the table, a nurse will help them to eat later, let's go."

When the three teenagers left the room, the cat jumped off Alice's lap and walked towards the table. After all, he was a good cat and he deserved treats too.

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"You did great, Blaise! Does it still hurt?"

"A little. My joints hurt when turning back, but my teeth are the ones that really bother me," the boy explained, rubbing his jaw.

"I guess it has to do with your animal. Perhaps you would benefit from flexibility exercises, in any case, continue taking the mandrake essence. I will teach you how to brew fortifying essence to help with the process," she told the boy, "now go back to meditating and try the transformation again."

Apolline smiled a little when the boy did exactly what he was told, not a single complaint despite the sweat pearling his face. Four hours of practice were nothing to scoff at.

Being honest, Apolline was surprised by how far the kids managed to get on their own. Most of them could finish their respective transformations, but couldn't keep them for long and were still clumsy in their new shapes.

The sweet girl, Luna, tried flying while in her owl shape, but she was forced to turn back because of the pain of torn muscles in her arms. Theo had the same problem, though the boy

was also losing an alarming quantity of hair in each transformation, he needed to control that before turning bald. Thanks heaven Fleur was helping the young kids with that. Ironically, Apolline's eldest daughter's inner animal was a harpy eagle, thing that perhaps helped her with her veela transformation.

Ah, there was also the gallant Neville. She was speechless when the gentle kid turned into an intimidating lion, but weirder things she witnessed. The boy would be someone to be reckoned with once he was able to control his other form and stopped tripping with his own paws.

The younger twins were also advanced, however, they had yet to master turning back. Both of their animals had really sharp claws and when stopping the transformation, the poor girl's nails fell off. Adrian and Terrence were having similar problems, though the former had to also deal with constant muscular pain because his bear form strained his body. Then, Apolline remembered the oldest twins and had to contain a groan.

Both boys were able to fully turn and keep their shapes for a few minutes. However, they caused so much mischief it was a hazard to leave them unattended. They were not even bothered by the pain their transformations brought. Reluctantly, Apolline admitted she admired the boys. They were almost adults and, yet, they managed to keep their connections with their inner animals alive. An admirable feat indeed.

"Bloody hell," a girl hissed, breaking Apolline's train of thought and she approached the teen.

The pretty girl, Daphne, spat blood to the grass and she immediately began examining her. With a relieved sigh, she concluded it was nothing serious, just the canines retracting.

"Drink this and take a break," she ordered Daphne, handing her a vial that contained a thick liquid the girl gulped without hesitation.

"At least my nails are no longer falling off," Daphne muttered in a barely audible tone.

"You are almost there," Apolline confirmed, patting the girl's shoulder and walked over the panting while cat that soon enough turned into a panting teen. With a grimace, she uncorked another vial and helped the boy to drink it, "stop practising for today, you will hurt your fingers otherwise."

As a testament of how tired the boy was, he simply collapsed on the grass and mumbled a thank you. Apolline took out a handkerchief and wetted it with a spell, cleaning the blood on the boy's fingers. She had to admit Draco was determined. His pain tolerance was relatively low and yet he kept pushing until someone forced him to stop.

Apolline began walking again when she heard a pained yelp. One look at the boy was enough for her to know she would be forced to end the transformation. With a flick of her wand, the boy collapsed and she began examining him. Nothing serious aside from exhaustion and skin abrasion. Gently, she forced him to drink two vials of potions.

"You should rest now."



"But I still haven't managed to transform," Justin muttered in complaint.

The boy was right, he was having trouble with the transformation, just like the other two boys, Cedric and Marcus. In their defence, it was hardly their fault. Justin wasn't taught how to connect with his magic so the connexion with his inner animal was not strong enough and maybe he would never be able to complete the transformation. However, that knowledge didn't deter his efforts. The older boys' case was different, and perhaps harder.

Marcus was able to visualize his inner animal, but until the moment, he was only able to transform certain parts of his body. Cedric was an even more serious case. The boy was not even able to visualize his inner animal, neither to meditate for long periods of time unless he was practising his wandless magic. Being honest, she would have already given up in teaching those three if they weren't his daughter's friends. Also, there was another reason.

Young Elizabeth was fairly experienced in animagi transformations. Not entirely surprising, considering the girl was being taught in the Northern Tribes. That country could perhaps turn anyone in an advanced animagi. The girl was currently helping the three boys with their transformation and Apolline would be lying if she said that she wasn't curious.

At the moment, the two older boys were sitting around a fire that created horrible quantities of smoke had a strange scent. Elizabeth was randomly placing a finger on their foreheads to help them in the process. Heaven only knew what the girl was doing, but it seemed to be working because even Cedric was deep in trance.

"Rest, you can try again tomorrow," she ordered the boy that was composing himself and inching towards the fire. "If you get magically exhausted then it will take you a few days to go back to practice."

"Okay," the boy mumbled, looking mutinous. Despite of this, Apolline knew she took the right decision when Justin slumped on the grass.

She was about to order him to head inside when a large Siberian tiger sped through the garden, followed closely by a white owl. There was also a ginger cat following them at a sedate pace, Apolline could swear the small feline's features were contorted in an exasperated mask... Or perhaps she was projecting her own exasperation on the misshapen creature.

There went the person responsible for Fleur's newfound happiness: Harry Potter.

The boy was nothing if not perfect, far too much for her peace of mind. He seemed to be so mature and kind, awfully talented in anything related to magic, courteous and polite to a fault. If that was not enough, he had the looks that would make many swoon and family background that granted him a comfortable life. All in all, the boy seemed far too perfect to be true and, if life taught her something, it was to be distrustful of appearances.

The boy spent an awful amount of time in his study, but he was rarely alone. There were always elves coming and going, carrying different folders, or at least, the ones she saw did. Also, his large group of friends went in the room for hours, including Fleur. His daughter would never really tell her what they were talking about, which only led her to be more

suspicious. Perhaps she was overreacting, but her instincts were rarely wrong. Therein laid her conundrum.

Apolline never saw her daughter so happy. Her new friends were incredibly kind and supportive, barely even remembering her heritage, thing that surprised her the most. In a sense, it was refreshing because it gave Fleur a taste of what a normal life was like. On the other hand, it was worrying. Veelas were terribly territorial and loyal to a fault, thing Fleur inherited in spades. As a mother, Apolline could already see the fiery protective glint on her daughter's eyes when she interacted with her friends. Something that was only extended to her small family before. This is what worried her the most.

Maybe she was being paranoid, but she had a feeling that Harry Potter was far too involved in the coming conflict with Voldemort, which meant Fleur would also be involved. The idea of her eldest being in peril was horrifying to any mother.

Her sombre thoughts were interrupted when she felt a familiar pair of arms snake around her waist.

"What is bothering you?" her husband asked in a hushed whisper.

"Look at Fleur."

"She is happy," Augustine concluded after looking at their daughter, and indeed, Fleur was happy. She was openly laughing at the antics of one of her friends.

"I'm worried."

"You always are, but remember she is her own person before being our daughter."

"I know," Apolline sighed in defeat and her husband's hug tightened.

"Get a room!" one of the devilish twins howled, dramatically covering his eyes and breaking the couple's moment.

"Don't exaggerate," Daphne hissed, "you are embarrassing us."

"No, he is right. Mama, Papa, please, do get a room," Fleur requested in a polite tone, though her eyes were glinting in mischief.

"Okay, you all! End of the lesson. Get some rest and be presentable for dinner," Apolline ordered and, much to her satisfaction, she heard the kids groan.

She may be worried, but it was undeniable, Fleur was happy and that was the only thing that mattered. If her daughter decided to participate in whatever machination Harry Potter was planning, then she would support her. Fleur's happiness was more than worth it.

Apolline only hoped she never came to regret her decision.

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Harry Potter stared at the moon. A waning crescent, the perfect witness for what was about to happen. He took a deep breath and focused his eyes on his surroundings.

He was standing up in the middle of a nine-pointed star, each point represented by his friends and his sister. Curious how life worked, there were exactly eighteen people that were going to receive his mark, the exact same number necessary for the ritual. Now, he only had to wait a few moments until the moon was in the right position.

The preparations for the ritual was nerve-wracking. If he made the slightest mistake, then he would harm his friends and that is something Harry would never be able to forgive himself. Fortunately, nothing went wrong during the most stressful part: carving the mark.

Harry chose a rarely visible place for his mark, the left side of the chest, right above the heart. He would never admit it, but he took two vials of calming draught in order to ease his nerves for the part he had hated the most from the whole process. He was proud to say his pulse didn't tremble once while carving the mark on his friends' chest, despite of the blood that freely poured out of the bleeding wound. During the process, his magic itched to heal the damage, almost circumventing his strict control. Compared to that, marking his chest was a piece of cake.

Now, they were on the last part of the process, the blood sacrifice. Even though it sounded quite morbid, it was the easiest part. His friends only had to finish the last detail of the mark by themselves. A sign of their willingness and loyalty.

The moonstones surrounding the group lightened up when the moon reached the desired position. It was time. Harry traced his finger on his mark, opening a new wound. He gritted his teeth when he felt liquid fire burning the wound and a strange sizzling hiss evaporated the blood. After a second of agony, the pain left as suddenly as it came.

Harry looked at his chest and saw a pitch-black mark. It was done.

The light of the moonstones increased and he felt his magic communicating with the ones surrounding him. It was an indescribable sensation. He could feel his friends' wild emotions and pure euphoria. Luna's giggles broke the silence and she hugged the closest person to her.

Harry allowed the laughter that was bubbling on his chest to escape and joined the high spirits around him. They were safe and that was the only thing that mattered.

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## **25<sup>th</sup> of December 1994, Number 4 Privet Drive, Surrey**

Petunia Dursley stared at the almost naked living room with an inscrutable expression. How did her perfect life turn out like this? What did she ever do to deserve this?

She sighed and took a bite of her dinner. With a heavy heart, she looked at her husband.

Vernon was not doing well. He lost so much weight, which she would have appreciated years ago, but now, it was only a reminder of their misfortune. After he was freed, he was unable to find a job thanks to his criminal record and their savings were long gone. The only source of

income was, ironically, Petunia's housekeeping and baking skills. She had to swallow her pride in order to make a little money just to keep paying the expenses. This was not how she imagined her life would be like when she got married.

She could clearly remember those uncertain times and her ambitious, if a bit frivolous goals. Petunia married at the tender age of twenty with a man who was fourteen years older than her but offered the stability and normalcy she desperately craved. Admittedly, she didn't love Vernon at first, which may or may not have not been related to her husband's blatant unattractiveness. However, he was the man who remained at her side despite of the freaks that refused to leave her life and always offered her a shoulder to cry on when life overwhelmed her. And most importantly, he loved her as she was. Marrying Vernon Dursley was a decision Petunia would never regret.

However, she would eternally curse the day on which Harry Potter arrived to her life. Thanks to that freak, her life was going to hell!

"I wonder what Dudley is doing right now," Vernon said in a voice that was barely above a whisper. His dinner remained untouched in front of him.

"I am sure he is having fun," she murmured, trying to ignore the sharp pain in her chest at the memory of her only son.

"Who would have thought Dudders would leave the nest so young? ...He no longer needs us, Petunia."

Her husband's words hung in the air, creating a tense atmosphere. This was not something she wanted to talk about, ever.

Dudley matured so much, but he had yet to forgive them. Petunia ignored that little detail until it was no longer so insignificant, until the day Dudley decided to leave the house. She wasn't blind, she knew what her son was trying to do but she pretended not to notice until it was too late. How could she ever forget that day?

Her sweet Diddykins arrived home early, for a change, and gave them the paperwork they needed to sign for him to study abroad. A scholarship to Exeter was not something to scoff about and any other parent would be proud of their children achieving so much on their own. Petunia was not any other parent. She was a mother that knew she was losing her only child and didn't know how to fix it.

For a few days, she seriously considered the idea of simply not giving Dudley the authorization to leave, but Vernon stopped her. For the first time in months, her husband showed interest in something. Unfortunately, his newfound interest in their son's education went against her own needs as a mother, which led to one of the worst fights in their sixteen years of marriage. It was terrible, especially because Vernon put into words her worst fears. Fears she tried to ignore for years.

To put it in simple words, they would lose Dudley if they denied him this opportunity. He would resent them even more, and when he was of age, he would inevitably leave without turning back. She knew this, which is why she wanted to have her son close while she could.

However, Vernon had a point. If they allowed Dudley to have time for himself, his anger would run out. At least that is what they hoped. She had no argument against her husband's logic and signed those bloody papers. Reluctantly, with tears streaming down her face, and with such a shaky handwriting the ones who reviewed them would think she either had Parkinson's disease or signed in the middle of an earthquake. But she signed them.

With a heavy heart, she realized Dudley spoke to her more in those three months before his departure than in the previous year. Vernon was right, their son just needed time alone. In the end, she decided it was for the best. Despite of not having her son during the Holidays, it was better if he was not present to see his parents' shame.

They could no longer tolerate their lives in Little Whinging, especially not her! Her blasted neighbours rejoiced on their misfortune, always gossiping about them and taking advantage of their situation. They gave her generous tips for the baked goods she sold, if a few pence can be called so, rejoicing on the humble facade Petunia needed to wear in order to earn her living. It was humiliating! It was something she could no longer live with so she wouldn't. Thankfully, Vernon supported her decision to leave.

Selling the house would give them enough money to start a small bakery in Acton. Thankfully, they managed to find a small two-bedroom flat, which fitted perfectly with her plans. Yes, it would be hard to start again, but they desperately needed to do so. Besides, they had each other and they would somehow make it work.

Unlike Vernon, she wasn't surprised when Marge stopped talking to them when their disgrace began. That awful woman always hated her, always calling her a gold digger behind her back and giving her that ever-present disapproving frown. Petunia was definitely not surprised by her sister-in-law's indifference and barely concealed contempt when Vernon tried to contact her. Marge would probably ignore them until they were stable once again and she felt lonely enough to pay them a visit and pretend she helped them all along. That harpy!

"We were wrong, don't you think?" Vernon asked out of the blue, interrupting her sour thoughts.

"What do you mean?" Petunia muttered in an almost robotic tone and winced when her husband's already tired visage withered under her blank stare.

"Harry Potter." That name was enough to rekindle her anger. What was Vernon trying to do my mentioning that freak? "What if we treated him as a family? Hear me out, Petunia. I know you and your sister had a big fight because of her husband, I know you are scared of magic and so am I. But what if we treated the boy as your sister would have treated Dudley if something happened to us? We both know Marge would never raise a child, so it was either your sister or an orphanage."

"What makes you think she is better than me?!"

This was utterly unbelievable! Her own husband was comparing her to the oh-so-perfect-Lily!

"I never said she was better than you, Tuney," he sighed, rendering her speechless with that old nickname that she so fondly loved and gained much mockery from the neighbours. "I had time to think about this. Remember that day? When Dudley was a few months old, we went to that office party and I drank too much but didn't let you drive. We almost crashed that night. The Potters would have taken Dudley and raised him as their own."

"We don't know that," Petunia tried to argue, but the knot in her throat was not helping. Besides, her anger was brusquely extinguished by shock.

Since when Vernon had a high opinion of Lily's husband?

"Raising a child as he deserves is the right thing to do. It has nothing to do with affection, just with being normal."

With those words, Vernon left the table. His dinner was still untouched.

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