

The Heart In The Tree

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The Heart In The Tree

by [spulenspul](#)

Summary

The future is murky and prone to shift. The best laid plans are never fool proof. When Harry woke abruptly to an incredible surge of magical power, the destiny he thought lay before him suddenly changed.

With the looming threat of Voldemort ever present, the future of three of the magical worlds most powerful noble families have been ensnared by the machinations of a different yet just as dangerous enemy. With the support of those who came before him, Harry must uncover the truth behind the betrayals he'd faced, and do whatever he could to make things right.

Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Please let me know what you think.

This is a bit different to what I've written in the past. Over Christmas 2022, I read a Ignite the Spark by Angelwithwingsoffire, as well as stories with a similar premise. A spark of inspiration took hold and the next thing I knew it was six months later and I have nearly 140k words written. I hadn't originally intended to post this, but given how much I'd written, I felt it would be a shame if I didn't.

- Inspired by [Restricted Work] by [Angelwithwingsoffire](#)

The still ocean beneath the blue sky

Chapter Notes

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

Harry awoke suddenly with a gasp, as though somebody had thrown a bucket of icy cold water over him. He lay in bed shivering as the sensation seeped within and grew warm. It took a long time for him to settle, and even longer beyond that for him to realise what was going on and where he was. This wasn't the cupboard under the stairs at number 4 Privet Drive, nor was it the dreary second bedroom filled with Dudley's broken and forgotten things. The room around him was sparse but not uncomfortable, for it was the Leaky Cauldron.

That was right. Two days ago Harry had left the Dursleys following an unfortunate incident where he inflated his uncle's sister. Though he had feared punishment, the Minister for Magic had assured him all was well, and now here he was. Three weeks remained of the summer and Harry was totally free aside from the instruction not to go out into Muggle London for fear of Sirius Black.

Throwing off the blanket and peeling off his now sweat soaked shirt, Harry stood and leaned against the window frame. The early morning air cooled his skin as the sun peaked out over the roofs of the buildings. Despite the early hour, Harry felt wide awake. It was as though he was a battery that was now fully charged. The sensation was like what Harry had grown to recognise as his magic within him, only there was somehow more of it.

Before Harry could ponder this strange new phenomenon, there was a tapping at the window in front of him, causing him to jump. A serious looking owl stared at him until he opened the window, letting it hop inside. It held out its leg and Harry untied the letter there. The owl flew off before Harry could say anything to it. More confused now, Harry inspected the letter. It was sealed with wax embossed with the Gringotts seal. He was quick to open it.

Dear Mr Potter

Earlier this morning, we received notification of your magical inheritance. To finalise the details regarding your accounts, we require you present yourself to Gringotts at the earliest convenience for an inheritance test. Until verification of your inheritance has been completed, all connected vaults, properties and titles shall remain sealed.

Please respond to this letter either by return owl or by arriving at your nearest Gringotts branch.

May your treasures prosper,

Ironclaw

House Potter Account Manager

Harry read and reread the letter three times, still not entirely sure what it meant. Magical inheritance? He had never come across that term before, though his access to knowledge about the wider wizarding world was limited. Was it somehow different to the vault he had received from his parents when they died? It had to be, otherwise he would have gained it at the same time as that.

A sudden chill overcame him, quite unrelated to the actual temperature of the room. This letter said that his vaults would be sealed until this was sorted out. Did that mean he no longer had access to his parents' money? With what he'd withdrawn already, he should probably be alright for the rest of the summer and possibly next summer as well, but beyond that was a worry.

Harry raced into the bathroom for a quick two minute shower to freshen up slightly before dressing in the nicest clothes he owned. They still dwarfed his frame substantially, but they were at least clean and were the least faded. After that, he left the Leaky Cauldron. It was early enough that Diagon Alley was mostly empty. A few wizards and witches pottered about, yawning as the various shops began to open their doors. Harry bypassed them all, heading straight for the imposing marble building at the end of the street. Gringotts was already open, and Harry went inside.

"Excuse me?" Harry asked the nearest teller, "could I please ask for some of your time to help me?"

A passage from one of his textbooks floated to the fore of his mind, saying that goblins often appreciated a little more over politeness and formality than wizards typically used. As it was, the goblin raised a sharp eyebrow at him, looking slightly intrigued as he set aside the glittering gemstone he had been inspecting.

"How may I be of service?" he asked.

"I received a letter earlier this morning regarding a magical inheritance? I would very much appreciate it if I could speak to Ironclaw about this," Harry said, handing across the letter.

The goblin quickly read the letter, his expression giving nothing away.

"Wait here one moment sir," he said, hopping from his stool.

Harry was left waiting at the desk for a minute before two goblins returned. One was the teller and the other was an older looking goblin dressed in a sharply imposing suit. From the cuffs of his jacket, Harry saw gleaming arm guards, and around the goblins neck hung a glittering golden chain.

"Heir Potter, my name is Ironclaw. It is a pleasure to meet you at last," he said, inclining his head to the boy.

Not knowing what else to do, Harry bowed back.

"If you could follow me, we have much to discuss."

Harry trailed after the goblin as he led him deeper into the building. The maze of tunnels below the bank had not prepared him for the twisting labyrinth of corridors of smooth, polished marble. Ironclaw opened a door to a richly furnished office. Behind the desk was a suit of armour of the highest quality and an entire wall was taken up by a carving of some kind of battle. Ironclaw sat and gestured to the seat across the desk from him.

"I am sure you have questions, Heir Potter. As such you may speak freely here," he said.

"Why do you keep calling me Heir Potter?" Harry asked.

"Because you are the heir to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter," Ironclaw said, then after taking in Harry's confused expression, "were you not aware of your family's status?"

"No. I mean, I figured my parents were rich since they left me so much money, but I had no idea they were such a big deal," Harry said, trying not to become overwhelmed.

"I see," Ironclaw said, "your father James was Lord Potter, and your mother Lily his Lady. Together alongside myself as their account manager, they oversaw the Potter estates and seat within the Wizengamot. Depending on the results of your inheritance test, all of that will become yours once you claim the lordship."

"But I thought that the money in my vault was theirs? Are you saying there's more?"

"The vault you have been accessing until now has been a trust vault set up by your parents, overseen by the main family vaults as is typical for children of the Noble Houses. I can assure you that it is not the sum total of the Potter's wealth," Ironclaw said.

Harry took a moment to try and calm down. Growing up with nothing, suddenly finding himself rich beyond his wildest dreams had nearly sent him into a panic attack. He was terrified he would spend too much and end up with nothing. Every purchase was quibbled over until Hagrid or Mrs Weasley had pushed him into making a decision. It was only arriving at the Alley this year, with all the freedom it entailed, that he had come to accept his newfound wealth for what it was, but now there was more?

"Heir Potter, please reign in your magic before it becomes an issue."

He startled, only then realising that his magic was more turbulent than he wanted. He calmed it down with a muttered apology.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why that happened. I woke up this morning and my magic felt really weird," Harry said.

"Then it is best we conduct your inheritance test now Heir Potter, as this should enlighten you as to what is happening," Ironclaw said.

The goblin reached into a drawer in his desk and pulled out a heavy bowl made of thick stone. Gems were inlaid in the rim and a complex array of runes covered the inside. He placed the bowl in front of Harry, then held out a knife covered in just as many runes.

"Hold your hand over the bowl then cut the tip of your index finger. Exactly five drops of blood will drip into the bowl before the wound heals. This will be used to conduct the test," Ironclaw said.

Not unused to pain, though slightly apprehensive about causing it to himself, Harry did as he was told. Just as the goblin said, the cut healed as soon as the required blood had been gathered. Inside the bowl, the blood bubbled, turning an inky black. Ironclaw dipped the tip of a long quill into it before transferring it across to a roll of parchment. Almost immediately, the quill began to write.

"Typically magical inheritances are felt by the Lord or Lady of the House as well as the Heir. The Lord then brings their heir to Gringotts for confirmation. In such cases there is no need for Gringotts to inform the House as these events are anticipated and expected by all parties," Ironclaw explained over the scratching of the quill, "the test will reveal the immediate family history and any titles set to be inherited."

As if on cue, the quill stopped, standing to attention as Ironclaw returned it and the bowl to the drawer. With a snap of his fingers, a second identical roll of parchment appeared, which Ironclaw rolled up.

"Gringotts shall keep this copy for our records. Here you are, Heir Potter."

MAGICAL INHERITANCE TEST

Performed by: Ironclaw, Potter Account Manager, Gringotts, British Branch

NAME

Hadrian James Potter

IMMEDIATE FAMILY

Lord James Potter (deceased, 31 October 1981)

Lily Potter nee Evans (deceased, 31 October 1981)

Sirius Black (godfather)

Alice Longbottom nee Prewitt (godmother)

Petunia Dursley nee Evans (maternal aunt, presumptive guardian 7 November 1981)

TITLES

Lord of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter (by right of birth, formerly Heir Potter)

Lord of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Gryffindor (by right of birth, formerly Heir Gryffindor)

Lord of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin (by right of conquest, 2 June 1993)

Heir to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black (declared 8 August 1981)

Harry stared at the parchment, his hands beginning to tremble. There was no way this was accurate. It had to be a mistake. Harry had barely been able to accept that his family was apparently part of wizarding nobility, but he was also the Lord of two of the Hogwarts founders' lines!

"Um, Ironclaw sir, are you sure the test was done correctly?" Harry asked, handing the parchment across to the goblin.

For the first time since he'd arrived at Gringotts, something broke the stoic, unreadable expression he always saw on the goblins faces. Ironclaw's eyes widened and it took a moment for his expression to smoothen once again.

"I can assure you Lord Potter, there is no mistake in the test, but if you would like further confirmation, there is proof I can give you."

Harry nodded and Ironclaw tapped his long fingers against the polished wooden desk. The action reminded him of typing on a computer. A moment later, a goblin entered the room carrying three small boxes resting on a velvet pillow. He handed them to Ironclaw then bowed to both of them before leaving the room.

"These contain the lordship rings for the Houses Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin. If you truly have inherited these titles, then their magic should accept you once you put them on. If not, then the rings will not remain on your finger," Ironclaw said, "we shall start with the Potter ring."

It was a simple golden band with a small moonstone inlaid in it. Harry was directed to place it on his right middle finger, and as soon as it slipped into place, he felt a surge of warmth within and around him. It was like a warm bath or a hug from a loved one, similar to what he'd felt when he received his wand.

"The Potter family magic has accepted you as Lord, which was expected," Ironclaw said, "less expected were these two."

Ironclaw handed across the Gryffindor ring. Like the Potter ring, it was made of gold, but Harry could make out tiny runes moulded into the metal. Instead of a moonstone there was a deep red ruby. There was a similar rush of warmth, but it wasn't quite the same. The only thing Harry could describe it as was that it was like celebrating with his team after winning a Quidditch match.

Unlike the previous two, the Slytherin ring was made of silver. It was moulded with runes and contained a bright green emerald. Harry was prepared to feel the warmth once again, and when it came, it felt almost like an approving nod one would get from a teacher.

"Incredible. The Gryffindor and Slytherin lines have remained dormant for centuries, yet have awoken again in you. It is an honour to meet you properly, Lord of the Most Ancient Houses of Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin," Ironclaw said with a curt bow.

"Um, what happens now? I don't know anything about how wizarding nobility is supposed to work," Harry said.

There was always some kind of pressure placed on him, and this revelation was just the latest in a long line.

"I am afraid that my knowledge on the subject is limited to the broader details. I would suggest searching for another Lord or Heir who could provide more information, or else find books on the matter. As your account manager, there are some things I can do," Ironclaw said, "given the length of time that House Gryffindor and Slytherin have remained dormant, they do not currently have an active account manager. If you would consent to it, I could take over the management of these estates as well as the Potter estate."

"If it's not too much trouble," Harry said.

"None at all, Lord Potter," Ironclaw said, "I shall review the accounts of all three houses immediately to make sure everything is in order. There is another piece of advice I can offer you if you wish."

Harry immediately nodded.

"While wizards originally gained the knowledge of runic magic from the goblin nation, the use of it to cultivate family magic was an art entirely their own, which goblins have tried many times to recreate with only limited success. It is said that an impression of each person to wear the lordship rings are contained within the family magic, ready to be called on by the current Lord should they have need of them," Ironclaw said, "given the rather unprecedented nature of your inheritance, I believe the best people to seek advice from are the previous Lords Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin."

"Um, how do I do that?" Harry asked.

"I am not sure. As I said, goblins have only had limited success recreating this wizarding art. I believe it should be connected with your magic, so perhaps meditation and focussing on your magical core is the key."

It was a start at least, which Harry was more than grateful for. By the time he left Gringotts, the sun had risen high into the sky. Diagon Alley was alive with activity, but Harry bypassed it all, heading straight for his room at the Leaky Cauldron in a daze. The information he had received was beyond overwhelming, and after locking his door he flopped onto his bed and didn't move for a while.

He was a Lord, his family was part of the wizarding noble class and he was descended from two of the founders of Hogwarts. No, that wasn't right. He was descended from Gryffindor, but he had somehow claimed Slytherin descent earlier that year. 2nd of June, that was when he fought and killed the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, defeating Voldemort once again. But if Voldemort was the Heir of Slytherin, why had he only claimed the lordship now and not when he defeated him the first time when he was one?

It was all so confusing, and no answers made themselves available. Ironclaw suggested speaking to another Lord or Heir, but Harry had no idea who he could turn to. The only ones who came to mind he had no intention of asking. He could easily see Malfoy being from a noble family, but Harry was very acquainted with that boy's attitude. If that was how Heirs of noble families were supposed to act, then Harry would gladly act differently.

With a sigh, Harry turned, attempting to meditate like Ironclaw suggested. He had no idea what he was doing, so he tried focussing on that place within himself where he felt his magic. It was bigger than he remembered, which was likely the addition of the Gryffindor and Slytherin family magic joining with his. He lay there, imagining the magic as water in a vast ocean that he waded through. It came up to his thighs, and he liked to think it was warm and calm, a gentle sun overhead with perhaps a couple of fluffy clouds.

He meditated until his stomach growled, ruining his concentration. It was lunchtime, and Harry hadn't had any breakfast. Ordering something delivered to his room, he wolfed the food down and tried returning to meditation but he couldn't reach that state of calm again. Thinking that maybe a more studious mood would focus his mind, Harry spent time working on his summer homework before attempting once again. This time though his mind was too filled with images of spells and discussions of witch burnings. It was endlessly frustrating, to the point that he called it quits for the day. As much as he was feeling about the discoveries, he forced himself to go through the motions of getting ready for bed and tucking himself in for sleep.

Harry was used to strange dreams. They had been the first clues he had towards magic when he was a little kid, though he had no idea that was what they were. All he knew was that the bright flash of green light and flying motorcycle were not normal. After discovering he was a wizard, the dreams changed, giving more context for the oddities, but it didn't stop them from being strange. They were nothing like this though.

He found himself in an ocean, much like the mindscape he imagined earlier. The water was completely still, and Harry walked across its surface as though it were solid, leaving behind only the barest ripples. The sky above was bright and blue, with fluffy clouds just as he'd wished. In the distance were three figures, and something in Harry's heart told him to approach. As he did so, they grew clearer. All three were tall. One was broad, one was skinny, and the other was somewhere in between. Two of them Harry didn't recognise but one was so painfully familiar to him it made him gasp. That same person ran towards him and wrapped him in a tight hug as soon as he got close enough.

Normally Harry would shy away from such touch, but there was only one person this could be. The messy black hair, the skinny frame, even the glasses he wore, Harry had only seen this man in pictures but there was no mistaking James Potter, his father. Harry's arms came up, wrapping around the man's chest and holding on just as tightly. A sob worked its way up his throat and remained there, a painful bubble that refused to budge.

"Such an emotional reunion!" a boisterous voice said.

"Shut up you oaf," another voice snapped.

James pulled back, hazel eyes filled with unshed tears.

"I had hoped that when the time came for you to inherit that I would be the one to greet you," he said, "I am so sorry that I couldn't do this in person."

"Dad," Harry said wetly, going in for another hug.

"Your mother and I loved you so very much, from the instant we first met you. Nothing would ever change that," James said.

This hug ended quickly and Harry stood back to survey the three figures before him. James was dressed in comfortable jeans and a shirt, the muggle clothes a stark contrast to the other two. Feeling his eyes on them, the broad one grinned, pounding a fist against his chest.

"Greetings young lord! I am Godric Gryffindor!"

The thin one rolled his eyes at Godric's exuberance.

"And I am Salazar Slytherin. A pleasure to meet one worthy of my line," he said much more calmly.

Gryffindor and Slytherin were like night and day. Godric was broad, well built with muscle. His hair was bright red and long, tied in a low tail. Golden brown eyes gleamed as he grinned at Harry, a short, well groomed beard framing his face. He wore a pale tunic across his chest, with leather breaches on his legs and well worn travel boots. A heavy cloak of ruby red rested across his shoulders. His arms were mostly bare save for the steel guards on his forearms, which also served as a wand holster. He definitely looked like a warrior, and the only signs of wealth were the gold accents on his belt and the familiar Gryffindor Lord ring on his right hand.

In contrast, Salazar Slytherin looked more like a stereotypical wizard from muggle fairy tales. He wore long flowing robes which at first glance appeared all black but upon closer inspection contained accents of silver. His skin was pale and his hair was thin, and Harry caught the resemblance to the teenage Tom Riddle in his face. Most striking were the bright red eyes. While the robes hid his form, there was no denying that he was much thinner than Godric and James. Despite his apparent frailty, there was a vitality within him and a fierce intelligence within those eyes which carefully inspected Harry.

"I- I um," Harry stammered, not entirely sure what to say when meeting such legendary figures.

"Where are we?" he settled on.

"This is a remarkable space created through family magic called the Ring Realm," Salazar said, "those who wear the lordship rings are able to access the experience of those who came before them. With practice, I suspect you could call on us whenever you need us, though until then you'll have to settle for the occasional dream."

"Wait, you suspect? Do you mean you don't know?" Harry asked.

"Neither Salazar nor I have appeared in the Ring Realm before so we can't be certain," Godric said.

"And I was never very good at calming my mind enough to access it without sleep," James said, "hopefully you inherited Lily's temperament more than mine."

"I don't understand. You're talking as if there's never been a Lord Gryffindor or Slytherin since the pair of you," Harry said.

"That story is long and riveting! Pull up a chair and let us regale you with our stories!" Godric said.

"While it certainly is fascinating, it is also rather lengthy," Salazar cut in, "it would be better told when there weren't other matters to discuss first."

"Come now my dear friend! Our young Lord has just come into a remarkable inheritance! What better way to bring him into the fold of our families than to share our history!"

"I think I agree with Lord Slytherin," James said, "today has been full of revelations for Harry. I think it would be best to explain the most important things first. There will be plenty of time to share your stories later."

Godric pouted but bounced back quickly.

"Then I shall be patient, my friends! My tales are best told after a good meal anyway!" Godric said.

"I thought dead people were supposed to be quiet," Salazar muttered, "and I thought I'd finally get away from this oaf in death."

"Ah but you are glad to see me, Salazar!" Godric said, dragging the other founder into a one armed hug.

"If I could curse you, I would."

"Such jests! I see your humour hasn't changed in the last thousand years!"

"My peace and quiet has changed."

Harry couldn't help the laugh that escaped him. The history of the founders of Hogwarts painted a very different picture of the men he was seeing before him. Godric was loud and boisterous, but despite his obvious strength, his touches were gentle no matter how forceful they might appear. Similarly, for all that Salazar complained about the other man, and looked as though he'd rather die all over again when Godric hugged him, there was a hint of fondness in his eyes. It made the pair of them seem much more human than the legendary figures they were portrayed as. In his laughter, he didn't realise that the bantering had stopped, not catching the soft looks he was getting from the three lords.

"Sorry. It's just that you're nothing like the stories people tell about you," Harry said when he calmed down.

"Ah but that is the danger of stories. It is why the cultivation of knowledge in the next generation must be handled with great care so that things are not lost," Godric said, his tone surprisingly serious.

Salazar nodded in agreement.

"I believe it's time we discussed Harry's future as Lord of our houses," James said.

Harry gulped but the presence of his father at his side allowed him to remain resolute. The four of them sat down on the surface of the ocean. Godric and Salazar faced Harry, but James sat beside him within arms reach.

"Young Harry, there is much we need to discuss with you, and while this should be a time for merriment, there are serious issues at hand," Godric said, "you have joined with our family magic, felt its presence within you."

Though it wasn't a question, Harry nodded.

"That is good. As Lord of our houses, all that we left behind by rights belongs to you. I trust that you will keep it well, for I sense that you share the same spirit of justice and righteousness that I do. Lord Potter will be better placed to guide you through the responsibilities of a Lord in your time, as it has been nearly a thousand years since we lived and I am sure customs have changed," Godric said, "but there are several important things you must know now."

"When you inherited, the family magic of Gryffindor broke through several spells and enchantments placed upon you," Salazar said, "it is likely that is why you experienced it so intensely this morning."

"Somebody tried to bewitch my son?" James said darkly.

"Somebody *succeeded* in bewitching your son, and from what I sense, there are still some spells in place," Salazar said, "unfortunately I cannot tell you what they are as I am merely an impression of my former self. It is important that these spells are removed. You've already experienced the effects of one being broken, the only one I have a reasonable guess what it did."

"My magic? Something was interfering with my magic, wasn't it? It's why I lost control with Ironclaw," Harry said.

"A sharp mind. No doubt Rowena would have enjoyed helping you hone it," Salazar said with a smirk, which dropped as he continued, "yes. There was a spell restricting access to your magical core. The family magic broke through it, meaning you not only had an increase in power from Gryffindor and Slytherin, but your own magic returned to full strength."

"How would somebody even do that?" Harry asked, "surely if you could restrict somebody's magic like that, magical prisons would be so much more secure because the prisoners wouldn't have magic."

"The ritual to do so is ancient magic not easily performed. Whoever did it must be very knowledgeable and powerful, which is all the more reason for you to have these spells put on you removed," Salazar said, "they could be influencing you in any number of ways. Consult a magical healer and have them perform an in depth cleanse. This should also provide a record of what was done to you, including the spells already broken."

"St Mungos has healers who should be able to do it," James said.

"But I'm not allowed to leave Diagon Alley," Harry said.

"And you are also a Lord," James said, "they will come to you."

"There is more than just cleansing your person that must be performed," Godric said, "the Gryffindor and Slytherin estates have been dormant for centuries, maintained by the goblins but not actively managed. Given that somebody has placed such spells on you, it is important that our estates be investigated for any tampering or theft. I trust the goblins and their records. If there are any discrepancies, they will find it. I would also suggest doing the same for the Potter estate, as from what I can tell it has been without the supervision of a Lord for a number of years."

"Most of all though young Harry, I advise caution and discretion," Godric said, "as of yet, our enemies are unknown. Seek out those you can trust, build alliances and connections, and do your best to uncover this tangled web our families have found themselves in."

"I- I'll try," Harry said.

"That's all we can ask for," James said.

"What troubles you child?" Salazar asked, noticing the way Harry had shrunk down as they'd spoken.

"I'm grateful, I really am, for everything you're giving me. I don't know what I did to deserve it, but I can't help thinking why is it always me," Harry said, the words tumbling out, "why can't I live a normal life? If it's not a psychopathic mass murderer out to kill me, then I'm suddenly the Lord of three prominent noble families, and not even a normal Lord either but one at the centre of some crazy conspiracy. Can't I just be ordinary for once? Can't I just be Harry?"

James pulled him into a hug, holding him gently like he was something precious.

"That is what Lily and I wished for you. Even if you were to be my Heir and eventually the Lord, we wanted you to grow up to be happy and safe," he said.

"I never had that," Harry admitted.

James's head dropped into Harry's hair.

"I know everything seems crazy and uncertain right now, but chaos always passes in the end. Regardless of how you feel right now, know that you are not alone Harry. The past of the Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin lines are with you, and you will have friends who will stay

by your side and help in the fight against Voldemort, as well as whoever is behind the spells placed on you," James said, "eventually you'll find somebody who can be for you like Lily was for me. A light in the darkness, who can give you one of the most precious gifts of all: a family."

That sounded nice. Harry had always wanted a family. The Dursleys were technically his family, but he had never been loved by them. The Weasleys were close, but he always felt a bit distant from them outside of Hogwarts, like a seat stuck on the end of the table, somebody clinging to the outside of a tight knit bubble.

The ocean around him began to fade.

"It seems our time grows short tonight," Godric said, "remember all that we have said young Harry. May the strength of the lion keep you safe."

"And may the cunning of the snake help you succeed," Salazar said as well.

"I'm proud of you Harry."

And then the dream ended, the room at the Leaky Cauldron was illuminated by the morning sun, and Harry woke.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you very much for reading!

This story is inspired in particular by Ignite The Spark, a story I highly suggest you read. There will be parts of this story which mirror events which took place in that story. I have tried to adjust these events based on what is established in this story so that it's not entirely a repeat, but there will be parts where I succeed at this more than others. I hope this is ok with you.

The betrayal

Chapter Notes

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

It was an odd feeling, Harry considered. There had been many expectations placed on him over the years. It was always a pressure bearing down on him, forcing him to kneel beneath the weight of it. Stop being a freak. Keep the house clean. Do as he was told. Stop being a freak! Keep up with schoolwork. Save the Philosopher's Stone. Try to make friends. *Stop being a freak!* Hearing that his father was proud of him lifted Harry up in a way he'd never experienced before, and while it should have made him buckle under yet another expectation, it did the opposite. Harry wanted to keep making his family proud.

Despite the knowledge that the day was going to be immensely busy, Harry woke feeling calm. Godric and Salazar's revelations had been troubling, but at least some of them Harry knew how to deal with. Godric spoke highly of the goblins and suggested he speak with them about inspecting his estates, so once again he made his way to Gringotts in the early morning. Before he could leave the Leaky Cauldron, a voice called to him.

"Harry, where are you off to so early?"

The stooped owner of the Leaky Cauldron, Tom, was cleaning tables in the bar as he passed, a kind smile on his face.

"I thought teenagers were supposed to get up at noon?"

"I've always been an early riser," Harry said, "it takes me a while to get into summer mode, and by then I'm back at school."

"I see. Nothing wrong with being a lark, my sister was much the same, bless her soul," Tom said, "anyway, I won't keep you. Just thought I'd let you know that there'll likely be more people staying at the Cauldron, what with Hogwarts starting up again at the end of the month."

Harry thanked Tom for the heads up and continued on his way. There were more patrons in the bank this morning, but plenty of free desks for Harry to be seen by a teller. It took a lot less time for Harry to be escorted to see Ironclaw. The goblin was in his office, reviewing a large stack of parchment.

"Lord Potter. I wasn't expecting to see you until later today," Ironclaw said, "is there anything I can assist you with?"

"I was able to speak to the previous lords last night," Harry said.

"Fascinating. My intellectual curiosity wishes to ask questions, but I feel as though there is a serious matter at hand," Ironclaw said.

"You're reviewing the accounts for all three houses. I would like you to investigate any possible tampering or theft," Harry said.

"That is quite the serious accusation, Lord Potter. I trust you have a good reason for this request."

"My magical inheritance broke through spells placed on me, including one limiting my magical core," Harry said.

"And if somebody was able to tamper with you then it stands to reason they would at least attempt to do the same to your accounts," Ironclaw finished, "very well. I shall expedite the review. I should have the results by the end of the day. I also assume you shall seek magical cleansing of any remaining spells?"

"I will be. St Mungo's should be able to do it, but I don't know how to contact them, and I can't visit the hospital since I can't leave the alley."

"Lord Potter, if I may be so bold, the authority confining you to the Alley is merely your own perception. Regardless, if you'd like, I can put in a request to the hospital on your behalf," Ironclaw said, "it is not uncommon for noble houses to request private treatment. I shall send them to your room at the Leaky Cauldron."

"Thank you."

The trip to Gringotts had been very productive. Not knowing what else to do, Harry returned to his room and felt around for his magic. It came easily to his call, perhaps too easily as the fire in the hearth suddenly grew in size. It was strange to have this freedom. Harry hadn't noticed anything blocking his magic, but now that it was gone the difference was stark. His magic flowed freely, the movement instinctual like an extra limb he'd always had.

An hour after returning to the Leaky Cauldron, Harry was just finishing a late breakfast when there was a knock at the door. He opened it to see a witch dressed in pale green robes of high quality. There was a small patch on her breast showing a wand crossed with a bone.

"I was sent here by Account Manager Ironclaw for an appointment," the witch said.

"Yes, please come in."

As Harry stepped aside to let her in, he inspected the witch more. She had long hair tied back into a ponytail, and she carried herself with a grace and poise that seemed familiar somehow. The witch placed a case down on a side table and when the door closed, she turned back to face him.

"My name is Healer Tonks, though if my lord prefers, you may call me Andromeda. Whatever you're comfortable with."

"I'm Harry, um, Harry Potter, but please call me Harry."

Andromeda raised an amused eyebrow but didn't comment.

"Manager Ironclaw told me that you needed a magic cleansing. May I ask why? I assure you anything you say will be kept in the strictest confidence."

Though he was nervous, Harry told her about the spells he'd broken through with his inheritance. Andromeda was shocked when she heard about the restriction on his core.

"I see. This is serious indeed," Andromeda said, "I have everything I need to perform the cleansing."

With a wave of her wand, everything moved to the side of the room. From her case, she took out several vials of potions and a few brightly coloured gems. The gems were placed in a circle in the middle of the room and with another wave of her wand, a shimmering line connected them.

"I'm afraid cleansing isn't a pleasant experience, especially since we don't know exactly what you've been affected with," Andromeda said.

"That's fine. I'm used to unpleasant," Harry said.

She handed him the potions to drink first, to purge any potions he'd been given which were affecting him negatively. Each one tasted foul, but Harry drank them without complaint. Once the last one was finished, there was an uncomfortable prickling in his skin which lasted a few minutes. When it was gone, he felt so much lighter. Andromeda had been casting spells the whole time, a quill scratching the results down on parchment.

Next came the cleansing ritual. Harry sat down in the centre of the circle made by the gems. Andromeda stood before him, and though he knew she was only there to help him, it was still intimidating seeing a grown adult standing over him with a wand raised. Then she began chanting spells, the words completely unfamiliar to him. The gems lit up, their light flowing through the lines connecting them. Magic filled the air and it crashed over Harry like a wave. Almost instantly, Harry buckled over in pain. It felt as though every cell in his body was on fire. Slowly that began to recede, but it only seemed to concentrate in his head. His scar burned, the pain building and Harry was blinded by it.

"Harry? Harry!"

Harry opened his eyes, startling. When did he lie down? Beneath him was soft. How was he in his bed? Soft clinking drew his attention to Andromeda, who was packing away the empty potion bottles. She saw he was awake and hurried to his side, helping him to sit. His body felt like limp spaghetti. A glass of cool water was pressed to his lips and he drank greedily.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You passed out," Andromeda said, "I've seen it happen a few times when there are powerful spells cleansed. Frankly, I'm very glad you called a Healer when you did. Had you remained under those spell effects for much longer, it likely would have had permanent consequences."

"What do you mean? What was wrong with me?"

" It's probably better if you see it for yourself. The diagnostic charm I cast produced a complete record, including a brief description and where possible, the information about targets and dates. Unfortunately, it cannot say who cast them."

She handed him the parchment and he quickly read through it.

RITUAL OF PURIFIED CLEANSING

Patient: Hadrian James Potter; Lord of Houses Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin

Healer in charge: Andromeda Juno Tonks

Assistant healers, if any: n/a

POTIONS

Attraction potion. The subject will feel increased physical attraction towards the targeted person. Date of first dose detection: August 23rd 1992. Confirmed dosage increase. Target key: Ginevra Weasley.

Affection potion. The subject will feel increased affection and other positive feelings towards the targeted person. Date of first dose detection: September 2nd 1991. Confirmed dosage increase. Target key: Molly Weasley, Ronald Weasley, Ginevra Weasley.

Affection potion. The subject will feel increased affection and other positive feelings towards the targeted person. Date of first dose detection: November 3rd 1991. Confirmed dosage increase. Target key: Hermione Jane Granger.

Unfocusing potion. The target will find it difficult to focus on tasks for long periods of time. Date of first dose detection: September 7th 1991.

SPELLS

Magical core restriction: 60%. Note: removed prior to cleansing.

Mental fog curse. The target will find it harder to think clearly. Note: removed prior to cleansing.

Mental processing curse. The target's mental processing is slowed, thus requiring longer to understand new information. Note: removed prior to cleansing.

Judgement charm. The target's judgement is impaired.

Suggestibility charm. The target is more likely to accept suggestions from the targeted person. Target key: Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

Suspicion charm. The target is more likely to perceive the targeted person/object/situation as suspicious. Target key: Dark magic.

Malnutrition curse. *The targets ability to extract nutrients from food is impaired.*

Pain dulling charm. *The targets sensation of pain is dulled.*

Courage charm. *The target feels increased courage.*

Horcrux contamination. *WARNING UNABLE TO REMOVE VIA RITUAL OF PURIFIED CLEANSING*

Harry felt sick when he finished reading the list of what was done to him. It was less the particular spells that had been cast but rather the people they related to and the dates attached. Had he actually become friends with Ron and Hermione, or had that just been the affection potions? The dates would imply the latter. The first dose he'd taken for Ron had been the day after he'd met him. Similarly for Hermione, her first dose had been shortly after the troll incident on Halloween. As for Ginny, he knew she had a crush on him, but to think somebody had been slipping him a potion to make him reciprocate those feelings and be attracted to her was awful.

Then there were the spells. Harry was caught on one in particular. Growing up, his meals at the Dursleys had been inconsistent. Being sent to the cupboard without dinner was a favourite punishment of Aunt Petunia's, and when he was allowed to eat, his portions were noticeably smaller than Dudley's. He was kept right on the edge of being suspiciously underweight for his age. It had therefore confused him why, despite having access to three full meals every day at Hogwarts, he never seemed to gain back the weight he was missing. Now it made sense. His stomach suddenly felt uncomfortably small, and he retched up his breakfast over the side of the bed.

Who had done this to him? Why would they put him through this? They'd even messed with his brain to stop him learning. Potions to keep him from fully focussing and spells to make it harder for him to think through and process information. Why? Now that those spells had been removed, the answer was clear. With impaired judgement and suspicion of dark magic, he would be more likely to act if he felt he had to, and he would act, the increased courage saw to that. Combined with a reduced ability to think for himself and being easily suggestible? It made Harry a puppet, one that could be pointed in the desired direction and set off without fear or hesitation.

A hand rubbing gentle circles helped him to ground himself. Once he was comfortable again, Andromeda handed him the glass of water to sip from while she cleared away the mess.

"I'm sorry," Harry said.

"There's no need for that, not with the news you've just received," Andromeda said.

"I- I don't know what to do. They- they were my friends, but it was all fake, or was it? I don't even know!"

"This isn't an uncommon reaction to someone who's been under similar bewitchments. You know now that it wasn't what you thought it was but your brain still remembers the feelings,"

Andromeda said, "just know that it is very good we caught these now. The ritual found evidence that the potion dosage increased over time."

"So they would have a stronger effect?"

"Exactly. I suspect that these were intended to lay the groundwork for stronger enchantments later on which would have been disastrous. The attraction potion alone is a clear cut case of attempted line theft, a serious crime in wizarding society because of the impact it has on family magic."

The thought of Ginny stealing his new found family out from under him while he was nothing more than a puppet caused him to shudder. Andromeda's grounding hand remained in place.

"With the potions and spells gone, I won't be under their control any more, and if I don't act too differently then they won't suspect anything and won't try to dose me again," Harry mused out loud, "I could potentially find out just how complicit they were in all of this."

"A plan with the subtly befitting a Lord," Andromeda said.

"But," Harry hesitated, "I don't want that. I don't want to keep acting as if they're my friends, not when they would do this to me."

"And that would also be a suitable plan."

Perhaps he could do both? Act just differently enough that Ron and Hermione react, and hopefully provide him some ammunition to break off the friendship without anyone questioning it. The thought of losing his friends hurt him, but he had to think about whether they were really friends at all.

"I don't know what to do," Harry admitted, trying not to sound too defeated.

"There is always something you can do Harry," Andromeda said kindly, "even if it's something small."

She spotted the small pile of textbooks near his trunk that he hadn't put away yet.

"You're going into third year, yes? What extra classes are you taking?"

"Care of Magical Creatures and Divination," Harry said, "but I only chose those because Ron was doing the same."

"Then perhaps that is a good place to start. If you had to choose classes again, which ones would you pick?"

Harry really wasn't sure. Now that he could think clearly, all of them sounded really interesting, except Divination, but Harry didn't know enough about them to actually decide. Seeing his hesitation, Andromeda patiently explained each subject. Muggle Studies would be an interesting perspective but Harry had no desire to learn things he already knew. While

Harry had no doubt that some in the wizarding world could see the future, it didn't seem like something that could be taught, so Divination was out.

"Study of Ancient Runes will help you as you come more fully into your lordship. Being able to interpret the runes of the family magic as well as develop the wards of your properties will be invaluable knowledge," Andromeda said.

"You certainly know a lot about the noble families," Harry commented, not expecting the aura of sadness that passed over her.

"I was once part of a noble family, until I was forced out. Differences of opinion ran too deep and they didn't approve of my choice of husband," Andromeda said, "nevertheless, I understand the importance of the traditions held in trust by the noble families, so I will do what I can to help you."

"I can't ask you to do that. I'm keeping you from your work enough as it is," Harry said.

"I only work part time on sensitive cases such as yours. You're not keeping me from anything. While I can't swear on the Black family name any more, I still give you my word that I want to help you for no other reason than to help you."

"The Black family?"

"Yes. Before I was married, my name was Andromeda Black."

Harry pulled out the inheritance test and showed it to her.

"Sirius named you his Heir," Andromeda said, sounding very confused.

"The murderer?"

"He was Lord Black after our grandfather Arcturus died, but he betrayed your parents. Why would he name you Heir?"

She remained quiet for a few moments.

"I will need to talk with the goblins about this, with your permission of course," Andromeda said, "in the meantime, it is even more important that I help you. I may no longer be a Black, but I still want to see my former family represented proudly."

"I don't know how to do that."

"First things first, you need to look the part. Would you be amenable to heading into Diagon Alley to buy more appropriate clothes?"

Harry was about to say no, but then he paused. He was still forced to wear Dudley's old clothes. The only clothes he had which fit him properly were his school robes. If he was going to make his lines proud, he needed to look the part, so he accepted Andromeda's proposal. Before they left, Harry wrote a letter to Professor McGonagall, requesting a change in classes. In the end, he decided to study Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. As Andromeda

said, Ancient Runes would allow him a better understanding of warding and family magic. Arithmancy was more mathematical and analytical. Harry had enjoyed maths when he went to Muggle school, so he was excited to try it in a magical context.

Shopping with Andromeda was a very different experience to shopping with Hagrid or the Weasleys. There was a sense of calm assurance to it in stark contrast to the barely controlled chaos that usually accompanied the Weasleys. With Hagrid things were better, but he could never answer Harry's question fully, mostly because he didn't know a lot of the answers himself. Andromeda did know, and while they shopped they talked about the important things for Harry to know about being a Lord.

Being fitted for new robes was embarrassing, but Andromeda made sure to get it done quickly. Harry didn't feel comfortable wearing such expensive things, so they also bought a cheaper, but still good looking, set. They were sent back to Harry's room at the Leaky Cauldron. After that, they bought Harry's new books, and Andromeda even found a few which would be useful for his new position: A History of the Most Noble and Ancient Houses of Britain, and In the Lord's House, A Guide to Social Etiquette.

Harry had never owned so much stuff in his life. Was this how Dudley felt all the time? Looking around his room at the Leaky Cauldron, seeing it all at once, Harry tried not to be overwhelmed by it. He would need to find some place to keep it all, as there was no way it would fit in his bedroom at Privet Drive. Then he remembered that he likely had other places he could live from his inheritances, which was another overwhelming thought.

As the afternoon drew on and evening approached, he received a letter from another imperious looking owl. Andromeda had been about to leave when it arrived. Harry recognised it as coming from Gringotts.

"You asked them to audit your accounts?" she asked.

"They were doing it anyway, but this morning I asked if they could hurry it along," Harry explained.

"I see. May I accompany you to this meeting? I believe my medical report should be kept with whatever they have been able to find and goblins prefer such reports to be given in person where possible," Andromeda said.

Harry saw no reason to deny her so together they walked the now very familiar path to Gringotts bank. A goblin spotted them immediately and escorted them to Ironclaw's office. Ironclaw's head was resting on steepled fingers, a heavy frown sharpening his features.

"Lord Potter," he said in greeting, "I trust that Healer Tonks provided satisfactory care."

"She did," Harry said, "she um, she also taught me a bit about being a Lord and helped me buy some things."

"I had noticed the increased quality of your attire. Much more befitting a Lord," Ironclaw said, before turning to Andromeda, "may I see the results of Lord Potter's cleansing ritual?"

She handed it across. As he read it, Ironclaw's frown deepened further.

"This is most troubling."

"Is there something wrong?" Harry asked.

"Unfortunately there is. I discovered several suspicious transactions in the Potter accounts. It appears that somebody has been transferring money from the Potter vaults to a variety of other places for the last decade," Ironclaw said, "these transactions had been signed off by your magical guardian in your name, yet when I tried to find a record of your magical guardianship, I was unable to. Am I to believe that you did not have any knowledge of these transactions?"

"No!" Harry said.

"That's what I thought. I have frozen these transactions. We have a complete record so when we are able, we can begin the process of returning the money that was stolen."

"I'd like that very much," Harry said, though he already knew the answer, he still needed to ask, "which accounts were stealing money from me?"

"Money was being transferred to vaults under the names Molly Prewitt, Ronald Prewitt, Ginevra Prewitt and Hermione Granger. Additionally, money was being sent to the muggle bank account of Petunia Dursley."

It was just like the spells placed on him, the same people who were controlling him had also been stealing money from him. This confirmed that Ron and Hermione had never been his friends, and that knowledge broke his heart.

"Lord Potter, I recommend bringing charges against these individuals," Ironclaw said, "this appears to be a classic case of line theft and must not go unpunished."

"It won't, but not just yet," Harry said, his voice growing hard, "I need to see how deep this goes. My friends aren't my friends, and my headmaster was trying to turn me into a puppet under his control. The others would be easy to punish, but Dumbledore is too famously good. It would be simple for him to escape charges somehow. Until I know exactly who it was that placed those spells on me and stole from my vaults, I need to bide my time and gather evidence."

"Very well. We shall keep gathering evidence for your case."

"If this is how you wish to proceed, you will need allies in the other noble families," Andromeda said, "I could subtly reach out to some people I trust who may know some things that could help."

That sounded like a good idea. Harry wasn't sure who he could ask, so now he was very glad for the books Andromeda had bought for him.

"Manager Ironclaw, there is something I would like to ask as well," Andromeda said.

The goblin raised his eyebrow at her.

"My cousin Sirius was sent to prison for murdering several Muggles and was accused of betraying the Potters," she said, "yet he named Harry as his Heir. If he intended to kill him, why would he do so?"

"That is an excellent point Healer Tonks. From my recollection, everything was done officially but I shall check with the Black account manager," Ironclaw said, "it certainly raises suspicions about Lord Black's actions that night."

"But surely they had to have evidence he killed those people. I mean, they wouldn't just throw him in jail for no reason, right?" Harry said.

"It was a very different time back then, Harry. The evidence at the scene appeared fairly damning, but this brings up questions about Sirius' motives," Andromeda said, "leave this with me. I'll do some digging with my contacts in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"There is one other matter that needs addressing immediately," Ironclaw tapped the cleansing report, "it appears that Lord Potter is a horcrux."

"I had seen that as well, but unfortunately I don't know what it means. It's not a condition I've heard of before," Andromeda said.

"The goblins have come across them rarely. Horcruxes are some of the darkest magic in existence, pieces of a still living soul split off and contained inside an object. So long as it exists, the person cannot fully die," Ironclaw explained.

"Voldemort ... that's how Voldemort survived the killing curse rebounding back on him. He had a horcrux," Harry said, ignoring the small flinch from Andromeda.

"It would seem so," Ironclaw said, "whether he intended to create this one is irrelevant. It must be dealt with as soon as possible."

"How? Extracting a soul sounds incredibly difficult," Harry said.

"It is, but the goblins have developed a method to do it. The issue is that horcruxes are not usually made using a living being as the vessel. As such, our current rituals for extracting the soul fragment would kill you," Ironclaw said.

"There must be something we can do," Andromeda said.

"I shall task our Chanters to adapt our ritual to work for a living vessel. It should not be too challenging for them but it will take time. I estimate six months at minimum."

"So I've got to live with Voldemort's soul inside me for six months!" Harry said.

"You should be perfectly fine, Lord Potter. The purpose of a horcrux is to keep the soul fragment safe. It is highly unlikely that it would intentionally cause damage to its vessel, or

give away its true nature," Ironclaw said, "though I shall make this a priority for the Chanters. Great jewels below, they're desperate for something new."

The conversation ended fairly quickly after that. Andromeda escorted Harry back to his room, leaving him alone with his thoughts. Today had been just as hectic as the previous, but Harry felt much more wrung out than before. The betrayal cut deep and after making sure his room was locked, Harry curled up on the bed and allowed himself a moment to do something he rarely did. He cried. He let the tears flow down his cheeks, the emotions crashing around him like waves.

A hand carding through his hair helped ground him. Opening his eyes, Harry saw the eerily still ocean of the Ring Realm. The hand in his hair was James', and the man helped him sit up. Seeing the look of tender care in his father's face broke the dam even further. He barrelled into his father's chest, burying his face as he sobbed. James rubbed circles into his back, softly rocking him.

"They were supposed to be my friends," he choked out, "how could they do that to me?"

"I don't know son," James said.

"Why? Why did they do that?"

"It'll be alright Harry. You've already started the journey towards justice. You know now what they've done," James said, "just let it out now."

He didn't know how long he stayed there, basking in the warmth of his father. Godric and Salazar may have been there as well but he didn't see them. The grief and pain of ten years of neglect pressed upon him, and Harry didn't move from that position until once more he woke up.

The week following the revelation of his friend's betrayal, Harry made sure to prepare himself as much as possible. There had been too many times recently where he had been completely caught off guard, and while he couldn't entirely avoid surprises, he was determined to at least react appropriately. He finished reading *In the Lord's House, A Guide to Social Etiquette*, and was slowly working his way through *A History of the Most Noble and Ancient Houses of Britain*. Without having to worry about his Muggle relatives finding out, Harry was able to finish his summer homework in peace, and since he could now think clearly and retain information better, he felt he'd actually done a good job with them.

As the start of term drew closer, Harry saw more and more people he recognised from school. He bumped into Oliver Wood at Quality Quidditch Supplies and only just managed to escape a lengthy conversation about team tactics. He joined his fellow third-years Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott as they browsed for new school books. There were a few people he tried to avoid, namely the Slytherins, as even though he no longer felt intense suspicion of them, they hadn't exactly given him a good impression.

Two weeks before school was due to start, Harry was surprised to realise he hadn't received any letters from Ron or Hermione. Last year when he was cut off from them, it left him in a dejected panic. Now he felt nothing for them except confusion. Surely if they wanted to keep pretending to be his friends they would write to him. That was when he thought about their correspondences so far, and realised he had been the one to initiate all of them.

"Honestly Neville, why did you pick Divination? It's such a woolly subject."

Harry was brought out of his reverie in Flourish and Blotts at the sound of the familiar name of his fellow Gryffindor. In the next aisle was a slightly dumpy boy standing next to a short witch. The witch was dressed in green robes and her hat had a stuffed vulture perched atop it. Her tone and expression were imperious.

"It's not too late to change courses. I'm sure there's one that'll be better suited for you," the witch was saying.

Harry stepped further into the aisle, catching Neville's attention. The boy lit up upon seeing him.

"Hi Harry."

"Well met Heir Longbottom, Dowager Longbottom," he said with an incline of the head to each of them.

Hadn't that been a surprise for Harry to learn that his shy, unassuming classmate was also from a noble family. The Longbottoms were apparently a well loved family. Much like Harry's own family, tragedy had befallen Lord and Lady Longbottom, leaving Neville practically orphaned. He retained his title of Heir while his grandmother, the Dowager Lady Augusta Longbottom held the lordship until Neville claimed it.

"Oh, somebody's been learning his manners. Well met Heir Potter," Augusta said, hitting Neville's arm lightly, "Neville, don't be rude."

"Um, well met."

"It's alright Neville. We're friends, right? You don't need to be so formal," Harry said, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Neville hadn't slipped him anything so surely the friendship they had was real? Neville relaxed, and Harry mirrored him.

"It's a pleasure to meet you at last, Heir Potter. Augusta Longbottom," Augusta said, "Neville's told me a lot about you, but he neglected to mention you discussing Heirship matters."

"I only found out about that recently," Harry said, subtly flashing the rings on his finger, "it's been an adjustment."

"Forgive my error Lord Potter," Augusta said, but Harry waved her off.

"Don't worry about my title. I'm keeping it quiet for the time being," he said, "I just thought I'd introduce myself properly since Neville and I both come from noble houses."

"You've certainly had quite the inheritance, but it will be good for the Potters to reclaim their place in society again. It's been a quiet few years without them," Augusta said.

"I hope to do them proud," Harry said, "and I'm sure you'll do your parents proud too."

Neville blushed and Augusta tutted, though it sounded fond to Harry's ears.

"Come along Neville," she said, "we have lots to buy since you insist on growing as tall as your grandfather. Good day Lord Potter."

"See you at school Harry."

Though it had only been a short conversation, Harry still felt relieved. At least he would have one genuine friend when he went back to school. Speaking of, he arrived back to his room to see two letters on the desk. One was from Ron and the other from Hermione. With a small amount of trepidation, Harry opened them.

Ron bragged about his family's holiday to Egypt, a sentiment which irked Harry somewhat. Normally Ron moaned about his family's less than stellar financial position, which was odd now that Harry knew they'd been stealing his money. One of his chief complaints about Malfoy was that the Slytherin flaunted his wealth. For Ron to complain about that in one breath and then in the next brag about his, no doubt expensive, foreign trip seemed very wrong.

Hermione wasn't much better. She had apparently been on holiday to France and was terribly apologetic about not writing sooner, but she had been so busy. Her letter was filled with all the things she'd learned about on her trip, along with not so subtle reminders to do his summer homework. She even offered to look his essays over for him.

Both letters told him that they would be coming to the Leaky Cauldron for the last few days of the summer so they could do all of their Hogwarts shopping. The language used made it sound like they'd coordinated it, rather than it being a happy coincidence, but at least Harry now had a date to prepare for. He wasn't looking forward to it in the slightest but he would get through it. He was the Lord of Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin. The past of all three lines were watching over him, giving him their strength. It was more than enough for Harry.

Chapter End Notes

Since I have a lot chapters written for this, I think I'll do two updates a week. The first will be on Monday, and the second will either be on Wednesday or Thursday.

Surprisingly enough, I don't actually dislike any of these characters. They all have flaws which can be easily exploited, and when done well, make it fun to vilify them.

Properties and histories

The restriction Fudge gave him to not leave Diagon Alley was especially irksome, as Harry was particularly interested in seeing some of the properties left for him. Ironclaw had given him a list of all his holdings, and to say it was a lot was an understatement. The investments tied to the Gryffindor and Slytherin vaults had long since expired, but each contained a huge number of galleons, which only grew each year with interest. Both vaults also contained numerous precious artefacts and treasures found nowhere else in the world. The Potter vaults, despite their depletion due to the thefts, still contained a sizable fortune, both in terms of galleons and objects.

Once Harry got over this shock, he found himself drawn to the properties. Potter Manor was where he should have been brought up had Voldemort not hunted down his parents, and he was very curious about it. There was a note written next to Potter Manor, instructing him to say the word Celio. Harry remembered how his old self would have reacted to this, saying the word without a second thought. Now though he pondered it a bit more. Celio was obviously a name, but whose name? There was no other instruction besides saying it, but what good would that do?

Then it hit him.

"Celio," Harry said cautiously.

Just as he suspected, there was a cracking sound and a house elf appeared in the room. He looked to be an older elf, with two freshly washed tea towels wrapped around him like a toga. He seemed surprised to be there, but when he caught sight of Harry, he bowed low, nose nearly touching the floor.

"Master Harry. A pleasure it is for Celio to be in the presence of Lord Potter once more," he said, in the high-pitched voice typical of house elves.

"Are you one of the Potter house elves?" Harry asked.

"Indeed I am sir. Celio is the head elf of Potter Manor," Celio said, "is master wishing to return to the Manor?"

"I am, but only for a short visit I'm afraid," Harry said, "I'm supposed to stay in the Alley."

"I see," Celio said, sounding very disappointed.

The elf held out a hand and Harry grabbed it. There was a sudden yanking pull, followed by a tight squeezing sensation. The bedroom at the Leaky Cauldron vanished and Harry stumbled, nearly falling over as he appeared somewhere completely different. Before him was a large stately home. Built of expertly masoned stone and panelled with rich woods, it was the most impressive building Harry had ever seen besides Hogwarts. Then something washed over him, and Harry realised it was magic. The magic in his core connected with the magic in the grounds. It was a power unlike anything he had ever felt before. Ancient and vast, the Potter

wards encompassed many acres of land, including a small lake and part of a forest. It felt like coming home after a long time.

"Lord Potter has been accepted by the house sir. Lord Potter has returned home!"

Harry was stunned when he looked down, expecting to see the aged elf, only to find a much younger looking elf.

"Celio?"

"Do not worry sir. Your magic has rejuvenated the wards of the house, which in turn has rejuvenated us," Celio said.

"Us?"

Celio beckoned him forward through the large mahogany doors into a vast entrance hall. A grand staircase was directly in front of him, leading up to the rest of the house. Other doors led away from the entrance hall to places unknown, and Harry couldn't wait to learn. Celio snapped his fingers and three more house elves appeared. All looked younger than him but all were dressed in the same tea towel togas.

"Lord Potter has returned home," Celio announced.

The four house elves then bowed.

"Please, call me Harry," Harry said, "what are your names?"

They were Tippy and Letty, both girls, and the youngest, Mun, was a boy. Their excitement reminded him of Dobby after he was freed from the Malfoys. Celio explained that Harry couldn't stay as he had other obligations, which disappointed them, but they happily gave him a tour of the Manor.

From the entrance hall was a large ballroom where Celio told him all about the parties the Potters had hosted over the years were held. Also on the ground floor was a sunroom connected to a spacious conservatory. The light filled the space, providing a peaceful atmosphere as he peered through the enormous windows and out into the grounds. The final stop was a two story library filled with shelves upon shelves of books. Hermione would probably have a fit if she saw it, so Harry would take great joy in not telling her.

The two floors above them contained private drawing rooms and offices, as well as many bedrooms larger than any Harry had ever seen before. Each one was connected to its own bathroom. The master bedroom was more luxurious than he could have imagined. Paintings hung on all the walls and like the ones at Hogwarts, they were able to move, the occupants jubilantly welcoming him back to the Manor.

"Is Master Harry pleased with his home?" Celio asked.

Harry was very pleased, beyond happy but also very sad. This could have been his home all along, but it was taken from him by Voldemort and whoever his magical guardian was. Needless to say, he would not be returning to the Dursleys after school next summer. He

would be coming to stay here, or at one of the other properties he owned. He said as much to the elves, who all cheered.

Celio apparated him back to the Leaky Cauldron. Reluctantly Harry had to let the elf return to the Manor, but he promised that he would call whenever he needed him. With the way things were going, that was likely to be sooner rather than later.

Days passed by before anything substantial happened. Harry found himself spending less and less time out in the Alley. While people-watching was always fun to do, he couldn't help feeling very exposed while out there now that he knew the truth. Inside his room, he felt more in control, though he did go down to the main pub for his meals. Ironclaw informed him that the lordship ring would heat up if it detected any negative potions or poisons in his food, which definitely helped what could easily have become paranoia. The three rings had combined into a single ring, which Harry could keep hidden unless he wished to reveal it, as well as change its appearance to any of his three lordships.

It was the day before Harry was due to return to Hogwarts when a rat and a cat streaked past him on the way down to breakfast. It was certainly bizarre but then he heard voices arguing loudly when he reached the top of the stairs.

"I'm warning you, Hermione. Keep that bloody cat away from Scabbers or I'll turn it into a toadstool!"

"He's a cat, Ron. What do you expect?"

Ron and Hermione were here. They were here and somehow already arguing. Now that he was listening, he could hear the voice of Mrs Weasley yelling from elsewhere in the Leaky Cauldron, likely trying to corral her children together since their shopping was being done at the last minute. The people who had betrayed him were all here, and Harry ... just didn't want to deal with it. He'd had a long time to think about how he was going to handle his former friends and he realised that the best way would be to appear to be drifting away from them. From the interactions he'd had with his fellow third-years these last few weeks, literally anyone would be better friends than Ron and Hermione.

Harry turned right around and went back into his room. His bags were already packed so there was nothing for him to do except read a book Celio had fetched from the Potter library, tracing his family tree back through the ages. It was quite a fascinating story, written by James' grandfather. It told the tale of the Potters all the way back to the founding of Hogwarts. The Potters had been a relatively minor magical house until a daughter of Godric Gryffindor's line married into it, raising its prestige, which was further raised again when Lucinda Peverell married Henry Potter nearly five centuries ago. The family then went on to lead the British Ministry through several critical periods of history, including the establishment of the Irish Ministry of Magic in 1794, which thanks to Eliza Potter's leadership was a mostly peaceful transition.

At lunchtime, Harry poked his head out of his room. The Leaky Cauldron was quiet, and he snuck downstairs. The main parlour was empty, save for a few wizards at the bar. The

Weasleys and Hermione were all gone, meaning he would have some peace while he ate his lunch.

"Harry?"

He whipped around, startled by the voice. Mr Weasley was behind him on the stairs, looking just as shocked to see him. That shock quickly gave way to happiness, the same tired but content look he was used to seeing on the man's face.

"We thought you were out in the Alley somewhere, but if you're here then I guess you must have missed each other."

Mr Weasley had always been kind to him. He was patient and calm where his wife always seemed out of control and loud. Harry wasn't one to judge but he did not understand how the two could get along well, especially since in the time he spent with them last summer, he can't say if he saw them share more than a couple of words with each other. Harry really wanted to believe that Mr Weasley wasn't involved in this. He didn't want any more to be a lie. Mr Weasley's expression turned to one of concern when Harry didn't respond. He stepped forward, and Harry unconsciously moved back.

"Harry? Is everything alright?"

"Well met Lord Weasley."

Just as the Longbottoms had been in the book on the British noble families, so too had the Weasleys. Nothing about the Burrow screamed lordship, but this was the only way Harry could think of to challenge Mr Weasley. They wanted him compliant and ignorant, so there would be some hint of annoyance in him using more formal language.

"Well met?" Mr Weasley repeated, sounding confused for a moment, but then the happiness returned, "did you inherit your fathers title? I wondered if you would. Harry, that's wonderful news."

"Is it?"

"Yes? You don't sound very happy about it Harry," Mr Weasley said, "I know I'm not a Lord but if you need help with that stuff, I'm sure I could give you some advice."

"Why aren't you? By rights you should be Lord Weasley," Harry couldn't help the slight hardness to his tone.

If Mr Weasley was offended by it, he didn't say anything. Harry could see the conflict within him.

"That ... is a very long and painful story, one I'm not comfortable sharing," Mr Weasley said, "Harry, has something happened? Have I done something to offend you? Whatever it was, I sincerely apologise."

"I'm not attracted to Ginny. I'm not, and I never will be."

"Ok? I'm sure she'll be disappointed but there's nothing to be done. There's plenty more fish in the sea as the Muggles say."

Harry bit his lip. Mr Weasley sounded so sincere it was almost painful. Harry really, really wanted to believe him. There had been no hint of negativity when Harry challenged him on his lordship nor when he revealed his aversion to Ginny. Both would likely have set off alarm bells if he had been involved, unless Mr Weasley was a phenomenal actor.

"Harry, I'm not sure what's going on, but clearly something is bothering you," Mr Weasley said, "I know we've not known each other for very long, but if you need somebody to talk to, I'm here. If you'd rather hang out here instead of going out into the chaos of the Alley to find the others, that's absolutely fine. If you want me to go away, then that's fine too. Just let me know what you need, and I'll do my best to help you."

"It wasn't you," Harry whispered.

"What wasn't me?"

"Something happened, and it wasn't you."

"It wasn't me, but I'm guessing I'm related somehow," a look of sudden clarity passed over Mr Weasley, "Molly. Did she do something?"

All Harry could do was nod. Anger and heartbreak flashed in Mr Weasley's eyes.

"May we speak somewhere privately?" Mr Weasley asked, "by the name of Weasley I bear, I swear to you that I mean you know harm. I can't do more of a formal alliance to show my intentions because otherwise Molly would feel it through the family magic."

It was more than enough. Harry had felt the shift in the magic as Mr Weasley spoke. It was a promise made as an individual, carrying the weight of magic to bind the promise together. It meant far more than words could convey, and chased away the lingering remains of doubts Harry had. He led Mr Weasley up to his room and locked the door behind them. He sat down on the bed while Mr Weasley pulled up a chair.

"Please, tell me what happened."

So Harry did. He explained his magical inheritance and the test he took with the goblins. How in the Ring Realm, Godric and Salazar told him about the spells placed on him, which were later discovered through a cleansing ritual. He showed Mr Weasley the results.

"Oh Harry," he said, his voice soft, "you must have felt so alone."

He looked at Harry with an utterly heartbroken expression.

"I am so, so sorry that this happened to you. I can't apologise enough," Mr Weasley said, then more to himself he said, "this has gone on long enough. To think trying to usurp one line wasn't enough."

"Mr Weasley?"

"You may call me Arthur if you'd like."

"Um, ok, but what do you mean? Has Mrs Weasley done something like this before?"

Arthur settled back into his seat. The man looked worn down and tired, which wasn't unusual, but this felt deeper somehow.

"I don't want to burden you with more than what is already on your plate, but you asked me why I wasn't Lord Weasley. It's because I wanted to prevent Molly from getting access to the Weasley vaults. Every galleon I've spent since I married her is a galleon I've earned, which let me tell you is a rather humbling experience."

"But if you didn't want her to have that money, why marry her?"

Arthur sighed.

"I've always wanted children, and that's what Molly used to trap me. I love each of my children dearly but I have never loved her," Arthur said, "you saw Molly, Ron and Ginny's names and thought that it was all of us. I can't fault you for being suspicious of me."

"I- I didn't want to believe it. I just- they're supposed to be my friends."

"I know."

"They'll get really suspicious if I suddenly change," Harry said, "but I don't know if I can pretend. I heard them arguing earlier this morning and couldn't handle it."

"Nor would I expect you to. What has been done to you is a grave injustice, one I shall do what I can to fix," Arthur said, "to start with, I can run some interference for you tonight so you can have some peace. You're right that they'll be suspicious if you completely ignore Ron and Hermione, but I'm sure a lengthy conversation between us would fill up some time. If not me, then Fred and George will gladly help, even if you don't tell them everything."

"That ... That sounds really good."

Slowly and carefully, Arthur rose from his seat and crouched in front of Harry. He then pulled Harry into a soft hug. Harry froze, not expecting it at all. For so long he'd never really been hugged. There were quick things between him, Ron and Hermione but they always felt more like being grabbed. Mrs Weasley's hugs were stifling like she was attempting to smother him. It was only when he felt his father hugging him in the Ring Realm that Harry understood what a hug was supposed to feel like. They were a bubble of safety against the scary outside world. Harry felt protected when James hugged him. In Arthur's arms, it was more like supports being added to a worn down building to help with the reconstruction.

"No matter what happens going forward, I'll support you," Arthur said, "and I'm sure that there will be friends out there who'll care about you for *you*, and not whatever they can gain from you."

The moment ended and Arthur asked Harry what else he had done since finding out about his inheritance. He was intrigued by what he heard about Potter Manor, particularly about the

house elves being rejuvenated when he connected to the wards. Weasley Hall apparently had a couple of house elves, and while Arthur tried to visit at least once a year to make sure everything was in order, he hadn't realised how much of an effect the presence of the Lord could have. Other than that trip, Harry didn't have much to tell. Arthur was impressed with what he'd learned so far about taking his place as Lord, and offered any advice he could give.

After Harry finished, he asked about Egypt. Reading between the lines of Ron's bragging spoke of an intriguing magical culture that was fairly different than the one in Britain. Perhaps Harry needed to buy a book on the subject. Arthur happily told him about the 1000 galleon prize he'd won from the Ministry lottery. He wanted to make sure all his children had better quality school supplies, but Molly insisted on a holiday. Naturally Arthur was outvoted and they went to Egypt to visit Bill, the eldest Weasley child. There they visited many tombs and Bill told them about the different kinds of magic the ancient sorcerers used to protect them.

"It was good to see Bill again. He's not often in the country since he works as a curse breaker for Gringotts. He's been stationed in Egypt for nearly two years now. Before that he did a stint in Iceland when they discovered a particularly nasty Barrow. Exciting stuff. Almost makes me wish I was a younger man and could go off exploring the world," Arthur said.

"Did you want to when you were younger?" Harry asked, genuinely curious.

"Part of me did, but my passion has always been with Muggles," Arthur said, "helping to maintain relations between our two worlds has always been my calling. My department used to be a lot bigger, but during the last war it was downsized to better allocate resources and it hasn't recovered. It keeps me busy, but I do regret not being home more to be a buffer between Molly and the kids."

"Ron and Ginny," Harry said under his breath.

"Exactly."

Harry definitely felt better after his conversation with Arthur. He was one more ally but more importantly he was one that Harry already knew. Andromeda had really helped him but she was still mostly a stranger. Augusta Longbottom could also be helpful, but Harry hadn't told her anything about his situation. It relaxed him somewhat that Arthur had been so genuine throughout, not a hint of treachery. The things he alluded to weren't pleasant, and while he didn't give many details besides the bare bones he told Harry, it was enough to guess what happened. Molly had tried stealing the Weasley line from him, and would have succeeded had Arthur taken up the lordship.

Unfortunately he couldn't hide away in his room forever. Harry left his room and followed the sounds of loud voices. The main parlour of the Leaky Cauldron was usually busier in the evenings, but it was dominated by a group of seven redheads and a messy brunette. Several tables had been pushed together so they could all eat together. Harry remained at the periphery. It took a while for him to be noticed.

"Harry!"

Hermione bolted forward and wrapped him in a hug that was bordering on being uncomfortable. Ron slapped his back, and they were both pushed aside as Mrs Weasley swept him into a suffocating embrace.

"Harry, thank goodness! We were so worried when we couldn't find you at all today! Where were you? You know you weren't supposed to leave Diagon Alley!" Mrs Weasley said, her voice almost shrill.

"I didn't leave. I was packing my things in my room and I guess I completely lost track of time," Harry said.

"Well I'm sure you'd love to catch up with your friends. Come on, sit down. Oh, you're so thin Harry dear."

Previously Harry would have accepted the insistent mother-henning with quiet happiness, but knowing that he had been cursed to malnutrition, Mrs Weasley's constant comments about how thin he was felt awful. The first meal he'd had following the removal of the malnutrition curse had nearly made him cry, because a regular portion kept him feeling full for a lot longer than it had ever done before. Harry had never felt that energised following a meal, and he could now understand why people would look forward to eating. It was supposed to feel satisfying, not uncomfortably cloying or like trying to fill a bottomless pit.

Arthur appeared at his side, a gentle hand on his shoulder to manoeuvre him to the large table. Fred and George were already sitting, and they grinned when they saw Harry. Ron and Hermione pushed their way past Arthur, claiming the seats either side of him. Arthur didn't go far, taking the seat opposite.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't write to you more Harry. The summer homework kept me so busy and then my parents took me to France for two weeks. Learning about French wizarding culture was so interesting I had to completely rewrite a few of my essays to include it all."

"And the tombs were wicked. Those ancient Egyptian wizards knew how to keep things safe. Bill had to stop Ginny from going in a few of them because there were all these skeletons from Muggles who'd managed to get in. It was pretty nasty seeing how they'd been deformed and stuff. It sucks that it was so expensive because there wasn't much left over to buy all our school things."

Ron and Hermione's voices washed over him in an incessant buzz. Harry nodded at the appropriate moments, not commenting on the fact that both of them were talking to him about separate things. It was also obvious to him now that neither of them once asked him about his own summer. Inheritance aside, Harry actually had different things he could tell them, such as the interesting people he'd seen in Diagon Alley. At least the less he was required to speak, the less chances he had to let something slip.

"But where were you Harry? I thought we were going to meet up since we haven't seen you all summer," Ron said.

"I'm really sorry Ron. I was packing away my things and completely lost track of time," Harry said, "I'll make it up to you."

"You'd better. Our shopping trip was a complete nightmare. With all the books we need for those new classes, I had to get second hand robes again, and whoever set that Monster Book of Monsters must be a right lunatic. The shop assistant nearly had a heart attack when we said we wanted two," Ron said.

"Yes, it was rather odd to set a book which attacks people. Did you have much trouble with yours?" Hermione asked.

Remembering those books from his own trips to Flourish and Blotts, Harry was suddenly very glad he was no longer taking that subject.

"Not really, but I think I just got lucky with it," he lied.

"Alright," Hermione said, "did you get your homework done? Getting ready this evening will be a bit hectic but I'll be able to look it over for you on the train to Hogwarts."

"I think I'll be alright, Hermione. I'm feeling pretty confident about them," Harry said.

"Are you sure? You want them to be good, right?"

"I had help from some of the people in Diagon Alley that I met. Florean Fortescue knows loads about witch burnings," Harry said, carefully ignoring the slight on his intelligence.

Hermione didn't look like she believed him but she let it go with an air of 'don't come crying to me later'. Harry forcefully turned his attention to Arthur, asking him what the plans were for tomorrow. Seeing what he was after, Arthur took control of the conversation, letting him know they'd be borrowing cars from the ministry since there were so many of them.

"So I want all of you packed and ready to go with plenty of time to spare, is that clear?" Mrs Weasley said imperiously to all at the table, "that includes you Harry dear. I don't want any delays wasting the ministry's time. We need to be ready to go by ten o'clock."

She checked her watch.

"In fact, I think it best if we all head up to our rooms and get packed right now."

Ron moaned, not wanting to go back to his shared room with Percy. For once, Percy seemed to agree with his brother. Harry was completely fine with going back to his room, and at the first sign of Mrs Weasley's raised voice, he slipped away from the table.

The quiet in his room was a blessed relief, and Harry crashed onto his bed with a great sigh. One meal, one conversation, and already he felt rung out. Now that his head was clear, the signs were obvious. Not once had Ron or Hermione asked him about himself. Ron had moaned, making pointed comments about his lack of money, while Hermione casually insulted his ability. It was maddening. Hermione had never really helped with his schoolwork before. Sure, she'd corrected his essays, but she never explained the material, or helped him improve. And the one time Harry had offered to buy something for Ron, the redhead had gotten in a huff, and Harry had to deal with his bad mood for the rest of the day, making concessions as though he was the one to do something horrifically wrong.

His plans for how to handle his former friends kept changing over and over again as he considered and discarded new possibilities. Harry knew one thing for sure. There was no way he was going to allow himself to be alone with them. As soon as Ron or Hermione realised he was slipping away, they'd likely try to tighten the reins. While the lordship rings could warn him of poisons, and offered some small resistance to enchantment, they weren't fool proof. He would need to be careful. He would need new friends at school.

Great, as if he had a whole lot of experience with that. Harry had never had friends. Dudley saw to that when they were at primary school, and then at Hogwarts there was Ron and Hermione. Who else did he have? There were plenty of people he got along with, but they weren't at the level of friends. Neville was one. Dean and Seamus, the other Gryffindor third-year boys, were nice whenever they talked in between classes. Like Neville, they hadn't treated him with suspicion during the Chamber of Secrets incident last year, an automatic point in their favour.

It was a start at least, and Harry shelved those thoughts for the night. Tomorrow was going to be hectic enough as it was. He'd need all the rest he could get.

The journey to Hogwarts

Chapter Notes

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

Chaos was an understatement. Mrs Weasley was storming up and down corridors, yelling at each of her children in turn to get ready. It seemed that neither Ron nor Ginny had finished packing, and in the whirlwind as they hurried to finish, Percy's belongings had been mixed up. It caused another argument between the brothers, which didn't help the noise level. The only reason Harry was spared was because he refused to open the bedroom door as soon as he heard it.

There was a knock.

"Harry, it's Arthur. Everything alright in there?"

Harry opened the door. Arthur looked a little put out but was otherwise cheery.

"Are you all packed and sorted?"

He stepped aside, allowing Arthur to see the locked trunk with Hedwig safely stowed away in her cage.

"Excellent! The cars from the ministry will be here any moment. For safety, you'll ride in the front car with me," Arthur said, "I'm just going to check on Fred and George since they'll likely be ready as well."

The man then disappeared into the corridors towards the shouting that still hadn't ceased. A very disgruntled Tom came shuffling up the stairs, nodding to Harry as he passed. Arthur returned a moment later with the twins in tow, both lugging their trunks behind them. They grinned at Harry, who easily smiled back. Checking out of his room was simple, Harry thanking Tom for his stay.

Muggle London was as bustling and busy as Diagon Alley had been, but instead of the occasional bang and flash from spells, there was rumbling and horns blaring from traffic, both close and distant. Two sleek black cars were parked on the curb right in front of the pub. A wizard stood by each, both dressed perfectly to blend in with muggles. Arthur led them to the front car. Much like his old Ford Anglia, the boot was magically expanded, allowing all three trunks to fit in easily. Harry, Fred and George took their seats in the back of the car, the space inside belied by the outward appearance and giving them lots of room. Arthur remained outside, chatting with the ministry driver as he waited for the others.

"You had the right idea, hiding in your room. Mum was on fine form this morning," Fred said.

"But you should have seen it. Tom the barman came and told her off for making so much noise and disturbing the guests!" George said.

Harry laughed. He thought it had been a bit quieter when they left.

"Do you reckon if they don't hurry up, we'll leave without them?" George asked.

"Hopefully," Harry said.

"Oh? Trouble in paradise between the three golden lions?" Fred asked, "care to share? George and I have totally legitimate therapist licences if it helps."

"I think that was a voucher *for* therapy Fred."

"Same difference."

"It's nothing really. I haven't seen them all summer, and when we finally got back together, all they could talk about was themselves. No questions about me or how I've been, or even what I was doing already at the Leaky Cauldron anyway," Harry said.

"We heard from Dad when he told Mum. Honestly, blowing up your aunt? Teach us your ways," George said, "but we can definitely show you how to not get caught."

"I'll keep that in mind," Harry said, "what did your dad say?"

"Not much. All he told Mum was that a bit of accidental magic got out of hand, so you were staying here for the rest of the summer since your relatives were understandably upset. He didn't tell us much more when we asked him."

"Yeah. I mean it's normal for him to keep things close to the chest around Mum, but this definitely felt like he was trying to downplay it so she didn't lose it," Fred said, "once again Harry, you made the right call skipping out on shopping yesterday. She would have been even more unbearable than she normally is."

"Was she really that worried?"

"Worried is putting it lightly. Terrified is more accurate. No idea why though, it's not like Sirius Black is gonna just be wandering out and about in one of the most trafficked areas in magical Britain."

"Then there was that whole thing with the goblins," George shook his head.

He was tempted to ask for more details, but he didn't want to give himself away. Not right here anyway. Percy emerged from the pub, looking distinctly ruffled and annoyed. Harry was almost tempted to offer him some space in the car with them, but as roomy as the interior was, it was clearly designed for the number of occupants a car normally had. Though he was very much mistaken in that fact. The ministry wizard tapped the roof of the car, and the front passenger seat expanded, turning into a comfortable double seat. Percy stowed his trunk and sat down, offering a polite good morning to them all.

At 10:30, a full half hour after they were supposed to be ready to leave, Mrs Weasley, Ron, Hermione and Ginny came trudging out of the Leaky Cauldron. Mrs Weasley opened her mouth when she spotted Harry riding with Fred and George, but Arthur said something Harry

couldn't hear, and the four of them were shepherded towards the other ministry car. Arthur slipped into the passenger side next to Percy while the driver sat behind the wheel. Harry didn't look back to see the others as the car smoothly slid out from its spot, merging seamlessly with the small amount of traffic.

Uncle Vernon would have had a fit if he saw what was happening. Traffic and congestion had always been a favourite topic of his to rant about when he found himself caught in a jam. Even if the lights were taking a second too long to change, he would complain. Despite the traffic on the roads, the ministry cars seemed to find all of the gaps, slipping past queues, and somehow finding themselves at the front without doing anything outwardly special at all. Harry was greatly amused imagining Uncle Vernon attempt to rage at the magic while appreciating the speed that the cars traversed the busy London roads.

15 minutes after leaving the Leaky Cauldron, they arrived at Kings Cross Station. The driver disappeared while they took their trunks from the boot and returned with several trolleys. In the next moment, they were back in their cars and pulling away, somehow ending up at the front of the queue at the nearest traffic lights.

Kings Cross Station was the kind of background noise Harry liked. It was ordinary people going about their day to day lives, and all the sounds that came with it filled the air. The shrillest noise was the whistle blowing, but even that didn't grate on his ears like Mrs Weasley now did. Harry remained close to Arthur in the group as they moved through the station. The man held him back just a moment as the others passed through the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

"If you need anything at all, don't hesitate to contact me. Stay safe."

Without another word, Arthur guided him through the barrier. Platform nine and three quarters was as busy as he remembered it being. The scarlet steam train, The Hogwarts Express, sat waiting to depart. Everywhere he looked, parents were saying final farewells to children leaning out of the train compartments. Harry allowed himself to blend into the crowd, keeping an eye on the group of Weasleys ahead and making sure to get on a different coach. He ended up finding a compartment filled with people he knew.

"Hey Neville, Seamus, Dean. Do you mind if I join you?"

The three of them looked up from what they were doing. Dean, dark skinned, tall and lanky, was reading a book while Seamus, sandy haired and broad shouldered, was putting away his things.

"Not at all," Dean said.

Seamus helped him heave his trunk up into the storage rack.

"Not travelling with Ron and Hermione?" Seamus asked.

"I got separated from them on the platform, and I'm not sure where they ended up. I saw you guys and thought it would be fine, but I can leave if you want."

"No, it's fine. Just a bit curious I guess," Seamus said, "did you have a nice summer?"

And that was how Harry passed the time until the whistle blew and the train pulled away from the station. Seamus and Neville both waved out of the window, while Dean returned to his book. It was for Astronomy, a class he knew the boy liked.

"This will be the first year we're not all taking the same classes. It'll be a bit weird," Seamus said, "but I guess we've got the core classes still."

"Another year of Potions with Snape," Neville said, sounding horrified.

"Don't let the bat get to you Neville. The man's a twat and shouldn't be allowed near children."

"Yeah. Just because Snape doesn't like teaching says nothing about you as a person," Harry added.

"Thanks guys, but I already know I'm hopeless at Potions. Gran isn't happy with it, but she can't complain because I make up for it with Herbology."

"We all have our skills," Dean said, "my mum's a teacher, and she's always coming out with motivational quotes for students like that."

"Better than my Mam. She works for the Irish Board of Charms Mastery Certification, so she's very invested in my Charms education; keeps getting on me to practise even though I'm not supposed to do magic outside school," Seamus said.

"What about your dad? You said he was a Muggle, right?"

"Aye, he is. Dad's a joiner," he said, then when Neville looked confused, "a carpenter, someone who builds things. He tries his best but most of the magic stuff goes right over his head. I can't complain though. He's always saying I can't rely on magic for everything, so he teaches me stuff around the house in case something breaks."

"But can't your mum just fix it with magic?" Neville asked.

"It's the principle of the thing, according to him. There's an unspoken rule in my house that if anything Muggle breaks, he gets to try fixing it first before magic gets involved."

"Sounds nice. My mum tries to understand magic as well, but she's like your dad in a sense. Honestly, I think she likes History of Magic more than I do because to her it's just stories," Dean said.

"I was like that before first year, but Professor Binns has definitely removed a lot of the joy I once had for that class," Harry said.

It was a shame, because magical history was interesting, but Harry had come to terms with the fact he likely would never be anything more than an armchair historian. The others agreed with his assessment. The conversation drifted away from the coming school year and back towards what they had been up to over the summer. Seamus chatted away about the relatives

he visited in America, his mother's brother who moved there to work for the American Quidditch League.

This naturally led to a conversation about the sport itself, something they could all participate in. Neville was the least enthused, but he joined in and got animated when he mentioned the few games his uncles had taken him to see when he was younger. It was a very different kind of Quidditch conversation than he would have had with Ron and Hermione. Ron considered himself an expert on all things Quidditch, and thus expected Harry to share all of his opinions, including which teams to like and not like. Considering he clung to his support for the Chudley Cannons despite their consistent bottom of the league position, Harry had to consider Ron's judgement skewed in this area. Hermione barely tolerated Quidditch talk, ignoring the pair of them entirely with increasingly loud huffs as though trying to get them to return to their homework.

Seamus, Dean and Neville were very different. For starters, Seamus and Neville knew a wider selection of teams than Ron, and even though neither of them had played the game, they described it using familiar game terms. Dean was more of a novice to supporting Quidditch teams like Harry was, and the other two were more than happy to share their stories without pushing them towards any particular team.

The landscape outside the window changed from tall buildings and cities to wide open fields and countryside. Unfortunately, it came with a downgrade in the weather. The sky darkened as thick black clouds rolled overhead. Rain lashed down on the train, completely obscuring what was usually a very nice view. The trolley witch came and went, and Harry and the other boys tucked into pumpkin pasties while daring each other with Bertie Botts' Every Flavour Beans.

"You blew up your aunt!" Seamus said.

Harry had just finished telling them about his summer, including the incident that led to him spending three weeks at the Leaky Cauldron all by himself. Of course, he left out his inheritance, but only Neville could call him out on it. The boy didn't comment on the omission, giving him a funny look which quickly faded.

"It was an accident. I shouldn't have done it, but I can't say I can complain about the results," Harry said.

"I don't blame you to be honest," Dean said, "I know my relatives ask Mum questions about where I go during the school year, but your Aunt Marge sounds awful."

"She's not pleasant," Harry agreed, "where do you say you go when people ask?"

"To a private boarding school in Scotland called Hogwarts," Dean said, "what? Muggles won't know what it means, and it's not like I tell them it's magic or anything."

"Lying by telling the truth, I like it. It's just about the only way I can slip anything past my Mam," Seamus said, "what about you Harry? What's your excuse back home?"

"The cover story is that I attend St Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys."

There was a beat, then Seamus snorted. Dean and Neville chuckled as well, but they went quiet when Harry didn't join them.

"Wait, you're serious?" Dean asked.

"Absolutely. The people where I live don't take kindly to anything that isn't normal, and I am very much not normal," Harry said, "it's better to paint me as a delinquent they're housing out of the goodness of their hearts than risk losing face by people thinking bad about them."

"What the hell! That is not right!" Seamus said, jumping to his feet with his face slowly turning red in indignation, "there's nothing wrong with you! Why the hell would they treat you like that?"

Dean caught his arm to stop Seamus's pacing, pulling him back down to his seat.

"Magical children are precious. That's what Gran always says," Neville said.

"Trust me mate, most Muggles think the same," Dean said.

"It's not great, but I'm alright. It won't be like that for long," Harry said.

He caught Neville's eye and the boy's eyes widened, recognition passing through them. With the Potter lordship, he wasn't forced to stay with the Dursley's any longer, or at least that was Harry's hope.

It was bizarre talking about the Dursley's so openly. Harry had told Ron and Hermione in the past, but they'd always brushed him off. For some reason, Harry hadn't questioned it at the time, far too used to that sort of treatment from his childhood. Knowing now about their betrayal, Harry understood better. Surely even as oblivious as Ron could be, he would have noticed that bars on his window and a cat flap on his door wasn't normal. Fred and George had tried telling their mother, but Mrs Weasley was too busy yelling at them for stealing Arthur's car to notice.

"So what did you do for the rest of the summer? I bet you got to see more of Diagon Alley than any of us," Dean said, noticeably changing the subject.

Beside Harry, Seamus was still calming himself down, so Harry easily accepted the change. He told them all about the various people he'd seen. Having dinner in the main parlour of the Leaky Cauldron lent itself to a variety of conversations, both engaged with and listened to. Harry finished telling them about his many trips to Flourish and Blotts when Seamus, back to normal, snorted.

"Whoever teaches Care of Magical Creatures must be a madman. I still haven't managed to open the book without it biting me," he said.

"You'll have to tell me what's inside when you finally get it open," Harry said.

"How come? Aren't you taking Care of Magical Creatures too?" Dean asked.

"I may have decided to change my subjects," Harry said carefully, as though worrying Ron and Hermione might hear him.

"Ooo, tell us everything."

The door to the compartment slid open to reveal Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown. Harry hadn't spoken to either of them much, save for the occasional comment in classes, but he knew that they were reasonably kind girls. However, he also knew they loved gossip. The rumour mill was practically unofficial Hogwarts journalism, and Parvati and Lavender were tapped into it. As someone already under a spotlight, Harry wasn't too keen on his secrets being spilled.

"Hello to you too," Seamus said, as though it was a regular occurrence for the two girls to appear when he least expected them.

For all Harry knew, it might have been.

"Hello, how are you all? Did you have good summers?" Parvati asked in a rush of questions, "but what's this about you changing subjects?"

The pair of girls slid into the free seat across from Harry, which ended up squishing Neville against Dean. They were both looking at him as though there was some scandalous story here.

"It's really not that interesting. I just got a chance to read some of the books for the other classes and decided I wanted to do those instead," Harry said.

"Reasonable explanation yet unexpected," Parvati mumbled to Lavender.

"Making big decisions is within typical behaviour," Lavender whispered back.

Harry felt as though he was being distilled into some kind of weird matrix of gossip, the facts gleaned from his short answer slotted into categories and compared against what was already known.

"Ignore them Harry," Dean said, "it's just something they do."

"You could tell them to shove off, but that just makes them come back again," Seamus said.

"Oh fine, ruin our fun," Lavender said, "can we not check in with our boys?"

"Yeah, especially since Harry's usually so occupied with Ron and Hermione," Parvati said.

"Occupied?" Harry said but Parvati waved him off.

"Your boys?" Seamus asked but Lavender ignored him.

"So what classes are you taking then? I'm guessing not the one with the biting book," Lavender said.

"Arithmancy and Ancient Runes," Harry said.

To his surprise, his answer was accepted without question. He even got a few nods.

"Good to know I'll be with someone familiar in Arithmancy," Dean said.

"Muggle maths?" Harry asked.

"Muggle maths."

"Mam couldn't stop laughing when I told her I was doing Divination, which got really annoying. My cousin Eoin suggested Ancient Runes since I liked learning about the standing stones when I was younger, so I'll be joining you in that Harry," Seamus said.

"So you're not learning Divination with us!" Parvati gasped, "Neville won't abandon us though, right Neville?"

Neville shrunk in his seat.

"Um, sorry, I changed to do Muggle Studies. I thought it would be interesting," he said.

"Oh well. If we see anything important in all your futures, we'll be sure to let you know," Parvati said, "and hey, my sister Padma's also doing Muggle Studies."

"Isn't Hermione also taking that class?" Lavender said.

"Hermione's taking every class," Harry commented.

The girls hissed.

"Sounds like we'll be keeping our voices down in the dorm room then," Lavender said, "it's such a shame. I found this really nice potion which I thought would work really well in her hair, but I guess there won't be much styling going on this year."

"Speaking of, Susan said she'd try finding more of those cute little bracelets when she went on holiday this summer," Parvati said, "see you boys later."

And just like that, Parvati and Lavender left. Harry felt as though a tornado had descended on the compartment, but as exhausting as it was, it also felt ... nice, in an odd sort of way.

"Are they always like that?" Harry asked.

"They came, they saw, they gossiped? Absolutely," Seamus said.

"You learn to just accept that when they descend, you will be spending time with them," Dean said.

The train suddenly lurched as it came to a halt. Dean checked his watch, and then frowned. Neville wiped away the condensation on the window, peering out into the dreary darkness of the stormy weather.

"No way can we be there by now," Seamus said.

"Maybe the train's broken down?" Harry suggested.

The lights in the compartment flickered and went out. All the alarm bells in Harry's brain were going off. Something bad was about to happen. He reached out and slid the bolt on the compartment door shut, locking it. That was when he felt it. Coldness washed over them, a creeping chill that seeped into their bones. The compartment, once bright and warm, was now freezing, and Harry felt goose bumps up and down the length of his arms. As it grew colder, it became suffocating, as though the very air itself was getting thicker. His thoughts became muddled and unclear. The darkness around him was no longer the compartment on the Hogwarts Express. It was the cupboard under the stairs of Number 4 Privet Drive.

At the edge of the compartment window, slowly gliding down the corridor, was a hooded figure. Its movements were eerie, the long cloak almost flowing around it. There was a long, rattling sound like a breath, and Harry could not tear his eyes away from it. It paused, and what Harry guessed was its head turned to face him. Long, skeletal fingers appeared from the folds of the cloak, and the door handle rattled. Harry's head was filled with voices.

"Freak."

"If there's something wrong with the bitch, then there's something wrong with the pup."

"There is no such thing as magic."

A loud scream had Harry clapping his hands over his ears. He clenched his eyes shut, trying to somehow drown out the deluge of voices from his memories, but it was like the only thoughts in his head were bad ones. He desperately tried to find a happy memory, something he could cling onto, but it was all gone in the face of the suffocating cold. Then there was a white light, muffled but still bright through his clenched eyes.

The first thing that Harry registered was a hand on his back. Then it was the warmth. Opening his eyes, the compartment was still dark, but the warmth had returned.

"Lumos," someone muttered.

A wand tip lit up, a glowing sphere shining in the dark. Harry could see a worn out face illuminated in the wand light. Neville unlocked the door and the person slid it open.

"Everyone alright in here?" he asked.

None of them were able to speak. Harry removed his hands from his ears, but his entire body seemed to not want to relax. It remained tense. The man seemed to understand, and he stepped into the compartment and knelt down.

"It's alright now. It's gone."

The lights flickered back on, and the man looked up at them, pleased as he extinguished his wand. His robes were shabby, and the brown hair on his head was thinning. Despite this, he had an air of youth about him.

"What- what was that?" Dean asked.

"It was a Dementor, one of the guards of Azkaban, looking for Sirius Black," the man said.

From his robes, he pulled out a wrapped bar of chocolate and he handed it to Neville.

"Here, it's chocolate. It'll help," he said.

"But Harry-" Seamus said.

"I'm fine," Harry said.

"Like hell you are."

"Calm down everyone. The Dementor's effect is not a pleasant one, so let's not make it worse by arguing," the man said, turning to Harry, "are you alright?"

Harry nodded. Already he was feeling a lot better, his muscles beginning to unclench. He moved away from Seamus, already missing the small warmth from the hand on his back. The man stared for a moment, eyes searching, and then he checked the other boys as well. He gestured to Neville.

"Share that amongst yourselves. It really will help," he said, "I'm going to check in with the driver, as well as see if the rest of the students are alright. If any of you start feeling off, I recommend seeing Madam Pomfrey when we get to Hogwarts."

With that, he left the compartment, the door sliding shut behind him. There was a snap as Neville idly broke off pieces of chocolate, handing them out. Surprisingly it did help, the sweetness filling him with warmth to chase away the lingering chill. None of them spoke about what happened. Harry was just happy that his hands stopped shaking. Neville had a far away look in his eye as he stared out of the window. Seamus and Dean didn't look much better. If they had felt as Harry had in the presence of the Dementor, then he didn't blame them for their silence.

Harry stuck close to the three boys as the train arrived at Hogsmeade Station. It was rather necessary as the mass of students exited the train and headed for the horseless carriages that would take them to Hogwarts. The familiar call of "First years!" carried across the station platform, but in the throng of people, Harry couldn't see Hagrid. He managed to get into a carriage with Seamus, Dean and Neville. As soon as the door closed, the carriage moved off on its own, but for some reason Harry felt as though he could sense something there.

The rain hadn't let up all afternoon. If anything it had become stronger as the wind picked up. All four of them agreed that they were glad to not be taking the boats across the lake this year. Their carriage followed a line of other carriages along the road leading to the school. Through the gloom, Harry could just make out the winged stone boars perched atop pillars framing the iron gate. Floating alongside them were two cloaked figures. There was a curtain

of unnatural cold as they passed through the gates, then one of the best feelings Harry had ever experienced.

It was like he had been immersed in a warm bath. All around him he could feel magic. It was like Potter Manor, but this was far older and ran far deeper than the Potter family magic. This, Harry could tell, was Hogwarts. The magic soaked into every inch of the grounds and reinforced by generations of students and teachers and headmasters was now welcoming him home. The only reason for this that Harry could think of was his inheritance of the Gryffindor and Slytherin lordships. Hogwarts was recognising its Heirs return.

The only outward sign Harry gave was resting a little heavier against the side of the carriage. They were all still a little on edge from the Dementor on the train, exacerbated by the brief return of that feeling as they passed through the gate. Harry didn't want them to think he was lying about how he felt. The carriage pulled up at the entrance to the castle, and the four of them ran for cover. They weren't the only ones as students tried shaking off droplets from their hair once they got inside. A few of the older students cast drying charms on their clothes.

"Harry!"

Ron and Hermione appeared through the crowd.

"What happened to you? Where did you go? We were looking for you on the train for ages?" Ron yelled.

"It's alright. I just got separated from you guys," Harry said.

"But we were looking for you!" Ron insisted.

"I didn't mean to make you worry, but the station was hectic like it normally is and I didn't want to try wading through that," Harry said.

"But Harry you really need to be careful," Hermione said, "are you alright? We heard you passed out."

Harry frowned. How could they have possibly heard that? Judging by the confused looks on the other Gryffindor boys faces, they were confused as well. Then Harry heard the whispers from people around him and he understood. They were working the school gossip mill to make it seem like Harry was affected by the Dementor more than he was, whether to make him seem weak or troubled, he didn't know.

"The Dementor wasn't pleasant but I didn't pass out," Harry said.

"Relax guys, he was with us the whole time," Dean said placatingly.

Professor McGonagall made her way through the horde of students, pulling Hermione to one side. Ron still looked angry.

"I was hoping to catch up with you properly on the train. We were too busy yesterday to do it properly," he whined.

"I'm really sorry," Harry said.

Trying to placate Ron's complaints was made easier when Peeves zoomed overhead, dropping water bombs. He nailed Ron in the back of the head, soaking him completely. Harry bit back laughter, keeping to friend appropriate chuckles as he guided the redhead into the Great Hall, his ire successfully diverted to the poltergeist. Hermione joined them a moment later but she didn't get to start another lecture before the large oak doors opened. All heads turned to the line of first years being led to the front of the hall by Professor Flitwick. Every single one of them looked like they'd been drowned.

The sorting was a perfect distraction, Hermione unable to say anything for fear of appearing rude. Once the last student was placed into their house, Dumbledore rose from the staff table and after a few words, the previously empty platters and bowls in front of them filled with delicious food. Harry was really looking forward to this. This would be his first Hogwarts feast where he'd actually get to enjoy it without having to force himself to take a smaller portion. He'd already felt the difference now that he could get proper nutrition from his food in the few weeks since the potions effects had been removed. Another positive to eating: he didn't need to speak to Ron or Hermione.

For the first time in his life, Harry felt pleasantly stuffed. Ron finished shovelling down the last of his chocolate pudding when the plates cleared and Dumbledore stood once again.

"Now that we've all enjoyed a most excellent feast, I have a few start of term notices to give before I dismiss you to your nice warm beds," he said, "we have two changes in staffing this year. First, taking the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher will be Professor R J Lupin. I'm sure we can all wish the professor the best of luck."

The man who helped them on the train stood from his seat next to Professor Sprout, bowing slightly to the assembled students to polite applause. At the opposite end of the staff table, Harry caught the slight snarl directed at Lupin by Professor Snape.

"Our former Care of Magical Creatures teacher Professor Kettleburn has unfortunately decided to retire," Dumbledore continued, "but I am delighted to say the post has been filled by our very own Rubeus Hagrid."

Harry clapped loudly, along with many of the Gryffindors. Hagrid teaching Care of Magical Creatures certainly explained the biting book, but now Harry was conflicted. Hagrid would surely be disappointed that he wasn't taking his class, but a part of Harry was relieved because he worried about Hagrid's ability to teach. The man had shown a very different idea of what was acceptable danger in his choice of pets. He also didn't know whether Hagrid was somehow a part of the betrayal. Harry hoped not. Hagrid had been nothing but kind to him ever since he met him, and none of the memories he shared with him seemed forced in any way.

"Lastly, for the foreseeable future, Hogwarts will be playing host to the Dementors of Azkaban."

Dumbledore's words caused the low level of chatter in the hall to cease.

"They will be stationed at the entrances to the grounds until such a time as Sirius Black has been captured. I have been assured by the Ministry that they will not enter the grounds, but I warn you. It is not in the nature of a Dementor to show mercy, nor forgive mistakes. I must ask that none of you give them any reason to hurt you," Dumbledore clapped his hands, then spoke in a jovial tone as if he hadn't just proclaimed that dark creatures would be patrolling the school perimeter, "now then, off to bed. There is learning to be done tomorrow!"

Harry followed the sea of students out of the Great Hall. Now that they had been reunited, Ron and Hermione stuck to his side. Naturally, the topic of conversation was the Dementors.

"They're horrible creatures. Truly, truly, awful," Hermione said, "I've read about them in Practical Counters to the Dark Arts. It says there that the only reason Azkaban uses them as guards is because they had already swarmed there and the Ministry was too scared of them running wild if they tried driving them off."

"Yeah, but Dumbledore said they'd stay out of the school grounds," Ron said, aiming for confidence but sounding unsure, "surely he's strong enough to keep them away."

"Not if they attack quickly. It wouldn't take long for a Dementor to do serious amounts of damage."

"Hermione, do you have to be so dreary before bed? You're going to give us nightmares," Ron said, "Harry's already had an unpleasant enough experience with them as it is."

"I think I'll be fine, but I would appreciate it if we could talk about something nicer," Harry said.

Thankfully they did, but unfortunately the next thing out of Hermione's mouth was her excitement for classes the next morning. This predictably made Ron groan loudly, and Harry wished more than ever that he could just leave them there. If he didn't want to learn just how deep this betrayal went, he would have done so, but there were benefits to playing dumb. That being said, if they gave him the opportunity to pull away without suspicion, then he'd gladly take it. Though it was only delaying the inevitable, Harry didn't say anything about his change in subjects, preferring to deal with the fallout when he had the excuse of classes to escape to.

Climbing through the portrait hole, the Gryffindor common room was just as warm and welcoming as it usually was. For a second, Harry could almost believe the room perked up, for lack of a better description, when he entered. Most people didn't linger, crossing the large circular room to the spiral staircases at the far end. Harry and Ron bid goodnight, taking the left hand stairs to the boys dormitories. Seamus and Dean were already there, and Neville right behind them.

"How I've missed these beds!" Ron said, flopping backwards onto his four-poster.

The others didn't say anything, too busy setting up their things. Harry joined them, putting his clothes away in the small wardrobe next to his bed, though with magic, small was only relative. The inside of the wardrobe held plenty of space for him to hang up his robes and

shirts, with drawers below for the rest of his clothes. With that done, Harry disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

Ron had begrudgingly started unpacking by the time he was finished, though he was grumbling under his breath something about getting it done now so he wouldn't have to do it later. Scabbers the rat lay sprawled on his bed. He was thinner than the last time Harry had seen him, and certainly seemed twitchier, but stretching out on the covers seemed to relax him. Harry didn't mind Scabbers so much, but the rat had an annoying habit of getting into people's drawers and making nests. There was no way Harry would put up with finding him sleeping in his underwear again.

Harry tucked himself into bed as Ron dashed into the bathroom, and before he could come back, he closed the hangings for some privacy. No doubt the other boy wanted to chat, but truthfully Harry was very tired after a long day's travel. He might have indulged him in the previous years, but Harry just wanted to sleep. Sure enough, in the dim light coming through the hangings, he saw a shadow step closer.

"Harry? Are you going to sleep?" Ron asked.

"Sorry. I'm just really tired," he said.

"Oh, alright then. Good night."

He could almost picture the sulk. Harry turned over, and after a few muttered good nights from the other boys, the lights in the dormitory went out, leaving him alone to ponder his thoughts. With nothing else to occupy him, he could feel the magic of Hogwarts surrounding him once again. The experience of being back in the castle was completely different this time around. Harry felt as though he could reach out and touch every single brick. An awareness filled him, and Harry had to resist the urge to go out and explore all the new places that would open up to him. Hogwarts almost seemed to be beckoning him like a child, giddy with excitement about getting to show him so many cool new things.

In his mind, Harry assured the castle that he wasn't going anywhere, and he had plenty of time to explore. That was enough, and the magic of Hogwarts settled down, covering him in a blanket of safety. The storm outside continued to rage, but the school would protect her students, keeping them safe from all that would do them harm, especially now that it was home to an Heir. The Dementors picked up on this. Though they were creatures that did not feel fear, they moved just that little bit more carefully in their eerie drifting around the perimeter of the school, an instinct on some level warning them of terrible punishments.

Harry knew none of this. In his comfortable four-poster bed, stomach pleasantly full of delicious food, knowing that though his future was unsure, there was something looking out for his safety, he relaxed fully. After setting an alarm for the next morning, Harry allowed sleep to take him into its embrace.

Thank you for reading! Please let me know what you thought.

Start of the new school year

When Harry opened his eyes, it was not to the ceiling of his four-poster. Instead it was to a clear blue sky with the occasional fluffy white cloud. Beneath him was an endlessly still ocean, and Harry smiled widely. He hadn't expected to be back in the Ring Realm any time soon, but he was more than happy to see James, Godric and Salazar again. He stood and barely had a moment to process when he was suddenly enveloped by very strong arms, the hug lifting him from his feet.

"Welcome home!" Godric said as he spun Harry around.

"Put him down you oaf. Give him a chance to breathe before you pounce on him," Salazar admonished.

Godric's smile was like the sun when he set Harry back on his feet.

"I'm so excited that my nephew has returned to Hogwarts! Surely you're the same my friend?"

"I am, but I don't feel the need to shout it to high heavens," Salazar said with a fond eye roll.

"You are missing out then. Sometimes I feel that too many people keep their feelings hidden, to the point that we all become strangers to each other."

"Wait, nephew?" Harry said.

"Of course! Though we may be too many generations apart to count, you are my descendent and my line has claimed you. For lack of a better term, that makes you my nephew," Godric said, before deferring to James, "though of course if your father wishes, I can choose another title to call you."

"I have no issue with it if Harry doesn't," James said, "I always wanted a brother growing up, and we never meant for Harry to be an only child."

His father stepped forward, pulling Harry into a less energetic but still heartfelt hug. Salazar remained where he was, but Harry didn't mind. He got the feeling the man was not one for physical affection, a message Godric somehow had never received as he threw an arm around Salazar.

"So what was it like? I'm sure crossing over the wards must have felt intense! Did you break anything? I wouldn't judge you if you did!" Godric said.

"It was ... incredible," Harry said.

It was hard to put into words just what it had felt like, but he tried his best to explain it. The others listened, and both Godric and Salazar looked very happy.

"All we ever wanted was for Hogwarts to be a haven of safety for magical children," Salazar said, "I am glad to hear that it has remained so, even if the current headmaster is questionable."

"How do you know that?" Harry asked.

"You are a part of us just as much as we are a part of you," James said, "we know the results of the cleansing ritual, and about the money being stolen from you."

"Such wicked deeds! To place such spells on a child, it is utterly deplorable!" Godric said.

"Agreed, but my main concern is the horcrux," Salazar said.

"Is it really that bad?"

"The goblins did not exaggerate when they said it was some of the darkest known magic. The witch who discovered the technique to making them was infamous for returning from what should have been certain death, but also just as known for the toll the process exacted on her. The soul is meant to remain whole, not torn to shreds for selfish gain."

"Knowing Voldemort, it isn't surprising that he would do it," James said.

"So I've gathered from young Harry's experiences," Salazar said, "though my knowledge of what you would now call dark magic is vast, I'm afraid the only techniques I know for getting rid of horcruxes involve destroying them."

"No! We mustn't do that!" Godric said, clinging to Harry as though he would disappear.

"Obviously," Salazar said.

"The goblins said they could adapt one of their rituals to work on a living subject. They said they could have it ready in six months," Harry said.

"Then we shall put our faith in the goblins. I have always found their magic to be fascinating, and I have no doubt they would have something to cleanse a foreign soul from a priceless artefact if it meant they could keep it."

"Our sibling species in magic is most impressive. I have the utmost faith in them," Godric gestured to the sword on his belt, "the sword they forged never failed me, but enough of such dreary talk."

He squeezed Harry in a one armed hug.

"Tell us Harry, are you excited for the coming school year? Which classes are you taking? There is so much we can teach you here in the Ring Realm!"

"Don't you already know what classes I'm taking? Isn't telling you kind of pointless?"

"Perhaps, but it is still polite to have a conversation," James said.

So that's what Harry did. He told them all about the classes he'd taken so far, and the new ones he would be taking this year. James recognised many of the teachers he mentioned, but seemed surprised to hear Snape taught Potions. Godric and Salazar added their own thoughts when they could. Harry was excited to start his classes, mainly because he was interested to see how he would actually do now that he could think clearly. Maybe he would actually be able to pay attention in History of Magic! As soon as he said it, he knew that was still impossible. Salazar was stunned that a ghost taught the subject, and Godric laughed loud and deep. When he calmed down, he looked up into the sky with a wistful expression.

"Hearing such stories makes me remember my own days at the school. Sharing my knowledge of magic with the children, teaching them how to swim, giving them a home. How I miss it," he said, "I was the headmaster, did you know?"

Both Harry and James looked astounded.

"Really?" James said in disbelief.

"I was!" Godric pouted, "the very first headmaster of Hogwarts! My mentor was so proud of me! He said he could never imagine me in the role, but I proved him wrong."

Harry expected Salazar to make a snide comment, but to his surprise the man said nothing.

"I know I wasn't the best student in History of Magic, but I did read Hogwarts: A History," James said, "I'm pretty sure it didn't say anything about you being headmaster."

"Such is the way of history. Many things are lost or ... distorted," Salazar said.

"Then that is why we must make sure to pass along our stories for the next generation to remember!" Godric said, a happy grin on his face.

He swept out his cloak and sat down on the surface of the endless ocean.

"Come my friends! Gather around and I shall tell you a tale!"

"Oh no, I'm not nearly drunk enough to listen to one of your long winded stories," Salazar said.

"I agree. A good story should be told in times of merriment when ale flows freely, but we must all make do," Godric said.

James grumbled something about Harry being thirteen, but he joined Harry in sitting across from the man, just as excited to hear what he had to say. Salazar sat down as well, but he pointedly commented that not everyone was as spry as the larger man.

"I suppose I won't tell the tale from the very beginning, but it should be enough to say that each of us had taken on students here and there. Times were very different back then, and while I would have loved to take on an apprentice properly, duty called me elsewhere. It pained me every time I had to leave one of my dear students. My mentor often said that he was fortunate that I remained at his side for so long, so he never had to suffer that pain of parting," Godric said.

"It weighed heavily on me, and to my shame, it was noticed by my king. When I was called before Arthur, I fully expected to be reprimanded, but instead I received sympathy. He allowed me to leave the service of Camelot with full honour to follow my heart, and that me and mine would always be welcomed back with open arms."

"Wait, Arthur, as in King Arthur of Camelot. You were one of the knights of the round table!"" Harry said.

"Indeed I was!" Godric beamed, "I fought by my comrade's sides for many years. Why do you sound so shocked?"

"Well, King Arthur is seen as a myth in the Muggle world. There's huge debates about whether he was real or not," Harry said.

"Even in the wizarding world," James added.

"I can assure you he was very real, and a more noble king you would never find," Godric said, "I will never forget the kindness he showed me. After I left Camelot, I travelled far and wide. I established a home for myself, the property I believe you inherited from me if I'm not mistaken. It was at this time that I was able to gather students to my side, but I realised that I alone would not be enough. That was when I met the others."

"Though we came from very different backgrounds, Salazar, Helga and Rowena had all found students of their own, and all were in need of help and support. After many long conversations, we agreed that the best thing to do was to work together. Combining our strength, we built the mighty Hogwarts castle, a safe place for magical children to come to and learn."

Godric chuckled.

"Each of us had a wide breadth of magical knowledge, but also our own areas we lacked in. For myself, Transfiguration was always my strength but my ability to brew potions was inadequate. Salazar on the other hand was an expert potioneer, and happily taught the students those skills."

"You were fine at making potions when you needed to. You just weren't patient enough to teach it," Salazar cut in.

"Of course, we didn't only teach a single subject. The four of us took pride in passing on our knowledge, but more importantly, we saw it as our duty to prepare our students for the world they would face. I made sure the children were strong in body, Rowena in mind, Salazar in spirit and Helga in heart. In magic, children are the future and must be nurtured to their greatest potential, and that is what we strived to do."

Godric leaned back, content with his story. Harry, meanwhile, was amazed. Hearing the story of the founding of Hogwarts from one of the founders directly was an incredible experience. The passion and dedication Godric had practically rang in every word he spoke. He clearly loved the school he built with the others. Salazar was sporting a very similar look. Godric chuckled.

"Of course, it didn't happen entirely smoothly. You would not believe the problems we had in those early years!" he said.

"I thought I had purged those memories from my mind," Salazar said.

"The castle didn't originally have dungeons, but Salazar was teaching Potions to the children, and there was a *minor* accident."

"That child had a talent for mischief. I swear he was a distant ancestor of these Weasley twins you have fond memories of," Salazar said to Harry.

"Indeed! He was a bit heavy handed with his bubotuber puss, at perhaps too high a temperature," Godric said, and James winced, "the resulting explosion filled the entire floor of the castle with an absolutely foul smelling gas that took at least three weeks to clear. Rowena was so offended by the smell she added an extra floor above and moved everything there just to get away from it. It was decided after that that we needed a dungeon as a more appropriate place to teach Potions."

"Is that why the Slytherin common room is in the dungeons?" Harry asked.

"It is part of the reason," Salazar said, "but don't act like that incident was my fault! Of the two of us, you got into far more embarrassing situations than me! I haven't forgotten that time with the suits of armour!"

To Salazar's annoyance, Godric let out a booming laugh.

"That was so much fun!"

"Only you would find fighting off a horde of enchanted armour sets fun!"

"What happened?" James asked, sounding just as intrigued as Harry felt.

"One of the children got very angry. He had been having issues with his magic, which wasn't helped by how he came to be at Hogwarts. He felt that he wasn't being acknowledged for his abilities, so he enchanted all of the suits of armour in the castle and had them attack. While the rest of us were getting the other children to safety, this moron," Salazar jabbed a finger at Godric, "pulled out his sword and dived right in!"

"What better way to acknowledge a troubled young man than to meet him in glorious battle! If I'm not mistaken, young Camran ended up as part of the Ministry of Magic."

"That's besides the point!"

"I must have done something right!"

Hearing these stories and the bickering banter between them once again reminded them that though Godric and Salazar were legendary figures, they were also human. It was so at odds with how they were usually portrayed in the stories. Apparently his father thought so too. He was unashamedly staring, unable to compute what he was seeing. Harry loved it.

"But enough of that," Godric said, completely cutting off Salazar's attempts to mock him, "dearest nephew, what news of the wider world? I'm sure there is much that has changed since we were laid to rest."

"I'm not sure. Most of the people in the Leaky Cauldron kept talking about Sirius Black," Harry said.

"Sirius? Why would they be talking about him?" James asked.

"Apparently he's a mass murderer who escaped from Azkaban," Harry said, taking note of the distraught expression on James' face, "I don't really know the full story. Nobody really wanted to talk about it, except to say that he was dangerous and one of Voldemort's closest supporters."

"That does not sound like the Sirius I know at all," James said, "that man nearly cried when I asked him to be your godfather. He *hated* the dark arts. There's no way he would have sided with Voldemort."

"I think there's more going on. The person who did the cleansing ritual was Sirius' cousin Andromeda, and she seemed really confused when she found out Sirius named me his Heir," Harry said, "Andromeda said that Sirius was accused of betraying you, but if he did that, why would he name me Heir?"

"It doesn't make any sense. With the protections we were under, there's no way he could have betrayed us," James said, "we were originally going to lock down in Potter Manor, but Dumbledore suggested a less obvious cause of action that the enemy would be less able to predict. The cottage in Godric's Hollow was my great Aunts, and it had many of the protections any family home would. Any weak spots were covered by the Fidelius charm."

Salazar hummed in appreciation.

"That's quite the protection. Voldemort could have his face pressed against the glass of your living room window and still couldn't find you," he said, "it's an impressive piece of magic."

"Is it really that good?" Harry asked.

"Indeed," Salazar said, "the Fidelius charm works by concealing something, such as a location or object, within a secret. Only those who know the secret can then find that which is hidden. One person is selected to be the Secret Keeper, and only they can share the secret. If Lord Potter's home was under the Fidelius charm, then only the Secret Keeper could share its location. To everyone else, it would be like it didn't exist."

"Mistress Annabelle was very proud of herself for creating that spell," Godric said, "as well she should. My mentor often spoke of her fondly."

"Originally we were going to have Sirius be our Secret Keeper, but following Dumbledore's inspiration about choosing a less obvious location, we chose a less obvious person," James said, "Peter Pettigrew had been a close friend since we met in first year. He wasn't the

outwardly heroic sort like Sirius was, but he was very loyal. I don't believe he would have betrayed us any more than I believe Sirius did."

James lowered his head.

"I hate to think ill of the man I once saw as a brother, but that being said, if Sirius really did go over to Voldemort's side, he would have been able to make Peter talk."

It was a very depressing thought. Godric must have thought so too, because he clapped his hands together loudly.

"I'm sure once this man is caught then the full story can be revealed. Since you are his Heir and he is your godfather, I'm sure you'd be able to question him," Godric said.

"I just hope it'll be soon. They've got Dementors guarding the school and they made me feel awful on the train," Harry said.

"What!"

The sudden shift in Godric's demeanour from jovial to angry took Harry completely off guard.

"They allowed those foul creatures onto Hogwarts grounds!"

"Not onto the grounds, but they're stationed at the entrances," Harry said.

"Calm yourself Godric," Salazar said.

"No! I will not calm myself! This violation is completely unnecessary! Do they have any idea what those things are capable of? After everything we did to keep children safe, they would willingly put children in the path of creatures who see them as nothing more than food!" Godric raged, "as if the protections that we placed in the castle wouldn't keep them safe!"

"I know this, but as we have learned this night, much of the stories of our founding of Hogwarts are unremembered," Salazar said, "it's likely they thought a former Hogwarts student would know the protections already in place on the castle. I'm not saying the Dementors are in any way an appropriate countermeasure, but placing *something* external to Hogwarts is not incorrect."

Godric took several deep breaths, sitting back down in their loose circle from where he'd been pacing. When he did, he fixed Harry with a look so intense it had him immediately sitting to attention.

"Our time here grows short as morning approaches, and there is much yet we still need to say. Fortunately at Hogwarts, surrounded as you are by the magic of the founders, it is likely you will visit the Ring Realm more often," Godric said, "you have many trials ahead of you. Much that you must do, and much that you must trust to others."

"Andromeda is looking into what happened with Sirius, and the goblins are developing a ritual to remove the horcrux," Harry said.

"That's a good start. Sirius always spoke highly of Andromeda. I'm sure she'll do her best," James said.

"Indeed. These are tasks for others, but there are still things you must do. Those former friends of yours may attempt to ensnare you once again. You must not let them," Godric said.

"I'm hoping to take every opportunity I can to distance myself from them," Harry said.

"It's a good start, but not enough," Salazar said, "your lordship ring should warn you if they try tampering with your food again, but you will still be in their company. If possible, try not to be alone with just them. Also, you will need allies, people who can help you, and people you can turn to when the distance between you grows. Alone we are weak. Together we are strong."

"I-I'll try," Harry said.

"I'm already so proud of how well you're handling everything. All of us are," James said, "if nothing else, you deserve friends who genuinely care for you. That's all your mother and I ever wanted."

James pulled him into a firm and grounding hug. Harry had never quite realised how good a hug could feel until then as he clung to his father.

"Fear not, dearest nephew. Salazar and I are with you. Hogwarts stands with you, and through her, Helga and Rowena as well. It was our dream to see our children safe, and that will forever include you," Godric said.

His strong arms wrapped around both Harry and James, and then reached out to pull a clearly reluctant Salazar into the group hug as well. Over Salazar's grumbling, Harry felt much lighter and couldn't help chuckling. The shadow looming over him, the mysteries and the betrayals and the distrust, all of it was less now that he'd spoken to the others.

"When next we speak, we shall discuss strengthening your body," Godric said.

"And your spirit," Salazar added.

Harry was looking forward to it. Like before, the Ring Realm slowly faded around him. The last thing he was aware of was the feeling of arms surrounding him with warmth and safety before he opened his eyes.

The storm that had been raging all night had passed by the morning, leaving the air crisp and humid. Harry rose from his bed, blinking away sleep. Being in the Ring Realm didn't make him tired, despite feeling as though he was awake the entire time. Waking up well rested afterwards was a sensation Harry wasn't sure he would ever get used to. As much as he would love to lie in though, classes started back up today, so with a sigh he got up.

Each dormitory in Gryffindor tower had an attached bathroom, which Harry was very grateful for. Inside there was sink space for all of them to brush their teeth, and at the far end

of the room were three shower cubicles separated by walls coming up to Harry's chest. The spray of water was pleasantly warm, and Harry relaxed under it, letting it wash away the remaining fatigue. A moment later, the shower next to him was claimed by Dean. After a quick wash, Harry dried and tied his towel around his waist. Neville was brushing his teeth at one of the sinks, and he passed a very sleepy looking Seamus as he re-entered the dormitory.

Ron was still passed out in his bed, snoring loudly. Harry could only just see him through a gap in the curtains. Usually Harry or Hermione would wake him up, since the boy never remembered to set any kind of alarm. If he was still going to pretend to be his friend, he should probably keep doing that. Harry dressed into his school robes and then proceeded to rip the hangings around Ron's bed open. It didn't wake the boy, but it did spook Scabbers. The rat's paws scrambling against his bare chest was enough to make Ron jerk awake.

"Harry," Ron whined, "what was that for?"

"Sorry. You weren't waking up and it's time for breakfast."

Ron flopped back down, but then he groaned and heaved himself out of bed. Harry left him to it as he packed his school bag for the day. He didn't know his timetable, but he could at least get the basic stuff ready. Following the other boys down to the common room, he saw Hermione was already there, buried in the textbook for Muggle Studies. It was the perfect excuse not to talk to her as they both waited for Ron, since she would just snap at him for distracting her.

Breakfast was as delicious and hearty as he believed it had always been, and once again Harry was amazed by how filling it was. Beside him, Ron stuffed his face as if this was the last meal he would ever have. Hermione scolded him for his awful table manners, a sentiment which Harry silently agreed with. By the time they finished, McGonagall was making her way down the Gryffindor table handing out timetables. It was a fairly simple process, until she reached Harry.

"I received your message, Potter, about changing classes. You're clear to start Arithmancy and Ancient Runes," she said, "if there are any issues, let me know."

She tapped the empty timetable with her wand and it filled with his schedule. As soon as she was gone, Ron rounded on him.

"What the hell Harry? What's this about you changing classes?"

"I'm really sorry Ron. I meant to tell but there was never a good time," Harry said.

"But what about Divination and Care of Magical Creatures?" Ron demanded, "I thought we were going to take them together!"

"It was when I was getting my books, there was this huge line. I ended up browsing the rest of the shelves and found the textbooks for the other classes. These ones just really jumped out to me," Harry said, "I was going to tell you but with how hectic everything was in Diagon Alley and then getting the train here, it completely slipped my mind."

"Could you not have put that in a letter? That's the sort of thing you tell your best friend," Ron said angrily.

"You were in Egypt and Hermione was in France. Hedwig isn't trained for international travel, and I didn't know any other way to pass on a message."

"Hagrid's going to be really disappointed you're not taking his class," Hermione said.

"I know. I'll go down to his hut after classes today and talk to him," Harry said.

Ron groaned loudly.

"I only took those classes because you were! Now what am I going to do!"

"I'll still have the core classes with you," Harry said placatingly, "and Hermione's still taking those classes, right Hermione?"

"I am, but are you sure about this Harry? Those are two of the hardest classes that Hogwarts offers according to Percy," she said.

"I'll be fine. I really enjoyed reading the textbooks for them," Harry said, completely honestly.

"Alright then," Hermione said, sounding unsure, "it's ok Ron. Professor McGonagall said that the first two weeks of third year are quite flexible to allow people to change optional classes if it's needed. I wouldn't be surprised if there were more than a few people who end up changing."

That seemed to placate Ron enough that he stopped sulking at Harry. He then became even further distracted when he caught a glimpse of Hermione's timetable and saw that she was taking several classes at the same time. The impossibility of that perked Harry's interest, but he didn't voice any of his questions. When he saw how packed her timetable was, all Harry could think was that Hermione was on a collision course with some serious burnout.

They didn't have any of their new classes that day, so after a quick trip up to Gryffindor tower to get their bags, Harry followed after Ron and Hermione as they headed for Transfiguration. After that was Herbology with the Hufflepuffs, then back inside for lunch. It was in Charms in the afternoon that Harry realised this year might be more difficult than he thought. Contrary to McGonagall and Sprout, who spent their first lesson of the year outlining the new material they would cover, Professor Flitwick had them reviewing material from last year. This included the shrinking charm Reducio.

As soon as Harry said the word, he felt his magic leap to his call. It flooded through him like a torrent, far stronger than anything he had experienced before. He managed to clamp down on it just in time to keep it to a reasonable level, but it was still noticeable in how the teacup they were supposed to be shrinking to half size shrank much faster than everyone else's and was instead a third size. Flitwick spotted this and chuckled.

"Remember to not let the spell get away from you. You are the one in control," he said to the class at large.

A moment later, Seamus missed, hitting one of the books in the pile Flitwick was standing on. The sudden decrease in size caused the entire stack to collapse, and Flitwick dropped to the floor with an oof. While the class was distracted, Harry relaxed. Flitwick thought it was only an accident. He didn't suspect anything was wrong. Harry's magical core had expanded following his inheritance, the family magic of Gryffindor and Salazar bolstering the Potter magic. He would need to be very careful not to show off anything too powerful, otherwise many people would become suspicious. Ron and Hermione would definitely notice, and Harry didn't want them to actively try to rein him in and bring him back under their influence.

The rest of the day went by thankfully without incident. Harry was right in thinking that History of Magic would be just as dull even with a clear head, but at least he wrote down what he thought were the important points of the troll wars, making notes of what he needed to look into later.

Despite it being the first day of school, the teachers had already set them homework. Being in classes with him all day had seemed to cool Ron's anger at Harry for not telling him about his subject change, so when Hermione dragged them both to the library to start their Transfiguration essays for McGonagall, he looked for Harry's support in his complaints. Harry mumbled agreements, which was enough for the redhead. Personally, he wanted to keep on top of his homework this year.

As he read through a book on animal-inanimate object transformations, he saw Hermione subtly reading what he'd already written. She moved as though to pull it closer to her, quill poised to make corrections, when Harry acted like he'd found what he was looking for. He made an adjustment to a sentence, and when he finished, he put the book down between him and Hermione. Harry was now wishing he could do his homework somewhere else, but no excuse came to mind.

After dinner, Harry managed to slip away from Ron and Hermione, strolling down the sloping lawns to Hagrid's hut. He followed the sounds of quiet singing to the back of the hut, where he found Hagrid digging in his vegetable patch. The enormous man, easily twice Harry's height, hadn't noticed him yet as he sowed seeds into the freshly tilled earth. The first to notice him was Fang, Hagrid's boarhound. The dog barked loudly and bounded up to him, attempting to give him kisses and generally slobbering all over him.

"Hey there Harry! Didn't expect to see you so soon," Hagrid said when he turned, eyes crinkling into a kind smile, "Ron and Hermione around somewhere?"

"They're back up in the castle. I just wanted to speak to you alone to, well, apologise," Harry said.

"Whatever for?"

"Because I'm not taking Care of Magical Creatures," Harry said, "I didn't realise you would be teaching it, otherwise I would have-"

A large hand patted his shoulder.

"Don't you worry about it Harry. You have nothing to be sorry for," Hagrid said, "there's no way you could have known, and even if you did, I wouldn't want you to choose the class just because of me."

"Really?"

"Really! Magical creatures can be a handful at the best of times. If you don't really want to learn, then it just makes the whole thing more dangerous," Hagrid said, "not everyone's like me who can shrug it off when they get excited."

Hagrid then glanced around, as though checking the coast was clear.

"Though since you're not taking my class, do you want a sneak peak at Wednesday's lesson? Don't tell Ron and Hermione of course. I want it to be a surprise."

Harry nodded, because as much as he didn't want to take the class, magical creatures were interesting. Hagrid strode off towards the Forbidden Forest, and Harry hurried to follow, a feat made more difficult by Hagrid taking one stride for every three of Harry's. Seeing the towering trees looming over him, Harry worried what Hagrid had planned, but they skirted around the edge until they came across a paddock bordered by low rock walls. Hagrid had him wait by the gate before moving into the trees, disappearing from view for a moment.

When he returned, he wasn't alone. The creature with him looked like a cross between an eagle and a horse. Gun metal grey feathers covered its front half, with talons pawing at the ground, while its rear half was a more silvery grey fur. Wings were curled up at its sides. The beaked head stared at him with vivid orange eyes. Hagrid led him close to the paddock walls, but still well clear of Harry.

"This is a hippogriff," Hagrid said, "his name's Buckbeak, and isn't he beautiful?"

Hagrid's clear love for the creature shone through as he gazed down at Buckbeak.

"He looks amazing," Harry said truthfully, before asking, "what are you going to get the class to do with him?"

"I've got a few other hippogriffs in the forest. I was planning on letting everyone interact with them. Of course, I'll tell them the proper way of doing it beforehand."

Hagrid then went on to describe the 'proper way', with a fairly comprehensive introduction to how to handle hippogriffs. Harry immediately spotted an issue though. It relied on the class listening to Hagrid, and this class contained Draco Malfoy. One wrong word from the arrogant boy's mouth and the easily offended creature would lash out. Harry didn't want Hagrid to lose his job over something like that.

"What do you reckon? Not bad for a first lesson, eh?" Hagrid said, sounding proud of himself.

"It sounds great. I just hope everyone listens to you when you tell them what not to do," Harry said.

"Well of course they would. I'm their teacher, aren't I?"

"You are, but you've got Malfoy in your class. We both know he's going to try getting you in trouble."

"That's true," Hagrid mused, "I just wanted the first lesson to be exciting, you know? There are so many amazing magical creatures in the world, and it's way better to see them up close!"

"And you still can!"

Harry racked his brain, because now Hagrid was looking sad.

"Why not show the class Buckbeak as an example, both of the kinds of magical creatures there are but also the importance of handling them properly. That way everyone can see how incredible he is but there's no risk of them getting hurt if they don't listen," he said, "as you said, not everyone can shrug it off when they get excited."

"I suppose," Hagrid said, deep in thought, "the fourth-years would probably really like meeting all the hippogriffs. Yeah, and I've just got a new load of Flobberworms that need checking for blocked ducts. That could work."

He descended into mumbled plans about his future lessons, which grew steadily more and more excited as they went on. He barely paid attention to Harry as he accompanied him back to the castle, though he gave him a sincere thank you when they parted. Harry felt better after speaking with Hagrid, especially because the man had not once seemed different. Though he knew Hagrid was loyal to Dumbledore, it seemed that whatever schemes were at play, Hagrid wasn't a part of it, since he couldn't keep a secret to save his life. That realisation honestly relieved Harry more than he expected it to. It was more than enough to make facing down Ron and Hermione again bearable.

"Where the hell have you been?" Ron demanded almost as soon as he crawled through the portrait hole.

"I went to see Hagrid, like I told you this morning."

"We could have all gone," Ron said petulantly.

"I know, but since I was the one he might be upset with, I wanted to ask his forgiveness on my own," Harry said.

"And did he? Forgive you, I mean," Hermione asked.

"He did, didn't seem upset at all so I guess we were all worried for nothing," Harry said, "he even showed me what you guys'll be doing in your first lesson."

"Really?" Hermione said.

"What is it?" Ron asked.

"My lips are sealed, Professor Hagrid's orders."

"Oh come on! You can't just tease me with stuff like that! Tell me!" Ron said.

"Enough Ron. If Hagrid asked Harry not to tell us, then we'll just have to be patient. The first class is on Wednesday so we won't be waiting long," Hermione said, "besides, you haven't even finished your Transfiguration essay."

"It's not due till next week!"

"Even Harry managed to finish!"

Harry allowed them to keep arguing, as it meant they weren't paying attention to him. He pulled out Introduction to Ancient Runes, rereading the first chapter in preparation for the lesson tomorrow. It made it easier to ignore the slight without getting angry. It was only the first day of classes, and Harry was already waiting for any excuse he could get to cut them off. Between Ron's whining and hair-trigger temper, and Hermione's condescension, even if he was doted to like them, it made him wonder how he'd ever become friends with them at all.

Optional classes

The next morning after going through his normal routine, Harry did his due diligence as Ron's friend by making sure he was at least waking up before heading down to the common room. It took an embarrassingly long time for the redhead to get ready, and they all headed down to breakfast. Between stuffing his face, Ron made a few comments again about him not being in Care of Magical Creatures, the first lesson being just before lunch. Fortunately they were sat across from the twins, so Harry was able to ignore him by talking to Fred and George. Breakfast was delicious, and Harry was really starting to enjoy feeling full after meals.

"We should probably get going. Divination is in the North Tower and we don't want to get lost," Hermione said.

Ron looked sullen at another reminder Harry wasn't with them. Since he didn't need to leave early, Harry was able to finish eating in peace. As he left the Great Hall, a voice called out to him.

"Hey Harry! Wait up!"

Seamus came running up behind him.

"You said you were taking Ancient Runes, right?"

"That's right."

"Brilliant! I saw you reading the book last night. I figured you might know a bit more about what we were doing," Seamus said.

The pair of them talked all the way up the Ancient Runes classroom, which was on the fourth floor. The tables each had two chairs, and with no reason not to, Harry and Seamus sat together. There weren't that many people taking this class. By the looks of it, most of the Ravenclaw fourth-years were, and Harry nodded politely to Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot. Ernie Macmillan was the only Hufflepuff, but he didn't seem too put off by this, taking the desk in front of them.

On the other side of the room were Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott from Slytherin. Harry dipped his head in acknowledgement, which earned him a couple of confused looks. If he was being completely honest, Harry wasn't sure what to think about Slytherin house. Sure, he had been dosed to make him distrustful of dark magic, a reputation which preceded Slytherin in all things. Interacting with Salazar and seeing him interact with Godric, supposedly the man's enemy, made him think that reputation wasn't entirely deserved, but even so, the Slytherins hadn't exactly endeared themselves to him with their behaviour. Regardless, Harry would make an effort to be at least civil. An olive branch, as it were.

Just before the bell rang, the door opened again, and to Harry's surprise, Hermione walked in. She scanned the room, a look of disappointment on her face when she saw Harry with

Seamus, and took the free seat next to Ernie.

"Hermione? I thought you had Divination?" Harry asked.

"I worked things out with McGonagall to keep my timetable flexible since it's so full," Hermione said, then slightly pointed, "sorry, I forgot to mention it."

If she was trying to get a rise out of him 'forgetting' to tell her and Ron important things, she was failing miserably. Harry accepted her answer and looked up as their teacher entered the room.

Professor Babbling was a short witch with a round figure. The way she smiled at them and spoke with a warmth in her voice gave off the sort of kind vibes Harry typically associated with Professor Sprout. She introduced herself and her subject, going through the structure of the class and what they would be doing going forward. Harry was fascinated by what she was saying. Ancient Runes was the study of, well, runes and their properties. Each rune could be translated into a word, and by combining them in arrays, a wizard could perform magic with them. Any kind of magic designed to last beyond the length of a human lifetime was done using runes. Harry felt the thrum of the wards surrounding Hogwarts as she used them as an example.

"I thought today we could start off with something simple, so you can all get a taste of what is to come as you continue studying with me," Professor Babbling said.

She waved her wand and sheets of parchment rose up. They filtered out and one landed on each desk in the room.

"I've given each table a very simple runic array, made using only the components you'll learn about in third year. In pairs, I would like you to try and break the array down into its constituent runic elements and if you can, try and figure out what the array does," Babbling instructed them, "any good scholar of Runes must first learn to understand the work of others after all. I will move among you and help where I'm needed."

Harry was even more glad he wasn't sitting with Hermione. As it was, he and Seamus bent over the runes they had been given. As Professor Babbling said, the array was simple. The primary structure was a circle made of two concentric rings. What Harry guessed were runes were written in the space between the rings, and one large rune was in the centre. He had no idea where to start, but there was no point dithering.

"She said this only uses third year runes, right? Spellman's Syllabary has a lot more than that," Harry said, flicking through the book.

"My cousin showed me some standing stones near where we live," Seamus said, "I could probably figure out which runes were which, but what they mean when put together I have no idea."

It was like a puzzle, and Harry quite liked puzzles. The pair of them leaned over the array and got to work. Since he'd seen runes before, Seamus separated each one from the rest, making sure not to accidentally confuse them. Meanwhile Harry noted them all down and scoured

through Introduction to Ancient Runes to decipher how they all connected together. They worked surprisingly well together, their quills scratching on parchment and the flipping of pages constant as they discussed in low voices.

The central rune was Home. All around it were phrases such as Connection, Joining and Boundary. At first Harry thought perhaps this runic array formed part of a ward. Seamus seemed to agree, but then he noticed little tick marks on the top, bottom, left and right of the rings, as though something was supposed to connect to them. Harry recognised it from his reading the night before.

"The ticks are angled inwards, meaning they're supposed to receive magic, but then why all the runes for connection?" Seamus asked, reading over Harry's shoulder, "maybe it's like a beacon? A sign post saying 'here I am'?"

"That's exactly what it is," Harry said, the pieces coming together, "I think this array is some kind of marker, one you'd place somewhere to define a location."

They quickly compiled their work together just as Babbling came over to their table. While she didn't say anything, she gave them a small smile and a nod, then put a finger to her lips. Harry felt very proud of himself. Not long after, Babbling called the class to a halt. Everyone handed in their work. Hermione looked slightly frustrated and Ernie looked annoyed. From what Harry could hear, they didn't work together very well, as their personalities kept clashing.

"Well done everyone," Babbling said after she'd looked over what they'd done, "this exercise wasn't really for you to completely decipher the array. It was merely to open your mind to the exploration process. The study of ancient runes is based on investigation, exploration and logical thinking. Each rune is like a puzzle piece and it is up to us to figure out what the puzzles show."

"I'm happy that even those who only managed to decipher a couple of the runes in their arrays still did their best, which at this stage is all I can ask for. Five points to each of the houses for their efforts," she said, "and an extra ten points to Gryffindor, as I was very impressed with the teamwork Mr Finnegan and Mr Potter showed."

With a wave of her wand, the array they'd been working on appeared on the blackboard.

"As Mr Finnegan and Mr Potter worked out, this runic array acts as a location marker. It is most commonly seen with apparition points. Somebody who knows the coordinates of the apparition point can then home in on the beacon, which is very handy for preventing people from appearing all over the place if their coordinates are even slightly out."

The rest of the lesson was taken by Babbling explaining the components of the array, and the bell rang with Harry feeling very pleased with himself. It wasn't often that he did well enough in class to receive specific praise from the teacher, and it actually felt quite good. No wonder Hermione craved this validation like a drug. Speaking of, Hermione's smile was ever so slightly forced as she congratulated him on his success. Together with Seamus, they left the classroom, but then Hermione disappeared to the toilet a few corridors later.

"I thought she was going to rip my head off. Nobody's ever done better than her in class before," Seamus said.

"What can I say? We made a great team," Harry said.

"Hell yeah we did. Let's ride this high, because knowing her she's not gonna take this lying down. I wouldn't be surprised if she ends up top of the class in a few weeks," Seamus said.

"Perhaps, but she's got a really busy timetable. I wouldn't be surprised if she ends up burning out at some point."

"Bet on it?"

"Five sickles she storms out of one of her classes," Harry said.

"Fine, but five sickles if she has a complete breakdown in the common room one day," Seamus countered.

They shook on the deal. They ended up re-joining Hermione along with the other Gryffindors coming from Divination. All of them looked slightly spooked, with Ron giving Harry a cautious glance. As they took their seats in Transfiguration, Ron leaned over and whispered to Harry.

"You really should have taken Divination, mate."

"Really?"

Professor McGonagall appeared on the teachers desk as a cat. She then leapt into the air and transformed back into her human form. Harry was astonished, wondering if he could learn how to do that. Unfortunately, most of the other Gryffindors weren't quite so enthusiastic. When McGonagall questioned them, Harry learned that apparently Professor Trelawney, the Divination teacher, had predicted the death of a boy with eyes of emerald and hair of coal. Naturally, this could only be Harry, but like McGonagall, Harry found it hard to take it seriously.

"Really? You're not even a little worried?" Ron asked during lunch.

"Not even a little bit," Harry said.

"But Harry, seeing a Grimm is a really big deal. They're terrible omens, and that's what was in my cup!"

"I thought you said it was a top hat," Hermione stated.

"It was a Grimm! There's only one thing it could mean and only one person it could apply to!" Ron insisted.

"Maybe it's because I grew up with Muggles, but I really don't put much faith into fortune telling," Harry said, "besides, I'm going to die. As if that's news to me. Everyone dies eventually."

"That's not what the Grimm means," Ron said.

"Did Trelawney say that, or did you just assume that?" Harry asked.

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but from down the table, somebody else interjected.

"You know Ron, I think Harry's right about this," Parvati said, "I looked up what the Grimm means in Unfogging The Future. It is an omen of death, but on its own it doesn't really tell you much. Like Harry says, everyone will eventually die, so the important part about seeing the Grimm is the details surrounding it, which Professor Trelawney didn't say anything about."

Ron grumbled something inaudible into his mashed potatoes. Harry only caught something which sounded like 'ganged up on' and 'best friend'.

"Divination still seems like a very woolly subject," Hermione said, "Ancient Runes this morning was a much better class."

"Hang on a minute. Ancient Runes was at the same time as Divination. There's no way you could have been in both classes at the same time," Ron said.

Harry had the same thought, but didn't want to ask. It was definitely a mystery, but one Harry had no interest in solving. The last two years had been defined by the crazy things which happened to him at Hogwarts. Was it too much to ask for a normal year for a change?

After lunch was the second of their optional classes, so when Ron, Hermione and Seamus turned left out of the Great Hall to head out onto the grounds, Harry turned right back up the marble staircase to go to library for a free period. An hour later, he was joined by Dean and they both headed to Arithmancy. Arithmancy was held on the sixth floor, and there were more people taking it than Ancient Runes. Harry and Dean were the only ones taking it from Gryffindor, but there was a decent sized group of Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin students. Like before, Harry nodded in greeting to the Slytherins, receiving a curious look in response. The room was arranged with individual desks, so Harry took one on the right hand side, and Dean took the desk to his left.

"Did you read the book for this one as well or was that just Ancient Runes?" Dean asked.

"No, it was this one as well. Did you?"

Dean nodded.

"I reckon the first few weeks will be going over basic maths. The people who didn't grow up in the muggle world might not know it," Dean said.

"If it's algebra, then even the Muggle-borns might not. It's not exactly a common primary school subject," Harry said in return.

"But you did it?"

"A bit. My primary school pretended to be super posh and sophisticated, even if the kids were awful, so we started doing basic algebra in Year Six. You?"

"Funnily enough, my mum teaches high school maths. I've been seeing algebra since I could read," Dean said, "my mum was very happy I took this class."

"You'll have to teach me then if I fall behind."

"Deal, if you help with Charms."

They were interrupted when Hermione burst into the room a minute before the bell rang. Harry was very confused, because this time he had actually seen her walking to a completely different part of the castle, but the girl offered no excuse, taking the only free seat two rows behind Harry. When the bell rang, Professor Vector appeared. She was a tall, thin woman, with high cheekbones and a pointed face. She moved with an almost swaying motion, and Harry was reminded of bamboo.

"Good afternoon, and welcome to Arithmancy. Some of you will be disappointed that this is one of the most theoretical subjects we offer at Hogwarts, but its potential applications are limitless. Arithmancy deals with the studying of magic through quantification, breaking down spells and enchantments into theoretical elements so they can be further studied and developed. This will lead to the study of spell creation, which we begin in your sixth year should you remain students by then."

Vector's sharp eyes swept over the classroom.

"Raise your hand if you were brought up in the Muggle world."

Harry and many others did so.

"The mathematics you learned in school will give you an initial advantage, but that won't last forever. I expect you to put just as much work in to keep up. I do not tolerate students who think they can coast by," Vector said sternly, "the same goes for the magic raised students. The first few weeks may seem challenging as we build up your foundation, but I expect you to stick with it and don't use your upbringing as an excuse. I myself am pure blood and didn't start learning Arithmancy until I took it at Hogwarts, and now I have gained a Mastery in the subject."

After that rather intense introduction, Vector then began her lecture. As Dean guessed, the first lesson went over the basic maths they would need going forward, laying the foundations of algebra, which would take up the next two weeks. As homework, she had them reviewing the material by completing a set of problems. For the Muggle raised students, she gave them extra, which Dean said went all the way up to high school level maths. Even though nothing was new, Harry still took notes just to be safe. He didn't want to fall behind because his foundation wasn't secure.

It was a fairly intense second day of school, and Harry was happy when it ended. The course material was definitely interesting, but he had forgotten quite how much the teachers pushed them. Hopefully it wouldn't take long to fall back into the rhythm.

"It was so cool! You'll kick yourself when you hear what you missed!" Ron said excitedly.

"Care of Magical Creatures was good then?" Harry asked.

"It was awesome! Hagrid told us how to get into those ridiculous books which was a bit anticlimactic really, I mean who thinks to stroke the spines! Anyway, he then took us to this paddock and showed this really cool eagle horse thing called a hippogriff. We didn't get to go near it because Hagrid wanted to tell us the basic rules to be safe during class, boring stuff, you know."

"It was not boring stuff!" Hermione cut in, interrupting Ron's rambling, "they were very important safety guidelines, ones which became obvious that very same lesson!"

"I was getting to that! Don't spoil it! So apparently hippogriffs are dead easy to insult and you know what Malfoys like. He couldn't help running his mouth. One of the hippogriffs heard him and tried charging but Hagrid caught it before it could get close. Malfoy nearly wet himself!"

Ron was beside himself with laughter as he remembered the incident. Harry was just very glad he'd been able to speak to Hagrid before his first lesson. If he hadn't, then the class would have been interacting with those hippogriffs and Malfoy may have actually gotten hurt, a point which Hermione made that very second.

"I was pleased Hagrid was able to show some backbone as a teacher. He banned Malfoy from going anywhere near any of the creatures without Hagrid's direct supervision, and if he tries he'll get detention," Hermione said.

"Bet he didn't take that very well," Harry said.

"Yeah well, Malfoy's a git. Who cares what he thinks," Ron said.

When they got back up to the common room, they immediately started their homework at Hermione's insistence. Harry only put up a token resistance, more than happy to get the work done now that he could fully focus on it. Ron had to be dragged through it, which meant Harry was stuck working with him on their Transfiguration essay and then the piece on moonstones for Potions. Hermione dived right in with her veritable mountain of work. Even just seeing the pile of books for all her subjects made him confident in his bet that she would overwork herself.

He and Ron bid Hermione goodnight a few hours later, heading up to their dormitory. The other Gryffindor boys were already there as well, getting ready for bed.

"Have you seen Scabbers?" Ron asked, searching through his bed covers.

Harry was about to answer, but he'd just opened up his underwear drawer and there the rat was, curled up like this was his bed. Perhaps rougher than he ought to have, Harry grabbed Scabbers, waking him with a loud squeak and dumped him on Ron's bed.

"Careful! He's old!"

"Ron, could you please keep Scabbers out of my clothes? It's disgusting. Who knows what he's done there."

"It's not like he's been anywhere but the dormitory," Ron said, "I don't trust Hermione to keep that mangy cat under control."

"I don't care if Scabbers stays in the dormitory, just keep him out of my things," Harry said.

He emptied his underwear drawer into a small bag and left it at the side of his bed. Closing his eyes, he pulsed a little bit of magic, letting his intention be known to Hogwarts. On the first day when he'd connected with the wards, he'd become aware of the large colony of house elves living at the school. One of them would come in the night and leave his freshly laundered underwear ready for tomorrow. Harry was more than willing to close his hangings in a huff, but when he pulled back the covers, he saw an envelope with the Gringotts seal stamped on it. Why it hadn't been delivered with the post that morning, Harry wasn't sure, but after he'd read it, he was glad it hadn't. He shut his hangings and opened it.

Dear Harry,

I've been going through the documentation that Sirius Black left, registering you as his Heir, with the Black Family Account Manager. As I suspected, everything is in order, and Longblade was able to confirm the validity. It adds to the suspicion surrounding the circumstances of Sirius' betrayal, but the goblins can't say much more. I will keep looking into things from my end, including having a chat with Amelia Bones. She's the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and I trust her to be fair and impartial.

The only other thing I learned from this was that Sirius performed the ceremony naming you Heir with a witness to verify the proceedings. He's called Remus Lupin. I remember him from my time at Hogwarts. Calm and collected if I'm remembering right, and thick as thieves with Sirius and your father. If I can, I'll try contacting him as well. A magical witness to a ritual like that will have a good insight into the people involved.

I figured you wanted to be discreet about this, so I had this letter sent through Gringotts with instructions for it to be placed in your bed for you to find. Any responses can be sent the usual way, unless you're under surveillance, in which case send it using a house elf if you can. You mentioned having some from Potter Manor?

Keep in touch about what's going on at Hogwarts, and I'll keep you updated about the goings on outside.

Kind regards,

Andromeda

The letter from Andromeda certainly raised questions. According to the goblins, Harry was made the legitimate Heir to the Black family, which once again left him wondering why on earth Sirius would do that if he planned on killing him later. Then there was the matter of Remus Lupin, the new Defence against the Dark Arts teacher and apparently the magical witness to Harry's Heirship. It made Harry slightly apprehensive about the coming lesson.

Would Lupin single Harry out because of it? He didn't seem like he would on the train. The slightly extra attention could be due to Harry's stronger reaction to the Dementors, and the fact that there were witnesses. Harry didn't want to think ill of the man before really interacting with him, but he couldn't help questioning his motivations. If he was as close to his father as Andromeda claimed, why hadn't he checked in on Harry when he was younger? Why was he only learning about him now?

Harry woke early the next morning and wrote a quick letter to Andromeda. He told her that Lupin was his teacher this year and that he would make a judgement himself before asking anything. He also told her about the conversation he'd had with Arthur, another ally in this debacle. The castle was quiet as he made his way to the Owlery. Hedwig swooped down and happily nibbled at his ear affectionately. Harry stroked his fingers gently through her soft feathers, and watched as she flew off with his letter. When he got back to the common room, Hermione was dragging a grumbling Ron from the dormitory.

"Where've you been?" Hermione asked.

"I went to visit Hedwig," Harry said.

"I told you so," Dean muttered.

Dean had been the only one who'd woken up before Harry left, and he'd given him that cover story in case anyone asked.

Their first Defence against the Dark Arts lesson of the term was before lunch, and Harry would get at least some of his answers then. There was a nervous excitement as the Gryffindors made their way to the classroom, everyone wondering what they would be doing. Quirrell had been a nervous wreck too scared to really show them more than the most basic of spells, and Lockhart had been an unmitigated disaster. Fred and George had spoken highly of Lupin's lesson with them, so Harry was willing to be convinced.

Lupin looked just as shabby as he had done at the opening feast, but there was an air of calm about him that was quite disarming. He smiled at them as they entered the room, telling them to leave their bags and bring their wands as they would be having a practical lesson. Given their history of such lessons, there was more than a little apprehension, but Lupin simply reassured them kindly as he led them through the school to the staff room.

The lesson was about Boggarts, remarkable creatures who could shape shift into whatever a person feared the most. Lupin engaged the entire class, calling on people to answer questions rather than simply asking for volunteers which would inevitably be Hermione. Harry suggested confusing the Boggart with numbers when asked how to handle one, which earned him praise, and then one by one the class faced the creature using a spell Lupin taught them.

Neville went first, bravely forcing Professor Snape into his grandmother's clothes. Ron went next, turning a spider into a pile of noodles with googly eyes. It followed like that: a severed hand caught in a mousetrap; a banshee forced to sing embarrassing songs; a snake turned into an inflatable tube man. The room filled with the sound of laughter as the scary images turned

into something funny. Harry wondered what his Boggart would turn into, and that was when Lavender Brown stepped aside, giving the Boggart a clear view of him.

"Here!"

Lupin suddenly stepped forward, drawing the Boggarts attention. It turned into a silver orb of light.

"Riddikulus!" Lupin cried with a flick of his wand.

The orb turned into a deflating balloon which whizzed around the room with a squeaky farting sound. It landed limply on the ground, and Neville was encouraged to finish it off. With a final pointed "ha!", the Boggart vanished, defeated.

"Excellent! Wonderful job everyone!" Lupin said.

Gryffindor house received many points from that lesson, and as they were dismissed to retrieve their things from the classroom, there was a buzz in the air about finally having a decent Defence against the Dark Arts lesson. Hermione certainly thought so, and Harry agreed, though he was stuck on one particular thing.

Lupin hadn't let him face the Boggart. That was an intentional act on his part. He didn't intervene to draw the Boggarts attention away from anyone else, only Harry. It was hard to think of any other reason besides the connection to his parents, and Harry didn't like that. He didn't want Lupin to treat him differently. Unfortunately, his inner turmoil was noticed by Hermione.

"Everything alright Harry?"

"Yeah. It's just I felt like Lupin purposefully stopped me from facing the Boggart."

"I'm sure he didn't. He probably just needed to wrap the lesson up. There were loads of us who didn't get to face it," Hermione said, "it makes me wonder what it would turn into for me."

"Probably a test sheet marked 9/10," Ron said.

"I'm not sure," Harry said.

"Listen mate, if you're so worried about it, why don't you just ask him?" Ron said, "he seems like a decent enough guy so I'm sure he won't mind."

That was actually a really good idea. It was lunch now, which was the perfect opportunity. Harry split off from Ron and Hermione, doubling back to the Defence against the Dark Arts classroom. Lupin was sorting through a pile of books, placing one on each of the desks, and he looked up when Harry entered.

"Harry? To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I just ... had a question about the lesson, Professor," Harry said, not nearly as confidently as he hoped.

"Ah. I wondered if you would," Lupin said.

"Well, it was at the end. The Boggart was looking right at me, but you stepped forward before it could change," Harry said, "I just wanted to know if that was on purpose."

"It was," Lupin said.

Harry was taken aback by the ease with which he said it. There wasn't even a token attempt at denial.

"Why?"

"I thought that would be obvious. Introducing people to Boggarts is always difficult when you're not sure of their history. Those who have faced hardships in their past can be significantly affected," Lupin said, "you more than most have faced particular events which your classmates have never even dreamed about. As such, I didn't think it would be wise for Lord Voldemort to suddenly appear in the staff room."

That was a perfectly reasonable response, one that Harry could easily understand, and he was once again taken aback by how easily Lupin said it. Even saying Voldemort's name, something which most wizards Harry had met shied away from as much as possible. Perhaps he was wrong to be suspicious of the man.

Though now that he was thinking about it, Harry didn't actually know what his Boggart would turn into. Lupin noticed his thoughtful look and regarded him curiously.

"Unless you don't think that's what your Boggart would turn into," he said.

Voldemort was definitely a scary thought, and Harry would be lying if he said he wasn't at least a little bit scared of him, but was he what terrified him the most? Not really. Harry didn't even know what the dark lord looked like. To Harry, he was shadows and memories and high, cold laughter. It was nothing like the almost instinctual terror everyone else had at the mere mention of his name.

But if not Voldemort, then what? The things his classmates were scared of hadn't bothered him. Harry was quite comfortable with spiders from his time in the cupboard under the stairs. Severed hands, snakes and banshees were startling but not scary, and Professor Snape was more annoying than anything. Then Harry remembered a slimy hand pressed against glass, a cloaked figure in the corridor, and a long rattling breath bringing with it a suffocating cold. Harry had been scared by the Dementor, but less so by the creature itself and more from the memories it brought up. Things going back to how they were before that first letter addressed to him arrived was what scared him, but how could a Boggart visualise that?

"It's alright if you can't think of it," Lupin said, "things like fear can often be sources of great introspection for some people. I have a feeling that you're one of these people."

Lupin then smiled warmly at him.

"Any other questions for me? I'm sure you'd much rather be at lunch with your friends."

Harry barely bit back a scoff, because Ron and Hermione were not his friends anymore. He turned and was almost at the door when he remembered Andromeda's letter. He wanted to know about the connection Lupin had with his parents, but how best to go about this conversation.

"Um," Harry paused on his way to the door, "if it's alright to ask, did you know my parents?"

That made Lupin freeze, so Harry hurried to continue.

"It's just that Hagrid gave me an album with lots of photos of them, and I recognise you from some of them."

"It's alright Harry, there's nothing wrong with asking," Lupin said, a thin shade of grief in his eyes, "and yes, I did know your parents. I knew them very well indeed."

"Do you think, could I ask you about them sometime?"

"I would be more than happy to answer any questions you might have," Lupin said, his usual kindness returning, "but not right now. After all, it's time for lunch."

Harry took the dismissal for what it was, but he couldn't help leaving without one last question.

"Then you must have known Sirius Black as well sir. He was in the album as well. Were you friends?"

"I have not spoken to that man in nearly twelve years," Lupin said.

This time Harry inclined his head, thanked his teacher, and finally left the room. He slid into the free seat next to Hermione and waved away her and Ron's questions about what Lupin said. They seemed placated enough by the answer, but meanwhile Harry was going over what he'd just learned.

Lupin knew his parents, and he also knew Sirius. They had obviously been close enough for him to be the magical witness for Harry's Heirship, but the tone Lupin had when he asked told Harry that he certainly didn't think of the man fondly anymore. It was understandable if Sirius was actually a murderer, but it meant Harry would have a harder time bringing up his suspicions. He'd need to confer with Andromeda and Arthur. Both of them knew how to navigate delicate situations like this better than he did.

Thankfully the rest of the day passed by without incident, and Harry was able to turn in relatively peacefully. Oliver Wood had cornered him after dinner to tell him about Quidditch practice starting that weekend, which was a piece of welcome news. With all the food that Harry was now able to fully enjoy, he found himself with a lot more energy, which wasn't helped by having to rein in his magic so much during lessons to not arouse suspicion. It would be good to burn some of it off doing the sport that he loved.

Doses

As the days at Hogwarts turned to weeks, Harry allowed himself to fall into the comfortable routine of school. It helped that all of his classes kept him and the other Gryffindor third-years very busy. Professors McGonagall and Flitwick worked them hard, and they left each lesson as though their heads had been stuffed full of information. Professor Snape was as unpleasant as ever, but now that Harry was able to think clearly, he was able to make at least a decent attempt at each potion. Ron complained loudly about his improvement in Potions, and all Harry could say in his defence was that he'd made sure to read the instructions carefully.

Despite Hermione's subtle suggestions otherwise, Harry found himself falling in love with the optional classes. The material was incredibly interesting, and he found himself remembering the joy of learning he'd once had when he was very young. Professor Babbling introduced them to proper rune pronunciation and grammar, and they spent several weeks going over basic runic scriptures to build up their base knowledge. After that, they were given another simple array to work through. Like before, Harry and Seamus were a well oiled machine, the previous classes making it easier for them to decipher and decode the runes that made up the basic magic transfer array.

In Arithmancy, Professor Vector led them all through increasingly complex algebra without dropping her standards. At times Harry wasn't sure what was going on, but Vector seemed to sense these moments in her classroom, and always managed to link the topics to their uses in magic. Every single time the students' interest peaked again. While there wasn't any application yet, Vector announced at the end of one lesson that they should know enough for a simple derivation of magic very soon. She held up her wand and coloured sparks showered over them.

The best part about the optional classes was the break it gave him from Ron and Hermione. The pair of them would part ways with Harry as they went to their separate classes, and Harry would instead be joined by Seamus or Dean, who he was quickly growing quite fond of. Without fail, Hermione would appear before the bell rang, but since Harry was sitting with someone else, she wasn't able to pester him. He only needed to put up with them during breaks or in the evenings when they did their homework. Ron complained of course, but Harry bore them easily. He didn't even need to worry about Hermione peering over his shoulder to 'help' him either, because as he predicted, the workload was already weighing down on her, and she would be left working late into the night to finish it all.

With the return of Quidditch, some of Harry's now boundless energy was used up, but he still felt restless. It almost made him want to cut back on how much he ate at meals, but then he remembered the endless hunger and those thoughts went away. He needed to find a way to get rid of some of the excess energy, but the only sport offered at Hogwarts was Quidditch. Harry loved the game but he was not enough of a masochist to ask Oliver for more training. As luck would have it, the answer came a few nights later, during a conversation in the Ring Realm.

"Swimming?"

"Yes! I love swimming! There's a reason why we built Hogwarts next to a lake after all," Godric said, "magical or Muggle, kids are still kids, and they need something physical to keep them healthy, and swimming is the perfect activity to do so."

Godric sighed fondly.

"I remember those days well. Teaching the boys how to swim was always so much fun, and Rowena said the same thing about teaching the girls."

"There aren't any swimming lessons offered at Hogwarts," James commented, "but there were always some people who'd cool off in the summer with a swim."

"So do pureblood wizards not learn to swim? What happens if they fall in a river or something?" Harry asked.

"Which is why we taught them at Hogwarts," Salazar said, "the Muggleborns usually were better at it than the purebloods."

"A fact which helped keep the latter humble," Godric said, "so there you are Harry. Exercise that you can do consistently on your own is just what you need!"

It did sound like a good idea. Aunt Petunia had managed to get a good deal for Dudley's swimming lessons if Harry went too, so he'd learned when he was younger. Those lessons didn't last long as Dudley found it too strenuous, but then his primary school offered them in Year Six. Harry had enjoyed it, but the only issue was he didn't own any swimming trunks. Back then he'd always had to borrow a horrible pair of shorts from the lost property bin.

"Even better, it doesn't need any equipment! You just take off your clothes and you're good to go!" Godric said.

"Wait, what?" Harry said in return.

"I believe times have moved on since we were alive so now swimming is done wearing some form of clothing," Salazar said, taking in the aghast expressions on Harry and James's faces.

"Yes, it very much is," James said.

"But what would you even wear when swimming?" Godric asked, head tilted to one side like a confused puppy, "it'd just get wet?"

"Then you wear something designed to get wet," Harry said.

He gave them a brief explanation of swimming trunks, which only seemed to confuse Godric even more. As usual though, the boisterous man bounced back easily, and by the time he woke up, Harry's head was filled with all sorts of different advice for how to make the most of the lake, including a few nifty charms to make the experience more pleasant. It was a very odd conversation in hindsight, but it at least gave Harry an idea of what he could do going forward.

The only issue was that, as much as Godric extolled the virtues of lacking equipment, Harry didn't have what he needed, and there was no way for him to go and get it. Fortunately, Andromeda had told him about owl ordering, and there were two people he knew who had order catalogues he could use. As he was heading to the bathroom, he bumped into one of them, literally.

"Sorry," Seamus mumbled, not quite awake until he'd had a shower.

"No problem," Harry said, "hey Seamus, could I borrow your owl order catalogue at some point?"

"Huh? Sure. I'll leave it on my bed when you finish."

Sure enough, there it was when Harry came out of the bathroom, freshly showered. He quickly dressed and lounged on his bed, flicking through it. There were sections on new book releases, deals on potion ingredients, but Harry found the clothing options. He had never really paid attention to fashion before, with his only exposure to robes being his ones for school, but Andromeda had helped him pick out a few sets befitting his new station. Apparently how a Lord dressed said a lot about them. Harry was just happy for clothes that fit him properly.

Seamus came out of the bathroom and Harry thanked him. Though the catalogue had a very large selection of undergarments, ranging from ankle length long johns to thongs so small Harry was sure they wouldn't cover anything, it did not have any swimming trunks. It was a shame, but Harry was sure he'd be able to get some. Maybe he could ask Andromeda if she'd be able to get what he needed?

"Argh!"

Harry looked up to see Seamus, still only with a towel tied around his waist, grabbing Scabbers from one of his drawers. Everyone in the dormitory watched as he marched across the room, ripped open Ron's hangings and dumped the rat on his chest. Ron woke with a start, instinctively holding onto Scabbers protectively.

"What the hell! Why'd you do that?"

"Keep your pet out of my things Ron. I mean it!"

"You'd be bored too if you were cooped up in the dorms all day! What else am I supposed to do?"

"I don't give a damn what you do. I don't want your rat messing around with my underwear!"

Seeing the way Seamus's cheeks and Ron's ears both flushed red, Harry could tell a major argument was incoming. Dean saw it as well, and they both stepped between them.

"Here, you can borrow some of mine until yours get cleaned," Dean said, "get dressed so we can have breakfast."

Seamus glared for a moment longer at Ron, before taking the offered clothes and returning to his bed.

"It's not like Scabbers is dirty," Ron huffed.

"It's the principle of it, Ron. You might be used to Scabbers being all over your stuff, but we're not," Harry said, "can you understand why we might not be comfortable with a rat crawling around in our clothes?"

"You guys didn't complain about it last year, or the year before."

"And now we're saying we're not comfortable. Please Ron, it's not too much to ask, right?"

Ron huffed again, then pushed past Harry to the bathroom. Harry sighed. It really wasn't an unreasonable request that Ron keep better control of Scabbers. After all, the boy often complained about Hermione letting Crookshanks roam free, so why would the same not apply to him? Speaking of, Harry caught the cat when he tried slipping past him as he headed down to the common room. Crookshanks grumbled a bit but didn't object to the head scratches, nor when he was deposited on one of the squishy common room sofas.

"Hey Harry, wait up."

Dean came down the spiral staircase after him.

"Have you finished the Arithmancy homework yet? I'm stuck on a part and I'm not sure what to do."

"I think I can help. Which part is it?"

Too wrapped up in their conversation, Harry didn't notice Hermione coming down the staircase from the girl's side, nor that he was leaving the Gryffindor common room without either of his so-called friends. It didn't even cross his mind as he talked with Dean about the Arithmancy assignment all the way down to the Great Hall. Harry helped himself to scrambled eggs and toast while they scanned over their two rolls of parchment to find where Dean had made his mistake.

"I think it's there," Harry pointed out after taking a sip of pumpkin juice, "you're missing a factor of 2."

"And that would mess up everything after it as well," Dean groaned, "Mum says she tries giving partial credit if her students use the right method but a little mistake like this gives them the wrong answer. Something tells me Professor Vector won't be like that."

"At least it was only a little mistake and not something major," Harry pointed out.

"True," Dean said, already scratching out numbers to make the corrections.

By this point, the Great Hall had filled up. Seamus took the seat on Harry's free side, looking significantly calmer than before. Ron and Hermione appeared as well, sitting down across from them and next to Fred and George.

"Is that Arithmancy?" Hermione asked, "you can't just copy other people's work."

"We're not copying," Harry said, putting his homework back in his bag before Hermione could reach across the table to look at it, "Dean needed help finding a mistake. It's nothing less than what you've done before."

"Oh, right," Hermione said.

"The first Quidditch match of the season is soon. That's gonna be wicked!" Ron cut in, obviously annoyed by the school talk.

Harry tucked into his eggs, happy to talk about Quidditch. Even if Ron felt the need to act like an expert on the subject, it was still a topic that Harry loved. It was all going so well until he finished eating and reached for his goblet of pumpkin juice. The lord's rings on his finger heated up, and Harry froze. He played it off by leaning over to see Dean's final corrections, and gave a satisfied nod when the boy had gotten everything right, but inside he was reeling. He stood, claiming to need the bathroom, and then left the Great Hall.

As soon as he was locked in a stall, he took several deep breaths. Somebody had slipped something into his pumpkin juice. How? While admittedly he hadn't been super vigilant, he still hadn't seen anything at all! He didn't even know what it had been spiked with, but it must have been harmful for the lord's ring to heat up like that. Harry's first thought was that it had to be Ron or Hermione. Between the new classes and the resistance to their antics these last few weeks, they must have thought he was pulling away from them and tried dosing him again with affection or loyalty potions.

The thought made his stomach turn. He thought he was doing a decent enough job of still acting like their friend, but apparently it wasn't good enough. Now if he had to constantly watch everything he ate and drank for signs of tampering, Harry worried about becoming excessively paranoid. Was it still paranoia if people truly were out to get him?

Giving himself a few more minutes to calm down, Harry planned out what he was going to do. Firstly, he wouldn't act like anything had happened. As far as they knew, he either managed to avoid the spiked drink by pure accident, or he had had some and should now be acting more like his old self. Harry would therefore have to play along, act as though their attempt had been successful, otherwise they would keep trying. Getting to fully enjoy his meals was more than enough reason for him to not want his food tampered with.

Sure enough, when he met back up with Ron and Hermione for Herbology, Harry immediately spotted the overly friendly way they acted, as though they were the epitome of friendship. Harry went along with it, but his heart wasn't in it. He remembered that this was how they used to be, a tight knit trio making their way through Hogwarts. Seeing it now reinforced just how much it had been a lie.

Even just a week later, Harry found keeping up the act to be exhausting. At least Ron and Hermione were convinced, as they hadn't tried putting anything in his meals again, but it also meant they went back to their usual selves. Ron complained endlessly about their

schoolwork, putting it off as long as possible only to have to rush through it at the last minute while trying to convince Harry to do the same. If Harry were under their sway, he probably would have done so, so it was a difficult balance to achieve. Hermione returned to her mountains of homework and endless studying, but she seemed pleased whenever she saw him doing his own work.

He probably would have gone completely mad if it wasn't for the other Gryffindor boys. Ancient Runes with Seamus and Arithmancy with Dean were pockets of sanity that kept him going, and he and Neville had several long and interesting conversations about the Muggle world. Occasionally, when Hermione was too busy with homework, Harry would manage to slip away from Ron and study in the library.

Harry was going over the essay on vampires for Professor Lupin. Beside him, Seamus and Dean were pouring over books about animate-inanimate Transfiguration. Though they were working on different things, it was still nice and peaceful.

"Have you guys finished the Defence against the Dark Arts homework?"

Parvati and Lavender descended on their table. After the last few times this happened, Harry now fully understood what Seamus had meant by the girls suddenly appearing out of nowhere.

"Not yet. We're trying to finish this for McGonagall," Dean said.

"Harry's working on it though," Seamus added, smirking as Parvati and Lavender turned their sights on him.

"Settle an argument for us Harry. We all know vampires hate garlic so I wrote in my essay that it acts like a poison to them," Parvati said, "but Lavender thinks differently."

"I'm sure I read in a book that garlic is more like a severe irritant, causing skin rashes and nausea but it isn't actually fatal," Lavender said, "but Parvati doesn't believe me and now I can't find the book anywhere!"

"You're usually pretty good at Defence. Tell us who's right," Parvati said.

"Um, ok?" Harry read through his essay for the right section and then said aloud, "of the documented methods for dealing with vampires, garlic is perhaps the most common. The particular combination of chemical compounds found in garlic are poisonous to vampires, and exposure is often fatal,-"

"Ha! Told you!" Parvati said.

"-however, this is only true if the garlic is ingested. Other forms of exposure, such skin contact and inhalation of aerosolized garlic chemicals typically do not result in death for the vampires subjected to them. The most common symptoms are severe skin irritations which can cause immense pain, as well as difficulties breathing and a few documented cases of nausea. Regardless of exposure method, garlic is still an effective deterrent for vampires," Harry finished.

"So, we were both right?" Lavender said.

"You were."

"That's a relief," Lavender said, "I thought I was going mad when I couldn't find that book again."

"It's probably in one of those massive piles Hermione's set up in the common room. Where's Ron anyway? Isn't he usually with you?" Parvati asked.

"Probably sulking in the dormitory because I wouldn't play wizard chess with him," Harry said.

"But we've got homework for Transfiguration, Defence against the Dark Arts *and* Potions all due soon," Dean said.

"Not to mention Professor Trelawney wants us to research the famous seers of the last century," Parvati said, "a fascinating topic that I'm sure even Hermione would be interested in."

"Not that he really pays attention in Divination. I keep seeing him either laughing at Professor Trelawney or sleeping," Lavender said, sounding put out.

"Looks like we dodged a bullet by not taking that class," Seamus said.

"But it's really interesting! There are so many different ways to see the future, and people can resonate with some methods more than others," Parvati said, only for Seamus to laugh, "it's true! There was a Seer two hundred years ago, Melonie Sanders, who never once saw anything in tea leaves or palmistry, but she got all sorts of visions from staring deep into the heart of fires. She made a prophecy which predicted the American Civil War, which would have caused all sorts of trouble for the wizarding community there had she not done so."

"Alright, I give," Seamus said.

"Have you two found your resonances?" Harry asked, wondering if he'd said it correctly.

He must have done, because they both beamed.

"Professor Trelawney says we both have a real talent for the subject. We've only seen little things so far, but Trelawney's confident we'll find our resonance," Lavender said.

"Don't worry. We'll let you guys know if there's anything important coming in your future," Parvati said.

"Please don't. I'd rather just live in blissful ignorance so I can pretend my life is normal," Harry said.

"It's not been so bad this year," Dean said, "besides the Dementors on the train, nothing's happened."

"Don't jinx it. The troll breaking in and Mrs Norris being petrified both happened on Halloween," Harry said.

"Yeah. Professor Trelawney says that tempting omens invites them closer," Parvati said, "we wouldn't want the Dementors to make Harry pass out again."

Harry groaned, dropping his head to the table.

"People are still going on about that?" Dean said.

"It's ridiculous. Harry didn't pass out, and nobody else besides us were in the compartment," Seamus said hotly.

"We figured it wasn't true, but your reaction definitely confirms it," Parvati said.

"Gossip and rumours are powerful tools but they must be exercised carefully," Lavender said, as though she'd just spouted ancient wisdom.

Thankfully the topic turned away from rumours, and the girls pulled out their books to study. Even though all they were doing was schoolwork, it was still quite a pleasant time, and left Harry in a good enough mood to be able to handle Ron being obnoxious over something else that had annoyed him.

When he got back to his bed that night, Harry found a parcel waiting for him, with a note from Andromeda. Pulling his hangings closed for privacy, he opened it to find swimming trunks and goggles.

Dear Harry,

I asked Ted what things you would need, and he suggested these. I wasn't sure what style to get, so if they're not to your liking, just send them back and Ted can exchange them from the Muggle shop he bought them from.

That they would try and dose you with something again is worrying. It is very good that you had your ring on. In the future, make sure not to leave food and drink unattended. Give them as few opportunities as possible to get you.

Asking Lupin about your parents was risky, but it seems to have worked out. His reaction to questions about Sirius may complicate things, but if I send him a letter explaining the apparent discrepancy, perhaps with the excuse of discovering it during an audit of the Black accounts, he might be more open to revealing more.

Kind regards,

Andromeda

Harry was much more excited to start swimming now that he had what he needed, but he was suddenly hit with a thought. He wasn't really a prude. Two years of living in a dormitory with other people, changing in front of them, and with showers that were completely open on one side didn't really lend itself to total modesty, but, well, the swimming trunks were essentially

briefs. Tight to the skin, there would be a lot of himself on display. Harry would basically be walking around in nothing but his underwear if anyone saw him, and with the Hogwarts gossip mill being what it was, he dreaded to think the kinds of stories people would tell.

That was why he woke up an hour earlier than normal the next morning. The only sound in the room was the soft breathing of his roommates, Ron's loud snoring muffled by his hangings. Swimming trunks, goggles and a fluffy towel in hand, Harry snuck out of the dormitory. It was almost spooky seeing the castle so empty, but at least he didn't run into anyone who would question him as he made his way outside.

The late September air was crisp but not too chilly, though Harry knew the lake would be colder. There it was, the water dark and almost ominous. Harry skirted the edge until he found a nice secluded area tucked out of the way. It was probably the most privacy he was going to get, but he still looked around nervously as he changed out of his clothes and into his trunks. The cool morning air nipped at his exposed skin. Harry quickly cast the warming charm Godric taught him, and it was like being submerged in a warm bath. Wand safely stored in an arm holster, he strode out into the shallows.

Swimming was a different kind of exercise than Quidditch. Each movement needed to be coordinated with the last otherwise he would be left flailing in the water. It took a few minutes for his childhood lessons to surface in his memories, but once they did, Harry felt much more comfortable. The warming charm even worked as described and he didn't feel the cold at all. Since this was his first time, he didn't want to stay out for too long. The warming charm needed reapplying every ten minutes, so after treading water three times to reapply it, Harry returned to the sheltered little cove.

That would definitely work to burn off energy, Harry thought as he dried himself off. Though he hadn't pushed himself too hard, the exertion still left his body pleasantly worn out. By the time he made it back to the Gryffindor common room, it would be just in time for breakfast.

There were more people up when he made it back. Harry received a few curious glances when they saw him coming back into the common room, but he ignored them in favour of getting back to his dormitory. At first he thought his morning adventure would go unnoticed, but Dean was sitting up in his bed when he came through the door.

"Harry?" he asked sleepily.

"Yeah, it's just me."

Harry stored his swimming trunks and gathered his wash bag for a shower. There was no way he wasn't going to clean himself after being in the lake. Dean came in not long after, taking the shower next to him.

"You're not usually up so early," he said, "where'd you go?"

"I went down to the lake for a swim," Harry said, deciding to be honest with his friend, "but please don't tell anyone. I have enough rumours about me already."

"Relax, I won't say anything," Dean said, "but I am curious what brought this on. I thought Quidditch was enough exercise for you."

"I don't know. I've had a lot of energy lately, and Wood would absolutely destroy me if I said that to him. Either that or the rest of the team would kill me and hide the body if I gave him the idea for more training."

Dean chuckled, having seen Oliver's ... enthusiasm for Quidditch first hand. They finished up, passing Neville on their way out. Seamus was sitting at the edge of his bed, looking very close to falling back to sleep before he trudged like a zombie for a shower. Predictably, Ron was still snoring away. Through a gap in the hangings, Harry could see he wasn't wearing a shirt, and he was cuddling Scabbers to his chest. That seemed very bizarre to him, but at least it kept the rat out of their clothes.

"Ron, it's time to wake up," Harry said, opening the boy's hangings.

Ron groaned, turning over. Harry was so tempted just to let him fall back to sleep, but he needed to keep pretending otherwise they would try and dose him again. He gave Ron's shoulder a shake, which did the trick in waking him up properly, even though he grumbled about it. Ten minutes later, they were both dressed and heading down to the Great Hall. Harry was much more vigilant of his meals now, always alert for any heat coming from his ring. The mail owls came with a flurry of feathers. Hedwig came as well for a visit, and Harry offered her a piece of bacon.

"He's been sighted!"

Seamus had a copy of the Daily Prophet open in front of him. On the front page was a picture of Sirius Black, screaming at the camera in chains and the Azkaban prison garb. It wasn't a pretty sight, but it had appeared fairly consistently on the front page as the search for the escapee continued to turn up empty.

"Where?" Ron asked.

"Kelso," Seamus said.

"But that's not that far from here, right?" Hermione asked.

"Kelso is on the border between England and Scotland, and assuming Hogwarts is in Scotland, it's a lot closer than the last sighting, which was in London," Dean said.

"Why would he be coming this way? I mean, is there something else in the north he could want?" Neville asked.

Looking around the Great Hall, Harry could see a few small groups of people discussing the news of the sighting. Daily Prophets were laid out flat so multiple people could read it at once.

The only thing Harry could think Sirius Black would want by coming to Hogwarts would be him, but for what purpose he had no idea. The suspicion raised by the Heirship posed too

many questions about his motive. All Harry could hope was that something came up with Andromeda so they could get to the bottom of this quickly.

Up at the staff table, it looked like they were also discussing the news. McGonagall had turned to speak to Lupin, who seemed a little paler than usual. Snape also looked surly as he listened to Flitwick. Dumbledore alone appeared unfazed, his twinkling blue eyes gazing out across the Great Hall. Harry ducked so as not to meet his gaze, but he still felt when it passed over him.

The sighting caused quite a stir within the castle for the next two days before the gossip moved on. Apparently two seventh years getting caught making out in a broom cupboard by Filch of all people was more interesting than an escaped convict drawing closer. The change in news showed the passage of time, as September gave way to October, which soon would become November. As Halloween approached, a notice appeared on the board in the Gryffindor common room. Ron peered over the heads of a couple of excitable first years and read aloud.

"The first Hogsmeade visit is on the 30th of October, the day before Halloween."

"That's so exciting!" Hermione said, "it's the only village in Britain to have an entirely magical population. I'm sure there's some incredible history that's taken place there."

"And Fred and George have told me all about the great shops there are. I can't wait to see Zonko's joke shop. Maybe I'll be able to get my own back for all the pranks they've pulled on me," Ron said.

He then slapped Harry's back.

"What about you, mate? Excited for anything in particular?"

"I won't be going."

"What?" Ron squawked.

"My aunt and uncle didn't sign my permission form. I'm not allowed to go into the village," Harry said simply.

"Ask McGonagall!" Ron said, "it's outrageous if you're not allowed to go!"

"But the form specifically states that a parent or guardian needs to sign it," Hermione said, "oh Harry I'm so sorry. I promise we'll bring back loads of good stuff for you, and we'll tell you all about it."

"It'll be like you were with us all along!" Ron said.

Neither of those statements seemed like they were supposed to make him feel better, especially when they both kept 'accidentally' bringing Hogsmeade up in conversation. It was almost as though they were trying to get a reaction out of him. Too bad they wouldn't get one. Sure it was a shame he didn't get to go to the village with everyone else, but Harry wasn't too

disappointed. If he went, he would have to go with Ron and Hermione, and this way he got a few hours free from them.

The whole castle was abuzz about the upcoming trip to Hogsmeade, but Seamus, Dean and Neville were polite enough to not talk about it in front of Harry, knowing he wouldn't be allowed to go. Harry was thinking about how he was going to spend his day with everyone gone as he packed away after Defence against the Dark Arts, when Professor Lupin called his name.

"Harry, would you mind hanging on a moment? I have a few questions about your vampire essay," he said.

"I thought you said you'd done a good job with it," Hermione hissed under her breath.

"I did," Harry whispered back, not sure what was going on.

The rest of the class left the room until it was just Harry and Lupin. Harry couldn't see any rolls of parchment, and immediately grew suspicious.

"I don't have questions about your essay. Actually, it was exceptional and received full marks," Lupin said, "I figured what I'd like to talk to you about was best done in private."

"And what is that sir?" Harry asked carefully.

"I received a couple of very curious letters recently, and they made me think about the last conversation we had."

Lupin fixed him with an analytical look, one which warned him not to lie.

"Why did you really ask me about Sirius Black?"

Important conversations to be had

Chapter Notes

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

"What letters did you receive?" Harry asked.

Something in Harry's tone made Lupin's face soften. He reached into an inner pocket of his robes and pulled out two slips of parchment. He handed them across to Harry. One was a letter from Andromeda, giving the cover story of an audit of the Black vaults discovering that Lupin was the magical witness to the Heirship ceremony. The other was from Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, asking to meet to discuss a case which had been opened.

"Receiving these within an hour of each other made me understandably suspicious of you asking about him," Lupin said, "particularly asking me, when I am a teacher you've only just met."

"Were you really the witness when Sirius made me his Heir?" Harry asked.

"I was," Lupin said, "but I didn't think you'd been-"

He glanced down at Harry's finger, and Harry allowed the ring to be seen. Lupin gasped when he saw the combined Lords ring and the Heir ring.

"You had your inheritance. Of course it would be around this time," Lupin said under his breath, "you inherited James' Lordship and Sirius' Heirship."

"You don't seem very surprised to see these," Harry commented.

"I always knew you'd inherit the title from James, and as I've been reminded, Sirius made you his Heir," Lupin said, "I'm actually more surprised that *you* don't seem surprised by them."

"How so?"

"It's around thirteen or fourteen that people receive their magical inheritances, so when Dumbledore offered me the job here, I asked him whether you'd been informed about yours. He told me that he didn't want to overwhelm you when you were just trying to find your feet in the magical world, and that it was better to inherit at Hogwarts where you'd be surrounded by people who could help you."

"As if they'd help me," Harry muttered darkly, but somehow Lupin still heard him.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Let's just say that my inheritance was larger than most."

Harry proceeded to give him an abridged version of what happened when he received his inheritance, and what he learned in its aftermath. Lupin sat down on a nearby desk, his face pale.

"But... Ron and Hermione, I thought they were your friends?"

"I'm pretending so they don't try and dose me again. They've already done that once," Harry said.

"I can see now your need for subtly. If Dumbledore is involved in this somehow, then it will be very difficult to unravel," Lupin said, "especially this business with your unknown magical guardian. Who else knows the truth?"

"Besides the goblins, Andromeda Tonks and Arthur Weasley."

"I'm guessing there's more to Arthur's story if you trust him despite what his wife and children have done," Lupin said.

"And it's also why there has to be more to Sirius' story," Harry said, "from everything I've learned, one of the most sacred duties of the Lord of a Most Ancient and Noble House is to make sure the family magic is passed on. Naming somebody from outside the family as Heir is a big deal, and that's exactly what Sirius did."

"That is true," Lupin said, frowning, "while I would very much like to believe that what happened that night was not what we were led to believe, Harry, you need to know that Sirius *hated* his family. There were times where everything he did was just to spite them. Naming you as Heir could have just been part of the ruse; a way to make James trust him more, and with your death it would take the future of the Black family magic with it."

"But Sirius also hated the Dark Arts. I'm guessing that's because of his family, so how would joining forces with the greatest dark lord of the century be spiting them? It'd just be giving them what they wanted," Harry said.

"You can't know that's the case Harry."

"I know that, but you can't know that either. I'm well aware that everything could have happened exactly as people said it did, and the fact that I'm asking these questions might just be opening old wounds that people thought had healed," Harry said, "but the truth is that we *don't know* any of these answers, so surely that makes the questions worth asking?"

Lupin gave him a funny look, and for a moment Harry had the feeling that the man wasn't seeing him, but somebody else.

"You're definitely your parent's child," Lupin said.

"Really?"

"Definitely. That desire for the truth, even if it would hurt, Lily was very much the same. She could sniff out lies and deceit as easily as breathing. It's why she made such a good Head Girl. Nobody dared do anything worse than mischief because she would hunt down those

responsible with almost unnatural precision," Lupin chuckled, "but that stubborn streak? That's all James. If there was something he wanted, he would work hard and never give up until he achieved it."

He'd often heard comparisons between himself and his parents, but never from one so close to them as Lupin. It made him think back to the photo album and the happy faces smiling out at him from the pages, then getting to meet his father in the Ring Realm. It left a warm feeling inside of him.

"I'm sure they would be very proud of the young man you've become," Lupin said.

"I know," Harry said, idly playing with the Lord's ring on his finger.

Lupin caught the action.

"Well then, I think I'll take up Madam Bones' offer to meet," he said, "and obviously I'll help you however I can. You said they tried dosing you again?"

"It's only happened once," Harry said, "and Ginny hasn't tried anything as far as I can tell. The cleansing ritual said the doses were slowly increasing, so I'm guessing they weren't strong enough just yet for her to make a move."

"Alright, then be careful if she does. Attraction potions taken over long periods have a similar effect to a drug addiction. If it had been allowed to continue, your body would have craved the target of the potion regardless of how you actually felt about her."

"I know. I try not to think about what they had planned on that particular front," Harry said.

"So far you've been very sensible. I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of this, and when we do, there will be no more pretending," Lupin said.

That sounded very nice. Harry really wanted a normal year at Hogwarts, without burglary plots and hidden monsters. The sooner they could unravel the machinations against him, the better.

Harry had to rush down to lunch, but at least his hurry to eat let him avoid Ron's questions for a brief time. After that, it was just a few simple half truths about Lupin being impressed about his essay and wanting to know the resources he'd used so he could suggest them to other people. Hermione pursed her lips at it, but Ron seemed to buy the story. Fortunately, Fred and George cut in, easily diverting the conversation away.

The morning of the Hogsmeade visit was appropriately miserable for how Harry should be feeling. Ron and Hermione certainly seemed to think so.

"It sucks that you've been left out of this mate," Ron said, patting Harry's shoulder.

"We promise we won't spend all day there," Hermione said.

Harry put on a suitably sad face as he walked them out to the courtyard where Filch was checking off names on a list. As it turned out, almost everyone in third year had their forms

signed, and since it was the first visit, almost everyone was going. Harry stood to one side and watched as Ron and Hermione queued behind Ernie, Hannah and Susan, before being allowed through the gates leading to the village. Floating either side of the winged boar statues were two ominously cloaked Dementors. Harry felt their unseen eyes on him. They inched closer only to flinch back when the wards snapped at them. It seemed Godric was right that Hogwarts would protect him.

Lupin passed him on his way into the village to meet with Madam Bones, as Harry walked back to the castle. It was much emptier now with most of the students in Hogsmeade. With no homework to occupy him, Harry wandered through the halls and passages with no set destination in mind. Hogwarts was a massive castle, with a tendency to rearrange the parts that nobody really visited every now and again, as he had learned that magical dwellings were wont to do. Despite this, Harry never felt like he was lost. The magic of the castle filled his being, and it was as though there was an internal map he was following. It led him to the ground floor near where he thought the Hufflepuff common room was.

On the wall down a flight of stairs was a painting of a bowl of fruit. The magic seemed to be focused on the pear, so Harry reached out and touched it. The pear gave a little squeak, and the wall slid open. The room beyond was enormous, easily as large as the Great Hall, and if Harry was right then he was directly below it. Four long tables mimicked the house tables, and both of the long walls were lined with ovens. Pots and pans hung on racks, and behind where the staff tables were was a row of sinks. This was the school kitchen.

As soon as he entered, he was swarmed by the largest group of house elves Harry had ever seen. Like the elves at Potter Manor, they wore towels like a toga, the Hogwarts crest embroidered into them. While they left plenty of space around him, every single one of them looked at him in awe.

"You feel like Hogwarts, sir," one of them squeaked.

"Yes yes, he does!"

"Are you the house elves of Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

"We are, sir," the first one said, and they all bowed, "may Kilo ask you a question sir?"

"Of course you can. Don't worry about asking me questions," Harry said.

"Is young sir an Heir of the school?" Kilo asked.

Harry showed them his Lord ring, allowing it to present as both the Gryffindor and Slytherin rings. That caused many of the house elves to gasp, and a few even burst into tears.

"It has been so long since an Heir to the school has attended. The last one we felt was fifty years ago, but he never came to visit us," Kilo said.

"But if nobody from the founding lines has been here, how are you all so healthy?" Harry asked, "I thought house elves drew their strength from the magical bond with the family."

"We do, sir, but Hogwarts is special, sir!" Kilo said excitedly, "every student who passes through its gates is part of the family, and we draw our strength from them! It is why Hogwarts is the largest dwelling of house elves in the country because no other family is big enough to sustain so many!"

"Godric and Salazar said that they wanted Hogwarts to be a safe place for magical children. I never thought they meant becoming a family with them," Harry said.

"A magical family does not necessarily mean the same thing as a blood family sir," Kilo said.

"What do you mean? Is it like having someone from outside your family be an Heir?"

"The young lord is wise as that is a similar concept!" Kilo said, "Hogwarts Castle was the home of the four founders, and they cast powerful magic so that when they accepted young witches and wizards into their home, they would become part of their family until they chose to leave."

"That sounds like really powerful magic."

"It is sir! I'm sorry that Kilo cannot tell you more about it sir. The Lord and Lady Founders did not tell anyone how they cast such a spell," Kilo bowed apologetically.

Harry hurried to assure the elf that he wasn't upset. The four founders of Hogwarts were known as the greatest of their time. It stood to reason that there was magic they cast that defied explanation. It did make him wonder what sort of magic would allow people to freely enter and leave a family like that.

He remained in the kitchen for a little while, asking about the house elves' role at the school and any interesting things they'd noticed. When he found out they were responsible for cleaning the castle as well as cooking the meals, it made him wonder what the point of having Filch was, since the man clearly hated his job. Unfortunately Kilo couldn't tell him, and Harry recognised the signs of a house elf being perilously close to speaking ill of their masters and so didn't push. When he left, they filled his pockets with treats as he went back up to his dormitory.

The conversation with the Hogwarts elves made him curious about something, so when he got back to the dormitory, he pulled his hangings closed.

"Celio," Harry called into the air, and a house elf dressed in towels with the Potter crest appeared in front of him.

"Master has need of Celio?"

"I do. If someone inherits property from a different family, can a house elf from their family get inside that property, or would the wizard have to let them in first?" Harry asked.

"Celio believes it would depend on the property," the house elf said, "does Lord Potter have such a place?"

"I inherited a lot when I took up the lordship of Gryffindor and Slytherin, including Gryffindor Castle and Dùn Slytherin. As far as I know, nobody has lived in them for centuries, but I would like to get them back into working order. Since I'll be stuck at Hogwarts for most of the year, I wondered if a house elf from Potter Manor could transport themselves to one of these properties before me, or whether I would need to unlock the door, so to speak."

Celio was silent for a moment, his brow creased with thought.

"Celio thinks that it should be possible," he held out a hand, "may Celio place a finger on the Lord's ring, sir?"

Harry nodded, and Celio touched the ring with his forefinger. He closed his eyes, before stepping back with a decisive nod.

"Celio is an elf of the Potter family, and the Potter family now also contains Gryffindor and Slytherin. Any of us should be able to travel to Gryffindor Castle and Dùn Slytherin prior to your Lordships arrival. Would you like us to do so?"

"I very much would. I'm not sure where I'd like to live when I'm not at Hogwarts so I'd like to have the option," Harry said.

"Then we shall restore Lord Potter's homes to their full glory. Which would you like us to visit first?"

This made Harry pause. Both would likely be in similar states of decay, but truthfully Harry didn't know what there was in either place. Did Gryffindor or Slytherin have servants to maintain things in their absence? Harry imagined that they would, but that was still nearly a thousand years ago. According to Kilo, the longest living house elf was 300 years old, but the typical lifespan was between 150 and 200 years. The magic received from their families in payment for their services helped keep them alive for longer, so even if Gryffindor or Slytherin had house elves, they were long dead by now.

He bit his lip. Of the two, Gryffindor Castle was probably the safer bet. While Salazar had shifted his perspective on what the old wizard had been like in life, as well as the comments about dark magic not being inherently evil, it was still true that dark magic had a lot of potential to linger and cause harm. While Harry was sure that Salazar wouldn't have intended for anything like that to happen, he didn't want to take the chance just yet, and he said as much to Celio.

"But that doesn't mean you shouldn't be just as careful at Gryffindor Castle. Don't risk your safety. This isn't something that I want you to rush. If it takes years to make even one of these properties safe, then I'll be patient and wait years," Harry said.

"Lord Potter is most kind to think of our wellbeing," Celio bowed to him, "we shall be careful sir. Is that all Lord Potter needs?"

"It is, thank you Celio, and give my thanks to the others," Harry said, "keep me updated on what's happening at Gryffindor Castle, but don't come when there are other people around."

When my hangings are closed like this would be the best."

"Celio will ensure Lord Potter's privacy."

With another low bow, Celio disappeared with a snap of his fingers. Now there was nothing left for Harry to do besides wait for Ron and Hermione to return from Hogsmeade. It would have been nice to go to the village, but spending the entire day playing pretend would have been exhausting. Hopefully he could pull away enough that it would make sense for him to go without them.

A few hours later, Harry was completely caught up on all his schoolwork and was lounging in the common room reading Numerology, when Ron and Hermione appeared, dumping a small pile of sweets in his lap.

"This was everything we could get from Honeydukes. You should have seen it! There were so many different kinds of sweets!" Ron said, "there should be a bit of everything we tried there. It was really good!"

"And we saw the Shrieking Shack, one of the most haunted buildings in Britain. We didn't go close to it because it's not exactly in the village and we didn't think we were allowed, but it was still quite spooky to see," Hermione said, "there was also a post office with so many different owl species for different jobs! I had a lovely conversation with the man at the counter about the kinds of services they offered, but then Ron dragged me away."

"Because it was so boring Hermione! Harry doesn't want to hear about that!" Ron said, "anyway, Zonko's was awesome! Fred and George really weren't kidding. I managed to get a few things for myself. The twins will think twice about pranking me now that I can get my own back on them."

Harry said nothing, and neither Ron nor Hermione asked for his input. They happily rattled on about their day as though Harry was supposed to be interested, as though they weren't bragging about the things that Harry was barred from doing. He was almost tempted to ask how come Ron had so much money to spend considering how often he complained about being poor. The monthly payments may have been stopped, but until Harry or Gringotts discovered who his magical guardian was, and so could prove the transactions were fraudulent, the money couldn't be reclaimed. So he sat there, occasionally humming when he thought it was appropriate to show he was still listening to them even as his attention turned back to Numerology. Eventually Hermione noticed.

"So what have you done while we were gone?" she asked.

"Nothing as exciting as Hogsmeade," Harry said, "I mainly just caught up on all my homework."

"That's so dull," Ron said.

"But necessary. Wood's been pushing us hard in Quidditch training so I don't have as much time to do it otherwise," Harry pointed out.

"Well I'm just glad you're finally taking your schoolwork seriously. If you'd like I can have a look over what you've done," Hermione said.

"I'll be alright. I think Ron would appreciate the help more than me."

"Of course! We've been gone for an entire day and there's so much to do!" Hermione said, shooting to her feet, "come on Ron. Let's get our things and make a start."

"Hermione!" Ron whined, but she was already up the stairs, so he turned his ire on Harry, "I don't want to do work! Why'd you remind her? Now today's been ruined."

"It's not so bad, and she'll probably get too engrossed in her own mountain of work to notice what you're doing."

"But now I've got to pretend or she'll be even more insufferable."

With a scowl, Ron stomped up to the dormitory to get his things. Harry carefully moved the pile of sweets into his school bag. There was no way he was touching anything there without thoroughly checking them first.

"I really need to stretch my legs," Harry said after Ron had started his homework.

Ron opened his mouth, probably to complain, but Hermione started grilling him on his Herbology essay, giving Harry a chance to slip out of the common room. The rest of the castle was much more occupied now that everyone had returned from Hogsmeade. It wasn't quite time for dinner yet, but there was still a general level of activity in the corridors as people socialised with people from different houses. It was as he was passing one of the classrooms on the fifth floor that an arm was slung over his shoulders.

"Harry, my good man, what brings you out of the common room all alone?"

It was Fred. George was with him, as usual.

"Listen, we've got a few questions to ask so why don't we go where we won't be disturbed?"

Harry didn't have much of a choice as he was steered into an empty room. He was completely on edge. While Fred and George hadn't tampered with him via potions and enchantments, he couldn't help being suspicious, especially since he was now all alone, with them in the way of the door. To his surprise though, their usual mischievous expressions weren't present. In fact, both Fred and George looked troubled.

"Is everything alright?" Harry asked carefully.

"That's actually what we were going to ask you," George said, "but first, did you give Ron some money for those sweets?"

"W- what? No! What gave you that idea?"

"Because we were being good older brothers on little Ronnikins first trip to Hogsmeade-" Fred said.

"By which we mean nosy parkers," George cut in.

"-and we saw him buying a lot of stuff," Fred continued, "you know that our family doesn't have a lot of money, but Dad still tries to give us some for things like Hogsmeade visits. George and I each got a galleon for this weekend, but Ron must have spent a lot more than that."

"We didn't see Hermione give him any, and Ron's too prideful to accept that kind of debt, so we wondered if you'd given him some," George finished.

"I didn't give him anything. I've tried buying him stuff in the past but he's always thrown a strop whenever I offered," Harry said.

"We thought so, but it was still worth checking," George said, "I guess it begs the question of where he got the money from? He's terrible at self management so there's no way he saved it."

"Mum might have given him extra since it's his 'first time visiting the village' or some rubbish like that," Fred said.

Harry knew exactly where Ron had gotten the money, but Harry couldn't exactly say that to the twins. Apparently Ron was good enough at hiding it to not spend it in Diagon Alley when the rest of his family were around, but when he was alone with Hermione, somebody else 'in the know', he must have felt comfortable enough to do so. Something of his mood must have shown on his face, because Fred and George looked concerned.

"Is everything alright Harry?" George asked, "you're not fighting with Ron and Hermione are you?"

"Why would you think that?" Harry sputtered, which he realised made him look very suspicious.

Both twins looked unimpressed.

"The key to being excellent pranksters is keen observation, so we see more than most people think," Fred said, "we've noticed that you seem to be spending more time away from them."

"And that you're arguing against them more than you used to," George said, "once again, is everything alright?"

He really wanted to be honest with them, because having somebody else at Hogwarts who knew the full story, and who was easier to get to than Lupin, would be great. It would be more people who Harry could be himself around. At the same time though, Harry wasn't super close with the twins. They played Quidditch together, and they got along really well from the time Harry stayed at the Burrow last summer, but outside that, they only really interacted as brothers of Harry's friend.

Despite that though, they were taking the time out of their own business to make sure he was alright. It was more than most people had ever done for him, so perhaps a version of the truth

would be enough for now.

"There's nothing really big. Just a lot of little things, I guess," Harry said.

"Oh? Few knuts for a bag of thoughts?" Fred said.

"What?"

"What sort of things?" George translated.

"Well, you guys remember that I spent a few weeks at the Leaky Cauldron this summer?" Harry asked, getting nods from them both, "neither of them asked me about it. They only talked about their own summers and never once asked about mine. Then we got separated on the train so I rode to Hogwarts with some different people, and they were both really annoyed about it."

"We heard you passed out," George said.

"I didn't, and I have no idea where Hermione could have even heard that," Harry said, "I was with Seamus, Dean and Neville the whole time, and nobody came to our compartment after the Dementors left."

"You think Hermione is the one who started that rumour?" Fred asked.

"I don't know," Harry said, "but I annoyed them again when they found out I was taking different classes than what we talked about last year. Like I said, a lot of little things, but it makes it really tiring to be around them sometimes."

"I see what you mean," George said.

"If you ever need a break, let us know. If there's anything we can do, it's be a distraction," Fred said.

"And we'll keep our eyes on them as well. If we see them being too overbearing, we'll try and get them to back off."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely.

He wasn't expecting the offer, but he was grateful for it all the same. Godric and Salazar told him he would need allies, and the twins would certainly fit that description. It made returning to the common room a lot easier. Ron was glaring at his Herbology homework as though it had personally offended him, while Hermione had three different books for two different essays open in front of her. Harry slipped past without noticing them. The other Gryffindor boys were in the dormitory. Neville was reading a book for Muggle Studies while Dean was practising wand movements for Charms. Seamus was lying on his bed, Introduction to Ancient Runes and Spellman's Syllabary open as he slowly worked through the homework for Ancient Runes.

"Hey Harry, I need a second opinion," Seamus said, beckoning him over.

Harry sat down on the bed beside him.

"Babbling said this array was supposed to be about providing warmth, but this rune here means 'money', right? I've been through the book three times already and cannot figure out how money comes into providing warmth."

"I thought so too when I saw it, but look here," Harry flicked through Introduction to Ancient Runes and pointed out a passage, "the rune for money can also modify the immediately following rune to mean plenty. Here it means plenty of warmth, or lots of warmth."

Seamus read through the passage, then made a sound of understanding. He crossed a few things out on the parchment, then wrote in the corrections.

"Thanks mate. That had me struggling for ages."

"No problem," Harry said.

He was smiling, because it was easy to smile around these boys. Even when they were doing their own thing, like now, there was a comfort in their presence which Harry realised had always been missing with Ron and Hermione. Even when Harry leaned against Seamus's headboard so he could keep reading Numerology, there was no demand for attention from the sandy blonde. Conversation came and went naturally. Occasionally Neville would ask him and Dean a question about the Muggle world that he had just read about, Dean would try the charm he had been practising, and Seamus would talk himself through deciphering the runic array.

This must be what having friends should feel like, Harry thought. He really hoped Ron and Hermione messed up soon, because he couldn't wait to have this all of the time.

Chapter End Notes

Meant to upload this yesterday, but it completely slipped my mind.

Lupin is now in the know. Hopefully things will go well with this revelation.

From reading a lot of HP stories recently, I've noticed a tendency for people to write the twins as constantly speaking in twin-speak. Constantly switching back and forth between which twin is speaking in the middle of the sentence, speaking at the same time, calling each other Gred and Forge, and I just find it ... really weird. I know that the films had Fred and George do the twin-speak thing a lot more, but I can't remember it happening like that in the books. I'm pretty sure they only called each other Gred and Forge once as a joke. Maybe it's just me, but I don't think twin-speak translates as well in text. What are everyone else's thoughts? Apologies for the long note. I just had some thoughts I was curious about.

Victory and Arguments

As October turned to November, the weather grew steadily worse. Quidditch practice was often held in the rain, leaving Harry soaked after every practise. Unlike the rest of his teammates, he didn't complain about it much. He had gotten into the habit of swimming in the lake nearly every morning so he'd grown used to being wet. The combination of the two sports was starting to have an effect as Harry felt his body growing stronger.

It was on one such stormy day that Harry ate his breakfast. The enchanted ceiling above them was dark grey, rain falling and lightning crashing. Really, it was the perfect weather for the Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff Quidditch match. Ron and Hermione sat either side of him, both wearing scarlet and gold scarves. Harry caught them glancing up at the enchanted ceiling, and they didn't sound very enthusiastic about being in the stands to support the team.

"Everyone gets far too over excited about Quidditch," Hermione said in the self important tone Harry was rapidly starting to dislike, "it's a very big distraction when we're all so busy with schoolwork."

"There's nothing wrong with taking a break every now and again," Harry said, "and if the Ravenclaws, the house of the academic overachievers, can spare the time to support their house team, then there's no issue."

That made Hermione huff, seemingly in embarrassment, and she looked away from him.

"I really don't envy you Harry. You're not going to be able to see anything in this weather, let alone the snitch," Ron said.

"I thought of that," Harry said, "I've been practising the Impervious charm on my glasses. It won't be perfect but it'll at least help keep them clear."

"Is that allowed?" Hermione asked.

"Wood said that professional Quidditch goggles usually have this same charm added to them, so I'll be fine," Harry said, cutting over Ron before he could go on a rambling explanation about Quidditch equipment.

Before long, Wood came down the Gryffindor table, and it was time to play. The weather was as bad as it looked from inside the castle. Rain lashed down on them, and they were soaked by the time they reached the changing rooms. Strong winds ripped through the stadium, causing it to rattle. Harry cast the same warming charm he used when swimming, which helped as he changed into his Quidditch robes.

"Alright, Hufflepuff has a strong team this year. Their Chasers have excellent handling of the Quaffle, but I reckon ours are better. Scoring as many goals as we can will be of utmost importance in this game since visibility will be such a big factor," Wood said, "Fred, George, make sure to keep those Bludgers off us since we probably won't see them coming until it's too late."

The twins saluted him.

"Harry, it'll be tough, but catch the snitch as fast as you can. Their Seeker's got a lot of experience, but I've no doubt you can manage it."

Harry was planning on catching the Snitch quickly, but mostly for selfish reasons. The warming charm would only last for ten minutes, and he didn't really want to be flying about in this weather.

Out on the Quidditch pitch, the roar of the crowd was only barely audible over the wind and the rain. Harry spotted his rival seeker, Cedric Diggory, and was glad to see the entire Hufflepuff team looking just as miserable as the Gryffindors. They kicked off and Madam Hooch's whistle cut brought the din. It was easy to ignore the team and focus on finding the Snitch as the rain was coming down so thickly Harry could hardly see anything, even with the rain being repelled from his glasses.

Everywhere he looked, light seemed to catch off something. A thousand tiny gleams caught Harry's eye, taunting him by not being the Snitch. Harry pulled up, circling higher over the pitch after he nearly flew straight into one of the Hufflepuff Beaters. A stray announcement from Lee Jordan told him that Gryffindor were twenty points up, and he doubled down on trying to find the snitch.

The rain cleared slightly, and Harry saw what looked like a large black dog standing on a nearby hill. Assuming it was Fang, Harry tried to turn his attention back to the game, but then he felt something at the edge of his senses. The castle wards had flared. The magic rushed through Harry in a wave. Seeing through his eyes, though none of it was normal sight, he saw as the Dementors, one by one, left their posts at the castle boundaries and started floating towards the pitch. Harry didn't want to feel that awful cold again, and he channelled that intention into Hogwarts.

Hogwarts listened. Just as there was a bright flash of lightning above Harry's head, the wards pulsed with magic and the Dementors were thrown out of the grounds. Harry only had a second to catch his breath when there was another flash of lightning, reflecting off something gold.

The Snitch was above him!

Harry shot upwards. Rain smacked against his exposed face and the wind tore at him, threatening to unseat him from his broom. Cedric had seen the snitch too, and unfortunately he was further ahead as they flew higher into the sky chasing after it. Harry's grip tightened on his rain slick broom as he urged the Nimbus 2000 to go faster. A bolt of lightning struck, causing Cedric to swerve out of the way. The path ahead was clear, the Snitch a tiny ball of gold glinting against the dark clouds. Harry reached out his hand, desperately inching closer and closer.

A sudden gale, stronger than any previous wind, ripped across him. His broom was wrenched violently to the side, and with his entire body drenched by the rain, Harry slipped off. He flailed his arms wildly, his hand automatically clenching when it met something solid. Harry was falling, the ground beneath rapidly approaching. A yellow and black figure appeared in

his peripheral vision. Cedric matched his descent, one arm reaching out to guide Harry behind him. Understanding, Harry held onto Cedric's robes, manoeuvring so he ended up behind Cedric on the broom. Cedric pulled up, and Harry swore his toes skimmed the grass as they came out of the dive.

"You alright Potter?" Cedric asked.

His voice hadn't quite returned to him but he was able to squeak out a yes. In fact, he wasn't in much of a position to move at all, as his arms were currently wrapped tightly around Cedric's chest. Over the sounds of the storm, there was something else roaring, and Harry caught Lee's announcement.

"Harry Potter has caught the Snitch. Gryffindor wins!"

They landed, and Harry stumbled to his feet, having managed to detach himself from Cedric. He opened his hand, and they both saw the little golden ball he had clenched there. Before Harry could thank him for saving him, six figures in scarlet and gold crashed into him. Excited voices filled his ears as he was bundled off the pitch and towards the castle. They didn't stop until he was in the Hospital Wing.

"What happened this time, Potter?" Madam Pomfrey said, taking in the state of the Gryffindor team.

"He fell off his broom when he was really high up," Angelina said.

"It was really scary," Alicia said, "we all tried to catch you but Cedric was closest."

"We'll all need to thank him for saving our Seeker, just so long as he doesn't start demanding favours," Wood said.

"Relax Oliver, Cedric's not like that," Fred said.

"Yeah. He's a pretty boy but an alright one," George said.

"Enough!" Madam Pomfrey moved them all away and forced Harry onto one of the beds, "now, tell me what happened Potter."

"Really, I'm fine! I was reaching for the Snitch when a really powerful gust of wind ripped the broom out from under me," Harry said.

Madam Pomfrey hummed.

"I see. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with you, so here," she handed each of the Gryffindor team a small bottle of an amber coloured liquid, "it's Pepper-Up Potion. It'll help warm you up. Honestly, forcing children to play in a storm like this. Completely irresponsible."

That last part was said under her breath but they all heard it. The potion did wonders, so even though they were all still soaking wet, they felt more than comfortable heading back up to the Gryffindor common room.

"Oh, does anyone know what happened to my broom?" Harry asked as they reached the Fat Lady.

"No idea. I think I heard Madam Hooch saying she was going to try and find it," Wood said.

There was an uproar as the portrait opened. The rest of Gryffindor house was ecstatic about their victory, and Harry caught a few saying that it would go down in history as one of the most exciting ends to a match ever played at Hogwarts. There was talk of a celebration, and clearly people wanted to speak with him, but Wood declared that they would all be changing and showering before anything else. It didn't stop an excited Ron from approaching Harry as he crossed the common room.

"That was wicked Harry! I can't believe you managed to catch-"

"Ron, I can't talk right now," Harry said.

"But-"

"You heard Wood," Fred cut in, "leave us alone until we're presentable."

Harry made a beeline for the bathroom in the third year dormitory, which was surprisingly not empty. Dean was washing his hands and looked up when he entered.

"You look a little wet," he commented with a smirk.

"Haha," Harry said, as he struggled out of his robes.

It was only the other person in the room which reminded Harry that he was making a mess of his clothes. He bent down while he still had his pants on, trying to push everything into a vaguely neat pile.

"Hey, don't worry about that. I can sort it out. You get in the shower and warm up."

"Thanks a bunch, Dean."

He stripped out of the rest of his clothes and jumped into the nearest stall. The hot water felt heavenly, and Harry had to resist the temptation to stand there for hours. While at this point, all of the Gryffindor boys were more or less comfortable with other people being in the bathroom while they showered, Harry didn't want Ron to come barging in trying to talk to him when he was naked. He enjoyed the hot water while he could, before finishing and drying off. His Quidditch robes were gone, having been tidied up by Dean.

Back in the common room, the celebration was well underway. A bottle of butterbeer was pressed into Harry's hand as people slapped his back and loudly congratulated him for his heroic catch of the Snitch. Ron sidled up to him, still looking surly.

"Am I allowed to talk to my best friend now?"

"Now that I'm warmed up and in clean clothes, of course you can."

It took a while for Ron's foul mood to pick up, but when it did, Ron launched into a full play-by-play of the rest of the match. Part of this Harry appreciated as it had been very difficult to tell what was going on, but it cemented in his mind that Ron's future career did not lie in Quidditch reporting. Seamus had to interject a couple of times to translate his less than stellar descriptions, which earned him glares from the red head.

"I can't believe you actually managed to spot that Snitch. Everything was mental!" Ron said.

"There was a brief break in the rain, which let me get my bearings," Harry said.

"You had time for sightseeing in the middle of the match?" Seamus teased.

"Not quite, but I did see this big black dog on the hill nearby. Fang must have gotten out of Hagrid's hut," Harry said.

"Wait, a big black dog?" Ron asked, "was it kind of skinny looking?"

"Honestly I have no idea. I wasn't really paying attention to it because I saw the snitch right after."

"Harry, this is important!" Ron said, "it sounds like you saw the Grim!"

"Not this again," Harry said under his breath, "Ron, I don't think it was the Grim. Like I said, Fang probably just got out."

"But you saw it and then you fell off your broom! How can you not believe that kind of omen?"

"Because apparently the Grim is supposed to be an omen of death, and unless I'm mistaken, I'm very much still alive," Harry said.

"Only because that prat from Hufflepuff caught you. If he hadn't been there, it could have been way worse."

"But he did catch me, so what's the point in thinking otherwise," Harry said, "and why do you think he's a prat? What's he done to you?"

"Come on Harry, you must have seen him. Flouncing around the school like he's all that, and the way all the girls trail after him and he just acts all cool about it, it's disgusting," Ron said, "he should ask one of them out and be done with it! Save us all the trouble of watching it every day!"

"Honestly, as someone who's had a lot of unwanted attention before, I don't blame Cedric for ignoring it," Harry said.

Ron's ears went red, but Harry ignored him, happily turning away from that conversation when Wood approached him. Even better, Wood asked him to come with him. He led him down to Madam Hooch's office. Madam Hooch was hunched over her desk, a pile of splinters and twigs placed on a blanket.

"Thanks for coming so promptly Potter. Apologies for dragging you away from your celebrations, but I'm sure you wanted to know the condition of your broom," she said.

"That's my-" Harry couldn't even finish.

"I'm afraid it got caught in the wind and blown across the grounds until it ended up in the Whomping Willow," Hooch said, "unfortunately this level of damage cannot be fixed. You'll need a replacement. Wood can supply you with order forms, and if you need advice, he or I will be happy to help you."

It was a dull sort of pain that Harry felt, seeing his broom broken so thoroughly. He had never really lost anything he owned before, but he also never really had much to lose either. Perhaps it was a bit silly to be upset, but he had grown fond of his broom. It had helped him win every single game of Quidditch he'd ever played.

"Come on Potter. Let's get back to the common room and let the team know."

The victory during the storm, marred slightly by the loss of his broom, still managed to lift Harry's spirits throughout November. It was sorely needed because Ron seemed to make it his mission to spend as much time as possible with him. The only breaks Harry had were in the classes the two didn't share, as well as Quidditch practise and his morning swims. Harry knew exactly why this was. Hermione was rapidly becoming swamped by all of the classes she was taking, to the point that she wasn't able to make sure Ron did his homework. As a result, Ron took every available opportunity to not do it, and he tried his hardest to keep Harry from doing his as well.

It was really starting to get on his nerves. Harry felt his temper rising each time Ron complained next to him as he worked on homework for McGonagall and Snape. It didn't matter how many times Ron ended up in detention for missing it, and how many times Harry reminded him of those particular consequences. In fact, Harry would rather he spend all his time in detention because then he would leave him alone. The worst part was when Ron remembered they had homework due and frantically tried to convince Harry to let him copy his.

"No. I told you you needed to do it," Harry said before a Transfiguration lesson.

"You're sounding like Hermione," Ron said, as though that was supposed to be a bad thing.

"Well Hermione has a point. We always left our homework to the last minute, and look where that got us. It's not hard to keep on top of it."

Ron scowled, and then promptly received another detention from McGonagall as well as a long lecture after class ended. After that, Ron begrudgingly did his homework, but always with a lot of complaining and frequent badgering for Harry to help him.

Several times after that, Harry felt his ring heat up during meals. Once again, he didn't see either Ron or Hermione do anything, but whenever it happened, he managed to avoid eating whatever they contaminated. By this point, it was almost becoming a skill. They were trying to pull him back in, Harry thought, but he wouldn't let them.

The breaks he had during Arithmancy and Ancient Runes were the best. While Hermione was also in those classes, she was too frazzled to try anything. Harry just felt sorry for Ernie, as any group work was done in pairs, and the Hufflepuff was frequently the only one available to work with her. According to Neville, she was no better in Muggle Studies.

"This translation is gonna be rough," Seamus said after a particularly gruelling lesson in Ancient Runes.

"We'll manage," Harry said.

"You will. You're better at all the grammar stuff."

"And you're better at figuring out which runes are which," Harry pointed out.

"Your attempts to make me feel better are noted, Potter."

"And are they working, Finnegan?"

"Maybe."

They met up with Dean and the other Gryffindors for Transfiguration, where McGonagall grilled them on the limitations of switching spells. It was another busy day for them all.

"We've got to practise the freezing charm for Flitwick, eight inches on Saturn and its moons for Astronomy, read the chapter on animal Transfiguration for McGonagall, *and* whatever work our optional classes give us!" Seamus said as they sat down for dinner.

"It'll be alright. We're keeping on top of it nicely," Harry said.

"I know, I'm just dreading the horrors that Snape will give us which will throw us all completely off."

"Don't let Parvati hear you say that. What did she say, don't invite omens in closer?" Dean said.

"What I'm hearing is that if we get an awful assignment from Snape, it's all Seamus's fault," Harry teased.

If this were Ron, he'd probably get into a huff and his foul mood would bring everyone down. Seamus simply rolled his eyes, and accepted the ribbing when Snape set them a horrific essay on the properties of anti-venoms.

December passed by agonisingly slowly. Ron was glued to his side but had mostly given up arguing with Harry about studying. So long as he stuck to complaining to himself, Harry pretty much tuned him out. The list came around for those wishing to stay at Hogwarts during the Christmas holidays, and Harry was torn. Part of him wanted to leave, get away from Ron and Hermione for two weeks, but there was no way he could justify it. They both knew he didn't like his aunt and uncle, and that was the only place he could go without arousing Dumbledore's suspicion.

He really wanted to spend time at Potter Manor. It was supposed to be his home, and he wanted to connect with the family he was denied for all his life. The brief couple of hours he'd spent there in the summer weren't enough. Even more so, he wanted to explore his other properties. Celio had come to him a couple of weeks ago full of excitement. He said that there was still a house elf living at Gryffindor Castle, the last of the line of elves that had once worked for Godric himself. They were very old, and Harry wanted to meet them. Reluctantly, Harry signed up to stay at the school.

There was another Hogsmeade visit before everyone left for the Christmas break. Like before, Ron and Hermione assured him that they would bring him back gifts. Harry told them they didn't have to, that he wanted them to have a good time without worrying about him. He waved them off and turned to head back into the castle, only to be stopped by Fred and George.

"We've got something to show you now that your shadows have gone," Fred said.

Intrigued, Harry followed them into an empty classroom. He was expecting a lot of things, but he was not expecting an old folded sheet of parchment.

"We talked it over, and we figured that you would get a lot more out of this than we will," George said, "besides, there's not much else it can teach us."

"Um, guys, it's a blank piece of parchment."

"A blank piece of parchment he says," George said, "I think he needs a demonstration Fred."

Fred pulled out his wand, dramatically cleared his throat, then tapped the parchment.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Spreading out from where the wand tip touched, lines of ink appeared. They criss-crossed across the parchment, forming an intricate array of intersections and openings. It took a moment for Harry to realise what this was, and when he flicked back to the front of the parchment, it now read Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs present The Marauders Map.

Now fully curious, Harry opened it out. It was a map of Hogwarts, showing the entire grounds. From his own wandering, it seemed completely accurate, but then Harry noticed the little dots moving about. Each one was labelled to show a name. Focussing in on the room they were in, Harry saw three dots with his, Fred and George's names attached.

"This shows everyone," he said.

"In real time. Excellent for avoiding patrolling teachers when sneaking around at night," George said.

"It's gotten us out of a few close shaves over the years, and while it pains us to let it go, we figured your needs are greater than ours," Fred said.

"What do you mean?"

"Like we said, we notice a lot more than people think," Fred said, "we've seen the way Ron won't leave you alone. We figured knowing when he's coming would be helpful."

"But he's your brother."

"Yes he is," George said, "but that doesn't automatically make him good."

"I mean, he's always been a bit of a prat but this year he seems to be on even finer form than usual," Fred said.

"As for the map, don't worry about us. We've learned the layout of the castle off by heart and we're more than skilled enough to not get caught," George said with a mischievous grin.

The Marauders Map would definitely be useful for keeping away from Ron and Hermione, and frankly it was a fascinating piece of magic. To be able to accurately track everybody in the castle in real time made him think it was connected to the wards somehow. For the first time in his life, Harry felt like he was Hermione as the itch to go to the library and research nearly overtook him.

The twins departed, going off to cause whatever chaos they had planned, leaving Harry on his own. The weather was cold, but the warming charm had become such second nature to him that he didn't even need to think as he cast it. The wind was calm today, so Harry took himself for a stroll along the shore of the lake. The still water was like a mirror reflecting the overcast sky above. Lupin had taught them all about a few creatures that liked to live in lakes, and it made Harry wonder how many of them lived here. How special was the Giant Squid? Harry had seen it a couple of times when he swam, but it didn't come in that close.

Harry arrived at the little cove he started his swims from, and sat down on a particularly smooth rock with a heavy sigh. It was at times like these that he felt more alone than ever, wishing that he could just be normal for once. Why couldn't he have friends who didn't act behind his back? If Seamus and Dean were anything to go by, it wasn't hard, so why had Ron and Hermione done this? He sighed again, and that was when he felt eyes on him.

Coming out of a thicket of bushes on the other side of the cove was a large black dog. It froze when it saw him looking. The shaggy hair was very matted, and while Harry might not know much about grooming dogs, he knew that it must be very uncomfortable. It was also very skinny, as though it had gone a long time without decent and regular meals, a feeling Harry very much understood.

The two of them stared at each other for a long time. Harry made sure to stay calm and relaxed. This dog was acting nothing like Ripper, Aunt Marge's favourite bulldog, so he knew it wasn't being aggressive. He smiled at it.

"Hello," he said quietly.

Very slowly, the dog inched closer to him, constantly sniffing the air. When it was close enough, Harry carefully reached out a hand and patted its head. The dog seemed content enough with that, and it lay down heavily, panting with exhaustion.

"What brings you to Hogwarts? Are you a wizard too?" Harry snorted to himself, "I'm not sure the school does uniforms that fit dogs."

There was no collar telling him who the dog belonged to, so it had to be a stray. Perhaps somebody from the village was missing one. He'd have to ask when everyone got back.

Harry was careful not to pull on any matting when he patted the dog. The sight of it looking so bedraggled made him want to bring it up to the castle and give it a bath, or even just go and get some food, but he resisted that temptation. Doing so would only make the dog hang around, and Harry didn't even know how it got into the school grounds in the first place.

"You're thin enough you probably slipped through the bars of the gates," Harry mused to himself, "you look like you've had it rough."

The dog let out a little whine.

"I know, I've been there. Just make sure that when you next get food, you don't eat it too quickly. You'll only make yourself sick," Harry said, "I nearly did that a couple of times when I first came here. My stomach was too small so I had to be really careful and take my time, building up to larger and larger portions."

He scoffed.

"Not that it made much difference. I was always hungry."

Maybe it was because he had been forlorn thinking about his former friends, wishing that he had someone he could talk to about everything, but he found himself telling the dog about Ron and Hermione. He talked about the potions and enchantments he found himself under to make him like them, and how somebody in this grand conspiracy had made it so he couldn't receive proper nutrition from his meals. Hearing that made the dog whine again, and Harry apologised for bringing up food.

"They say that Sirius Black is a mass murderer who betrayed my parents. Ron and Hermione expect me to be scared of him, and I think the teachers do too," Harry said, "whenever there's a new article in the Daily Prophet about how they haven't caught him yet, I always catch them glancing at me, like they're trying to gauge my reaction. I hope he gets caught soon, because I have a lot of questions about what happened that night."

He sighed.

"I don't like the thought that somebody who was supposed to be my dad's closest friend got him killed, but I'd rather know that for certain, right?"

Of course, the dog didn't answer, but it did nudge his hand with its head, and Harry resumed patting it.

"It's kind of hard to be scared of somebody supposedly out to get me when the people closest to me did the exact same thing," Harry said.

When everyone returned from the Hogsmeade visit, Harry made himself scarce. The Marauders Map proved its usefulness, allowing him to avoid Ron and Hermione. It was a bit difficult trying to isolate their dots from the throng of people, but Harry somehow managed. Most people were heading to their common rooms, and if they asked where he was, Harry could just say he was wandering. The days were getting shorter and shorter as December wore on, and extra lamps and torches needed to be lit as the afternoons grew darker.

Harry was just thinking he should probably face the music, when he heard a voice call his name. It was Professor Lupin, peering out of one of the rooms on the corridor.

"I'm glad I could catch you on your own. Would you like a cup of tea before dinner?"

He gladly agreed. Harry had been in this office once before. Gilderoy Lockhart had covered every available surface with his own beaming face. Thankfully, Lupin was much more tasteful. The grindylow they had studied in class was sleeping in its tank in the corner of the room. Lupin tapped a teapot with his wand, and it started to steam as he poured them each a cup.

"You know that I met with Amelia Bones during the Hogsmeade visit at the end of October. She just got back to me now."

"That took a long time," Harry commented.

"The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has always been a busy place even before Black's escape," Lupin said, "Madam Bones is probably one of the busiest people in the entire Ministry."

"But she found something?" Harry prompted.

"Something," Lupin said, "she dug into the Ministry's archives to find the records of the original investigation, hoping that something discovered closer to the time could shed light either on how Black escaped or what his goals are."

Lupin looked very troubled.

"The original investigation was very ... brief."

"How so?"

"I mean it quite literally. There was a record of the arrest, evidence collected at the scene, and that was it."

"And that's enough to send a man to Azkaban for twelve years!"

"Apparently that was Madam Bones' exact reaction," Lupin fixed him with a stern look, "you cannot tell anybody this Harry. By rights I shouldn't even be telling you, but I feel that you deserve to know given the concerns you raised."

"Is she opening an investigation?"

"She is. The knowledge that Black named you his Heir and the lack of interview gave her enough suspicion that something was amiss."

"How on earth did he even get sent to Azkaban in the first place?" Harry asked, "from everything I've heard of the place, it sounds awful, so surely they wouldn't just send people there for no reason."

"It was a different time back then, Harry. Voldemort and his supporters threatened our entire world. In order to crack down on them, the Ministry passed laws stating that confirmed Death Eaters, Voldemort's subordinates, could be sent to Azkaban without trial."

"That sounds inhumane."

"You're not the first to say so. In the years between then and now, most of those incarcerated in this way were given trials, and most had their convictions upheld," Lupin said, "Black wasn't one of them because as far as everyone was concerned, there was evidence he did what he did. There were the Muggle witnesses who testified to what Peter Pettigrew revealed before the explosion, Peter's finger was found at the scene, and the fact that Black was caught there laughing maniacally. It doesn't paint a very innocent picture."

Lupin's gaze turned weary.

"And therein lies the problem. Unless some undeniable evidence can be brought to light casting doubt on the events that happened, the only way to know for certain is to capture Black and have him tell the courts. With a case as high profile as this, truth potion or memory review could easily be authorised. However, even that poses issues. The most pressing one being that Black is uncaught, and the longer he remains uncaught, the more likely the Ministry is to authorise harsher methods."

"I can't imagine what those would be, if he's already escaped Dementors."

"It involves the Dementors actually. I'm not sure how much you know of them," Lupin said.

Harry knew quite a lot. After Godric's explosion of fury at hearing they were posted around the school, Salazar had taken Harry aside on another occasion he'd visited the Ring Realm. There the older wizard told him everything he knew about the Dementors, and Harry completely understood Godric's anger. They were disgusting creatures which drained every positive feeling from their surroundings, leaving nothing but fear and despair. The final stage of their attack was to clamp their mouth over the mouth of their victim and suck out the soul.

"Fortunately we're not at that stage, but we can't exactly ask Black to come in for questioning," Lupin said.

"So there's nothing we can do," Harry said gloomily.

He finished his tea and thanked the Professor for keeping him informed. It wasn't good news, but Harry had long since learned to appreciate any information over no information. After all the knowledge that had been kept from him, he wasn't much of a fan of adults keeping secrets because they thought he couldn't handle it.

Harry expected anger from Ron and Hermione when he returned to the common room, so he was surprised to find they weren't angry at him, but with each other. Hermione clutched Crookshanks to her chest, a look of fury on her face, while Ron's ears were bright scarlet, always a danger sign.

"How many times have I told you to keep that mangy cat of yours away from Scabbers! I'm constantly having to keep it out of my dormitory! Scabbers was already old but now he's skin and bones!"

"He's a cat, Ron! It's not like he can control his instincts!"

"What happened?" Harry asked Neville quietly, not wanting to draw attention to himself.

"Crookshanks managed to get into the boys dormitory. Ron went mad and threw him down the stairs and now they're arguing," Neville quickly summarised.

"It's like you don't even care about other people's pets!"

"You're one to talk! Who throws a cat down the stairs because they did something you don't like!"

Part of Harry wanted to just slip past them both and go up to the dormitory where it would be quiet, but unfortunately Ron spotted him. He gesticulated wildly between Harry and Hermione.

"Harry, tell her! Maybe she'll listen to you and finally keep control of that bloody cat!"

"Harry, Ron's completely overreacting and he hurt Crookshanks!"

How to handle this? Honestly, Harry thought they were both in the wrong, and while he could play along and try to placate them, as he would have done even six months ago, that wasn't what he decided to do.

"I think you're both being completely ridiculous," he said simply.

The pair of them went silent, dumbfounded. Harry continued before either of them were able to recover.

"Ron, it's true that Hermione should have kept better control over Crookshanks and not let him into our dormitory, but that does not give you the right to hurt him. There were plenty of better ways to handle the situation than throwing Crookshanks down the stairs, and frankly, you're as bad as Hermione when it comes to controlling your pets. None of the other boys like it when they find Scabbers curled up in their underwear drawer, but you do nothing to stop him."

He then turned to the other.

"Hermione, it is true that Crookshanks is a cat and so will have some instincts to hunt rats like Scabbers, but you've been completely insensitive to Ron's feelings. Just like you're angry with how he's just treated Crookshanks, he's angry that Crookshanks keeps trying to kill

Scabbers and you act like there's nothing wrong with that. Them being a natural predator and prey does not excuse it."

He sighed heavily.

"Honestly, both of you need to learn to be better pet owners. Maybe then this ridiculous feud between you can end."

There was a moment after he finished speaking where it processed, and then came the inevitable anger.

"How dare you blame *me* for this! Scabbers is the victim here, I was just defending him!"

"Of course you'd take Ron's side! Crookshanks is the one who's been hurt!"

Even though Harry had expected it, the vitriol directed at him still left him speechless. It made anger coil in his gut, but he kept it closely locked down. These two were supposed to be his friends, even if it was under enchantment. Ron and Hermione having a more volatile relationship was a given, but they had never taken it out on Harry like this. How they expected to come back from this, Harry had no idea. Probably more potions.

The pair of them stormed off to their respective dormitories, and Harry remained where he was. He took a long, deep breath, gazing up at the ceiling of the Gryffindor common room. It worked to calm his pounding heart. When he looked down again, the rest of the Gryffindors were giving him sympathetic looks.

"Are you alright?" Seamus asked.

He, Dean and Neville approached him, looking concerned.

"Yeah."

"They shouldn't have laid into you like that. You were only telling the truth that they were being ridiculous," Seamus said.

"It wasn't pleasant, but I'm alright."

"How long do you reckon it'll take for them both to calm down?" Dean said.

That was the million galleon question, and Harry didn't much care for the answer. Whether this was the end to the friendship or not, it was the perfect opportunity for Harry to pull away from them both. Nobody would be able to question it either, what with the very public feet placed in both their mouths. Christmas at Hogwarts was certainly shaping up to be a much more interesting time of year than it normally was.

An eventful Christmas

Chapter Notes

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

Ron and Hermione weren't speaking to him, and that was perfectly fine with Harry. All three of them had signed up to stay at the castle for the holidays, and they were some of the very few to do so. Harry handled the stony silences by exploring the castle more, as well as reading in the library. Besides them, the only other Gryffindors were the rest of the Weasley's. Fred and George pulled Harry in for games of Exploding Snap, and when snow fell across the grounds, they went out for epic snowball fights. Harry even found himself enjoying conversation with Percy, though they were a lot harder to navigate if he wanted to remain interested.

By Christmas morning, the argument still hadn't settled. Harry woke up to a pile of presents at the end of his bed. Included among the usual homemade mince pies and knitted sweater from Mrs Weasley was a pocket sneakoscope from Ron and a broom servicing kit from Hermione. Hagrid had given him a leather holster for his wand that he'd sewn himself. More unexpected but still appreciated were the gifts from his new friends. Seamus had bought him a selection of Honeydukes chocolate, which unlike the mince pies didn't make his ring heat up. From Dean he received a puzzle box which could store items, and Neville had sent him a very warm looking scarf.

After a morning lounging about in the common room with the twins, they all went downstairs for Christmas lunch. The four long house tables had been moved aside, a much smaller one set to accommodate the lower numbers. Along with the eight Gryffindors, there was also a Ravenclaw sixth year and a Hufflepuff first year. The only teachers were Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Lupin. Just as they were about to start, the doors to the Great Hall opened once again.

"Sybil!" Dumbledore said jovially, "how good to see you."

Harry guessed, based on Ron's less than flattering descriptions, that this was Sybil Trelawney who taught Divination. She certainly looked a little odd, with draping shawls and hanging beads nearly touching the floor, and large round glasses which magnified her eyes. It gave Harry the impression of a large glittering insect. She peered at each of them in turn before facing the headmaster.

"I had not intended to descend into the main school, but I felt the forces of fate leading me here. It seems my arrival is most fortuitous, as you are currently 13 in number, and when 13 dine together, the first to rise is the first to die," Trelawney said.

"Then we thank you for saving us," McGonagall said.

"Indeed. Allow me to draw you up a chair," Dumbledore said.

Harry caught the way Dumbledore glanced between him and Trelawney. The twinkling in his eyes seemed to dim slightly, and the seat he conjured found a space between Lupin and Ginny.

As usual, the food was delicious, and Harry especially enjoyed the crackers, which exploded with bright bangs and gave him his very own set of wizard chess pieces. Sitting between George and McGonagall was an experience of two extremes. Fred and George were joking along with the Ravenclaw, and actually succeeded in making the girl laugh. McGonagall was more serious but this was the first time Harry had actually spoken with her outside of an explicitly school related context. The near constant dry wit was almost as funny to listen to as the twins, especially when Lupin tried telling the twins to rein in their pranks just a little bit, which led to a long diatribe about what he got up to when he was in school.

Trelawney wouldn't stop looking at him, which was particularly noticeable with how her eyes were magnified. Her expression was as though Harry was a particularly troubling puzzle, or like she was certain she knew his name but for the life of her couldn't remember it.

"I had thought I would see you in my class Mr Potter," she eventually said, her voice airy and soft, "it was what all the signs showed, but alas, the ether is ever shifting. One must always tread carefully when they attempt to peer through it."

"Quite," McGonagall said, "though speaking of, Potter, I've been very pleased with your marks for Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. Are you enjoying them?"

"I really am!"

It felt strange talking to a teacher like this but Harry took the offered subject change eagerly, not wanting Trelawney to draw him into a conversation about Divination. As much as he might complain about it, Ron still seemed to put a lot of faith in many ill omens, and seemed annoyed when neither Harry nor Hermione agreed with him. At least Parvati and Lavender fully accepted that nobody else in Gryffindor took the subject seriously.

When they'd all eaten their fills, Harry retreated back up to the dormitory, shutting the hangings to give him a bit of privacy. He fiddled with the puzzle box, idly wondering what he was going to store inside it. When he mentioned it at lunch, McGonagall said that some puzzle boxes could be charmed so that the only way to open it was to solve it properly. The idea of it amused Harry, but first he needed to solve it himself. It didn't help that the dormitory was warm and he was pleasantly full, falling into a light doze several times. He very nearly missed dinner, but managed to enjoy a cup of eggnog with the Weasleys without incident.

The best part about Ron and Hermione not speaking to him was that it gave Harry plenty of opportunity to try out the Marauders Map. Whoever had written it must have explored every nook and cranny of the castle. There were secret passageways all over the place. When Harry followed one that went directly from the seventh floor to the dungeons, very convenient for Gryffindors to get to Potions if they overslept, he thought there must be something else at play. Perhaps Hogwarts made new secret passageways to meet the needs of the students, as a roundabout way of apologising for being so internally confusing?

Along with the passage leading to the dungeons, Harry found another which connected the fifth floor boys bathroom to a broom cupboard on the second floor, and one that seemed to run parallel to the Charms corridor but could only be accessed from a suit of armour one floor above. The weirdest was a passageway that went from near Ravenclaw Tower to a seemingly unconnected balcony on the east side of the castle. Runes were carved into the floor which Harry couldn't decipher with his rudimentary knowledge. Perhaps he'd ask Salazar or Godric the next time he saw them.

As though sensing his thoughts, when Harry went to bed that night, he opened his eyes in the Ring Realm. Godric beamed, scooping him up in a tight hug and twirling him around like he normally did. James's hug was much calmer, but Harry still melted into it.

"You've been keeping up with your exercises," Godric grinned, "it's brilliant to see how self motivated you are, dear nephew. There were plenty of boys I had to drag out of bed to go for a nice swim!"

"I've gotten used to it now. I thought for sure the squid would be an issue, but then Professor Lupin taught us about grindylows. I made the mistake of looking down once and I'm sure I saw one," Harry said.

"There are grindylow in the lake, but they very rarely come to the surface," Salazar said, "I'm more impressed that you're sticking with it even in winter. Even with warming charms, Godric struggled to get the boys to do it, but then they didn't have clothes as a barrier against the cold."

"You made the boys swim naked in the freezing cold," Harry said aghast.

"Nothing wrong with a bracing swim to wake you up in the morning!" Godric said, "and Salazar doesn't know how good the warming charm can be considering he never joined us."

"Anyway!" James cut in before they could descend into another argument, "I'm happy that you're enjoying it, and I'm sure you won't need to worry about the grindylows. I'm sure Moony will have taught you well enough to handle them."

"Moony? Do you mean Professor Lupin?"

"Ah, sorry, sometimes I forget," James said, "I've said before that Sirius, Peter and I were friends back in school. Well, Remus, or Professor Lupin to you, was the fourth member of our little group. We all had nicknames for one another, and he was Moony."

Moony, why did that sound so familiar? Harry was sure he'd heard that somewhere before. No, not heard, read. He'd read the name Moony in a list of three other names, which were obviously nicknames now that he thought of them.

"What was your nickname?" Harry asked.

"Prongs. Why?"

"It was you!" Harry yelled, causing the other three to jump, "you made the Marauders Map!"

It took a moment to register in James' mind, but when it did his eyes lit up.

"You have our map! That's wonderful news! But how? Filch confiscated it in our seventh year," James said, "not that he knew what it was, but since it was ours he assumed it was up to no good. He was right of course, but still."

Harry quickly filled them in with what Fred and George told him.

"I'm kind of sad I won't get to meet these boys. They sound fun," James said.

"And what is the Marauders Map? You make it sound like an ancient relic you invented," Salazar said.

"It's honestly one of the best pieces of magic we ever did at Hogwarts," James said, "we drew a map of the entire castle and grounds since we'd done so much exploring, but what really makes it amazing was that we managed to tie it into the school wards."

"You what?" Godric said.

"Fascinating," Salazar said, eyes gleaming, "but none of you four are Heirs of the founders, so you wouldn't naturally have access to such magic. How on earth did you manage to do it?"

"We might not have been Heirs to Hogwarts, but we were Heirs to our own families, so we understood wards," James said, "it took us ages to do, but when we succeeded, it showed a real time view of where everyone was in the castle."

"It's great! Whenever I want to get away from Ron and Hermione, I always have warning when they're getting close," Harry said.

"Extraordinary. To think that neither Rowena nor myself thought to do something similar," Salazar said, "but I suppose since we were hand picking our students and we ourselves were connected to the wards, we didn't really need it."

"It gets even better," James said, "because the map is based on magical signatures, it can see through disguises and concealments."

"Then it is a grave oversight that we didn't think of this in our time," Godric said, "but at least now we know that it is possible to do."

"Just how much did you explore? I found a balcony tucked away near Ravenclaw Tower that I had no idea existed!" Harry said.

To his surprise, Godric let out a hearty laugh.

"So somebody managed to find one of the ritual sites! Fantastic news! I wondered where Rowena put that one."

"She never told you because she knew you'd disturb her peace and quiet, you big oaf," Salazar said.

"We found that balcony in fourth year, I believe," James said, "we could never quite work out which ritual it was for. Considering it faces east, we figured it had something to do with the rising sun."

"And you would be entirely correct," Salazar said, "there are many ancient magical rituals that exist. The old holidays such as Samhain and Yule are based on them. Rowena and I both studied these rituals extensively throughout our lives. The power drawn from the ebb and flow of natural magic is intense, and the wizard or witch who could harness it could work wonders."

"Even those like me could make use of such knowledge," Godric cut in, "with my dear friend's help, I even managed to develop a ritual of my own."

"Because of course you would be the one to do what Rowena and I could never," Salazar muttered petulantly.

"My friend, don't be sad! You both helped me immensely!" Godric slapped Salazar on the back, which sent the thinner man sprawling on the ground, "I could even teach it to you, dear nephew!"

"Perhaps later. I don't think there's enough time tonight," James said.

Sure enough, Harry woke up not long after. As always when he came out of the Ring Realm, he was filled with excitement at the prospect of learning more about everything they discussed. The ancient rituals that could perform great feats of magic particularly drew him in. Dumbledore had explained at the end of his first year that his mother's sacrifice bestowed upon him a powerful protection charm that Voldemort would never have anticipated. It certainly sounded like the kind of ancient magic Salazar was talking about. Also, the idea of there being wizard specific holidays was intriguing, and it made him wonder why they weren't celebrated at Hogwarts.

After the conversation he had with James, Godric and Salazar, Harry decided to try and find more of the ritual sites. Salazar implied that there was more, and they weren't labelled as such on the map, so Harry had to find somewhere that looked interesting and go see what was there. It was the perfect excuse to get away from Ron and Hermione. They must have realised what they had done and were trying to talk to him. It was painfully obvious the way they acted very politely towards one another, and how Hermione would make a show of leaving Crookshanks in his basket on a sofa in the Gryffindor common room. She claimed it was so he could recover from his injuries in peace, but Harry knew it was to show she was keeping better control of her pet.

Harry had no desire to make it easy for them, but he had mostly accepted that he would need to reconcile. Their argument might have been very public, but it wasn't friendship ending, not when Ron and Hermione often argued like that. All he could do was keep doing what he was doing. If they could make a mistake like that once, they could do it again, and if it happened often enough, or if it was serious enough, then that would be it.

It was a few days before term was due to start again. The grounds were still covered in a thick layer of snow. Chilly winds whistled through the castle, and Harry was very glad for the

warming spell Godric taught him, even if it needed reapplying every ten minutes. Taking a break from his exploring in a particularly roomy hidden passageway behind a tapestry on the fourth floor, Harry looked over the map again. Watching the dots moving about felt a bit like people watching. When everyone was in the castle, Harry liked to make up stories in his head about why people were where they were. As it was now, the castle was nearly empty, so there weren't many people for Harry to follow.

Fred and George were in an empty classroom on the fifth floor, likely coming up with some new ideas for pranks. Percy was in his dormitory, Harry imagined he was polishing his Head Boy badge again. Rather boringly, the teachers were all in their offices. Harry had seen Lupin at breakfast so he'd gotten over whatever illness that had affected him over New Year. Ron and Hermione were both together in the library, but he'd caught their dots roaming the castle, probably searching for him.

There wasn't anyone else for him to follow. The map didn't show ghosts as he'd checked when he passed Nearly Headless Nick. Harry was just about to put the map away when something caught his eye. He gasped, peering even closer at the map because there was no way this was possible.

Right there, in the Gryffindor third-year boys dormitory was a dot labelled Peter Pettigrew. That was impossible. Pettigrew was dead!

But the map didn't show ghosts. The only explanation was that Pettigrew was still alive somehow, and for some reason in Harry's dormitory. Was the map faulty? Harry had no way of knowing, unless he asked the people who made it.

His heart was racing as he bolted down the various hidden passageways he'd grown so familiar with. When he reached Lupin's office he frantically knocked. Lupin opened the door looking concerned.

"Harry? Is everything alright?"

Harry pushed past him. This did nothing to reassure Lupin, especially when Harry held the Marauders Map to him.

"Where did you get this?"

"That doesn't matter. This map identifies people by their magical signature, right?"

"It does, but Harry-"

"So it can see through disguises and concealments?"

"Yes, but why-"

"Then why is *he* in my dormitory?"

Harry pointed to Pettigrew's dot. Just like he did, Lupin gasped when he saw it, staring at it in disbelief. Immediately, he took his wand out, waving it over the map while muttering

incantations under his breath. Occasionally he prodded it, but nothing he did caused any visible change.

"It's still working perfectly, which means that dot really is Peter, which means he's still alive."

Lupin collapsed onto a nearby chair, staring at the dot on the map.

"What do we do? You said we'd need undeniable evidence to cast doubt on what happened twelve years ago. I'd say one of the people who supposedly died still being alive more than counts," Harry said.

"It does," Lupin ran his hands down his face, weariness weighing on his body, "we need to handle this very carefully. Do you have any idea how Peter could have gotten into your dormitory? Has there been anything odd there lately? Things out of place, a strange smell, anything that would suggest someone else had been in the room?"

"There's been nothing! Nothing's been different. It's just the five of us in that room, and nothing else-"

Harry suddenly stopped speaking, because that wasn't strictly true. There was one other thing which lived in the dormitory alongside the five Gryffindor boys.

"Was Pettigrew an animagus?"

"What makes you say that?" Lupin said, looking very pale.

"Please, just answer the question."

"Yes, he was, but nobody knew that except the four of us."

"Could he turn into a rat?"

Lupin nodded, then looked very serious.

"This is important, Harry. All animagi have distinct features that mark them as what they are, and we need to be sure that we're right before we act. Is there anything you can think of? Any strange properties that couldn't be explained otherwise?"

"Scabbers never really showed anything impressive. We all just thought he was a normal rat in every way. He's been Ron's rat for as long as I've known him, but he said he belonged to Percy before that."

"The average lifespan of a brown rat is 2-3 years, and I'd argue the absolute minimum age for Scabbers is 4 years, but he could just be a particularly long-lived rat. Anything else?" Lupin prompted.

Harry racked his brain. He remembered the lesson McGonagall gave them on animagi, using her own transformation as an example. Her tabby cat had rectangular markings around its eyes which resembled the glasses she wore. The issue was that Harry didn't know what Pettigrew looked like, which made it that much more difficult for him to try and find features

in Scabbers. With all the weight Scabbers had lost recently from the stress of being around Crookshanks, it was even harder. Then Harry realised it.

"They say the only bit of Pettigrew left was his finger. Which finger?" he asked.

"They can't be certain, but they believe it was the index finger from his right hand," Lupin said.

"Scabbers is missing a toe on his right front paw," Harry said, "it really is him, isn't it? Peter Pettigrew is alive and has been hiding as Ron's pet rat."

He could practically see the revelation sinking in, and then something shifted in Lupin's face. The weariness was still there, but there was now more discipline and control baked into the lines as well.

"I need you to stay here and watch the map. Keep an eye on Pettigrew. I will be back as soon as I can. Do not tell anyone!"

Lupin waited long enough for Harry to nod, before snatching the little pot of floo powder from next to the fireplace and tossing a pinch into the flames, which immediately turned bright green.

"Ministry of Magic!"

Lupin vanished in a roar of emerald fire. Harry sat down in Lupin's now vacant chair, his eyes fixed on Pettigrew's dot. It wasn't moving, but then Harry already knew that Scabbers was a lazy rat. He would sleep the day away, only waking up long enough for Ron to feed him. Obviously he did move, but that only made Harry's face twist in revulsion. Knowing that it hadn't been a rat but instead a grown man that had, at one point, rooted around and slept in each of their underwear drawers was so much more disgusting.

It was half an hour before Lupin returned, but he wasn't alone. Stepping out of the fire first was a short woman with hair that curled slightly at the tips, wearing a monocle in her left eye. Next came Lupin and following after him was a tall, broad, bald man with dark skin and navy blue robes.

"Madam Bones, Auror Shacklebolt, this is Harry Potter who I told you I've been speaking with. Harry, this is Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and Kingsley Shacklebolt, an Auror. I guess for lack of a better comparison, you could say he serves a similar role to a muggle policeman," Lupin said to introduce them.

The two of them nodded, and then Madam Bones homed in on the Marauders map, still open on Lupin's desk.

"This is it?" she said.

"It is. I've explained to you how it works. As you can see here, this is the location of my office with the three of us and Harry registered here. I did not know which Auror you'd be

bringing with you, and as you arrived first, you can confirm that I didn't tamper with it, yet Shacklebolt's name is clearly there," Lupin said, "and up here is Peter."

Madam Bones and Shacklebolt both scanned the map.

"This seems very plausible. Detaining Pettigrew and questioning him is a top priority," Madam Bones said, "do you have something we could use? A cage or basket that a rat wouldn't be able to get out of?"

Lupin dug through a drawer and pulled out a small cage. The gaps between the bars were tiny.

"We have a problem Madam Bones. If he lives in the boys dormitory, he'll likely be very suspicious if anyone besides the five occupants enters without a good reason, doubly so for Professor Lupin since he is an old friend," Shacklebolt said.

"I agree," Madam Bones, "we don't want him to escape or we will never get to the bottom of this."

"I could do it."

All eyes turned to Harry for the first time since the introductions.

"It's my dormitory, and since it's the Christmas break, I've been spending a lot of time up there. Ron's also a friend, so he shouldn't find me suspicious," Harry said.

Madam Bones pursed her lips, staring at him imperiously through her monocle.

"It may be the best option Madam," Shacklebolt said.

"Very well Potter. Get this rat out of the dormitory without raising suspicion and we'll handle it from there," Madam Bones said.

Harry led them up to Gryffindor Tower with Lupin watching the map closely. Nobody else was in the common room, so there was nobody to question them. Lupin and Madam Bones remained in the common room but Shacklebolt followed him up the stairs. The man remained out of sight as Harry walked into the dormitory. If this was normal, he would sit down on his bed and close the hangings, so that was what he did, except as he was pulling the hangings closed, he looked over to Ron's bed.

Scabbers was lying on the pillow. He was much thinner than when Harry first met him, and there were small patches of fur missing. A toe on his front right paw was clearly missing. He had looked up when Harry entered but then dropped back down to go to sleep again. Harry walked over to Ron's bed, kneeling down beside him. Scabbers looked up again.

"It's just me Scabbers. Sorry to disturb your nap."

He sat on the bed and carefully stroked a finger down Scabbers's back.

"Ron was right. You're not doing very well, are you?"

Scabbers arched into his hand, allowing Harry to lift him up and put him on his lap. Almost immediately, Scabbers snuggled against his crotch, and Harry was barely able to suppress the grimace. How many times had Harry seen this exact same thing?

"You're probably due another dose of rat tonic."

He rummaged in Ron's bedside drawers, ignoring the small bottle of red liquid he'd seen Ron giving the rat.

"He must have left it down in the common room," this caused Scabbers to tremble, "don't worry. Crookshanks is in his basket so you'll be perfectly safe."

Harry picked Scabbers up and waited until the rat stopped trembling before standing and heading for the door. As he stepped onto the stairs, a wand appeared from over his shoulder, aiming at Scabbers who went limp in Harry's hold. Shacklebolt appeared from the shadows.

"Quickly now," he said in his deep voice.

As soon as he made it into the common room, Shacklebolt took Scabbers from him and put him into the cage. He and Madam Bones each tapped their wands to it, causing a series of clicks.

"Potter got him out of the room perfectly. He should be unconscious for about an hour," Shacklebolt said.

"Then we'd better get him into a sealed holding cell before he wakes up," Madam Bones said.

Without another word, she threw a pinch of floo powder into the common room fireplace, and she and Shacklebolt vanished into the flames. Lupin watched them go, a pinched look on his face.

"Are you alright Professor?"

"For twelve years, I thought my best friend had betrayed his brother to Voldemort and murdered another close friend. It was painful to be the last of the Marauders, but I had accepted it. Now everything I thought I knew might not be true. I guess it's taking time to sink in," Lupin said, "what about you?"

"Same."

"Needless to say, what has happened here must not be shared with anyone," Lupin said, "if I hear anything else, I'll let you know."

Lupin left Harry alone in the common room. It was strange, everything potentially changing but having to pretend nothing had. Even though it was exactly what he was doing with Ron and Hermione, this felt different, much more immediate. To pass the time, Harry sank onto one of the squishy armchairs by the fire and fiddled with the puzzle box. This was where Ron and Hermione found him when they returned to the common room.

"Um, Harry? Can we talk to you?"

Harry looked up from the puzzle box. Both of them looked contrite, and had this been last year, Harry would have actually felt guilty. Now though, he knew it was all an act.

"We wanted to apologise," Hermione said, "the things we said, yelling at you like that in front of the whole common room, it wasn't right. You hadn't done anything wrong, but we took our frustration with each other out on you."

"Sorry mate," Ron said.

Harry sighed.

"It hurt," he said, "you're my friends, but both of you expected me to take your side regardless of how I actually felt. I don't appreciate being used as a weapon to support one side over the other."

"We know, and everything you said back then was completely correct," Hermione said, "I wasn't being considerate of Ron's feelings about Scabbers and wasn't doing enough to keep better control over Crookshanks to stop him from pouncing."

"And I was being a complete hypocrite for complaining about Crookshanks when I let Scabbers do basically the same thing," Ron said, "do you forgive us?"

He sighed again, but nodded. The days of freedom he had were nice, but pulling away from Ron and Hermione was always going to be a long term plan.

"I think you should apologise to the other boys when they get back from the break, but yes, I forgive you."

Ron grinned. They chatted for a while, catching up on what they'd been doing while they'd not been speaking. Harry told them that he'd been exploring the castle, leaving out all the secret passageways and the Marauders Map. Hermione opened her mouth as though to criticise, but cut herself off, remembering she was supposed to be trying to get back into Harry's good graces. After a while, Ron stood.

"Scabbers needs his rat tonic. Should I bring the Exploding Snap down with me?"

They both nodded, and Ron went up the spiral staircase. Hermione sat down in front of Crookshanks's basket, crooning at the ginger cat through the wicker. That was when they heard a cry from the dormitory. They raced up the stairs and burst through the door to find Ron tearing his bed apart in a frantic search.

"Scabbers! I can't find him!"

"Could he have gotten out of the dormitory somehow?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know! The door was shut when I came up here!"

"I've been in the common room for a little while and I didn't see Scabbers come down," Harry said, "and Crookshanks is in his basket so we know he didn't do anything."

"We can help you look for him!" Hermione said.

So that was what they did. Hermione checked under all of the beds while Harry went through the bathroom. Though Ron clearly wanted to grumble about it, he and Harry also, as carefully as they could, went through everyone's clothes to see if he'd gotten in there. In the end, they searched as much of Gryffindor Tower as they could and found nothing. Harry had never seen Ron so upset. As much as he might complain about it, he clearly cared about Scabbers. Seeing him like this almost made Harry tell Ron about what he suspected.

"What's up with Ron!?" Fred asked when he and George came back to the common room later.

"Scabbers is gone and we can't find him," Harry said, "and before you ask, no it wasn't Crookshanks."

"We searched everywhere!" Ron cried, "could he have gotten out of Gryffindor Tower?"

"I just asked the Fat Lady," Hermione said, "she said she hasn't seen a rat leave the Tower."

Percy and Ginny arrived then, and Harry repeated what had happened to them. While Percy looked like he wanted to scold Ron for being an irresponsible pet owner, even he was cowed by the miserable look on his youngest brother's face. The other Weasley's searched their dormitories and turned up empty handed. Throughout it all, Harry remained silent. The truth about Pettigrew would likely be confirmed very soon, and if it was also revealed just how he had hidden himself, Ron would no doubt be mortified. Harry grew anxious at the thought of what would come out of the investigation. Whatever it was, it was likely to shake the wizarding world to its core.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you very much for reading this chapter!

I like to think that the reason Fred and George never found Pettigrew on the Marauders Map in the years they had it was because, while they were certainly pranksters, using it to see who was in the dormitories would be an invasion of privacy. When Harry had it, everything he would want to look at was elsewhere in the castle, hence why he never found Pettigrew either.

Breaking news!

Nothing much happened after that fruitless search, and a few days later the rest of the school returned from their Christmas holidays. The other Gryffindors quickly took in Ron's mood and figured something had happened while they were gone. Theories were developed and quickly discarded when they asked Harry and he told them about Scabbers going missing. They all promised to keep an eye out but it was clear that nobody believed he'd be found.

"I thought you weren't speaking to those two," Seamus asked as they walked to the first Ancient Runes lesson of the new term.

"I wasn't, but they apologised after Christmas," Harry said.

"And you accepted it?"

"I did. To be honest, I'm still hurt that they vented their frustrations on me, but they did make a genuine effort to take on board the things I said to them."

"Alright, but if I were you, I wouldn't let them back in so easily," Seamus said, "you don't deserve to be a sounding board for their arguments."

"Thanks. I appreciate the concern," Harry said genuinely.

Even if things were back to 'normal' between them, Harry was still keeping on guard. Several times he'd felt his ring heat up at meals, and he was still annoyed that he was never able to catch them in the act. Their sleight of hand was impressive, and there was only so subtle Harry could be about keeping his food away from them. Thankfully he was much better at artfully not eating anything they tried dosing. The fact that they were trying so often meant that they were worried about him slipping even further away after their falling-out, and they were trying to bring back into the fold.

Each morning, Harry waited for the post owls to arrive. Hermione had a subscription to the Daily Prophet, and no doubt any updates in the Pettigrew case would appear there. It took five days for it to happen, but when it did it was obvious. The owls came and went, dropping off various packages and letters to their intended recipients. Harry tucked into a bowl of porridge when Hermione suddenly gasped. A few seats away, Dean nearly spit out his pumpkin juice. Both of them were reading the front page of the Daily Prophet.

Innocent or guilty?

Shocking new evidence in the Sirius Black case casts doubt on the veracity of the charges.

Below the headline were two pictures side by side. One was the standard picture of Black taken in Azkaban, while the other showed a picture of a short, mousy looking man. Harry guessed it must be Pettigrew. Hermione quickly opened the paper to where the story was written in full and dove in to read it, laying it out flat so Harry and Ron could read it as well.

For the last twelve years, the wizarding community has been convinced that Sirius Black was guilty of mass murder, and a cloud of fear has descended over Britain with news of the man's escape from Azkaban. However, the investigation into his historic escape has uncovered new evidence which casts doubt on that surety of guilt, according to sources within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

On November 1st 1981, Sirius Black was sent to Azkaban for the murder of 12 Muggles and one wizard; a serious attack only a day after the downfall of He Who Must Not Be Named, who Black was also accused of supporting. The evidence at the time seemed damning, until it was recently discovered that Peter Pettigrew, the wizard supposedly killed by Black, is in fact still alive. This is at odds with the reports of Muggle witnesses, who claimed to have seen Black kill Pettigrew. How did Pettigrew survive the encounter? While going into hiding makes sense now that Black has escaped, for twelve years Black was incarcerated. Why remain hidden to everyone, even his own mother?

Sources within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement have confirmed that Pettigrew is still alive but refused to answer any other questions about the matter. "This remains part of an active investigation. Further details will be released when appropriate," said one Ministry representative. The Daily Prophet reached out to the Minister for Magic for comment and has yet to receive a response.

This latest discovery casts doubt over the current state of the search for Sirius Black, and also whether the Ministry performed its due diligence when Black was originally arrested. Ministry policy at the time was that Death Eaters could be sent to Azkaban without trial, a decision that has since been criticised by many in the magical community. The reporting surrounding Black's arrest does not make it clear whether Black received a trial to determine the truth of the matter. Given the uncertainty that Pettigrew's discovery raises, the full truth is sorely needed.

Harry finished reading it and sat down heavily in his chair. So Scabbers was Pettigrew all along. The story they'd all been told about what happened that night wasn't the full truth. All around the Great Hall, people spoke in whispers about this latest development. Up at the staff table, the teachers all looked very serious. Professor McGonagall was pale, her lips thin as she read the paper, while Snape looked practically murderous. Lupin had his head in his hands, Professor Sprout patting his shoulder consolingly. Harry noticed Dumbledore looked particularly annoyed, the twinkle in his eyes was gone.

"What about catching Black? They're still going to do it, right? I mean, he's a lunatic who escaped from Azkaban," Ron said.

"But if he was wrongfully imprisoned then it's understandable that he would want to escape," Hermione said.

"He's after Harry though!"

"We can't be sure of that now. It's just as likely that he somehow discovered that Pettigrew was alive and was going after him," Hermione said.

"Yeah, to finish the job!"

The school could talk of nothing else for the next few days but the discovery of Peter Pettigrew. Theories about both how he had escaped Black that night and how he was eventually discovered grew steadily more and more ridiculous. Harry overheard a Hufflepuff first year insisting that Pettigrew must have been recuperating on a remote Scottish island for the last twelve years, while others postulated that his rediscovery was probably incredibly boring with somebody spotting him in a Muggle supermarket. While the gossip was very funny, it took a week before somebody guessed at something close to the truth.

"What if he'd been hiding at Hogwarts?" Seamus said.

He, Harry and Dean were alone in the dormitory doing homework. They had managed to ditch Ron, who needed to work on an essay on palmistry for Divination, a class none of them took. They were all squeezed onto Dean's bed, with Harry sitting against the headboard, Seamus lying alongside him, and Dean resting against one of the posts at the end of the bed. Various books were spread out in the remaining space as they worked their way through their homework.

"What do you mean?" Dean asked, looking up from his Herbology essay.

"Well, the sightings were all steadily heading north, with the nearest not that far from Hogwarts, right? If it was Pettigrew he was after, then why come to Hogwarts unless that's where Pettigrew was?"

"But how would he know that? Surely if Pettigrew was hiding at Hogwarts, the teachers would have known. Judging by their expressions when the news broke, they were just as surprised as we were," Dean said.

"There's bound to be places to hide without people finding you. This place is huge!"

"True but Dumbledore is the headmaster. I don't think there's a lot that goes on in this place without him knowing," Dean said, "and there's all the portraits and the ghosts. There's more eyes in the castle than people think."

"I suppose," Seamus said, though he didn't sound convinced, "what do you think Harry?"

When Harry didn't immediately answer, they both looked up from their work at him.

"Harry?"

Harry startled out of his thoughts.

"Sorry, did you ask me something?"

"Is everything alright? You've been quiet lately," Dean said.

"We can stop talking about Black and Pettigrew if you want," Seamus said.

"No, it's alright, that's fine," Harry said, "it's just ... I don't know how to feel about the whole thing."

Both Seamus and Dean put their work aside to focus on him.

"How so?" Dean asked.

Harry's eyes flicked to the door, which remained closed.

"Sirius Black is my godfather," he said in a quiet voice, but in the otherwise silent dormitory, they both heard him.

Both of them looked stunned. In fairness, it was quite a large revelation.

"Apparently he was my dad's best friend, and when he died I should have gone to him," Harry continued, "but then all of this happened, and I don't even know what's supposed to be true. I didn't even know he existed until this summer when I heard that he was supposedly a mass murderer who escaped from an inescapable prison, and now even that might not be the case."

Harry pulled his knees up to his chest. Getting to talk about it with other people was nice, and neither Seamus nor Dean were judging him. They also hadn't immediately insisted that Sirius must still be guilty like Ron had.

"So everything about this has been really hard for you," Dean said.

"How come you didn't tell us before now?" Seamus asked.

"Because it seems ridiculous, right? I'm the Boy Who Lived, famous for defeating Voldemort when I was a baby," Harry ignored Seamus's little flinch hearing the name, "so of course my godfather has been in prison for murdering a bunch of people. Nothing about my life is normal. I didn't want to have something else to make people think I was 'special'."

"Well then Potter, you'll be pleased to know that you've only ever been Harry to us," Seamus said.

"Really?"

"I'm Muggleborn, so I didn't know who you were before Hogwarts," Dean said.

"And my Mam raised me better than to fawn over somebody for something as tragic as losing their parents," Seamus said, "besides, you're special enough without all that stuff."

The casual ease with which he said that, coupled with the approving nod from Dean, caused Harry's breath to hitch slightly. He pressed his head into his knees, hiding from them. Seamus moved so he was sitting beside him and he slung an arm over Harry's shoulder. He felt a hand touch his foot, a small gesture to show that Dean was there too. They were two simple touches, but they were kind and offered without hesitation. Harry kept his face hidden, not wanting either of them to see just how close he was to crying. Oh god this was embarrassing. Neither of them moved away, letting him work out his emotions without interruptions. Eventually he calmed down enough to lift his head.

"Sorry about that," he said.

"It's no problem," Seamus said, "you looked like you needed that."

"Do you want to keep working on homework, or are we done for the night?" Dean asked.

Harry looked at the scattered books and parchment. Any motivation he had to keep working was now gone. They both seemed to interpret his expression correctly.

"You know what we need. Ice cream," Seamus said, "Dad always says that something sweet when you're feeling down can work wonders."

"It's too bad there wasn't any ice cream for pudding tonight," Dean said, "we'll have to settle with whatever sweets we've got left over from Christmas."

"Unless," Harry said.

Both Seamus and Dean turned their attention back to him.

"If the pair of you are up for sneaking through the common room without Ron and Hermione seeing us, we could go down to the kitchens. I'm sure they've got ice cream there."

"That sounds awesome!" Seamus said.

"Let's pack away our things and then we can go," Dean said, ever the sensible one.

Making it through the common room was easy if they timed it for when Ron tried bugging Hermione, and Harry showed the two of them how to get into the kitchens. The house elves were more than happy to supply them with ice cream, and they ate the delicious treat while Dean politely asked the elves about their role at the school. It was a good end to an emotional day.

A week after the original article about Pettigrew came out, the gossip had died down slightly. Harry found himself at the centre of curiosity from the teachers. Many times he caught them watching him when they thought he wasn't looking, making excuses to walk down corridors he was in, and just generally keeping an eye on him. Professor McGonagall asked him to stay back after Transfiguration one day with a grave expression on her face.

"With all the rumours floating around after that story in the Daily Prophet, we decided it was best that you know the truth Potter," she said.

"About Sirius Black?" Harry asked.

"Yes. This may be difficult to hear, but Sirius Black is your godfather," McGonagall said, "you must understand that this wasn't kept from you maliciously. Up until now it seemed like he would never step a foot outside of Azkaban for the rest of his life, and to tell you the truth would have only burdened you more than you already are."

"But now there's a possibility that he might have been falsely imprisoned, and you didn't want me finding out about our connection through the newspaper," Harry said.

"Indeed," McGonagall said.

"I've known for a while Professor," Harry said, "Mr Weasley told me when I saw him at the end of the summer."

It wasn't quite the truth but it would have to do. McGonagall looked shocked.

"So all this time, you've known about Black's connection to you?"

"I have," Harry said, "I don't appreciate people keeping secrets from me. Even if it's hard to process, even if it's done out of kindness, I would much rather know the full picture than be drip-fed things which are important."

"I see," McGonagall said, "then I can only apologise for not informing you sooner. You're clearly made of stronger stuff than we thought."

After that conversation with McGonagall, the other teachers calmed down with their watching. The only one who didn't was Dumbledore. Harry often felt his eyes on him during meals, and it was in these times that Harry had to be careful with his food, as Ron and Hermione persistently tried dosing him. A few times Harry had to fake that he forgot something just for an excuse to dash to the kitchens for safe things to eat. Thankfully that didn't happen often.

Given that things had calmed down again, Harry was taken by surprise when one morning he felt the Dementors pushing against the wards. They kept trying to slip inside, but Hogwarts kept repelling them. It was so distracting that Harry didn't go down for a morning swim, the idea of being alone away from the main castle wasn't that appealing when he didn't have a way to defend himself should they succeed in gaining entry. Lupin made the Dementor on the train go away, so there had to be something he could learn.

Dumbledore, McGonagall and Lupin weren't at breakfast when Harry came down with Ron and Hermione. Their absence was noted, but then the post owls arrived, and the gasps that echoed throughout the Great Hall were practically deafening. In big bold letters on the front page of the Daily Prophet was a damning headline.

Peter Pettigrew Guilty

Pettigrew charged with multiple counts of murder and conspiracy.

Hermione didn't even get a chance to open the paper before Harry ripped it out of her hands.

Following a thorough investigation by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Peter Pettigrew has been found guilty for the murder of twelve Muggles, amongst many other charges. This finding also serves to exonerate Sirius Black, who had previously been imprisoned for all of these crimes. Speaking to the Daily Prophet earlier this morning, Madam Amelia Bones gave this statement.

"For twelve years, a man has been in Azkaban for crimes he did not commit. Sirius Black was accused of the murder of twelve Muggles, as well as conspiring with He Must Not Be Named to murder the Potter family. I can say with confidence that today we have discovered the true culprit behind these heinous crimes. Peter Pettigrew will face sentencing before the

Wizengamot and will likely spend the rest of his life in Azkaban. His twelve years of borrowed time are now over."

According to sources within the Department, the severity of the accusations was enough to warrant memory evaluation, followed by the application of Veritaserum to establish the details to many questions the Ministry had about the night in question. Both confirmed Pettigrew's guilt in this matter.

"Pettigrew was made the Potter's secret keeper as he was thought to be deeply loyal to Lord James, as well as being a much less obvious choice for the role. He then passed their location along to You Know Who. After the terrible events of that night, with Harry Potter taken to safety, Sirius Black then located Pettigrew, who made a scene by lying about what happened in front of witnesses. He was the one to cast the curse killing those twelve Muggles, and he also cast a powerful cheering charm on Black to make him appear insane when Ministry wizards arrived."

When asked how Pettigrew was able to evade capture and remain hidden for twelve years, a spokesperson for the Department revealed an astonishing piece of information.

"Amongst his list of charges is being an unregistered animagus. Pettigrew was able to transform into a rat, and had been living as a family pet."

Now that the truth about that night twelve years ago has been revealed, questions naturally arise about Sirius Black. The only criminal charges that can be applied to him now are breaking out of prison, but considering he was imprisoned illegally, it is unlikely that he will be charged. Many resources have been used to hunt Black down, including the placement of Dementors as guards around Hogwarts school. When asked about Sirius Black, Madam Bones had this to say.

"Quite correctly, many in the magical community have criticised the Ministry policy of automatically sending suspected Death Eaters to Azkaban without trial. Given the nature of the crimes he was accused of, Sirius Black was one of these people, and I declare now that this was a mistake. The Ministry has committed a grave injustice to not only a Lord of one of Britain's most prominent noble families, but also against a citizen who had famously fought against You Know Who during the war. As such, I hereby declare all missions to recapture Lord Black have officially ended."

"Sirius Black, though it is unlikely you will read these words, I would like to personally apologise for our actions. I know you have no reason to trust me, so I would encourage you to reach out to somebody that you do trust. I would like to meet with you and give you the proper investigation you were denied. You have my personal guarantee that you will receive justice."

The Daily Prophet reached out to the Minister for Magic for comment and has yet to receive a response. Similarly, we have also reached out to Lord Bartemius Crouch, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the time who implemented the policy of imprisonment without trial, and have likewise received no response.

The picture that accompanied the article was of a younger Sirius. No longer a screaming, emaciated corpse of a man screaming at them from a black and white image, now there was a handsome young man in the prime of his youth. A devilish grin which Harry recognised him from pictures of his parents' wedding. The paper was carefully removed from his hands, and Ron and Hermione quickly read it. Harry was too stunned to notice.

Pettigrew had been found guilty. Sirius was innocent. All that was going through Harry's mind was that now he finally had a living connection to his parents, one who he should have grown up with had things been different. He didn't even realise that a couple of tears were leaking down his cheeks until somebody put a hand on his shoulder, and Harry jumped out of skin.

"Are you alright Harry?" Neville asked.

Was he alright? There were too many emotions running through his mind to truthfully answer that question, so there was only one thing he could honestly say.

"I've got my godfather back."

Silence fell over those who heard him say those words.

"Black's your godfather!" Ron said, "but he's a-"

"No he's not Ron," Harry snapped, "you read the exact same thing as I did. Pettigrew framed him for those murders, and he didn't get a trial so nobody knew any different!"

"Why are you acting like you know him?"

"I don't know him, because that disgusting man destroyed my chances to get to know him!"

"Ron, that's enough! The evidence is clear. Pettigrew was the one to commit those crimes," Hermione said.

For his part, Ron did look contrite, but Harry was already leaving. He was in too good a mood to be brought down by Ron's ignorance. He made it up the marble staircase when he heard footsteps following him. Seamus and Dean were there.

"So, he was innocent all along," Dean said.

"Don't listen to Ron mate. He's a total git if he still thinks Black's guilty after all that," Seamus said.

"I'm not listening to him. I'm ... I'm really happy," Harry said, "I know things aren't going to change right away, but I've got my godfather back. I've ... I've got family again."

He was so happy! He felt the overwhelming urge to hug something, so that was what he did. He hugged Seamus and Dean tightly, and they hugged him back as he laughed and generally felt giddy. It was a bizarre feeling to have but Harry wasn't going to try forcing it away. This was the best news he had received since he woke up that morning in August following his magical inheritance.

Harry's good mood persisted for the entire day. Even Ron's apology for putting his foot in his mouth, meaning he had to spend time with him, wasn't enough to dampen it. The only thing which calmed him down was the fact that the tight control over his magical power was affected by his excess emotion. Fortunately their first lesson of the day was Charms, where ironically enough they were practising Cheering Charms. After Harry's attempt left Dean so extraordinarily happy that he was semi-catatonic, Flitwick took him to one side and gave him a few meditation exercises to help him regain control. Flitwick gave him a reassuring pat on the back, and the meditation was helpful. Afterwards, Dean told him he'd gotten a glimpse of what Harry must have been feeling at that moment.

Nobody could talk about anything else besides the surprise exoneration of Sirius Black by way of finding the real culprit. It was almost like something out of the trashy crime novels that Aunt Petunia liked to read. The teachers tried to keep control, but only those like McGonagall and Snape really succeeded. It was only much later on, when the school day was over and everyone had retreated to their dormitories, that people turned to the other important piece of news that had been revealed in the Daily Prophet.

"So Pettigrew's an animagus," Dean said as they worked on homework, "how come they didn't suspect that sooner?"

"They're supposed to be really rare," Parvati said, "I think in the last century there's only been like three, including McGonagall."

Everyone looked across the room to the three tables Hermione had commandeered for her mountains of work. Her curly hair was frizzier than normal, and nobody really wanted to disturb her to see if Parvati was right.

"Surely there's ways to know though," Ron said, happily abandoning his Potions essay in favour of the conversation, "I mean, there's got to be spells that can check for an animagus, otherwise all dark wizards would do it for easy access."

"McGonagall said the process to become one is really difficult so I doubt many would actually be able to," Harry said.

"She also said there's identifiable markings to distinguish an animagus from a regular animal," Seamus said, "makes you wonder what Pettigrew's was."

There was a lull in the conversation, and Harry was waiting for someone to make the connection.

"Hey Ron, didn't Scabbers have a toe missing?" Seamus asked.

"Yeah. Why?" Ron said, but then the implication registered, "no, absolutely not."

"Think about it, Scabbers was missing a toe in the same place that Pettigrew was missing a finger," Seamus continued.

"Scabbers was just an ordinary rat!" Ron insisted, "ask Percy! Scabbers was his rat before mine. He's been in our family for years!"

"That's a long time for a normal rat to live," Neville said quietly.

"And he went missing over the Christmas break without a trace," Seamus said.

"This is mental! There's no way! No way at all!" Ron argued, but it was much weaker than before as the realisation sank in, "I did not sleep with a grown man in my bed."

But his denial didn't stop a look of dawning horror appearing on his face. At those words, the other Gryffindor boys came to the same conclusion, and their expressions morphed into the same disgust Harry had felt when he confronted Pettigrew.

"Do you think we can write to the Ministry and get them to add more charges to the list?" Seamus said, his face flushed red with anger, "because that disgusting pervert should never see the light of day again."

Twelve years of lost time

The horror of Pettigrew's true identity grossed Ron out so much he completely stripped his bedsheets and tossed them out. Likewise, anything he had for Scabbers was thrown in the bin. Harry watched all of this with the other boys as they got ready for bed. It was so tempting to point out all the times Ron allowed Scabbers to rub himself over everything, but considering how badly he was taking this, they all remained silent. Harry busied himself by pouring over a broom catalogue. The next Gryffindor Quidditch game was in February, so he really needed to replace his Nimbus. At least money was no issue.

As the days passed by, Harry watched through the Marauders map as Dumbledore was visited by many people he could only guess were from the Ministry. The Dementors had been increasingly restless in their positions at the boundary. There was talk at breakfast one morning about them being removed now that Black was no longer a threat. It was also noted that Lupin was less frequently seen at meals, and during classes he seemed both tired and invigorated at the same time.

"Please come to my office after dinner Potter," McGonagall said as he was packing away after Transfiguration.

Ron gave him a questioning glance, but all Harry could do was shrug. It had only been a week since Pettigrew was found guilty. Lupin hadn't said anything about any developments, and Andromeda hadn't sent any letters. It was with some trepidation that Harry knocked on McGonagall's door after dinner. When he entered, he saw Lupin was there as well.

"Have a seat Potter," McGonagall said, gesturing to the chair across the desk from her.

"He turned himself in," Lupin said once he'd sat down.

"What? Sirius? But how? When?"

"After the story broke in the Daily Prophet, I received a letter from one of the school owls. It was from Sirius, asking me to meet with him," Lupin said, "it was cryptic, but there was only one place he could have meant. I helped set up a meeting with Madam Bones. Sirius was officially questioned yesterday under truth serum, with further review of his memories to confirm the exact circumstances."

"Does this mean he's been cleared?" Harry asked.

"Yes, he's cleared," Lupin said, sounding just as happy as Harry felt.

"We didn't just bring you here to share this news, though I trust that you'll keep it to yourself. Word of Sirius turning himself in is being kept from the press to give him a chance to recover," McGonagall said, "Sirius has asked to meet you."

This news stunned Harry. While he wanted to meet with Sirius himself, he had never expected it to be so soon.

"He does?"

"Apparently it was the first thing he asked for," Lupin said, "well, after a shower and the greasiest burger imaginable."

"As your head of house, I can grant you permission to leave the school for a brief time should you wish to meet him. I'd understand whatever choice you decide to make," McGonagall said.

"Can I meet him now?"

"Not right now. It'll take a couple of days to get things sorted," McGonagall said, "the earliest would be this weekend."

"I can wait until the weekend," Harry said immediately.

"Harry, I know you're excited, but please temper your expectations a little," Lupin said, "it wouldn't be good for either of you to go in there with too high an expectation of what the other is like. I said the same thing to Sirius when we talked. Twelve years in the 'care' of the Dementors is a lot to recover from, and he's only just started on that journey."

That sobered Harry up immediately. Of course things wouldn't automatically be fixed now that Sirius was found to be innocent. Harry remembered the feeling of the Dementor on the train very clearly. It had been awful, so he could hardly imagine what it must have been like to spend every moment of every day with them. The more he heard about Azkaban, the more terrible it seemed. Even for the worst people alive, did anyone really deserve that? McGonagall and Lupin accepted his seriousness and sent him away with a perfectly reasonable excuse to give to anyone who asked.

Harry's excitement grew as the weekend approached, though it was tempered by the gravity of the situation. On Saturday, he met McGonagall in her office. Harry didn't have much experience with the floo network. The first time he'd ever used it, he'd ended up coming out of the wrong fireplace. Upon hearing this, McGonagall took a hold of his arm and stepped into the fire, saying "St Mungo's Hospital, Edith Tanhill Ward" as she did so. It was disorienting to travel by floo powder, but after a whirlwind of green fire and soot, they stepped out into an empty room.

St Mungo's was the main wizarding hospital in Britain. The receiving room they'd arrived in was pristine, with large portraits of famous Healers on the walls. Harry could hear a low level of noise coming from elsewhere in the building. A moment after they arrived, a witch dressed in the same green robes that Andromeda had worn entered the room.

"On time as ever Minerva," she said.

"Of course Evelyn," McGonagall said.

The witch, Evelyn, turned to Harry.

"It's a pleasure to meet you in person Mr Potter. My name is Evelyn Pryce, matron for the Edith Tanhill Ward, affectionately known as the Sensitive Cases Ward. Given the nature of our guest, I ask that you do not mention his name until you are inside his room and the door is closed. If you need to, you may call him Mr Wolfstar. Am I clear?"

Harry nodded.

"Very well. If you'd both follow me please."

Considering he could hear other people in the hospital, Harry expected the corridors outside to be full of people, yet when they left the room they were alone. They were at one end of a long hallway with many doors leading out from it. The doors didn't have windows so Harry couldn't see through them as they passed.

"The Edith Tanhill Ward was set up for those patients who for whatever reason cannot be placed on a public ward. Most commonly this is due to the nature of their condition, such as extreme infectiousness, highly noticeable or embarrassing symptoms, or a decrease in immune response causing secondary infection concerns," Healer Pryce said, easily spotting Harry's curious glances, "it is also used for patients where there are security risks, either the risk to the patient or the risk the patient poses to others. As a result, this ward is kept separated from the main hospital, each room is warded to prevent information leakage, and only those with prior clearance can access it."

Those were some hefty precautions. Harry wondered where on that spectrum Sirius was, but he thought better than to ask. All the doors were nondescript but Healer Pryce stopped in front of one and knocked.

"Mr Wolfstar, it is Healer Pryce with visitors for you. I'm coming in."

She opened the door to reveal a reasonably sized room. Light streamed in from the large narrow window, but the glass was frosted so Harry couldn't see the view of the outside. The room was only lightly decorated, with a bed situated in the centre. Harry couldn't take his eyes away from the man propped up on pillows.

Having seen the same picture of the man basically everyday since August, it was surreal to see Sirius Black in the flesh. With sunken cheeks, pale skin and scraggly long hair, he was a world away from the handsome man at his parents wedding. Sirius seemed just as shocked to see Harry there. Neither of them looked away.

"Harry?" he said, his voice breathy and slightly weak.

As much as Harry had wanted to meet his godfather, now that he was here he had no idea what to say. McGonagall stepped forward at that moment, and it was almost funny how Sirius straightened up when he saw her. Healer Pryce closed the door behind them.

"Professor?"

"It's been a long time Mr Black."

"Yes it has. I wish I could say the years have been as kind to me as they've been to you," Sirius said, smiling though it didn't reach his eyes, "would it be possible to speak to Harry alone?"

McGonagall shared a brief look with Healer Pryce, who nodded.

"We'll be just outside. Knock on the door or ring the bell if you need us," Healer Pryce said.

And just like that, Harry was alone with Sirius. Neither of them said anything, and the silence was slightly awkward. Harry kept searching for something in Sirius's face, what he didn't know. How was he supposed to address this man? Was there a proper way to address the godfather you only learned existed six months ago? Eventually, just as the awkwardness was becoming unbearable, Sirius broke the silence.

"For the last twelve years, I've waited for this moment, and now that it's here, I haven't the faintest idea what to say."

Harry chuckled slightly.

"Same here," he said, "h-how are you?"

Even as soon as he said it, he knew the question was stupid. The man looked like somebody breathed life into an emaciated corpse!

"A hell of a lot better than I was, even if I've just traded one cell for another," Sirius said, "at least this one has a soft bed. The meals are an improvement too, when I'm able to eat them."

Sirius stared wistfully at the bedsheets before returning his gaze to Harry.

"I'm sure you must have lots of questions."

"So many."

"Then pull up a chair," Sirius said, "I'm not going anywhere, and I've got a fair few questions myself."

Harry sat down. The silence fell over them once again. It took remembering the conversations he'd had back and forth with Andromeda for him to pull himself together enough to speak. He was the Lord of Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin. He could handle a conversation. Only when he opened his mouth, Sirius let out a short, bark-like laugh.

"Sorry, you just reminded me of James so much in that moment I couldn't help it."

"How so?"

"James definitely had a way with words, but he was much more of a charmer, and serious conversations were never really his thing," Sirius said, "I saw him make the exact same face that you just made so many times when he was about to have a Talk. I always just thought it was Lordship training, but now I think it might be genetic."

"It's not the weirdest thing I've been told I've inherited from my parents," Harry said.

"I'm sure it isn't. You fly like him too," Sirius said, "better, I'd argue, at least enough that you wouldn't complain about the bad weather."

"Dad didn't like to fly in bad weather?"

Sirius gave him a flat look.

"Did you like flying in that storm?" he said.

"Not in the slightest," Harry said, "you were at that game? How? There's no way you could have gotten onto the grounds."

Sirius didn't answer immediately. He fiddled with the blanket, running the soft material through his bony hands.

"I've already told Madam Bones. I'm sure it'll come out eventually, so I might as well tell you now," he muttered to himself before looking up at Harry again, "how much do you know about Peter Pettigrew?"

"Only what was in the papers, and what Professor Lupin told me."

"They said that Pettigrew is an animagus, and that is true, but anyone who knew him would tell you that Peter wasn't the brightest candle in the chandelier. The only way he could become an animagus was because I showed him how."

Harry opened his mouth, the question already forming, but then he paused. Connections were being made, and they all led to one answer.

"You can turn into a dog," he said.

Sirius barked out another laugh.

"Remus said you were sharp," he said, "yes, I can turn into a dog. I won't tell you why I became an animagus, perhaps one day but not now, but it's important because that's how all of this began."

"For twelve years, the only thing keeping me going was the knowledge that I was innocent. It wasn't a happy thought, in many ways it was torture, so the Dementors couldn't take it away, and by wrapping myself up in that conviction, I was able to keep my mind while everyone around me went mad. The Dementors can't see like we do. An animal's emotions are ... lesser in a way, and their power doesn't affect them as much. I'd transform into a dog in my cell and just exist."

"That was when I saw Peter in the paper. I recognised him immediately, and I knew I needed to deal with him, because while Peter had always been a coward, he was also inherently self interested. Hiding with a wizard family gave him access to information, the kind of stuff he could use to get back into You Know Who's good graces," Sirius said, "and he was far too close to you. I couldn't have that. When they opened my cell to bring food, I slipped past

them as a dog and made it out of the prison. Somehow I managed to swim back to shore, and that was that."

"You were in Magnolia Crescent when I caught the Knight bus, and there was a dog on a hill at the Quidditch match," Harry said.

"I needed to see you, to make sure you were alright. It was pure luck," Sirius said, "it was a long journey north, and I made it to Hogwarts on a stormy day. When I saw everyone heading out to the Quidditch pitch, I guessed that there had to be a game on. I was exhausted, starving. I ... I needed something good!"

"I didn't even know who was playing until I heard the commentary. Imagine my surprise when I heard it was Gryffindor, and even more so when I heard that Potter was the Seeker," Sirius said, "I'm sorry about your broom, by the way."

"So you've been at Hogwarts for months," Harry said, "how come you didn't do anything?"

"I wanted to, but I really wasn't kidding when I said I was starving. I didn't have the strength to do anything, and I probably would have died had it not been for Crookshanks," Sirius chuckled, "that cat pegged me as human as soon as he saw me, but more importantly, he knew about Pettigrew as well and I was able to explain why I was there. He snuck small bits of food out of the castle, just enough to let me build up enough strength to manage myself. By the time I was ready, it was the Christmas holidays. Crookshanks told me that Peter was being kept under closer surveillance by the wizard who owned him."

"Ron was really angry that Crookshanks kept trying to eat him," Harry said.

"It didn't matter in the end," Sirius said, "Remus told me how you came to him with the Marauders Map. I guess you know the rest."

It was a long, slightly harrowing tale. Even just the idea of having to swim from an island to the shore as a dog sounded horrible, and Harry had grown to like swimming.

"Remus also told me you've got quite the story yourself," Sirius prompted, causing Harry to jolt.

"W-what did he tell you?"

"Not much. A lot less than what you yourself did that day on the shore of the lake," Sirius gestured to Harry's hand, "it's been a while since I've seen that ring."

Harry twisted the Lordship ring around his finger. It flashed between the Potter ring and the Black Heir ring.

"Well met Lord Black," Harry said, looking up to meet Sirius's eye.

"Well met Heir Black," Sirius said in return, "and by the look of things, Lord Potter as well. When did you inherit?"

"A couple of days after you saw me on the Knight bus," Harry said, "that's what started all of this. I saw that you were my godfather and had named me your Heir, and I thought that didn't make sense if you also wanted me dead. When I met Andromeda, she said the same thing and started looking into it."

"You met Andy? She was always my favourite cousin."

"She helped me find my feet a little after ... everything else I found out," Harry took a steadying breath, "they tried to make a mindless puppet!"

"Not here," Sirius said, "I know they say this ward is shielded for privacy but I don't trust it. You already told me enough that day by the lake for me to be concerned. If you want, when we're somewhere more secure, you can tell me everything."

"Alright," Harry said, though he wasn't happy about it, "I've just been playing along for now so I don't act too suspiciously. It's been hard since I don't even know who's behind it all. The goblins still haven't been able to find who my magical guardian is. Do you know?"

"I'm afraid I don't. If anything happened to your mum and dad, you were always supposed to come to either me or Alice Longbottom," Sirius said.

"So does that mean I can live with you?" Harry asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"I really want that, believe me I do, but I don't think they'll let me."

"Why? You've been cleared," Harry said, "please Sirius, I can't go back to living with the Dursleys, not after everything I've learned about myself this year."

"It has nothing to do with my criminal history and everything to do with the other circumstances," Sirius said, "I've no idea what happened to my old flat, probably repossessed, and the Black family properties have all been empty for years so I have no idea what state they'd be in."

He gestured to the bedside table, which was mostly covered in an array of potion bottles.

"As you can see, I'm on quite the cocktail of potions to help me recover from twelve years with Dementors. Nutrition potions, immunity potions, I think there's one in there to help my teeth as well. Once my case has been fully processed, they'll find me a Mind Healer as well. All in all, it'll be months of recovery. I highly doubt they'll let me leave this hospital room without a safe, clean environment to heal in, let alone look after you."

"Then stay with me."

Sirius looked stunned.

"You're a Lord of a Most Ancient and Noble House, right? You can afford to recover at home, so why don't you stay at Potter Manor?" Harry said, "it's a comfortable enough room but you've already said it feels like a prison cell. Andromeda also said she does treatment for the noble families because she understands the need for subtly. You can stay there while you

recover, and they can hardly say no to me visiting my own house. In the meantime you can also have one of your other properties fixed up so there'll be no possible arguments."

"Harry, I never wanted to be Lord Black," Sirius said.

"I don't care. It's something we can use, and I ... I need help, Sirius. There's so much going on, and so much I don't know anything about, and," Harry ducked his head, "please."

A bony hand reached out and rested on top of Harry's.

"You will always have my help Harry, that I swore when I became your godfather," Sirius said, "and I think we just discovered another thing you inherited from your dad. That stubbornness just now was all James."

A chuckle forced its way past Harry's lips.

"Professor Lupin said the same thing."

"Quite rightly," Sirius said, leaning back in bed, "and I'll do it. Potter Manor will be a hell of a lot better than here."

Sirius turned, reaching out to his bedside table and extracting a sheet of parchment from beneath a copy of the Daily Prophet.

"And in the meantime, there is something I can do right now to help you, even if it's only in a small way."

Harry recognised the order form for Which Broomstick and his eyes widened. He opened his mouth to protest but Sirius held a hand up to stop him.

"No complaints. As godfather, it is my duty to spoil my godson rotten in ways that annoy his parents. Think of this as twelve years worth of missed birthday presents."

"How come you're so happy?" Ron asked Harry one day as they walked down to breakfast.

Truthfully, Harry had many, many things to be happy about. A few days after his visit with Sirius, the Dementors had been removed from the boundaries of the school. No longer fearing their unauthorised entry to the grounds, Harry had been able to resume his morning swims. He was getting stronger, able to swim for longer periods without breaks. The water was still cold in the February chill, but he had gotten so good at casting the warming charm, he could draw his wand and cast it with barely a stroke missed.

The common room also felt calmer. With no Scabbers to increase the tension between them, Ron and Hermione no longer argued as much. Crookshanks looked slightly smug whenever it saw Ron, though it was hard to tell with how squished its face looked, and Harry found it to be actually a very pleasant cat to be around. It was nice to read books by the fire with a cat purring in his lap. Now that he had calmed down from the initial horror of finding out exactly

what Scabbers was, Ron refused to speak of it out of severe embarrassment. Fortunately for him, no one else was inclined to bring it up either.

Classes were going very well. Harry decided to use his good mood to justify using just a little bit more of his magical power in class. That combined with his clear mind allowed him to improve his average marks in Transfiguration and Charms, to the approval of both teachers. Hermione had pursed her lips when Harry did better than her at casting the Cheering Charm until he pointed out that his own happiness had been a big factor.

"There is a link between magic and emotions. Of course being happy would make a happiness spell more powerful."

Flitwick, who happened to hear this, agreed with him, and their next Charms lessons included an overview of other emotion based spells which could be influenced by how the caster was feeling. That soothed whatever ire Hermione had. Harry wisely didn't point out that her missing the first lesson where they covered Cheering Charms probably didn't help her being a bit behind.

In short, Harry had many reasons to be happy.

"Things are going well," Harry said.

"Are you kidding? Are the teachers trying to kill us with how much homework they're giving us? Even Hagrid!"

There was a small commotion when the post owls arrived, with three large grey owls working together to deliver a long, thin package. They deftly set it down in front of Harry without smashing into anyone's plates, and Harry happily fed each of them some bacon. The package was wrapped in brown paper, but it was obvious what it was.

"Excellent! Perfect timing for your new broomstick to arrive Potter," Wood said, getting up from his seat further down the table to stand behind Harry, "what did you go for in the end?"

Harry carefully unwrapped the paper. There on the Gryffindor table, with an exquisitely polished handle and perfectly trimmed twigs, was a Firebolt. Jaws dropped from the people around him, and a silence fell over the Great Hall as the news of the Firebolt spread. Oliver Wood was looking at it as though it was the answer to the mysteries of the universe.

"Harry, where the hell did you get this?" Ron asked breathlessly.

"It's a present from Sirius," Harry said, "he insisted on repaying me for twelve years of missed birthdays."

"You got this from Sirius Black! And you trust it?"

"Of course I do," Harry snapped.

"Don't be like that Harry. Ron's just worried about you. After all, even if he's innocent, he still spent years in Azkaban," Hermione said, "it'd be a good idea to have it checked for any accidental tampering, just in case."

"Why would I do that? Sirius hasn't been near this broom. All he did was give me the filled-in order form," Harry said, "there's nothing wrong with it, and I'll thank you to not speak ill of my godfather again."

Taking hold of the Firebolt, Harry stood from the table. Wood trailed after him as though hypnotised by the sight of the broom.

"Wait!"

Ron was now standing as well, gawking at the Firebolt.

"Could ... Could I have a go? Please! Just for a little bit!"

"I thought you didn't trust it?"

Ron spluttered, which was the perfect opportunity for Harry to leave the Great Hall. Quidditch practice that night went better than he'd ever experienced. The whole team had marvelled over the Firebolt, and Madam Hooch even came down for the start of training to give her professional opinion. Harry soared through the air, weaving in and out of his teammates and catching the Snitch every single time it was released. Needless to say when they faced Ravenclaw a week later, Gryffindor won. Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw Seeker, did an admirable job marking Harry and making his life harder, but Harry still managed to catch the Snitch before her.

As he held the tiny golden ball above his head, his teammates crowding around him, Harry beamed, never having felt so happy before.

Gaining allies

As the major upheavals caused by the discovery of Pettigrew and the exoneration of Sirius faded into the past, things began to settle down at Hogwarts. February passed by with little issue. Harry was still putting up a front of friendship with Ron and Hermione, but now that there was no serial killer trying to break in and kill him, both of them were more relaxed, and he didn't have to avoid any more attempts to dose his food. In fact, Harry barely had to avoid Hermione at all. Her workload was so vast, she spent every night with her homework spread across three tables in the common room. Seamus kept smirking whenever he saw it, and often spoke about what he was going to spend the five sickles they'd put forward in the bet on.

One morning towards the end of February, a large eagle owl dropped a letter in front of Harry. Given that he never usually got any post, and the last package he'd received was a Firebolt, more than a few heads turned in his direction. It was a letter from Sirius.

Dear Harry

I'm now officially set up at Potter Manor for the rest of my recovery. It's been a long time since I was here, but the elves all remembered me and welcomed me back with open arms. Honestly, anywhere would be better than the room at St Mungo's, even if that was a vast improvement over Azkaban.

Andy visits most days, both to check my progress and to catch me up on all I've missed since I've been away. Most of it is really boring stuff. Hopefully during the summer, you can fill me in on what your time at Hogwarts has been like.

I'm not sure how busy you'll be during the Easter holidays, what with exams coming up soon after, but I wouldn't be averse to some company. I was a dab hand at Transfiguration in my day if you feel the need for a bribe. If you can't make it, that's fine. Your school work is more important. On that note, I enclose something else with this letter which should make things a bit more enjoyable.

Stay safe and keep in touch.

Kindest regards,

Sirius

Harry shook the envelope and another sheet of parchment came out. There wasn't much written on it, but it made Harry's heart leap. It read " *I, Sirius Black, give permission for Harry James Potter, my godson, to visit Hogsmeade on weekends* ". Ron, who had been reading over Harry's shoulder, let out a gasp.

"He's given you permission to visit Hogsmeade!"

"He has," Harry said.

"Can he do that? I thought a parent or guardian needed to sign the form," Hermione said, sounding confused.

"He's my godfather."

"I know that, but you don't live with him. I don't think I'd be able to get away with having my godfather sign the form if my parents didn't."

"Shut up Hermione. This is great!" Ron said, "now you'll actually be able to come to the village with us! It's too bad the next one's not going to be until after exams, but that just means we can go without feeling guilty!"

Hermione huffed. There were bags under her eyes, showing a persistent lack of sleep. While he didn't want to ask the question, since Ron was doing it well enough, Harry was curious how Hermione had been getting to all her classes. She hadn't missed a single Arithmancy or Ancient Runes class, Neville said she was always in Muggle Studies, and Ron talked enough about what they were doing in Care of Magical Creatures for Harry to know that Hermione hadn't missed a lesson there either.

The only things Harry could think of were either clones or time travel. Both seemed completely ridiculous, but either would explain the bizarre things he was seeing from her. However, as much as he was curious, Harry wasn't going to ask. There were times when Ron asked where Harry caught the subtle glance he would get, as though he was supposed to be playing along, but Harry kept saying he believed her original answer, that she had permission to miss certain classes, even if it was obviously a lie. Nothing really came of this until one morning in mid March.

Harry bade goodbye to Ron and Hermione as they went up to the North Tower for Divination, while he and Seamus headed to Ancient Runes. They had been taught enough of the runic language that the translations they were being set were longer and more complex. It was difficult to stay on top of them, and Harry wasn't sure he'd be able to it if it wasn't for Seamus. They had just taken their seats when Hermione came storming through the door, looking very angry. She sat down in the seat in front of them with a huff, tucking something into the front of her robes. Ernie, who sat next to her, inched away.

"Honestly, I cannot believe that woman. Why didn't I drop that class months ago? It was such a waste of time!" she seethed under breath as she pulled out her books and quill.

"Is she alright?" Harry whispered to Seamus.

"Doesn't sound like it," Seamus whispered back, "do you reckon something happened on the way up to Divination?"

As though hearing them, Hermione turned in her seat to fix Harry with a scrutinising stare.

"Harry, you were completely right to have not taken Divination. The whole subject is completely ridiculous!"

"Oh," Harry said, "does that mean you dropped it?"

"Yes. I just hope I don't have to take the exam since it's so late in the school year, but I'm sure Professor McGonagall will agree. She thinks it's a ridiculous subject as well," Hermione rattled off.

He was saved from replying by Professor Babbling, who began lecturing them about how tenses influenced runic magic. When they left the classroom to head to Transfiguration, Hermione left in a hurry. Harry held out a hand to Seamus, raising an eyebrow at him. Seamus huffed, and dug around in his bag until five silver sickles were handed across.

"Pleasure doing business with you."

"There's still time yet for her to have a breakdown," Seamus said.

"Who's having a breakdown?" Dean asked as he joined them.

They filled him in on what Hermione had done. The news that Hermione Granger, goody two shoes bookworm rule follower Hermione Granger, had stormed out of a class spread through the entire school within an hour. They heard whispers about it at lunch, but Hermione simply held her head high, as though looking down on those who would question her.

"Professor McGonagall said there was no issue with me no longer taking that class," was all she said whenever anyone asked her about it.

Truthfully, the one who had the most issue with it was Ron, as he loudly complained in the common room that night.

"First Harry abandons me to that class and now you!" Ron said, "at least you've got a million other classes you can fall back on. I'm stuck there! It's so boring!"

Harry decided not to comment on this. He remembered when he and Ron had gone over the brochures for the different optional classes taught at Hogwarts. The only reason they both chose Divination was because they thought it sounded easy, not because they thought either of them would be particularly good at it. It was what he told Lavender when she asked during one of their library study sessions. Dean was finishing off an essay for Herbology with Seamus, while Harry, Parvati and Lavender worked on Defence Against the Dark Arts. Lupin had set them an essay on how to handle an infestation of pixies after hearing about their disastrous lesson from Lockhart the previous year.

"I suppose that makes sense," Lavender said, "all he does is complain or sleep in class. I think Professor Trelawney was offended by it at first, but now she just ignores him."

"He makes things up for his homework," Harry said.

"We know," Lavender said grumpily.

Parvati, who would usually have joined in the conversation by now, was frowning at her homework while rubbing her eyes. It was unusual to see the girl so quiet.

"Everything alright?" Harry asked.

"Hm? Oh, yes, sorry," Parvati said, "I've not been sleeping well lately."

"Have you been to see Madam Pomfrey?"

"While it's sweet of you to ask, I'll be fine," Parvati said, "I'm a lot better than Hermione is. I swear, that girl always comes up to bed really late!"

"I know. She's going to burn out really badly if she keeps it up," Lavender said, "but there's no point in suggesting she drop any of her classes. She always snaps at us whenever we say anything about it."

"Same here," Harry said.

March was very nearly over, and with it came the final Quidditch match of the season, Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Gryffindor were in a strong position to win the cup, but Slytherin were close behind them. It was important that they win this game with a large enough margin. They walked out onto the pitch to a tumult of noise. Three quarters of the stands were waving flags of red and gold, while the stands near the Slytherin end of the pitch were a sea of green and silver. Harry met Malfoy's eyes across the field. Madam Hooch blew her whistle and fourteen blurs shot into the sky.

Unlike Cho, who tried marking Harry the entire game, Malfoy circled the pitch, obviously trying to find the Snitch first. In a contest of speed, Harry would win. Both had keen eyes, and they scanned the pitch constantly. Below them, the Chasers for both sides were playing a ferocious game. Whoever won would win the cup, and tensions were high. Fred and George were smacking Bludgers at the Slytherin players constantly, while Angelina, Alicia and Katie all ducked and weaved around the opposing Chasers.

Gryffindor were in the lead by 30 points when Harry spotted the Snitch. It was hovering near the ground by the Slytherin goal posts, on the other side of the pitch. Harry dove for it, racing as fast as he could. Malfoy spotted him moving, and quickly tracked what he'd seen. The two of them were neck and neck as the Snitch skimmed just above the ground, practically begging one of them to crash. It suddenly shot upwards. Harry reacted faster, yanking his Firebolt up to give chase. He lunged forward, grabbing the tiny golden ball in his fist.

Just like that, Gryffindor had won the Quidditch cup for the first time since Charlie Weasley was on the team. The others crashed into him and they descended to the ground in one big bundle of scarlet and gold. Everything that followed was something of a blur. One minute he was on the pitch, watching Professor Dumbledore present the Quidditch cup, the next he was in the Gryffindor common room where the party was in full swing. It was a haze of congratulations and back slaps, and Harry was eventually spat out near the table laden with food and drink. Hermione was sitting on a chair nearby, valiantly trying to read a book.

"Hermione?"

"Oh!" she practically jumped out of her seat.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked, since he was still supposed to be her friend.

"I'm perfectly fine," Hermione said, though she sounded a bit hysterical.

"I think you need to take a break. Not studying for one night won't kill you," Harry said, "did you even come to the match?"

"Of course I did, and I'm very happy that Gryffindor won, but I need to finish reading this book by Monday!" she snapped.

By the looks of it, she had barely even started. Apparently Hermione had that exact same revelation.

"I've still got 400 pages to read!" she said in a barely contained sob.

Tears formed in her eyes. She snapped the book shut and raced up the spiral staircase to the girls dormitories. Harry watched her go, idly realising that he'd now need to pay Seamus back the five sickles. He made to go and get it, but before he could get far, Ginny appeared in front of him holding a goblet of butterbeer and a plate of food.

"Here," she said, offering both to Harry, "I noticed you hadn't gotten anything to eat or drink yet, and with the way this lot is clamouring you probably won't get a chance to."

In his distraction, Harry took the goblet. He was thirsty after the Quidditch game, and Ginny was right that he hadn't had anything to drink yet. It was only when the goblet neared his lips that he felt the burning coming from his ring. Just as he racked his brain for a way out of this, a hand slapping his back made him spill the butterbeer before he could drink any. Fred and George were suddenly at his side, arms slung over his shoulders and mad grins on their faces.

"Harry, Harry, excellent flying today! You should have seen Malfoy's face!" Fred said.

"We've got a few things we need to talk to you about," George said.

The twins led him away from Ginny to a more secluded part of the common room, and all the while, Harry was kicking himself for letting his guard down. He knew Ron and Hermione had been trying to dose him all year, and the attraction potions had been geared towards Ginny, but he had been so happy with winning the match and Ginny hadn't done anything to him so far. It was no excuse though, and the thought that she would try and bring him back into the fold, today of all days, made anger surge through him.

"So it's not just Ron and Hermione trying to spike your food," Fred said when they were alone.

"We saw Ginny put something in that drink she tried giving you," George said, "Harry, what is going on?"

"What? You've seen them doing that?"

"Of course we have. We'd have said something sooner but you always avoided eating whatever it was. It didn't look like you noticed it this time though," George said.

"Why are two of our siblings trying to slip you something?" Fred said, sounding more serious than he'd ever done before.

It was that tone which made Harry pause. He'd considered before whether or not to share anything with the twins, but he'd always decided not to since he wasn't sure how they'd react. Now that they'd noticed so much, Harry felt like he needed to, even if for no other reason than to stop them drawing their own conclusions.

"Not here. There's too many people," Harry said.

Fred and George exchanged a look.

"Tomorrow morning in the common room. We'll go somewhere private and you'll tell us what's going on," Fred said.

"And for the rest of the night, we're not leaving you alone," George said.

While Harry was used to getting up early now that he'd started swimming, it wasn't usually following a party that went late into the night with the promise of an important conversation the next day. He retreated to his dorm, shut the hangings and immediately summoned Celio. The house elf appeared instantly, and bowed when Harry asked him to deliver a message to Arthur. If anyone would know which way Fred and George stood, it would be him. An hour later, Celio reappeared with Arthur's assurances, which helped calm him down enough to get some sleep.

The next morning, Harry woke and dressed quietly. The common room had been cleared of the rubbish from the party, and Fred and George were both waiting for him with grim expressions. They gestured for him to follow. The castle was silent, as it usually was this early on a Sunday morning. Their destination was the same empty room as their first conversation. At Fred's request, Harry laid out the Marauders Map. Nobody was nearby.

"Alright, now spill. What is going on with you, Ron and Hermione?" Fred asked.

"How much do you want to know?" Harry asked in return.

"Everything," they both said.

"Even if it would change how you saw your own family?"

This caused the twins to pause, and they exchanged silent glances with one another.

"This is bigger than just a spat between friends, isn't it?" George said, "we want to know. I'm sure we're not gonna like what we hear, but it's better to know the full picture than to only have bits and pieces."

"And yes, even if that means we look at our own family differently," Fred said.

Harry looked between them, seeing nothing but resolve in their faces. With a heavy sigh, he showed them the Lords ring on his finger. The reaction was immediate as both of them jolted upon seeing it.

"You inherited your fathers title," George said.

"Well met Lord Potter," Fred said.

"You know the proper etiquette?" Harry couldn't help asking.

It seemed so out of character to hear the twins speak so formally.

"Our father may not have taken up his lordship, but he taught us if we wanted to," George said, "Bill learned a lot, Charlie not so much. We only learned bits."

"Hang on, if you've inherited, how come nobody's calling you by your title? Since you're underage, I'd expect them to at least call you Heir Potter," Fred said, sounding confused.

"Because I only found out about all of this this summer. Before then, I didn't even know wizards had noble families, let alone that mine apparently was one, not until I woke up one morning to a sudden rush of magic and a letter from Gringotts requesting a meeting," Harry said.

From there, he told them about what he'd learnt. He told them about the titles he now held, and how discovering he was Heir to the House of Black made him suspicious about Sirius's imprisonment. That suspicion had then spiralled until he discovered evidence of Sirius's innocence.

"To think we could have found that proof at any point in the last two years if we'd just looked at the dormitory with the Marauders Map," Fred said.

"In fairness, we swore that we'd never use it to look at the dormitories after we accidentally discovered Archie and Maxwell, uh, *otherwise engaged*," George added.

"You likely wouldn't have known who Pettigrew was," Harry said.

"True, but even by Christmas of your first year, we knew who was supposed to be in your dormitory. Seeing some random guy's name would have been very suspicious," George said.

"We're getting off topic. How does this relate to Ron and Hermione?" Fred asked.

There was no getting around it. Harry told them about the potions and enchantments he'd been under, how they'd basically made him a puppet that could easily be led. Fred and George went white when they heard that these bewitchments had all been keyed towards Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Dumbledore, and the pain Harry went through to be cleansed of it all. They snarled when he told them about the payments being made to their accounts.

"So you've not just been annoyed because they didn't pay attention to you and kept flying off the handle with you this year, you've been trying to pull away from them to get out from their control," Fred said aghast, "and the times they've put things in your food was an effort to dose you again."

"Ginny tried dosing you last night, and since it was from her it was probably some kind of attraction potion since you're the big Quidditch star," George said.

Both looked disgusted, which was a relief to Harry. Arthur said they could be trusted, but seeing it in person was much better than hearing about it second hand. A moment later, they enveloped him in a tight hug.

"We are so sorry you had to go through all that," Fred said, "it's frankly astonishing that you trust anyone from our family at all after what they've done to you."

"You're taking this remarkably well," Harry said, even as he melted into the contact, "I thought you'd try and deny it, or argue, or anything really."

To his Harry's disappointment, the hug ended. Both Fred and George looked sad.

"Let's just say we know that our family is messed up," George said, "I reckon you must know some of it since you're trusting us enough to tell us."

"How much do you know about our family?" Fred asked.

"I spoke with Mr Weasley at the Leaky Cauldron," Harry said, "he told me that he didn't take the Weasley Lordship because he didn't want your mother to get access to the vaults. There's obviously more to that story but I didn't want to pry."

The twins exchanged another look.

"Dad doesn't know that we know, or at least we don't think he does. He tries not to show it because he really does love us, but we know that none of us were his choice," Fred said.

"At the end of his seventh year of Hogwarts, Mum seduced Dad and got pregnant. Dad's always wanted kids, and he's also really honourable, so he did what he thought was the right thing and married her. Grandpa Septimus, the Lord Weasley at the time, was suspicious about it, and that was when Dad refused to take the Heirship. It was a bit of a scandal at the time because nobody knew why. We only found out about it because we snuck downstairs one night and heard them arguing when they thought we were all asleep," George said.

"What do you know about line theft Harry?"

"Not much. I've heard about it a few times and it's always talked about like it's really serious, but nobody's really explained what it is," Harry said.

"Line theft is the act of forcing your way into a family in order to gain access to their wealth and magic," Fred explained, "it's considered very bad because of the power that family magic can hold. It's why a lot of noble families will make formal marriage proposals for their children so that potential partners can be properly vetted. Mum didn't do that."

"It probably wasn't obvious when you stayed with us last summer, but Mum and Dad can't stand each other. Dad hates that he's been forced into this family but he won't leave because he really does love his kids," George said, "Mum probably figured that Dad wasn't going to claim the Weasley Lordship any time soon, so she's been counting on either Ron or Ginny being able to marry into another noble family. She's always been weird with them, doting in a way she never was with the rest of us."

"At least we now know where Ron got his money from. He stole it from Harry," Fred said, "please tell me you're doing something about it."

"I stopped the transactions, but until I discover who my magical guardian is, I can't prove fraud to reclaim what was stolen. The goblins are on my side though, and they're doing what they can to find it out. As soon as they do, they'll reclaim my money," Harry said.

"That's good to hear," Fred said, "and we'll do what we can to help as well."

"I think we should write to Dad, let him know that we know as well," George said.

"Good idea George. I'm guessing your plan is to keep pretending to be friends with them until you find out more?" Fred said.

"I have no idea what they hoped to gain, and I don't know how deep this goes. All the pieces point to me being some kind of easily manipulated puppet, but to what purpose I can't say. Dumbledore is involved in this somehow, but like Ginny, up till now he hasn't done anything. It's all been Ron and Hermione," Harry said, "but at the same time, if they give me the chance, I'm pulling away, like what happened with the Scabbers-Crookshanks argument."

"Alright then. We'll keep our eyes open as well. If we see any of them put stuff in your food, we'll warn you, because even without the line theft, that's just a really weird thing to do," George said.

"We've got your back," Fred said.

That proclamation went a long way to reassuring Harry. Now there were people at Hogwarts who knew the full truth, people who were better positioned to help than Lupin was. Considering how anxious he'd been when he went to sleep, he left that room feeling much lighter than he had been when he woke up.

And so the year ends

March gave way to April, and the Easter holidays were a lot less fun than Christmas. As exams approached, all the third years spent whatever time they had studying. The teachers seemed determined to fill their heads with as much information as was physically possible. Harry alternated between the library and the common room when he wasn't in lessons. Thankfully there weren't any more dosing attempts after the Quidditch party. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were all too busy studying. Considering exams had been cancelled last year, it was almost funny seeing the distressed look on Ginny's face.

Harry trudged back up through the castle, his bundle of swimming gear tucked under his arm. Getting to swim in the mornings did wonders for his stress levels, the pleasant burn as he pushed himself helped to ease the restless energy now that the Quidditch season was over. Nobody else was awake when he re-entered the boys dormitory, which suited Harry perfectly well. Just as he stepped under the shower spray, the bathroom door opened, and Dean took the shower next to him.

"I feel like this has become a habit for both of us," Harry said.

"What can I say? Hearing you leave for your morning swim is a good alarm clock," Dean said, "and you coming back is like the snooze button."

"Glad I can help keep you on schedule, but I do try not to make too much noise."

"I know you do, but I'm not a very heavy sleeper anyway. It makes me so glad that the hangings around our beds have soundproofing, otherwise I don't think I'd be able to sleep over Ron's snoring."

"Seamus and Neville snore as well," Harry pointed out.

"Seamus is more like loud breathing, and both of them quiet down after a little while," Dean said, "Ron snores like a freight train all night long."

"That sounds like you're speaking from experience."

"The first few nights in first year were rough," was all Dean said.

Harry glanced over. Dean was staring at the wall of the shower with a sad expression.

"I'd never been so far away from home before, in a world I'd never considered could be real. It was a lot to take in, and I thought I was all alone," Dean turned to face Harry and smiled, "but it's alright now. I've got really good friends who can help me when I need it."

"Any time," Harry said, easily returning the smile.

"It's weird. Sometimes I feel more lonely during the summer when I don't get to see you guys."

"I count the days until I can come back to Hogwarts. Coming here was the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Even with all the complications he'd recently discovered, and the large amounts of danger he'd found himself in in the previous years, Harry would never regret stepping forth into the magical world. It gave him a connection to his parents he never knew he'd craved. It gave him a place he could go to where people didn't look at him like he was dirt beneath their shoes. For all that he'd found out about Ron and Hermione's betrayal, here at Hogwarts, Harry had really great friends. One of them was standing right next to him, enjoying a nice conversation as they showered. Another would probably come stumbling into the bathroom bleary eyed from sleep very soon.

They shut off the water at the same time and stepped out of the showers. Just as they finished drying and tied their towels around their waists, the bathroom door opened. Seamus shuffled in, rubbing his eyes and yawning. He froze when he saw them as though not quite comprehending what he was seeing. Harry thought it was adorable how Seamus struggled to function immediately after waking up. The boy stared for a long moment, then he quickly shook his head, heading past them to the showers. Harry missed the slight redness of his cheeks.

Later that week, Harry received another letter from Gringotts. It was delivered like the last one on his bed. As soon as he saw it, Harry shut the hangings and opened it.

Dear Lord Potter,

I am writing to inform you that the ritual we discussed during the summer has now been finalised. It should now be perfectly safe for use on humans. Chanter Ungo assures me that there is no risk to you whatsoever. After all, there is no use in a cleansing ritual that destroys the treasure.

The ritual is available to be performed but it will take a week to prepare the necessary materials. As such, we ask that you provide us at least that much time. Upon receipt of this letter, please confirm the date that you would like to schedule this ritual for.

May your treasures prosper,

Ironclaw

House Potter Account Manager

This was very good news to hear. Knowing that he would finally be rid of the horcrux was a relief. Ideally Harry would go through the cleansing ritual as soon as possible, but there was no way for him to leave Hogwarts without drawing a lot of unwanted attention. Harry pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill from his bag, and immediately wrote a response for Ironclaw. The earliest he could have the ritual done was during the summer holidays, and he arranged a time for the end of June.

Though as soon as he finished writing, Harry paused. What was going to happen to him this summer? He never had any desire to return to Number 4 Privet Drive, but knowing what he

now did about his family, the thought of going back to the Dursleys was even worse. He had a godfather, one who would be more than happy to act as his guardian. Sirius had even said as much directly in one of their frequent letter exchanges. Harry even had a number of properties he could stay at. Potter Manor was back up and running, and the updates he'd received from Celio told him that Gryffindor Castle was well on the way to being complete. For the first time in his life, Harry truly had options available to him.

The issue though was whether he would be allowed. Harry was still under aged, which meant he needed to have an adult as a guardian. Sirius was the obvious choice, but the man was still recovering from twelve years with the Dementors. From his and Andromeda's letters, it sounded as though things were going well on the physical side of things. Sirius was almost back up to a healthy weight, and he was able to move around with no issues or sudden fatigue. The problem came from his mental state. His sessions with the Mind Healer often left him panicked and jumpy as they worked to undo the damage the Dementors had done to his mind, and it would be at least another two months before he could be deemed stable enough to look after Harry.

The only other people who could take Harry in were the Dursleys or the Weasleys. The Dursleys were an immediate no, and even before he learned everything about them, Harry wouldn't have wanted to impose himself on the Weasleys like that. One more mouth to feed, one more child to clothe when they already struggled with money, or at least they claimed to to hide the theft of Harry's money. Harry's magical guardian was still a mystery, so whoever they were was unlikely to try and raise Harry now, not when they'd neglected him for nearly thirteen years.

One piece of good news in all of this was that Sirius had been able to officially reclaim the Lordship of House Black. While he had never lost the title itself, the seat on the Wizengamot and the political power that came with it had gone dormant following his arrest. Sirius had written to the Wizengamot clerk to regain his seat. Apparently there had been a lot of debate about it, and it was only a signed declaration by Andromeda, as the Healer in charge of his recovery, and Willemijn Geest, the Mind Healer, proving that Sirius had made good progress towards recovery that convinced them to give it up.

It was that drama which reminded Harry of one of Dumbledore's many titles. He was the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. According to the books Harry had read about how the Wizengamot should work, the Chief Warlock acted in a manner not unlike the Speaker of the House of Commons. Their job was not to decide the laws but rather to guide the discussion and to ensure that all members of the Wizengamot had access to all the relevant information before they voted. Harry suspected that Dumbledore had been using his powers in the Wizengamot to influence things in his favour, using his reputation as a 'good' wizard to make people look the other way. He had no proof of this of course, but it was reasonable given everything that had been done to Harry.

Time had an annoying habit of speeding up when it was least desirable. The next thing Harry knew, the exams were upon them. Outside the sun was shining brightly, almost mocking them as it tried enticing the beleaguered students out to relax in the warm grounds. The third years all managed to resist the temptation, even as Harry stared out of the dormitory window longingly in the morning before going out for a swim. Every moment they had available was

spent bent over books and scribbling last minute notes on parchment. Many wands were waved and incantations practised before finally they began.

In the morning, Harry and the other third years sat through a gruelling exam on Theory of Transfiguration. After a hurried lunch, they trooped back up to the Transfiguration classroom, where McGonagall had each of them turn a hedgehog into a tea cosy. Harry screwed up his face, making it seem like he was putting loads of concentration into it. He waved his wand, said the incantation, and he did it! He perfectly transfigured his hedgehog. When he looked up, McGonagall gave him an approving nod.

Most of his exams went in a similar manner. With his clearer mind and greater access to magic, he was able to perform the required spells a lot easier than he normally could. His work over the whole year to slowly build his skill in a believable manner paid off, and all of the teachers seemed happy with his performance. Since Hermione had been so stressed with her own overworking and Ron was as lackadaisical as ever about studying, Harry was even able to do very well on the theory exams, though History of Magic was still a struggle. Even Potions went quite well. Harry's Shrinking Solution wasn't quite the perfect shade of pink, but it still shrunk the frog he'd been given to test it back down to a tadpole.

Harry had a break while Ron and Hermione went outside for their Care of Magical Creatures exam, giving him an opportunity to study for Arithmancy. After lunch, he joined Dean and Hermione in heading up to the sixth floor classroom. Professor Vector had managed to put together an especially tricky exam, but Harry still felt confident. He and Dean had spent hours going over Numerology tables together, and whenever he struggled, a phantom sensation of the other boy beside him, shoulder to shoulder, helped him find the answer. Something similar happened in Study of Ancient Runes. He and Seamus had grown so used to working together in this class that Harry almost felt wrong footed when he had to work on his own. Imagining him there with him was a big help.

One exam was simultaneously the easiest and hardest that Harry had to do. Professor Lupin was the best Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher they had ever had, and the whole class felt confident going into his exam. It was held outside and was built like an obstacle course, each station containing one of the various dark creatures Lupin had taught them to handle. After wading through a pond containing a grindylow, successfully managing to evade an angry Red Cap, and not being distracted by a hinkypunk, the final obstacle was a large wardrobe, like a walk-in closet, containing a Boggart. With some trepidation, Harry entered.

It was very dark inside, and as soon as the door snapped shut, Harry lit up the end of his wand, though he wished he hadn't. Attached to his wrist was a thin thread. As he cast his wand beam around, three more threads were attached to his other wrist and both ankles. More things became visible through the darkness. There was a large bed, where Ginny Weasley was lying in what was probably meant as a seductive pose. Either side of the bed were Ron and Hermione.

"Come closer Harry. I want to be Lady Potter," Ginny said.

"Yeah mate. Come closer," Ron added, jingling a bag full of coins, "there's loads of cool stuff I want to buy."

"It's really what's best for you. I mean, have you seen your exam results? You really ought to have let me help you," Hermione said, holding a stack of parchment, each with a big red zero on the front.

All three held up bottles of brightly coloured potions. Above his head, a shadowy figure held the puppet strings, and they jerked them. Though nothing was actually touching Harry, he still felt the urge to move closer as Ron, Hermione and Ginny beckoned him to drink the potions that would turn him back into the drone he was before. Harry struggled to keep his breathing under control. He just needed to turn this into something funny, but how? There was nothing he could do.

Except that wasn't right.

Conjuring up the mental image he hoped would work, he concentrated with all his might and cried "Riddikulus!" The puppet strings attached to Harry snapped. Long threads fell over the fake Ron and Hermione, who panicked and flailed, but that only tangled them up even further. The fake Ron stumbled wildly, and one thread wound around his legs, causing him to trip and tear down the hangings, which landed on Ginny in an undignified heap. All three of them complained loudly to the figure above them, and though Harry couldn't see their face, somehow he knew that they were both overwhelmed and exasperated by the display. The final straw was when Harry felt a presence either side of him. A fake Seamus and Dean were at his side, struggling to hold in their laughter.

A small chuckle escaped him, which grew and grew until Harry couldn't stop laughing. What could be funnier to him than to see all of these machinations come crashing down by their own actions, and for the mastermind to be left to deal with the consequences. The best part was forcing the Boggart to give him friends to laugh with, and there was a small pop, and everything went dark again save for the light of his wand. The Boggart had retreated. Harry stepped out of the wardrobe.

"Everything alright Harry?" Lupin asked.

Harry felt a tear track on his cheek, but even as he wiped it away he was smiling.

"Yes. I'm good," he was able to say with honesty.

That was the final exam. Harry walked back up to the common room in a daze. He was only idly listening as Hermione, as she normally did, tried to compare her performance with everyone else's. After dropping off their things, they were finally able to enjoy the sunny weather. Harry watched the giant squid lazily drifting close to the surface. They sat under the shade of a large beech tree, but Harry wasn't paying attention to what Ron and Hermione were saying. Near them were the other Gryffindor third years, all of them lying around in various states of relaxation. Never before had a year at Hogwarts ended so peacefully.

With the end of exams came the end of June, and with it the end of the school year. Harry was ready to go, and was able to use Ron's frantic last minute packing as the perfect excuse for one last wander around the castle. Hogwarts was truly a beautiful place, and Harry had been able to experience it in a whole new way this year. He lost track of where he was until a head poked out of a nearby open door.

"Harry? Shouldn't you be getting ready to go home?"

It was Professor Lupin. He gestured for Harry to come inside. The office walls were now bare. No books were on the shelves, and there was a large trunk neatly shut to the side of the desk.

"I'd offer you tea but I've packed away my tea pot unfortunately," Lupin said.

"Are you leaving?" Harry asked.

"Unfortunately," Lupin said, "given ... certain things about me, my contract was only for a year subject to renewal. Dumbledore informed me two nights ago that he was letting me go."

"But you can't! You're the best Defence Against The Dark Arts teacher we've ever had. You can't go!" Harry said.

"Believe me Harry, I would like to stay, but it's not my decision I'm afraid," Lupin said.

"Everyone did really well in their exams though! Why would Dumbledore want to sack you?"

"He said there had been continuous pressure from the governors all year to get rid of me. He was very regretful of course, said it was such a shame, but I think we can both guess that that wasn't the real reason," Lupin said, "Dumbledore was the one to cast the Fidelius charm for your parents. He should have known Sirius wasn't the Secret Keeper. Even if he didn't, as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, one of his responsibilities is to make sure the law is upheld. He should have made sure that Sirius received a trial so the truth could be uncovered, as he did for many who were imprisoned in the same manner, but he didn't."

"So he sacked you because you helped Sirius," Harry said glumly.

"I will never regret doing what I did to help Sirius, and obviously I have no proof of this, but yes, I believe so," Lupin said.

"What will you do now?" Harry asked.

"I'm not sure, but whatever I do, I will do what I can to help you. The only family I really had growing up were the friends I made at Hogwarts, James and Sirius. It may not be by blood, or Heirship or as godparents, but I still consider you a part of that, if you'll have me," Lupin said.

"I'd like that. I'd- I'd really like that," Harry said.

Lupin smiled warmly at him.

"If there's one thing I'm proud of, it's how much you've grown this year. You've become quite a capable young wizard," he said, "I'm sure your mother and father would be so very proud of you."

It was bittersweet leaving Hogwarts. Harry wasn't the only one disappointed that Lupin was leaving. Ron and Hermione both expressed their sadness, Ron for how awesome the lessons were, and Hermione for how competent of a teacher he was. During the leaving feast, Harry managed to enjoy his steak and kidney pie, but he kept catching Hermione's eye. Instantly, he was on alert, pausing to feel if his ring was heating up, but it remained cool. Eventually, she sighed dramatically.

"It was hard, but I decided to drop Muggle Studies."

"I still think it's weird you took that class to begin with," Ron said around a mouthful of food.

"And since I'm not taking Divination any more, it means I can have a normal timetable next year," Hermione said, sending meaningful looks at Harry.

Oh, was she trying to get him to ask how she'd been getting to her classes?

"So you won't end up having a breakdown from biting off more than you can chew?" Harry asked instead.

"I was fine!" Hermione insisted, "but it was getting a bit ridiculous. I'm sure I'll be much happier."

"That's good. Maybe you can pick up a hobby that's not school related," Harry said.

"Fat chance of that. It's like asking Malfoy not to be a prick," Ron said, "but I still don't get how you were getting to all those classes Hermione."

Hermione scowled, but she told them. Knowing that time travel was possible was surprisingly not the most shocking part of that revelation. It was hearing how somebody decided that giving a thirteen year old girl a powerful magical artefact for the sole purpose of attending too many classes was a good idea! It didn't matter that Hermione was smart, or that she was a model pupil. Somebody should have just told her that no, she couldn't take every class and that she'd need to choose, rather than loaning out something which Hermione herself admitted was dangerous. Harry was just glad he didn't let himself get wrapped up in any crazy shenanigans involving the time turner. It sounded like it would be a major headache.

The final day dawned, and all the students made their way down from the castle to the carriages that would take them to Hogsmeade station. It was the perfect sort of crowd that Harry could easily lose himself in. He rode down with Ron and Hermione, but in the chaos of everyone trying to stow their trunks, Harry managed to get separated from them. Fred and George saw exactly what he was doing, and they bundled him into one of the carriages when they saw Ron and Hermione enter a different one.

It was the perfect chance, but Harry knew that Ron and Hermione were unlikely to settle for the same excuse as he used last time. It didn't stop him from grinning when he ended up finding a compartment with Seamus, Dean and Neville. Parvati and Lavender were also there, a magazine open in front of them.

"Mind if I join you until the chaos dies down?" Harry asked, sliding open the compartment door.

"Not at all," Seamus said.

Harry took the free seat next to Dean. As the Hogwarts express filled with students, conversation naturally turned to the coming summer.

"It's the Quidditch World Cup in August. Mam's trying to get tickets for us," Seamus said, "it's the first time in thirty years that Britain has hosted it, and it's Ireland against Bulgaria!"

"It sounds really cool, but I don't know if Gran will let me go," Neville said gloomily.

"It'd still be worth asking her though," Harry said.

"I suppose. She doesn't see much point in it since I don't play Quidditch, but I might ask Auntie Julia if she wants to go. She's a Quidditch correspondent for the Daily Prophet so she'll probably say yes."

"What about you Harry? Do you fancy going?" Seamus asked.

"If I can. My Aunt and Uncle won't want to, but I can ask Sirius."

"It's still really weird to think that he's innocent. I mean, it was in the Muggle news that he broke out," Dean said.

"Professor Burbage said that the news of his innocence made an even bigger stir for the Muggles," Neville said, "because the details had been so vague in the initial reports, apparently they felt blindsided when they were told the man they were supposed to be wary of was actually innocent."

"It sounds like you talked about it quite a lot," Harry commented.

Neville lit up in a way he usually did when discussing Herbology.

"It was really interesting. Professor Burbage used it as an example of the sharing of news between the magical and Muggle populations. Fudge told the Muggle prime minister because the crime involved the death of Muggles, but because it involved a wizard, the whole truth couldn't be revealed. Apparently a big part of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is knowing how to twist the truth of magical events so that it makes sense to the Muggle perspective."

What followed was a debate about how to cover up different magical disasters in a way that a Muggle would believe. Harry and Dean, who'd grown up with Muggles, acted as the arbiter of whether the excuse was Muggle worthy. Seamus was close when he said he would blame a sudden explosion on a faulty gas main, and Neville had a good stab at trying to cover up a troll on the loose in a Muggle town, but the funniest was Lavender. When asked how she would explain away somebody spiking an entire town with love potion, she simply flipped her hair over her shoulder and said, "it's not my fault that I'm so good looking."

Parvati wasn't joining in. At first Harry thought she was too absorbed by the magazine, open on the horoscope section, but then she closed it and leaned back in her seat. She looked very tired, as though she hadn't been able to get a good night's sleep in a while.

"Everything alright?" Harry asked.

"I think I was more stressed for this exam season than the others," Parvati said, "I completely blame you for having exams cancelled last year. I don't think my body was ready for it after two years of break."

"I'm sorry?"

"A few good nights at home without school to worry about and you'll be right as rain," Lavender said confidently.

"Hopefully. Just as long as I don't have any more weird dreams, I'll be fine," Parvati said.

"Weird dreams?" Neville asked.

"I don't really know how to describe it," Parvati said, "I wake up in a dark room. There's nothing there except a table with two crystal balls on it. The lighter one cracks and goes darker, while the darker one starts to lighten up."

"Didn't you say your Divination exam was on crystal gazing?" Dean said.

"Yeah, but these weren't like those ones. They were smaller, like this size," Parvati made a ball with her hands about the size of a large orange.

Harry thought that perhaps Parvati had been spending too much time studying for Divination, but he kept that to himself. In the times when he hung out with the other Gryffindor boys, Parvati and Lavender often descended upon them, appearing and disappearing just as suddenly, and usually to discuss the latest gossip in Hogwarts. He'd grown to quite like them, because even though they could be very nosy, they did relent if he told them to stop.

As they passed through the countryside, Harry eventually made his way down the train. Theoretically he was searching for Ron and Hermione, but every opportunity he had to be distracted he took. He asked Ernie about his plans for the summer, Terry and Anthony about their thoughts on wizard-Muggle relations, and even somehow managed to avoid an hours-long conversation with Oliver. Fred and George dragged him into their compartment with the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team and Lee Jordan when the trolley rolled around. By the time he managed to find the compartment Ron and Hermione had ended up in, there was only about an hour left of the journey.

The Hogwarts Express pulled into Kings Cross Station, and there was the usual chaos as everyone disembarked. Platform Nine and Three Quarters was filled with parents welcoming their children home. Harry didn't bother trying to slip away from Ron and Hermione this time. He allowed himself to be steered towards the rest of the Weasley's and endured another suffocating hug from Mrs Weasley. Uncle Vernon was waiting for him on the Muggle side of

the station, looking incredibly surly. With barely a word, he stormed off to the car, and gestured sharply for Harry to hurry up.

"Get in boy."

Harry did as he was told.

"This summer isn't going to be like last year. There's going to be more than a few changes after that stunt you pulled with Marge," Uncle Vernon growled.

There were indeed going to be changes, because now, Harry was a Lord, Lord of the Most Ancient and Noble Houses of Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin. He had a letter in his pocket from his godfather. If Uncle Vernon thought he would accept their ridiculous rules any longer, then he would be sorely mistaken. Harry was a Lord, and it was about time he acted like it.

A very different summer ahead

Chapter Notes

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

The drive back to Number 4 Privet Drive was completely silent, which suited Harry just fine. There was very little that Harry wanted to say to the man, and he could tell that Uncle Vernon was gearing himself up for something big. Harry reached into his pocket and felt the parchment. It was a letter from Sirius he'd received a few days before term ended. There was no way he would go back to the Dursleys without a plan, and with a few letters back and forth, Harry and Sirius had worked out exactly what he could do.

Little Whinging was exactly as ordinary and unchanged as Harry remembered it; all square houses, shiny cars and perfectly manicured lawns. Number 4 Privet Drive stood out only for its fantastic flower beds, which Aunt Petunia maintained only so she had something to show off. Growing up, tending to the flowers had been one of Harry's jobs. When they pulled into the driveway, Harry picked up Hedwig's cage and retrieved his trunk and followed his Uncle into the house. Aunt Petunia was waiting for them, standing by the open cupboard under the stairs and making tiny gestures with her pointed face.

Instead of complying with the silent order to lock away his school things for another summer, Harry set the cage and trunk down by the foot of the stairs, and folded his arms. Aunt Petunia's nostrils flared at the show of defiance, and Uncle Vernon puffed up in rage.

"Get that rubbish locked up right now!" he roared.

"No."

"Do not test me boy!"

"We need to talk."

Harry made sure to keep his voice calm and level. His wand was in his back pocket, tucked beneath his t-shirt so it wasn't visible, though he really hoped he didn't need to use it. Uncle Vernon's face went purple. He reached out for Harry, but Harry thrust Sirius's letter in his face before he could grab him.

"I'm not signing any bloody forms for you!"

"It's not a school form, which you'd know if you acted like an adult for once in your life and read it," Harry said.

Maybe it was the fact that Harry was so blatantly talking back to him in such a way, but Uncle Vernon was stunned. He ripped the letter from Harry's hand and scanned it, but Harry could tell the words weren't even registering.

"What is this rubbish?" Uncle Vernon said.

"It's a letter from my godfather," Harry said.

"You don't have a godfather," Aunt Petunia spat, "if you had, he'd have taken you off our hands for good."

"I do have a godfather. His name is Sirius Black, and the reason he couldn't take me in was because he was falsely imprisoned for being a mass murderer," Harry said, "you'll have heard all about it. It was on the Muggle news and everything."

Uncle Vernon's face made a complicated twisting expression, and Aunt Petunia glanced past Harry and out of the window in the front door.

"Do not use words like that in this house," Uncle Vernon hissed.

"As if anything happens in this house that's worth eavesdropping on," Harry said.

"Why you ungrateful-

"Like it or not, we will be having this talk, so why don't we get it out of the way so we can all go back to pretending the other doesn't exist?" Harry said, an eyebrow raised.

Face still purple, Uncle Vernon stormed down the hall and into the kitchen, Aunt Petunia sliding in behind them. Harry followed them at a far more relaxed pace.

"Well?" Uncle Vernon said petulantly, "since apparently what you have to say is so important, out with it!"

"Firstly, once my godfather has recovered from his false imprisonment, I will be going to live with him. This will almost certainly be our last summer together," Harry said, "so there will be a number of changes to how things work. I will be keeping all of my things in my room, and you will not touch them."

"Why you-

"You will not prevent me from communicating via owl. You will not force me to do any housework that you wouldn't also have Dudley do. I will not cook meals for you. I will not clean your house for you. I will not maintain your garden for you."

"Now see here-

"I have plenty of better things to do than hang around here. I will be visiting a few places this summer, sometimes overnight, and you will not prevent me from leaving or returning."

"And why on earth should we? You clearly don't want to be here, and you've never shown any gratitude for the time and money we wasted on you all these years! Why should we accept you back?" Uncle Vernon shouted, managing to cut into Harry's demands.

"Because until my guardianship changes, I'm technically still under your care," Harry said, "I'm sure the police would love to hear about how my aunt and uncle locked me out of the house."

"As if they'd believe a freak like you," Aunt Petunia said.

"I will not be threatened by an ungrateful brat. We took you in purely out of the goodness of our hearts," Uncle Vernon said, "the assistance we were given was pitiful, barely enough to cover how expensive you were."

"You received money for looking after me?"

"Of course we did. Those idiots in the government got it right when they decided that families kind enough to take in and care for a child should receive compensation for it," Uncle Vernon said, "but was it worth it to have our hard work thrown back in our faces like this?"

"Then why not ask for more?"

"Because unlike you, we are grateful for what little we are given!" Aunt Petunia hissed, "we can't just spout made up words and suddenly be rich."

Harry already knew that the Dursley's had been receiving money, but it wasn't from the government. It was coming out of his vault, illegally authorised by his magical guardian. Up till now, all Harry could do was stop those transactions, but until he discovered the identity of his magical guardian and proved they were fraudulent, he couldn't reclaim his stolen money, unless he could satisfy one other criteria. Since the transactions were suspect, if he could prove that the money was knowingly received by the party in question but was not used for its stated purpose, then he could declare those transactions to be fraudulent and be entitled to a refund.

The Dursleys had just admitted to receiving money in compensation for caring for Harry, yet his treatment under their 'care' was more than obvious. The goblins had noted the oversized clothes he always wore when he visited Gringotts in first and third year, and Harry would happily testify to the numerous punishments he'd received. It was exactly what he needed from them.

"Well then you should be thrilled that I'll be moving in with Sirius as soon as he is able. You stay out of my way and I'll stay out of yours, and these next few weeks will be as pleasant as they can be," Harry said.

He didn't give either of them a chance to respond. Harry turned and collected his trunk and Hedwig's cage from the foot of the stairs, before heaving them up to his bedroom. Once he was inside and the door was shut, Harry collapsed onto the edge of the bed. His heart was hammering in his chest, and the adrenaline of that last conversation surged through him.

Never before had he spoken to Uncle Vernon like that. The Dursley's various threats and ridiculous rules had mostly been ignored or avoided ever since he first went to Hogwarts, and while Harry had spoken back to his aunt and uncle before, he had always restrained himself to one off comments. To speak so directly, to lay down the law as it were, was both invigorating and terrifying. Harry had no idea if Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would comply with his requests. Perhaps he could have been more polite? No! Most of what he had asked for was basic decency. If they wouldn't force Dudley to do chores, then why should

Harry have to do them? Even the request to come and go as he pleased was in line with what the Dursleys accepted from Dudley.

Hedwig hooted lowly in her cage, pulling Harry back to the present. Harry opened his trunk and withdrew his parchment and ink. His letter to Sirius was brief but it contained everything that had happened in his conversation. He also wrote another letter, this one to Gringotts detailing the Dursley's confession. It was only when Harry reached out to open Hedwig's cage that he realised his hands were shaking. Hedwig hopped onto his lap, holding out her leg for him to attach the letter, but Harry stroked a finger through her feathers.

"Sorry. I'll send the letter in a minute. I just, I need-"

Harry wasn't sure what he needed but Hedwig seemed to understand anyway. She lowered her leg and allowed Harry to gently pet her, and feeling her soft feathers helped to calm him down. When his hands were steady again and his heart stopped racing, Harry tied the letter to her leg and carried her to the window. Once she was gone, Harry was at a loss. Since he didn't want to completely unpack his trunk, he instead lay down on the bed and went over the list of things he needed to achieve this summer.

An hour later, the front door opened with a bang, and Aunt Petunia's simpering voice echoed up the hall. Someone large and heavy came stomping up the stairs, and Harry caught a glimpse of a maroon blazer and straw coloured hat as Dudley marched past his room, still in his Smeltings uniform. The Hogwarts term finished at the end of June, but schools in England didn't break for summer until the middle of July. It was a small silver lining that meant Harry wouldn't have to see much of his cousin.

Dinner that evening was an awkward affair. Uncle Vernon was glaring at Harry as the three Dursley's sat down to eat. Harry's plate was set aside, left in the kitchen as it usually was when he didn't cook, and it was noticeably smaller than the rest of them. Harry raised an eyebrow at Aunt Petunia when she sniffed haughtily.

"If you're so ungrateful that you'd throw out everything we've done for you, I don't want you at this table. Take it and eat it upstairs, but don't you even dare make a mess!" she snapped.

Inwardly, Harry smirked. Harry hadn't even made it to the foot of the stairs when Dudley started complaining. As much as the Dursley's had failed to teach Dudley proper manners, the one thing they had been firm on was that meals were to be eaten at a proper table. Uncle Vernon often mocked the 'fat slob' who were so lazy they ate off trays. Aunt Petunia often remarked that only good for nothing's didn't eat like proper people. Since the dining table was where his food was always brought, Dudley complied, and Harry hadn't had a choice either way, except now Harry was being given the 'privilege' to eat in his room. Harry wondered how Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would explain away this one.

Later that night, after Harry had finished and washed his plate clean, his bedroom door opened. Dudley was standing there, arms folded in an effort to look intimidating. Considering it looked like he had gained weight over the last year, and his arms were large not because of muscle but from fat, the effect wasn't particularly impressive.

"Why didn't you have to eat at the table?" he demanded.

Harry raised an eyebrow at him.

"I don't know. Why don't you ask your mum?"

Dudley narrowed his piggy eyes at him. Then he spotted Harry's trunk and his eyes widened.

"You're not allowed that stuff! I'll tell Dad!"

There was a distinct note of fear in Dudley's voice.

"Uncle Vernon and I have come to an agreement," Harry said, "what do you want? If you don't mind, I'm quite busy."

"Doing what?"

"Homework. I'm sure you've got some as well that you're ignoring."

"The teachers don't care if I don't do it," Dudley scoffed.

Harry knew that was a lie but there was no point in arguing, so he just shrugged.

"Suit yourself, but I would quite like to do mine, so could you please leave?"

"But you're not supposed to have that stuff in your room! Doing that isn't allowed in his house!"

Harry stood from his chair abruptly. Dudley scrambled backwards in panic, which allowed Harry to shut the bedroom door. He found it ridiculous that Dudley was absolutely terrified of anything Harry might do to him yet he still thought it a good idea to antagonise him. It was just one more thing that he didn't think he would ever understand about the Dursley's.

The next day started without issue. Harry woke up at his usual time, and realised that he didn't have anywhere to go swimming. Fortunately that was easily remedied. None of the Dursley's were up, allowing him to make himself a simple breakfast in peace. He packed a bag with what he would need for the day before heading out the front door. Little Whinging was peacefully quiet as Harry walked, heading for the park nearby. It was only a small park, with two swings and a climbing frame, but at the back there was a small clump of trees. Aunt Petunia liked to say that delinquents used it for all manner of unsavoury things like drinking and drugs, but it was out of the way and private enough for Harry's needs.

"Celio."

The house elf appeared with a small pop.

"How can Celio help Lord Potter?" he asked with a low bow.

"Please take me back to Potter Manor."

Celio reached out for his hand, and after the brief, uncomfortable sensation of tightness, they appeared in front of the large Manor House.

"I'm going for a swim in the lake," Harry said, "there's nothing in there that'll hurt me, right?"

"No sir. The Potters have only ever had fishes in their lake," Celio said, "would Lord Potter like breakfast ready for when he is finished?"

"Yes please."

The grounds of Potter Manor were well maintained by the house elves. A sloping lawn with perfectly tended flowerbeds led down towards a Quidditch pitch, an empty stable and an ornate gazebo. Harry followed a path which led down to the shore of the lake. Across on the opposite bank was a forest, part of which lay within the boundary of the Manor wards. There was what looked like a smooth granite swimming pool that somebody had carved into the shore of the lake. It jutted off from it in a way that could have been natural had it not been for the straight lines and right angles. Harry didn't see anywhere he could change, but he was well used to changing out in the opening behind a small amount of cover.

Once he'd changed into his swimming trunks, Harry struck out confidently into the water, the warming charm already placed. It was freeing in a way, and Harry was incredibly glad he was able to do this. Swimming was surprisingly enjoyable to him now. In the little time he had left at the Dursleys, he already had to give up flying. If he had to give up swimming too, Harry would have gone stir crazy. Taking a deep breath, Harry dove down. The water was surprisingly clear, letting Harry see the small school of fish nibbling at the weed beds below him. He allowed himself to drift back up to the surface, and he floated on his back. This freedom to be was precious to him. Perhaps he'd go flying as well while he was here?

His morning routine at Hogwarts had given him a fairly good internal sense of time, so when he felt he'd been out in the lake long enough, Harry swam back to shore. He dried himself, changed back into his clothes, and walked back up to the Manor. Remembering the tour he'd received when he visited Potter Manor last summer, he entered through the sun room and headed straight for the dining room. As if on cue, Celio appeared.

"Is Master ready for breakfast?"

"I am."

A door leading from the dining room opened and Letty walked through, a tray of food floating in front of her. Harry sat down and the dishes were placed before him, a generous serving of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast along with a goblet of pumpkin juice.

"If Master wishes, Letty can make something else. We remember what Lord James and Master Sirius said they had when at Hogwarts and prepared that for you this morning," Letty said.

"This is fantastic. Thank you so much," Harry said.

Letty bowed low to hide the beaming smile on her face. With a pop, she disappeared back to the kitchen. Harry was about to tuck in when the dining room door opened. It was Sirius. The difference six months made was startling. Gone was the gaunt, skeletal man in a St Mungo's hospital bed. The man standing in the doorway was handsome, full of face and more

importantly, full of life. The eyes weren't darkened by unseen horrors, and when he smiled at Harry, the teeth were straight and white. Sirius wore a casual t-shirt and jeans, not too dissimilar to what Harry was wearing. The pair of them must have made quite the sight in this grand house.

"I wasn't sure when you'd be arriving," Sirius said.

He sat at the table opposite Harry, and Letty reappeared with another plate of food.

"I laid down the law to the Dursleys last night, so I figured I'd get out of their hair for the day."

"So you're not just trying to avoid the consequences of the other letter you sent?"

Harry looked up from his eggs to see Sirius's teasing grin.

"They deserve it," was all he said as he returned to his food.

"I'd never deny that," Sirius said.

The goblins could only reclaim the money stolen from Harry's vaults if they could prove the transactions were fraudulent, and two do that they needed to prove one of two things. Either they needed to discover who Harry's magical guardian was, thereby demonstrating that the payments were set up illegally, or they needed to prove that the money sent to the recipient wasn't used for its stated purpose. Harry could only guess why Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Mrs Weasley received money from him for, but since none of them had even admitted to having the money in the first place, his suspicion wasn't enough.

The Dursley's on the other hand had not only admitted to receiving money, but they'd also said what the money was for: taking care of Harry. Given his treatment growing up, they clearly had not used the money for its intended purpose, therefore they received it fraudulently and it was fair game to be reclaimed.

"The goblins work fast. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd already reclaimed what they can from those people," Sirius said, "and what they can't will either be set up as a strictly enforced repayment scheme, or they will require them to sell property to make up the loss. Do you know when they'll find out?"

"That depends. Will they be notified that it's happened?" Harry asked.

"A letter from Gringotts will be sent to them, and I'm sure their bank will also let them know somehow so they know it's genuine," Sirius said.

"Then I guess it'll either be when they're told, or when one of them tries to spend money they don't have," Harry said.

As much as Uncle Vernon complained about money, usually how expensive Harry was growing up, the Dursley's flaunted their lifestyle for all to see. Expensive cars, foreign holidays, Dudley never wanted for anything, not even if it was a top of the range games console or racing bike that ended up broken less than a month later. Uncle Vernon made more

than enough for Aunt Petunia to not have to work, but would it be enough if they had to repay the money they stole from Harry? Harry suspected that the Dursley's may have to radically downsize their expenditures to account for their new financial status.

"Is it bad that it feels good?" Harry asked.

"What feels good?"

"That they're getting their comeuppance, even if it doesn't cover all they've done," Harry said, "I don't want to be someone who holds a grudge, nor do I want to savour revenge, but this-

"Harry, this is not revenge," Sirius said firmly, "revenge would be burning their house down, or stealing everything they own, or forcing them to do unspeakable things in retaliation for what they did to you. What this is is justice. Justice can often be a form of revenge, but it is important that you do not conflate the two. They have committed a wrong against you, one which is now being righted proportionally and not out of cruelty or anger. Any additional harms that befall them because of how their own actions interact with these consequences are entirely their fault, not yours."

Sirius leaned forward, drawing Harry's attention even further.

"There is nothing wrong with seeking justice, and there is nothing wrong with feeling good about it. Think of it this way. It's less that you're feeling good, and more that the weight of bad has been lifted from you."

Now that he said it, that was exactly what it felt like. Each of the injustices committed against him were like boulders weighing him down, and now, one of them had been removed. It was much easier to accept than feeling good about another person's misery.

As they ate breakfast, Harry filled Sirius in on what he planned to do for the summer. He wanted to spend as little time at the Dursleys as possible. They were bound to be awful once they found out the money had been reclaimed, but Sirius said that if they tried anything, he would personally make sure Harry was removed from their custody.

"I've got an appointment with Andy in a few day's time. If all goes well, I should be declared physically recovered enough to look after you."

"And mentally?"

"The Mind Healer is very pleased with my progress, though she admits that it will take a long time to fully recover from it, if that's even possible," Sirius said, "however, she did say that there shouldn't be any issues with custody."

Sirius paused, thought for a moment, then continued.

"At St Mungo's, you hinted that there was a lot going on, and from what I've gathered from your letters and the conversation you had with my dog form on the shore of the lake, it's very serious. You asked for my help, and you will always have it," he said, "please, tell me the full story."

It was a difficult thing to do. There were many stops and starts, but Harry told Sirius everything. About how he woke up in the Leaky Cauldron with more magic than when he went to sleep. How he discovered in Gringotts the titles he inherited. The conversation in the Ring Realm, which led to the discovery of the various potions and enchantments that had been used on him. Sirius didn't say a word throughout his story, which Harry was incredibly grateful for. It was far easier to speak when he wasn't being interrupted. When he finished, that was when he expected the questions. Perhaps there would be denials, some effort to exonerate Dumbledore. Imagine Harry's surprise when instead the first question was-

"You got to see James?"

Sirius's eyes were full of something which looked like grief.

"I did," Harry said, "it's actually thanks to him that you were freed."

"Oh?"

"It's true that I noticed that you had made me your Heir but then supposedly betrayed me to Voldemort, but it was only when I spoke to Dad that I really got suspicious. He told me about who you were, but more importantly, he told me that Pettigrew was made the Secret Keeper, not you," Harry said, "obviously I couldn't really use that as evidence that anyone would believe, but it was enough to make me want to find the truth."

"It seems I owe you once again Prongs," Sirius muttered.

"That was Dad's nickname."

"It was. I told you that Pettigrew and I became animagi, well so did your Dad," Sirius said, "it's how we all got our nicknames."

"Padfoot because of the pads of a dog's feet, and Wormtail because of a rat's naked tail," Harry said, "what could Dad turn into?"

Sirius chuckled.

"I think I'll leave that for you to figure out."

They spent the rest of the day talking. Harry told Sirius all about his first three years at Hogwarts, and together they pieced together which actions might have been the result of the enchantments. It was so obvious now that he could look back on it with hindsight that he must have been bewitched in some way, because the stories he had about Ron and Hermione weren't exactly good. Ron came across as an obnoxious complainer who never put any effort in, while Hermione was an arrogant know-it-all who believed everything in her beloved library books to be right.

In return, and also to lighten the mood, Sirius also shared stories about his time at school. Getting to hear about his Dad was fun, and suddenly his adventures didn't seem quite so ridiculous in comparison. The stories were obviously sanitised, any reference to Pettigrew was minimised, and Harry got the feeling that Sirius was skirting around something with

regards to Lupin, but he found he didn't mind it. Getting to hear more about his father was always nice, and Sirius even knew a bit about his mother from that time as well.

Harry ended up staying for dinner, which delighted the house elves to no end. The cottage pie Letty made was delicious, and it was followed by treacle tart which was just as delicious, if not even more so, than the one served at Hogwarts. Harry wondered if house elves ever shared recipes. Though he left to go back to the Dursleys at the end of the day, he did so with surprisingly high spirits.

Sirius watched him go, seeing him out of the door as Celio apparated him back to Little Whinging. It wasn't right that his godson was forced to bear such a heavy burden, even to the point of not being able to live in his own home. As someone who had suffered much injustice these last thirteen years, Sirius did not wish to see Harry also suffer like he had. There would be many trials ahead, and he knew the one thing which he could do which would help. The thought of it made him nervous, but for Harry he would do it.

"Kreacher," Sirius said when he reached his room.

Instantly, a house elf appeared with a pop. This elf was old, copious amounts of white hair coming from his ears, and his posture was stooped with age. He grimaced when he saw Sirius.

"I need something."

"Kreacher is already cleaning Mistress's home, not that Master would appreciate it. The foolish boy would rather waste time amongst blood traitors in another's house," the elf said darkly.

"Once it is in a liveable state, I will be making Grimmauld Place my place of residence," Sirius said, cutting across the elf's muttering, and noting with some satisfaction the way Kreacher froze mid sentence.

"But Master turned his back on his family? Master would rather live under the hospitality of another family than his own?"

"My feelings towards my family are my own Kreacher, but I didn't call you here just to chat," Sirius said, "I need the Black Lordship ring."

If possible, Kreacher looked even more stunned.

"Master refused the Lordship once before, but Lord Arcturus refused to name Master Regulus as Heir instead, despite Mistress's objections."

Sirius had never wanted to be a Lord. His family had been stifling, containing some of the worst witches and wizards of the time, and so steeped in dark magic, Sirius could hardly stand it. Though he generally respected his grandfather, he refused to take on the Black Lordship upon his death. James had always taken to that stuff much easier than he had, but

then Lord Fleamont had been a much kinder father than his own had been. Sirius had wanted nothing to do with it, but now his godson had inherited titles not only from his fathers family, but also two of the most legendary families in the wizarding world. He had no choice but to enter this world and he would need all the help he could get.

That was something Sirius could do.

Chapter End Notes

And so begins part two of this story. When I wrote this, I didn't intend for it to have sections, but this was made sense as the start of the next part of the story, so here we are. Hope you enjoyed it!

In the face of pain

Harry returned to Privet Drive to find a tense atmosphere. He could hear Uncle Vernon in the kitchen, speaking to somebody on the phone in unmistakably angry tones. Not wanting to deal with it, he went upstairs to his bedroom, already wishing he could have stayed at Potter Manor. Hedwig was there waiting for him, and he gave her a few pets before she flew off into the night.

The tension had not faded by the next morning, not that Harry expected it to. Surprisingly, he wasn't the first one awake. Aunt Petunia was sitting at the kitchen table, holding a cup of tea in her hands as she stared unseeing at an open letter. It had an important looking letterhead. Notes with Uncle Vernon's hasty and untidy scrawl littered the table next to it. She looked up when he came down the stairs, eyes red rimmed and slightly puffy. It sent a jolt of guilt through him, but Harry pushed it down. This was not revenge. It was justice, a result of the Dursley's own actions, and what would happen to them now was their own fault.

It was a giant relief to apparate via Celio to Potter Manor. After another swim in the lake, he took breakfast in the dining room again. Sirius joined him, but he wasn't alone. A glowing silver dog followed Sirius through the door. It didn't make a sound, but there was something about the light which felt ... comforting. It faded once Sirius sat down.

"Another swim this morning?" Sirius asked, "I saw you do it a couple of times at Hogwarts, and I'll admit that it's not something I expected."

"Godric suggested it as a way to strengthen my body, and as a way to burn some energy."

"Godric, as in Godric Gryffindor?"

"I told you I've spoken with him and Salazar in the Ring Realm," Harry said.

"Right, yes, you did. I guess it'll take some getting used to, my godson getting to speak with two of the most famous wizards in history," Sirius said, "I've not had that experience yet."

Something caught Harry's attention, and his gaze lowered to Sirius's right hand, which was conspicuously placed on the table. On one of his fingers was a silver band inlaid with three black gemstones. Harry sensed the power in it and the connection to himself.

"The Black Lords ring," he breathed.

"I had Kreacher collect it for me. Growing up, I never wanted to be a Lord, but my godson will need allies, and if that requires me to take up my proper title and act the part, then so be it."

Harry felt a strong rush of affection for his godfather at that moment. Everyone who spoke about Sirius with him mentioned that Sirius did not have a good relationship with his family, and yet by taking on the Black Lordship, he would be forced into contact with them and their

reputation. It made him want to hug him, so as soon as they were finished with breakfast, that was exactly what he did. Sirius chuckled in response.

"Do you have any plans for the day?" Sirius asked.

"Not really. I thought I might have a look through the library, see what books there are there. I'd like to learn a bit more about the Potter family if I can."

"Then come with me. I think you'll like this."

Sirius led him upstairs to a long corridor lined with portraits. In pride of place was an empty frame, but leading off from that were a series of portraits of smiling people with jet black hair. Harry could trace a resemblance to himself that slowly faded as the portraits grew older. Under each one was a small plaque bearing the names of the occupants.

"It's important for the Noble families to keep track of their lineages. Most will have some form of family tree or ledger. The Potters have those, but they also have this," Sirius said, almost wistfully, "each generation of the main house had their portraits made when the Heir turned ten, one year before beginning formal education."

Harry's eyes focused on the portrait directly next to the empty frame. A tall man with wavy black hair stood beside a willowy woman. Between them was a boy, and it felt almost like looking in a mirror where the details were just slightly distorted. The messy hair was the same, but the face beneath it was slightly sharper. The boy wore glasses, but the frames were square and the eyes behind them were hazel, not vivid green. Harry had seen photos of his father before but never this young, and it suddenly made so much sense why people had always said he looked just like him.

Lord Fleamont Potter, Lady Euphemia Potter, Heir James Potter

These were his grandparents. When had they died? It wasn't written on the plaque. Next to them was the portrait containing the child Fleamont, who greatly resembled James and Lord Charles Potter, Fleamont's father. The occupants of the portrait bowed as he approached, and when the mother, Lady Dorea Potter, saw Sirius, she curtsied again.

"Lady Dorea was born Dorea Black. I believe she was my grandfather's aunt," Sirius said, "the portraits here all recognise you as the new Lord Potter, and those of Black blood will recognise me as the Lord of the house of their birth."

"Are there many Black's here?" Harry asked.

"A few. The Blacks and the Potters didn't intermarry as much as some other Noble families, but there was usually at least one every four or five generations or so, though not always between the main lines of either family," Sirius said.

"Charles was the one to write the book on the Potter family history. It was quite detailed, so I'm assuming he wrote it with help from the Ring Realm," Harry said, and the figure in the portrait nodded.

To think that so much of history could be recorded through the use of Family magic, accounts passed down directly from closer sources than whatever documents survived. Harry thought back to the stories he was told about Godric and Salazar, and how they differed significantly from how the two men acted in the Ring Realm. For one who thought History of Magic at Hogwarts was a waste of time and poorly taught, he was overcome with the urge to document the actual history between the two legendary wizards.

Sirius had wandered back down the hall to stand in front of the empty portrait. Harry joined him. There was no plaque to tell who was supposed to be here, but Harry had a suspicion he knew.

"This should have been James's portrait as a Lord," Sirius said, his voice quiet, "Lily had this beautiful frame made for it. James joked and said they had plenty of time, but Lily could be just as stubborn as him when she wanted to be. She fell in love with James despite his social standing, and she felt a great sense of honour and duty in being part of this family. I remember her saying that she wanted to do her part. The three of you should have been here."

"But Voldemort took that from us," Harry said, "and somebody else took the rest."

He stared at the empty frame, a great pressure suddenly building, weighing heavily on him.

"Do you think I can do it too? Honour them, do my part, like Mum wanted to?"

"I have no doubt you will," Sirius said, bringing an arm around Harry and tucking him against his side.

Each day Harry left Privet Drive early and headed to Potter Manor. Partially it was so Sirius could teach him things, but mostly it was to get away from the Dursleys. Learning about their new financial status had hit them hard. Uncle Vernon worked increasingly long hours, coming home looking very stressed, and Aunt Petunia became more snappish, even at Dudley. The first time Dudley complained about the new diet he was being forced on, Aunt Petunia sent him to his room without pudding. So shocked that his mother would take that tone with him, Dudley complied. Every night when Harry returned from Potter Manor, he could hear Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia frantically trying to figure out how they could make the repayments to the bank work while maintaining their lifestyle. It made Harry less sympathetic towards them.

Learning from Sirius was excellent. After breakfast, they would go to one of the studies and Sirius would instruct him on the things he needed to know as Lord and Heir to a Noble family. He was an unconventional teacher, but Harry quite liked it. It made it easier to learn the proper way to walk, talk, eat, and generally present himself to the world. Sirius also emphasised the difference between a public and private face.

"I might seem easy going and scruffy, but I know how to put on a public face as a Lord. The manner and demeanour is often more important than the clothes one wears," Sirius said, "but what you wear is important. It tells people about your priorities as a person. If you look as

though you don't look after yourself, then people will either think that you can't and will pity you, or they'll think you don't care and won't respect you. Neither is a good thing."

His lessons were the perfect distraction for him, because the end of the week approached rapidly, and suddenly he was returning to Gringotts to have the Horcrux extracted. Sirius apparated them to the back of the bank where the private entrance was, and they were received by a goblin and taken straight to Ironclaw's office. The older goblin looked up from the parchment he was reading and gestured for them both to take a seat.

"I trust that you are prepared for the extraction ritual," Ironclaw asked.

"Extraction? I thought it was a cleansing ritual?" Harry said.

"It is both. There are only two ways to 'cleansing' a horcrux: destroy the object, or extract the fragment of soul. Since the former is undesirable for a number of reasons, we pursue the latter here at Gringotts," Ironclaw explained, "as I said to you in my letter, the ritual should pose no risk to yourself. Chanter Ungo has many decades of experience, including experience removing a soul fragment from a Horcrux object. Nevertheless, this is the first time such a ritual has been attempted on a living being, so we will take all available caution. Are you ready to proceed?"

There was nothing else for him to do but nod. Ironclaw led the pair of them through a winding maze of corridors and down many stairs into the lower levels of Gringotts. As they descended, Harry's nerves began to grow, but Sirius had promised to be by his side for as long as he was allowed, and that was a comfort. They arrived at a wide stone room. Etched into the floor were lines of runes forming patterns and arrays that sent Harry's mind racing. They were similar to what Professor Babbling had taught them, but Harry couldn't recognise anything.

Chanter Ungo was a thin goblin dressed in flowing robes of cream silk. There were four other Chanters, but unlike them, Ungo wore a circlet of gleaming silver which caught the light from the torches lining the room. Her eyes were shrewd, scanning Harry as though piercing right through him.

"Lord Potter," she inclined her head to him.

"Thank you for helping me Chanter Ungo."

"Horcruxes are a defilement of the highest order. It is my pleasure to rid the world of them and purify the treasure so afflicted. If you could follow me, we can begin our preparations," she said, "I am afraid Lord Black will have to stay here with Account Manager Ironclaw. They must remain outside the boundary lest they disturb the ritual. You will also need to remove your Lordship ring to Lord Black's keeping."

After wearing it for nearly a year, it felt strange for him to take the ring off. It felt like a cloak being removed and a warmth taken away. Sirius accepted it with an expression of deepest resolve.

"You will be absolutely fine. There's no one better able to do this than the goblins," Sirius said, as though trying to convince himself rather than Harry.

Ungo led Harry to the back of the ritual room where a small screen was set up.

"This ritual requires runes to be placed directly against your skin to properly channel the magic. Therefore you must take off your clothes."

"I need to do what?"

"I'm aware that humans have a peculiar need for modesty even in ritual settings," Ungo said, almost sounding amused, "be lucky that we found a privacy screen big enough to cover you while you disrobe, and there is a cloth which you may use to cover yourself during the ritual itself."

It was only by telling himself that it was just like changing into his swimming trunks at the shore of the lake, and the fact that Ungo had turned around, that let him take off his clothes, folding them into a neat pile. The cloth was slightly larger than a tea towel, but it served its purpose. When he was done, Ungo brought out a pot of incredibly dark ink. She began painting symbols onto his body with a small brush, and Harry distracted himself by trying to decipher the runes, but try as he might, he wasn't able to.

"What do those runes mean?"

"It is highly unlikely that you would understand," Ungo said.

"I've been taking Study of Ancient Runes at Hogwarts. I know I'm only a year into it but I thought I'd be able to at least translate something, but there's nothing," Harry said.

"That was not intended as a slight against your intelligence Lord Potter. I simply meant that it would be highly unlikely for *any* human to understand runic magic performed by goblins. Not even knowing Gobbledegook would help, though it would be a start."

"You write runes in Gobbledegook?" Harry asked.

Ungo gave him an appraising look.

"It was in the fifth century CE that perhaps the closest relationship between humans and goblins ever existed. Before that, the two races had lived not quite harmoniously, but comfortably enough. There was an unspoken agreement to leave each other alone. Persecution by Muggles wasn't as bad at that time, so wizards were able to openly move around and do business more freely, but there was a growing fear towards anything magical. The Goblin Nation had its own issues as we mourned the decline of the Dwarves, our sibling species, who we shared a close bond with."

"Goblins and Dwarves both preferred to live in underground dwellings. However, special care had to be taken to prevent the spread of disease in such places, for by their very nature they are enclosed. That was when a magical illness struck. It was highly contagious and also

incredibly dangerous to both species. When the outbreak was discovered in the city of Utgard in what is now Norway, the city was sealed to prevent its spread to the rest of the Nation."

"Though the Healers worked as hard as they could, they could not find a cure, hampered by the illness as they were. All hope was lost, until who should stumble across Utgard but a wizard named Birger and his young sons Hakon and Halvar."

"While deadly to Goblins and Dwarves, the disease was harmless to humans, and unlike other, more selfish members of your species, Birger and his sons thought nothing of helping. Despite their young ages, Hakon was a gifted linguist and knew the Goblin language. He gathered all the information he could while Halvar, a prodigy of the healing arts, helped to keep as many of us alive as he could. Meanwhile, Birger was a Potions Master, and after two months of constant work, he devised a potion which cured the disease. The three gifted the Goblins the knowledge to develop and improve our own healing techniques, and so the Goblin Nation gifted them knowledge of Runic Magic in return."

"So how come wizarding runes aren't written in Gobbledygook now?" Harry asked.

"While they appreciated the gift, Birger and Halvar could not speak our tongue and so could not make use of it. Hakon could, and it is said that he found a way to recreate the mechanism of Runic Magic to fit the language of Old Norse which his kin spoke. Old Norse and Gobbledygook are very different, and so how the runes direct and knead magic are different. This is why human Runic Magic is able to achieve things that Goblin Runic Magic cannot, and vice versa, though I suspect that in time both will be able to do all."

"Still, it's incredible to hear about such cooperation. It makes you wonder why it's so hard to replicate," Harry said.

"That it does, but as with most stories, the Goblins also see it as a cautionary tale," Ungo said, "it warns us not to become so blinded by success that we fail to see the entire picture, because as hard as Birger worked and for all that he and his sons were able to achieve, they were not able to save the Dwarves."

"That's so sad!"

"It is. The Goblin Nation mourns their memory, and allows it to drive us forward," Ungo said, "and hearing about it allows you to remain still long enough for me to almost finish."

Harry looked down, shocked to see that Ungo was quite right. Over his heart was a series of runes, which were mirrored on the other side of his chest. Lines connected them to more runes in the middle of his belly, which trailed down to smaller symbols on the sides of his hips, which Ungo asked him to move the cloth so she could draw. The array continued down his legs and ended in the middle of both feet. It similarly went down both arms. Up the side of his neck were delicate lines of runes, and around his scar, Ungo had drawn a set of rings with runes inlaid between them.

"That mark is the remains of the Horcrux formation and that is the location we shall extract the soul fragment from."

"This array doesn't seem that complicated."

"Because you are only part of the whole," Ungo said, "the rest is constructed into this very room."

She gave her work one last inspection.

"Are you ready, Lord Potter?"

Harry nodded. Ungo led him back out from behind the privacy screen, and Harry kept himself covered as much as he could by the cloth. He was directed to lie in the centre of an enormous runic array. The pattern spread across the entire floor and strands of it went up the large pillars of rock which supported the rough hewn ceiling, in which various gems and crystals had been placed.

"I warn you now that this will likely be extremely painful. For such a delicate operation, movement can be devastating, so with your permission, I would like to apply a restraining spell on you," Ungo said.

"What sort of spell?"

"One which would completely immobilise any sharp, fast movements associated with pain, while allowing movements that are slow and calm."

Hearing that he wouldn't be completely frozen was reassuring, so Harry allowed her. The spell felt similar to being covered in thick treacle. Out of curiosity, Harry tried jerking his arm but it was like it was encased in concrete. Going much more slowly, he was able to reach up and scratch his nose, though it was like moving his arm in slow motion. Ungo gave him an amused smirk, as though she expected him to do exactly that. The other four other goblins approached, forming a ring with Ungo around Harry.

As they started chanting in Gobbledygook, Harry tried his best to remain calm. There was a strange, crawling sensation, as though something was wriggling about just beneath his skin. It took all his willpower to remain still and not glance to check that nothing was there. The chanting went up in pitch, forming harmonies which echoed around the entire room. The crystals and gemstones in the ceiling lit up in a veritable rainbow of colours, and the sensation in Harry's body increased in intensity. It travelled from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

Then there was a feeling as though a powerful vacuum had been applied to his skin and was trying to suck his insides out from a single point. His scar burned with such intense pain Harry was unable to remain silent. The restraining spell held tight around him, locking him in place, and the crawling sensation moved up through his body. Something bubbled up on his forehead. A crystal was held over his head by Ungo, and Harry screamed. It was pain beyond anything he could have imagined as an eerie black liquid was drawn from his scar and contained inside the crystal.

The chanting ended and Harry shivered, racked with deep tremors. The submerged feeling disappeared but Harry had no energy to move. He lay there, staring at the ceiling above him

as his entire body shook. Ungo helped him to sit up and then Sirius was there. Harry threw himself at his godfather and Sirius caught him, holding Harry as he sobbed, not caring how he looked to the Goblins.

"It's alright now Harry. It's alright. It's over," Sirius was whispering to him.

"Here, give him this. It'll help ease the lingering pain and should stop the trembling."

A glass vial containing an amber liquid was placed to his lips and Harry allowed it to be tipped down his throat. Almost at once, it was like a warm blanket was wrapped around him, and the remaining embers of pain still lancing through him began to fade. Harry was only vaguely aware of being picked up and carried away, only coming back to himself when he was lying down in a bed. Somebody had dressed him in what looked like a hospital gown. Ungo was waving a different crystal over him in slow, methodical movements.

"Everything appears to be in order," she said, "it seems like the ritual was a success."

"What happens now?" Sirius asked.

"Lord Potter needs rest. He should be strong enough to travel, but after that he will need sleep. As soon as he is awake, a good meal will help. I wouldn't be surprised if he sleeps for at least a day, and for it to take perhaps another two on top of that for him to be up and about."

"That long?"

"Lord Black, that was no ordinary ritual he just experienced. The soul fragment we removed had nearly thirteen years to integrate itself with his magical core. Regardless of the care we took, there was always going to be some level of damage to his magical core. Thankfully, that damage is only minimal, the sort that will naturally heal on its own, so Lord Potter will need to let it," Ungo said severely, "once he has recovered, we will give him a scan to make sure everything is progressing nicely and there are no complications."

"So I can take him home?"

There must have been some form of affirmative, because the next thing Harry knew he was being picked up again. He clung onto Sirius, feeling weaker than he had ever done in his life.

"You just go to sleep," Sirius said, "I'll take it from here."

And that was exactly what Harry did. They hadn't even made it out of the bank when Harry's eyes closed, and he drifted off into a blessedly dreamless sleep.

Fingers running through Harry's hair brought him back into consciousness, but the all encompassing warmth was not one he associated with the waking world. Sure enough, when Harry opened his eyes, he saw that he was in the Ring Realm. He was lying down in the endless ocean, his head in James's lap as his father gently carded through his messy hair. Godric and Salazar sat across from him.

"You were so brave Harry," James said.

"Indeed. Your strength of spirit is most admirable," Salazar said, "not many would have been able to handle that much pain."

"But it was necessary for the ritual, right?"

"The Goblin's could have made changes to shield you from as much pain as possible. I wouldn't be surprised if the Chanters aren't already in the process of doing so," Salazar said, "needless to say, at any moment you could have told them to stop and yet you didn't. To experience pain in the short term to achieve a long term goal requires a level of dedication most don't possess. Some in your situation would have been tempted to leave the Horcrux since up to that point it hadn't done them any harm."

"But it was doing me harm. Whenever Voldemort was near it really hurt. Dumbledore said there was a connection between me and him, which I'm guessing was the Horcrux," Harry said, then suddenly a thought occurred to him, "I won't be able to speak Parseltongue now, won't I?"

"What makes you say that?" James asked.

"Well, Parseltongue is a magical language. Hermione said you can't learn it since it's a trait passed down through bloodlines. I'm pretty sure Parseltongue isn't a trait in the Potter family?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then it must have come from my connection to Voldemort. He's a Parselmouth because he's descended from Salazar, and I got it from him through the Horcrux," Harry said, "so now that it's gone, I shouldn't be able to speak it, right?"

"Perhaps, but also perhaps not," Salazar said shrewdly, "it is true that you likely gained the ability because of the Horcrux, but I believe that you should still retain it even though it's gone."

"How so?" Harry asked.

"Because you are now a part of House Slytherin. Even if it's through conquest, the Slytherin magic has accepted you, which means you should still have access to Parseltongue," Slytherin said, "of course, we won't know until the opportunity arises."

"At least now you have the ability because of your own actions, and not some disgusting leftover from him," James said darkly.

Godric remained silent. It was so unusual for the normally boisterous and loud wizard that Harry grew quite worried. Even though this wasn't his real body, it still felt achy when he pushed himself into a sitting position. Salazar glanced at his fellow founder.

"Pull yourself together, moron. This isn't like it was in our time."

Though the words were chiding, Salazar's tone was softer and fonder than normal.

"Godric?" Harry said.

"Children are precious. This Lord Voldemort is truly evil to think of hurting even a single hair on their head," Godric said, "it is foolish of me to suffer because of your pain, and I don't want to dishonour you like that."

"It's alright to feel bad about things happening to other people. It shows you care," Harry said.

"Indeed it does dearest nephew," Godric said, "and I would much rather face that fact every moment of my life if it means I get to keep caring. The joy of life is meaningless if it cannot be shared, and it makes me very happy that you are now finding people you wish to share it with."

Harry thought about Sirius, and Lupin, and Arthur and Andromeda, Seamus and Dean, all of the people who had his back and supported him. There was a lot he was able to share with them. The road ahead was still long, and there would likely be a lot more pain, but it would be worth it if they were still there at the end.

The Lordship Vow

It was after lunch the next day when Harry woke up and he felt awful. His entire body felt like it had been shoved through a blender and then reassembled piece by piece. His magical core felt drained, but there was also a sensation like a tap running. He could vaguely remember Ungo telling Sirius about what his recovery would be like and he was already dreading it. The outside never looked quite so inviting as when he wasn't allowed to enjoy it.

Celio appeared not long after bearing a tray of food, the sight of which caused his stomach to growl loudly. After wolfing down two portions of porridge, eggs and bacon, and washing it down with several glasses of pumpkin juice, Harry felt too full to do anything. Sirius leaned against the door, smirking at him.

"I'm glad to see you've still got your appetite."

"How long was I out for?"

"We got back to the Manor at just after 11am yesterday, and it's 2pm now, so just over a day as Ungo suspected," Sirius said.

"Did anything interesting happen?"

"As it happens, yes."

Harry perked up, though he couldn't help being suspicious as well.

"As I am now officially in good health, I have begun the process of having you transferred to my custody. Grimmauld Place is now in a liveable condition, with more than enough space for the pair of us," Sirius said, "the paperwork should be processed within the next few days, and after that, that'll be it. You won't need to go back to the Dursley's ever again."

Something rose up within Harry's chest; an overwhelming, almost cloying feeling that he couldn't quite put into words. As he stared at Sirius, tears began rolling down his cheeks in a steady stream even as Harry didn't cry or sob. His breath hitched once, then twice, his hands clenched in the fabric of the bedsheets. It almost felt like too good to be true. Nothing ever went this well for him. Surely there had to be some catch. Sirius crossed the room, sitting on the edge of the bed and taking Harry's hands in his.

"I can live with you?"

"Of course you can."

That was all Harry needed to barrel into his godfather's chest. Emotion overwhelmed him, and he hid his tears as best he could. It was probably unbecoming for a Lord to cry like this, but it was the best news that Harry had received in a long time.

"There's more," Sirius said, and Harry leaned back so he could see him, "as a reward, for both of us recovering from horrific circumstances and also to celebrate our new living arrangements, I've been asking the Department of Magical Games and Sports about tickets to the Quidditch World Cup."

That certainly peaked Harry's interest. He had talked about it on the Hogwarts Express and had been meaning to ask Sirius about it, but other things kept coming up. His excitement clearly showed on his face. Sirius chuckled.

"I'm still making arrangements, but my contact has assured me that two tickets are available if we want them. I'm assuming you want to go?"

"Yes!" Harry said immediately, which made Sirius laugh harder.

"Then I'll write to her immediately. Better do it now so it doesn't get snatched up by someone else"

Harry let Sirius go, and he flopped back down onto his bed. Even just that small amount of movement had exhausted him. The next couple of days were likely going to be awful if he was confined here. He passed some of the time by writing letters to both Seamus and Dean, letting them know he might be getting tickets to see the Quidditch World Cup. It took a little while before he actually sent them though, as he wasn't sure if either of them were going and he didn't want to sound too conceited. When he felt his letters were how he wanted them, he called for Celio to bring him Hedwig. The elf could have taken the letters to the owl for him, but Harry wanted a bit more company.

Hedwig was happy to see him, and Harry allowed her to preen his hair for a bit with her beak before tying the letters to her leg. With that, she took off through the open window, which was letting in a pleasant summer breeze. Unfortunately, he now had nothing to occupy him, and as often happened in such moments, his thoughts began to wander. With the Quidditch World Cup still on his mind, he remembered a very different conversation he had about the event. Ron had said he was trying to get tickets for it as well, and that he would invite Harry to come and see it. As much as he wanted to go, he would much rather go with Sirius than with Ron, and he said as much when the man returned.

"That's easy to fix," Sirius said, "just let him know that you appreciate the thoughtfulness, but you've already made plans to attend with your godfather. Tell him that if you get the chance, you could catch up if you see each other. Obviously we'll conveniently *not* have the time, but he doesn't need to know that."

"I'm worried that's not going to be enough," Harry said, "I'm worried he'll tell Dumbledore, and that he or Mrs Weasley will try and meddle."

"I'd like to see either of them try. The only one who can possibly interfere with the transfer of guardianship to me is your magical guardian, but nobody seems to know who that is," Sirius said, "if either of them say anything, tell them to speak to me. I won't let them walk all over us like that."

"And if they use this to try and bewitch me again?"

"Do not be alone with either Dumbledore or Molly Weasley, preferably not any of the others on that list from Gringotts but at least they're not full grown wizards. At this point, they're still trying to pretend like everything's normal, so you can pull the 'happy child that they don't want to upset' card."

Sirius paused, considering something seriously.

"As for the rest of it, we'll speak more when you've recovered."

That couldn't come soon enough. By the second day of bed rest, Harry was going stir crazy. It was only the deep exhaustion which seemed to penetrate every cell of his body which kept him confined. He wanted to leave the house, go swimming, go flying, do anything besides lie there in bed. The only thing which kept him going was that he could feel his strength returning. With each nap and each delicious meal, his energy came back bit by bit. By the third day after the cleansing ritual, Harry could make short trips to the bathroom by himself, which was absolutely necessary because it was mortifying otherwise, so long as he went straight back to bed for a nap afterwards. On the fourth day, Harry could get up and move around without needing naps, but he couldn't walk long distances without taking frequent breaks.

It was only on the fifth day post ritual that Harry felt able to get up and take a much needed shower. The hot water felt heavenly and he washed off the sweat and grime from five days of being near sedentary eagerly. He felt a bit wobbly when he came out, but Harry likened the feeling to the aftermath of a particularly vigorous Quidditch training session. Feeling clean and refreshed, Harry went downstairs. Sirius was in one of the drawing rooms reading the Daily Prophet.

"He emerges!" he said when he saw Harry, "how are you feeling? Obviously better since you're up and walking."

"A shower has never felt so good."

Celio and Letty brought through some sandwiches for Harry to eat, which he devoured eagerly. The next day he felt much stronger, closer to his normal self, and that was when an owl arrived from Gringotts. He and Sirius were eating breakfast and Celio brought it to them.

"What does it say?" Sirius asked.

"They want me to come back to the bank as soon as possible. They've finished their analysis of the soul fragment they extracted from me," Harry said.

Apparating to the private courtyard of Gringotts, they were quickly escorted to Ironclaw's office. Ironclaw was there, as was Ungo, and both looked slightly grave.

"Lord Potter, thank you for returning so quickly," Ironclaw said, "we have the results of our analysis, but there is something Ungo would like to confirm first."

"May I have permission to perform a diagnostic scan on you? There will be no need to move as I have everything I need here," Ungo asked.

Harry nodded. Ungo put on a thick metal gauntlet and held a bright green crystal in her other hand. She moved the gauntleted arm over his body, paying particular attention to his head and muttering in Gobbledegook the entire time. Harry waited patiently for her to finish, and when she did, she sighed heavily.

"It's confirmed. We got it all."

"Then it is as we feared," Ironclaw said.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"We don't know the exact mechanism for producing a Horcrux, but we do know that each time one is made, the soul is divided exactly in half as that is the only way for each part to remain stable," Ungo said, "which is why when we saw that the fragment we extracted from you was tiny, we grew worried that we hadn't gotten it all. However, that isn't the case."

"Which leaves us with only one other explanation," Ironclaw said, "Lord Potter was not the only Horcrux Voldemort has made."

"He ... made more than one?" Harry said, astonished.

Everything Salazar had said about horcruxes emphasised the toll they took on the person who made them. The soul was meant to be whole. Even if the individual fragments were stable, they could never hold up to the complete soul. The weight of this revelation sunk in, and Harry was not the only one disturbed by it.

"How many did he make?" Sirius asked.

"By our calculations, the soul fragment we extracted from you is approximately one and a half percent of a full soul, which makes for a total of seven soul fragments," Ungo said, "one resides within Voldemort in whatever form he takes. Even if his body is destroyed, so long as the other horcruxes remain, that piece can still exist. Not including the one removed from Lord Potter, that leaves five horcruxes remaining."

"And as long as even one of them is intact, Voldemort can't be killed," Harry said.

"This is ridiculous," Sirius said, though there was a weakness to his voice, "there must be something we can do."

"As it happens, there is."

Both Harry and Sirius's eyes landed on Ungo.

"Souls are meant to be whole. When they are damaged, they slowly repair themselves in time. Every fragment separated off and stored in a container seeks to come together again, and we can use that to our advantage," Ungo said, "we still have the fragment we extracted from Lord Potter. We can use that to track down and destroy the remaining horcruxes."

"Really?" Harry said.

"Yes," Ungo said with surety.

"It is in the best interest of the Goblin Nation that Lord Voldemort be dealt with. His last rise to power resulted in many casualties for us. If he can be stopped before he rises again, or failing that, if his tethers to mortality are severed, then that is an endeavour worth pursuing," Ironclaw said.

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely.

The vague destiny that had constantly floated over his head, that *he* needed to be the one who stopped Voldemort, had always seemed so daunting. Now though, Harry actually felt as though it were possible. He was no longer alone in this fight, and together, they would win.

"What are we doing?"

The day after their visit to Gringotts, Sirius told Harry to bring his wand to the large ballroom on the ground floor of Potter Manor. There was so much space, and Harry didn't need to try hard to imagine it full of people all in fancy robes. Sirius had his own wand and he was pacing back and forth.

"Hearing about those horcruxes, how many of them Voldemort made in a psychotic bid to stay alive, it made me realise that there will come a time when you will have to face him or his supporters once again," Sirius said, "I would like to teach you some things that will give you a fighting chance."

"You're going to teach me magic? But I thought I wasn't allowed to do magic outside of school?"

"Technically you're not supposed to, but there's no way the Ministry will be able to tell."

"Two years ago, they sent a warning to the Dursleys when Dobby the house elf used magic in Privet Drive," Harry said, "they must have some way of tracking underage magic."

"Something called the Trace is applied to every wand sold to an underage wizard which can flag magic, but that spell is limited by design," Sirius explained, "it can only tell if magic has been performed in the vicinity of the traced wand, not who exactly was casting it. For a lone wizard in a Muggle house, it's obvious, but in a place where other adult wizards live, it is impossible. Parents are expected to enforce it themselves. Since I've been living here, any magic performed can be blamed on me."

That made sense, but then another thought occurred to him.

"Hang on. Doesn't that mean that Muggleborns are at a disadvantage? I mean, someone with magical parents can practise spells and stuff during the summer, but someone like Dean who has Muggle parents can't."

"That's a good point. I remember there used to be a shop on a street near Diagon Alley that served as a practice space for muggle born or raised children. Not sure what's happened to it,

and since you didn't know about it I'm guessing it's either shut down or just not advertised as much," Sirius said, "I can look into it, but for now, wouldn't you rather be learning some spells?"

Harry nodded eagerly, which made Sirius chuckle.

"The spell I thought we'd start with, I chose for a very specific reason," Sirius said, and his face fell, lined with worry that made Harry think back to how he'd looked when he was first exonerated, "even now, all these months later, I still have nightmares about the Dementors. Those creatures are truly evil, and I refuse to succumb to that evil ever again. I made sure that I know how to fight them, and from what you told me about how they affect you, I want to teach you so you can fight them as well."

Sirius held out his wand and muttered an incantation beneath his breath. From the tip of the wand burst an orb of silver light which rapidly shifted until a large dog touched down on the ground. It made no sound, but the soft glow that it emitted filled the air with a sense of serenity and peace.

"I've seen this before," Harry said.

"Yes, you have. I sometimes conjure it for my own peace of mind, because even if there are no Dementors around, I find it can help chase away the bad thoughts," Sirius said.

"What is it?"

"This is called the Patronus charm, and it is the only known method to repel a Dementor," Sirius explained, "the Patronus is formed from happiness and light. It is a source of energy that can withstand the effect of the Dementors in such a way that they cannot feed from it. It will protect you and drive them away."

"It's beautiful."

"Indeed it is," Sirius said, "it is also highly advanced magic. Many full grown wizards struggle with it, but I feel that I need to at least try to teach it to you."

"Then let's do it," Harry said firmly.

"Very well. The incantation itself is simple. Repeat after me: Expecto Patronum."

Harry did so.

"I'm afraid that is the easy part. In order to repel a Dementor, the Patronus charm requires a happy memory, the happiest you can think of, happiness so strong combined with a force of will that can project that happiness out into a physical form," Sirius said, "for me, my happy memory is the day that James and Lily named me your godfather. Close your eyes and think of a memory, then we'll give it a try."

Harry closed his eyes, searching through his memories. There were many he thought could potentially be strong enough. Arriving at Hogwarts, winning the House Cup for the first time, waking up on Christmas morning to find presents waiting for him. All of them were very

happy, but now that he thought about them further, they felt ... tainted somehow, because Ron and Hermione had been there for all of them. People who had dug their claws into him, twisted his mind into believing they were his friends, that they cared about him. The happiness of those memories dimmed significantly.

So he cast about for a memory that was solely his. He arrived at the first time he rode a broom in their first ever flying lesson. Being in the air and moving so freely had been the most exhilarating thing he had ever done.

"Once you've found a memory, let it fill your entire being. The happiness and joy need to be strong enough that your will can project it out of your body."

Harry focused on the elation he'd felt as he soared through the air, the rush of adrenaline as he'd dived for Neville's Remembrall. He let that sensation fill his body completely before brandishing his wand and crying 'Expecto Patronum!' A faint white vapour seeped out of the end of his wand.

"Not bad for a first attempt," Sirius said, "this is a tricky spell to master. It's possible your mental fortitude wasn't strong enough, but if you have James' stubborn focus then I doubt that. The only other option is that the memory wasn't strong enough."

"I thought about the first time I rode a broom, but I wasn't sure that would be enough," Harry said, "let me see if I've got anything else."

Rather than thinking about specific moments which made him happy, Harry tried thinking about happiness in general. Was there ever a time in his life which he could say with certainty that he was truly happy? The shadow of what Ron and Hermione had done to him lingered over a lot of what came to mind, but then he remembered something. It was a few months ago in the run up to final exams. Harry had just found out that he could live with Sirius, Ron and Hermione weren't trying to dose him, and he could just exist as himself.

So he focused on that. The euphoria of not having to return to the Dursleys. His new Firebolt had bolstered the Gryffindor Quidditch team's confidence to the point that they won the Quidditch Cup for the first time in years. The stress of exams had gotten to Hermione, meaning she left him alone, and Ron was forced to struggle his own way through his work. They both left him alone, and Harry was able to grow closer to the other Gryffindor third-years. Parvati and Lavender, whirlwinds of gossip who were always fun to talk to; Neville with his quiet sense of calm; and Seamus and Dean. Thinking of those boys brought a smile to his face. Seamus was quick to leap to the defence of his friends, always willing to lend a hand if he could. Dean was thoughtful, always ready with a sensible suggestion to temper the flames of recklessness.

Sirius watched the small blush forming on his godson's face and knew whatever memory he had selected would be strong enough. This time when Harry said the incantation, silver light erupted from the end of his wand. The magnificent creature touched the ground, shaking its antlered head and filling the entire room with warmth and peace. Harry stepped closer to it, drawn to it instinctively. There was no sensation when he touched it, but it lowered its head to accept the pats regardless. It was a stag, and something about it felt very familiar.

"Prongs?"

Sirius was staring at the Patronus with something akin to grief, and that's when it clicked for Harry. James was an animagus, and his animal form was a stag.

"I guess it goes to show that the people we love never truly leave us," Sirius said.

"So I've done it right?"

"Are you kidding? With a Patronus like this, I wouldn't be surprised if you could drive away all the Dementors of Azkaban!"

"They're awful creatures," Harry said.

"There's nobody in the wizarding world who would disagree with that assessment."

"Even Godric and Salazar don't like them. Godric was furious when he found out Dementors were stationed at the school. He felt that the castle defences would be enough to keep out a serial killer."

"I wouldn't know, since I'm not one," Sirius said.

Harry cast the Patronus charm a few more times, and when it was clear he'd mastered it, Sirius insisted it was worth a reward. They travelled to a nearby village, with Sirius disguising his face slightly with a glamour. The Muggles didn't notice. While they may have been told of his innocence, Sirius didn't trust that some busy body wouldn't call the police on them just to be safe, and he didn't want the afternoon to be ruined as he treated Harry to a pub lunch. As they munched their way through a generous serving of Bangers and Mash, they talked about the upcoming World Cup on the 7th of August. Before that though was Harry's birthday.

"I don't want anything too over the top," Harry said firmly.

"But I want to treat my godson. It's not like I haven't got plenty of money to spare."

"I know you do, and so do I, but the idea of spending tons of money doesn't feel right."

Years of living with the Dursleys and having nothing had left its mark. Sirius seemed to understand at least.

"Well, what would you like to do for your birthday?" Sirius asked.

"I've got an idea."

"Which is?"

"It's a surprise," Harry said with a smirk.

"But I'm the one who's supposed to be surprising you!"

When they returned to Potter Manor, bellies pleasantly full of homemade food, Sirius pulled him to one side.

"Now that you've recovered magically, there's something you need to do."

Sirius led him to the corridor with all the family portraits. They stopped outside the only door on this corridor. It had the Potter Family crest emblazoned on it, but was otherwise unadorned.

"You're the Lord of House Potter, the custodian of the Potter Family Magic, and you've already bonded with it somewhat, solidifying your own connection with it," Sirius said, "normally there would be a whole ceremony to induct you as Lord upon James's retirement. Unfortunately that didn't happen, but luckily it wasn't required for you to inherit your fathers position. Still, to ensure that there is a proper connection between you and the magic, we can at least do most of the ceremony ourselves."

He nodded to the door.

"Beyond there is the Potter Family ward stone. It is the concentration and nexus of the Family Magic, maintaining the wards around the Manor and acting as a repository. If you concentrate, you should be able to feel it."

It was true, he could. When Harry closed his eyes, it was as though he could feel all of the magic which thrummed through the air around him flowing outwards from somewhere on the other side of the door.

"What do we need to do?"

"It's more what *you* need to do," Sirius said, "you need to go down there and place your hand upon the ward stone. I can't follow you as I'm not the Lord or Heir Potter."

"If I don't do this, what will happen?"

"As far as I can tell, nothing. You've already been accepted by the Family Magic, this would only formalise and strengthen it. The only reason why I'm asking you to do it is for something I want to do together later and I don't want there to be any interference from the Potter magic," Sirius said, "it's a surprise before you ask."

Harry steeled his nerve, reached out, and grasped the bronze door handle. The metal felt warm to the touch, and when the door swung open, a presence washed over them both. Sirius inched backwards but Harry let himself step forward. There was a narrow stone passage with steps leading down. The light from the hallway seemed to seep into the very walls such that when Harry walked down the steps, he could still see clearly even though there were no torches or lamps. He wasn't sure how far down he walked but eventually the stairs ended.

Beyond was a large room made of rough hewn rock, like this was a cave that the Manor had been built on top of. As soon as Harry crossed the threshold, fires sprung to life in large braziers set in the corners of the room, the bright flickering light drawing his attention to the stone in the very centre of the room. It was perfectly smooth and round, deep black and

practically radiating power. This had to be the ward stone. Something within Harry reached out to it, and to his surprise, something reached back. With a new found respect, Harry approached and as though the knowledge of what to do was transmitted into his head, he reached out and laid his hand on top of the ward stone.

There was a rush and a pulse, and Harry gasped loudly but did not remove his hand. The room blurred for a second, and when it came back into focus Harry gasped again. The room was now far larger than before, the back wall gone and replaced by an endless void of white filled with people. At the front were a line of men and women who stepped out of the void and into the room proper. In the middle was a tall man with messy grey hair and a long beard. Harry was confused for a moment, but then he saw his dad in the line and it made sense. These were previous Lords and Ladies Potter. Behind them were the rest of the Potter family going back to the very beginning.

"Young Harry Potter, you have been chosen by the Family Magic to be the Lord of this House," the wizened old man said, "are you prepared to make the Lord's vow?"

From down the line, Harry saw James smile fondly.

"I am."

"Then do you swear to uphold your responsibilities as Lord Potter, to act as custodian of our family's magic and to use it for benevolent purposes?"

"I do."

"Do you swear to maintain and cultivate the Family Magic so that it may grow and be passed onto future generations?"

"I do."

"Do you swear to protect the Potter family?"

"I do."

"And do you swear to seek out an Heir who may bear the Potter name over any other, to guide them until they may rise to the title of Lord?"

"I do."

At his words, the magic in the air flooded through him. It was like the rush he experienced when he first stepped foot on the grounds of Potter Manor. When it faded, just as Sirius said, there was little difference, but something felt more official. He had sworn an oath to protect his family, and that was something Harry felt no regrets about. Both his father and his mother had done exactly that when they laid down their lives for him. He would honour their sacrifices, just as he would honour the generations of Potters, Gryffindors and Slytherins who came before him.

When he stepped out of the passageway and back into the hallway in Potter Manor, all the figures in the portraits lining the walls bowed to him. Sirius was waiting by the portrait of

Fleamont, Euphemia and James, and he beamed when he saw Harry.

"They accepted you?" his grin grew brighter when Harry nodded, "of course they would."

"I could feel the power of the ward stone. It was incredible."

"For a family as old as the Potters, it has had many years to accumulate magic," Sirius said, "and now it's official. You have taken your place amongst magical nobility."

"So how come you wanted me to do this even if I had already been accepted by the magic as the Lord?"

"I told you. It's a surprise, but you'll find out soon."

Harry couldn't wait. Learning and experiencing more about magic was exhilarating. It made him wonder why there wasn't a class on it at Hogwarts. Even if most students weren't members of noble families, it was still an important part of magical culture. It was something which set wizards and witches apart from other magical races like Goblins. Being able to cultivate magic in this way was revolutionary.

"Come then. I think it's time for more lessons," Sirius said, and he led Harry down the hall to the drawing room.

Grimmauld Place

Two days later, a letter arrived for Sirius. After he read it, he pumped his fist and handed it across to Harry. It was from the Ministry of Magic confirming that guardianship had been transferred to Sirius. Harry would officially never have to go back to the Dursleys. All the assessments had been completed and approved. Now all that was left was for Harry to move in with Sirius at his home.

"Of course, I'm not going to stop you from coming back here," Sirius said, "for administrative purposes, your primary residence will be Grimmauld Place with me, but I won't say no if you want to spend time at Potter Manor."

"Thank you," Harry said, "were there any issues with transferring guardianship? I can't imagine Dumbledore or whoever my magical guardian was would approve."

"Apparently Dumbledore expressed some concern about my ability to look after you properly, but given all the documentation I've provided, there was nothing he could do. Only concrete evidence of mistreatment on my part or the magical guardian saying otherwise would have been enough to stop this process."

"So Dumbledore isn't my magical guardian," Harry said, almost sounding disappointed.

"I'm not so sure about that. I've been giving it a lot of thought recently. Obviously I've got no proof except my own suspicion, but I think that Dumbledore is your magical guardian," Sirius said, "during the last war with Voldemort, Dumbledore was always the one making the plans. He led the charge, gave the orders, orchestrated everything as far as I can remember. He was also the one to deliver you to the Dursleys after Voldemort failed to kill you. I struggle to believe that he would leave anything to chance. There is no way he would leave somebody else in charge of monitoring you."

"It makes sense, but why wouldn't he have done anything to try and stop you? If he's my magical guardian, then you said he could have stopped you taking me in and forced me back to the Dursleys, like he did after my first and second year."

"To maintain his image," Sirius said, "think about it. Dumbledore always presents himself as a kindly, wise old man who only wants to do good in the world. He has a perfect reputation as the man who defeated one Dark Lord and led the resistance against a second, as well as all of his many titles and accomplishments. Not attaching his name to your magical guardianship means that any negative outcomes that arise from any investigations into your wellbeing won't affect him."

"But it means that I'm out from under his thumb," Harry pointed out.

"True, but if he's playing the long game, which I suspect he is given that list of potions, he'll consider it a small price to pay," Sirius said, "though of course, I don't have any proof of this."

It was an annoying state of affairs, but Sirius's suspicions made sense. Thankfully, the good news of the guardianship transfer meant that they needed to celebrate. Harry sent Celio to collect everything he owned that was still at the Dursleys. Seeing it all in a neat pile in his bedroom truly felt like he was now separated from them, and Harry took his Firebolt and flew several laps around Potter Manor. There were enchantments woven into the wards so that Muggles wouldn't notice anything, but the grounds were so big it was unlikely they'd get close enough to see him anyway. Being back in the air again was liberating, and the next thing Harry knew it was lunch time.

After tucking into delicious sandwiches and a salad, he met Sirius at the front door to Potter Manor.

"Are you ready?"

Harry turned back to peer around the entrance hall. It wouldn't be the last time he would see this place, but there was still a small amount of sadness at the thought of leaving. Celio and Letty appeared to see them off, the pair of elves bowing low.

"We shall keep the Master's house in perfect order!" Celio called after him in his squeaky voice, "call us if ever you need us sir!"

Sirius led him down the driveway to the gate. Harry gave Potter Manor one last look, idly patting his pocket where his trunk was shrunken down for easy transportation. Passing through the gate very much felt like crossing a threshold. Sirius held out his arm, and Harry took it, gripping it tightly.

Apparating still wasn't a pleasant experience. When the feeling of being squeezed through a tube subsided, they were in a narrow side street between two large townhouses. In the air was a feeling of lack of care, as though nobody paid much attention to this particular corner of the world and it had since fallen into disrepair. This impression was further compounded when they stepped out onto the street proper. The buildings were all very uniform and dreary with very little personality to set them apart from one another. They crossed a small square decorated with patches of grass and what may at one point have been planters.

"Welcome Harry, to Grimmauld Place," Sirius said, "lovely, isn't it?"

Harry wasn't sure what he should say in response. Sirius was supposed to be taking him to where he'd grown up as a child. The Black's were an old pureblood family. He found it very difficult to believe they had lived in a slightly run down part of a muggle city.

"The Black's do have a Manor. Not as big as Potter Manor because up until fairly recently my family had been quite large and we were spread out all over the place. My grandfather Arcturus lived in Grimmauld Place, and when he became Lord Black, it's where my parents lived and raised me and my brother," Sirius said, "I know my mother hated it, but Grandfather didn't allow her access to any other Black properties."

"I still find it hard to imagine two Muggle-hating purebloods could stand being forced to live so close to them."

"You say that as though there was any interaction between them. After all, we lived at Number 12."

Sirius gestured to the row of houses before them. Harry's eyes passed straight from Number 11 immediately to Number 13.

"This house has always been hidden from the Muggles. It's just as secure as any other magical dwelling," Sirius said, placing his hand on Harry's shoulder.

There was a small trickle of magic and Harry gasped at the sight. A house appeared, pushing aside Number 11 and 13 as though inflating to fill the space between them. There was no sign of any kind of reaction from the Muggles in those houses to them being moved in such a manner. When it finished, Number 12 stood in all its glory, a shining number plate gleaming against a polished black wooden door.

Inside the house, there was a sense of stately grandeur. Everything was a mixture of earthen tones, providing a pleasant atmosphere, but Harry still felt the history within the walls. A large troll's foot served as an umbrella stand next to a curtained off door frame. The entrance hall was narrow but it quickly opened up into a wider corridor, a staircase spiralling up one of the walls.

"Mind the troll foot, and don't open the curtains," Sirius said, sweeping past Harry and throwing his arms out in a wide gesture, "welcome to Number 12 Grimmauld Place."

"This is where you grew up?"

"It is, but it's a lot nicer than when I was a kid. It's been pretty much empty for over ten years, so it's been a lot of work getting it back into a liveable condition. There's a lot that still needs doing, but I prioritised the Lord and Heir bedrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen, drawing room and library for us. The house hasn't exactly been happy with me, which hasn't helped."

"The house? Is it alive?" Harry said.

"In a sense," Sirius said, "magically dwellings tend to take on a personality. They know when they're being neglected. It took me a while to convince it that I was serious about living here primarily, but as you can see, it's worked out quite nicely. Enough of that though, let me show you where you'll be staying."

Sirius led him up the stairs. On the first landing were doors leading to the living room, drawing room and library. Harry couldn't wait to see what sort of books there were, and fully expected to spend a few days just reading, much like he'd done at Potter Manor. The bedrooms were on the second landing. Sirius showed him the Lord's bedroom, which was spacious and grand, reminding Harry of his own room at Potter Manor.

"And here is your room," Sirius said.

The room was smaller than the Lords room but still with plenty of space. The walls were decorated with red and gold, the Gryffindor colours, but there were also hints of silver about

the place.

"I'm sorry it's not like what you've got at the Manor, but I'm afraid as part of the Black family you're only the Heir, so it wouldn't be appropriate for you to have the Lord's bedroom," Sirius said, "hopefully the décor is to your liking. This used to be my room so the colour scheme should be suitable. I added some silver for House Slytherin as well, and obviously we can redecorate however you'd like."

He was cut off by Harry barrelling into his chest. The fact that he had considered what Harry would like and tried to make this a room that he would want to spend time in filled Harry with such emotion that he didn't quite know how to handle it. His bedroom at Privet Drive had only been cleared of Dudley's broken old junk during the last summer, and the Dursley's would never have wasted money on him personalising the space. At Hogwarts, he shared the room with four other boys, so there was only so much he could do.

"Thank you," was all Harry could say.

Sirius didn't say anything in return, ruffling his hair.

After unshrinking and unpacking Harry's trunk, they went down to the living room, flopping down onto the sofas that Sirius told him were brand new.

"Oh!" Sirius snapped his fingers, "there's someone you need to meet. Kreacher!"

There was a small pop and an old house elf appeared in the living room with him. Slightly hunched over, he was wearing a freshly laundered pillow case and there was copious amounts of fluffy white hair protruding from his ears. The elf gave Sirius a very neutral look before fixing Harry with an imperious stare.

"Kreacher, this is Harry Potter, Heir Black," Sirius said.

"Master chose Potter's boy as Heir. Kreacher wonders why. Kreacher can sense more than just the Black Magic about him," the elf mumbled under his breath, "will he be able to make the Black family proud?"

"Harry has more than one House that he will make proud. I have absolute faith in him."

"It's nice to meet you Kreacher," Harry said.

Kreacher kept staring at him as though trying to figure out a particularly difficult puzzle.

"Does Lord Black require anything more of Kreacher?"

"Yes. I'll be swearing Harry into the Black Family Magic this afternoon so we'll need something light for lunch. Sandwiches perhaps?"

Kreacher nodded and disappeared with another pop. Sirius sighed heavily.

"Sorry about him. I know he's a lot different than the Potter elves."

"That's one way of putting it," Harry said.

"He's been the house elf here since before I was born. He was just as obsessed with blood purity as my mother was, and he and I did not get along at all when I was growing up," Sirius said, "house elves take great pride in the families they serve, and I never wanted anything to do with my family before, so it's been very hard to convince Kreacher that I'm serious about taking up my responsibilities as Lord Black. At least he doesn't insult me any more. I guess that's progress at least."

Kreacher reappeared with a tray of sandwiches and two large goblets of butterbeer.

"Thank you Kreacher," Sirius said.

The elf looked suspicious at the gratitude but didn't make any comments as he left them to eat. For a second, Harry almost thought that the food would be inedible considering what Sirius said about their poor relationship, but then he remembered what Letty told him. House elves were incredibly proud of their cooking, and it would be a grave insult to them to serve poor quality food. Kreacher seemed like a proud elf, so there was no way he would give them anything less than excellence.

"Do you remember what you did to be formally accepted by the Potter magic?" Sirius asked, "you're already accepted by the Black family magic as my Heir, but if you'd like, I want to do the formal ritual."

"That sounds great!"

What he'd done at Potter Manor had obviously not been what usually happened. Harry was very curious to see the proper ritual.

Once they'd finished eating, Sirius led them downstairs, past the dining room and kitchen and into the basement. There was only a single door down here, and distantly Harry could feel the magic coming from it. Sirius opened the door to reveal a pristine, wood panelled room with a glittering ward stone set on a plinth in the centre. The magic coming from it soaked into the air itself. Harry could practically taste it.

Sirius guided him to stand opposite him with the ward stone between them. After that came the vows. The words were very similar to the words of the Potter ward stone, but changed to match his lower status within the Black family. Sirius then placed his hand atop the ward stone, and Harry put his hand over it. There was a pulse and a rush, magic flowing through them both, connecting them together. It was similar to how he felt when he connected to the Potter magic, but also different. Here there was a focal point in Sirius, and when it subsided Harry was left with only a faint awareness.

Of course, Sirius declared that they needed to celebrate the occasion. Kreacher seemed to agree, because dinner that night was filled with all of Harry's favourite foods. Falling asleep was surprisingly easy considering he was in a brand new bed, but the content and happy feelings allowed him to settle down and drift off.

One advantage to living in Grimmauld Place as opposed to Potter Manor was that it was located within a city. Harry had never really gotten to experience the Muggle world all that much growing up, and Sirius had been locked away for twelve years. As such, they made many trips out into the city, which turned out to be London, getting to see all of the sights. Harry was a little self conscious about the money they were spending, but Sirius kept reassuring him that between the two of them, they had far too much money for them to spend in their lifetimes. Once Harry went back to Hogwarts, Sirius planned to look into some sound investments so they could ensure their families wealth could be passed onto the next generation.

Together Harry and Sirius visited the London Eye and the Houses of Parliament, the latter because Sirius was curious as to how it differed from the Wizengamot and the Ministry of Magic. When they left, he wasn't impressed by the similarities. Harry was saddened that he didn't have a good place to swim, but a few days after moving into Grimmauld Place, he found a gym a few streets away which had a fairly decent pool. It was also rarely busy considering how early in the morning he typically swam, so he was glad he had some place to go to burn off excess energy.

Getting to be active was sorely needed as Sirius redoubled his lessons on proper noble society etiquette and decorum. Most of these lessons were very dry, and both of them were desperate to do literally anything else when they were over, but they also understood the necessity of them. With Harry being who he was, when he finally stepped into the public eye as Lord Potter, there would be a lot of scrutiny. People would be looking for any sign of weakness, so he must show them none.

"There's one sure fire way to tell if you're doing well at this," Sirius said, "if the Slytherins start treating you better."

"Huh?"

"A lot of the Slytherins come from old families where these traditions and customs are still taught. They'll have been brought up on this stuff, and the ones that haven't will copy the ones who have. If you act like a proper Lord in training, they'll hopefully start behaving better towards you."

That made Harry pause.

"But should I?"

"What do you mean?" Sirius asked.

"How much should I act like I know what I'm doing?" Harry said, "I've been keeping this kind of knowledge secret all of last year. How suspicious would it be if I suddenly came back to Hogwarts knowing how I'm supposed to act?"

"You have a point," Sirius scratched his cheek, "Dumbledore is likely going to be keeping a closer eye on you this year since you've been removed from his control. Before Azkaban, I didn't exactly have a reputation for lordly behaviour."

"So I should continue to play dumb?"

"Not at all. If you want to show off who and what you are fully, then I will support you one hundred percent," Sirius said, "we'll just need to adjust our plans regarding Dumbledore."

"I don't particularly want to be friends with the Slytherins. Regardless of any mental manipulations, they've not exactly given me a good impression of their character," Harry said, "but I think I can at least be friendly with them. There's a few Slytherins in my optional classes, and I tried to always be polite to them unless they were rude first."

"That sounds like a good idea. In fact, you can use their bad manners against them," Sirius said, "if they try starting something, or instigating trouble, you can brush them off and imply their upbringing was subpar. It would be a slight on their family, but one they can't exactly complain to their parents about since it would implicate them as poor role models. The social standing of a pureblood family is important, and pureblood children are raised to not bring dishonour to the family."

"I'm not sure I can do the whole disdainful thing that Malfoy does," Harry said.

"You don't have to. Imply that manners are apparently only a Muggle thing and you'll shut them right up."

The image of Malfoy fuming over being compared to something less than a Muggle was slightly amusing.

"And if I can spread the word that everyone should treat each other at least politely then I should endear myself a bit to the more neutral Slytherins, since they'll see it's not me causing the conflicts," Harry mused.

"That sort of political manoeuvring can't really be predicted long term but it's definitely worth a shot. At the very least it'll make Hogwarts more peaceful."

A peaceful Hogwarts, wouldn't that be a dream. Last year had been close, since the Dementors had only been at the castle for just over one term. It was all the revelations surrounding him that made last year so hectic. Harry didn't think it was too much to ask for just a single quiet year at school, especially now that he got to fully enjoy his classes.

Was asking for that somehow jinxing himself?

As June turned into July, and August loomed ever closer, Harry experienced his best summer ever! He didn't spend every day with Sirius, but it made a huge difference getting to live in a house with somebody who didn't hate him. He finished his summer homework fairly quickly, and Sirius gave it a quick glance over. The approving nod he received made him blush and have to look away. It was much better than anything Hermione would have done if she'd read through his essays, making it a lot easier to handle the couple of times Sirius pointed at a sentence that didn't make sense or wasn't quite accurate.

Hedwig coming and going was a regular occurrence from Harry's bedroom window. At first Harry was worried he was working her too hard. After all, he had never sent so many letters,

but when he mentioned this to her, Hedwig hooted cheerily. It was as though she was trying to tell him that it was fine, and that usually she was quite bored since he didn't usually have people to correspond with. Ron and Hermione hadn't sent him anything, which he wasn't sure was a good thing or a bad thing.

He exchanged many letters with Seamus and Dean, and also a few with Neville. It was almost bizarre having such regular contact with his friends when they weren't in the same place. Hearing about their summers was very interesting. Seamus told him stories of all the relatives he had visiting, and how annoying his cousins were. Harry commiserated with him about that. It was in these letter exchanges that he found out that Dean actually didn't live too far away, in a small town on the outskirts of London.

Harry stared down at the finished letter, anxious about whether or not he should send it. It was short but contained within it the question of whether or not they could perhaps get together at some point if Dean was free and wanted to. Harry had never asked a friend to spend time with him before, and the thought of being able to do so made his heart race.

"Knock knock."

Sirius rapped his knuckles on the frame of Harry's open door.

"That's certainly a look of intense concentration. Anything interesting?"

"My friend Dean lives outside London. I wondered if I'd be able to meet up with him at all," Harry said.

"I don't see a problem with that. I'd prefer you to hang out here, but we can work something out if you want to go there," Sirius said.

The easy acceptance eased something in his heart, but Harry was still nervous.

"I see," Sirius said, "you know, when I moved in with the Potters, I was terrified of acting out."

Harry turned in his seat to face Sirius.

"Life at Potter Manor was completely different to what I'd experienced growing up. As much as I was a rebel before, there was only so much I could do, and the new freedom I had was terrifying. The thought that I could do something and the worst that would happen is being told no and not some cruel punishment," Sirius shuddered, "it took a long time to get out of that head space. I know it's not quite applicable to you, but I'm sure the thoughts are similar."

"I've never ... hung out with a friend before, outside school," Harry admitted, "staying at the Burrow after first year doesn't count."

"I understand, but Dean is different, right?" Harry nodded, "then you should ask him. The worst that'll happen is he'll say no."

When Hedwig returned with a reply from Seamus, Harry allowed her time to recover before giving her the letter to Dean. It was nerve racking watching her leave with it, but once she

was gone, something settled. He had asked the question. All he could do was wait for the reply.

The reply was yes. Apparently Dean's mother had been planning a trip to London anyway, and Dean could tag along with her so they could hang out. Harry quickly grew excited. Two days later, Harry waited at the agreed meeting spot, a small amount of worry forming in the pit of his stomach, until he saw through the crowd of pedestrians the familiar dark skinned boy. Dean grinned as he approached.

"Harry!"

"Hey Dean! No issues getting here?"

"None. Mum's spending the day shopping so we both took the train in."

The morning was cheerful as the two of them explored Muggle London. Dean had been here before, so he was able to show Harry places that he and Sirius had missed. It was quite fun, and Harry's anxieties about hanging out with a friend disappeared. They freely talked about their summers. Dean was very interested in Harry moving in with Sirius.

"I can show you if you'd like?" Harry said.

"Please? I've never seen a magical house before."

After lunch, they headed back to Grimmauld Place. At first Dean was very confused, his eyes passing from Number 11 to Number 13. Thankfully Sirius had shown Harry how to welcome people to the house. He placed a hand on Dean's shoulder. The Black Family magic connected them, and Dean's reaction was very similar to Harry's when he first saw Number 12 appearing between the neighbouring houses.

"It now makes so much more sense how a wizarding family could live so close to Muggles without being noticed," Dean said as Harry led him into the house.

"I said the same thing. From all the stories Sirius told me about his family, I'd have thought they would want to live as far away from Muggles as possible," Harry said, "shall I give you a tour?"

There wasn't much to show really. According to Sirius, Grimmauld Place had nearly as many rooms as Potter Manor, but most of them were still uninhabitable due to neglect and so were hidden away. It was an ongoing project for Sirius to get the house completely up and running again by the time Harry came home for summer next year. Even so, Harry still showed Dean the available rooms, ending at the library. Dean's stunned look made Harry both happy and nervous. Was he showing off too much?

"Your house is bigger on the inside. It's like the Tardis," Dean said.

"The what?"

"It's a time machine from an old show my mum liked when she was a kid," Dean said, "this is really cool Harry. I'm sure it was quite an adjustment from living with Muggles."

"It is but it's alright. It's much better because Sirius actually likes me."

Dean winced.

"Oh, right, sorry about that. It's definitely much better that you're away from them," Dean looked around the library once more, "can you imagine how Hermione would react if she found out you had a massive family library?"

"I shudder to think. I'm not sure I'll tell her to be honest. I don't want her constantly badgering me to let her come and read these books and I definitely don't want her taking any of them away."

"I get that. Some of these look like they'd be interesting to read, but Hermione can be a bit aggressive when it comes to books. I remember quite clearly her taking over several tables in the common room with all the classes she was taking last year."

"Thankfully she won't be taking as many now," Harry said, "are you looking forward to next year?"

They whiled away some time talking about what they thought the next year at Hogwarts was going to be like. Harry just wanted a normal year with as little drama as possible, a sentiment Dean wholeheartedly agreed with.

"Can I be honest Harry? With all the messes you got into in your first and second year, it's a miracle you managed to keep up with the work. I didn't have nearly as much to do and I still struggled," Dean said.

"I actually have no idea how I managed it," Harry said, "last year was a bit of a relief, but it was still marred by the Dementors lurking around. Hopefully this year I'll finally get to experience Hogwarts normally."

They were interrupted by the door to the library opening. Sirius walked into the room, wearing overalls covered in dust and grime.

"Thought I'd find you here," Sirius said, "it's nice to meet you Dean. Sirius Black."

"It's nice to meet you too Mr Black," Dean said.

"That's Lord Black to you."

Dean jumped as Kreacher shuffled into the room behind him.

"Be nice Kreacher. I hadn't introduced myself properly to him so he didn't know," Sirius said, "my name is Sirius Black, Lord of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black."

Dean shuffled slightly on his feet, clearly unsure how he was supposed to act.

"But you don't need to worry about any of that. In my own home among friends, I don't insist on formality," Sirius said genially, "Kreacher's been part of my family for many years, so he's quite the stickler for etiquette and upholding the family honour."

"One of us has to be," Kreacher grumbled under his breath.

"Then I'm sorry if I was rude Kreacher," Dean said, addressing the elf, "I didn't know this was a noble house. Could you keep me right if I mess up in the future?"

Kreacher eyed him imperiously, then grumbled under his breath.

"Not Kreacher's place to teach wizards from outside the family, but Kreacher wonders why he doesn't know about the noble families."

"Don't mind Kreacher. He has very particular opinions about things," Sirius said.

"Was I supposed to know that wizards have noble families?" Dean asked.

"As I've recently been made aware by my godson, Hogwarts should be making Muggle born or raised children aware of it as it is the culture that they're entering," Sirius said.

"Wait, does that make Harry nobility? If he's your godson?"

"Harry is my Heir. I'm currently teaching him what he is supposed to know to fully take up his role."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I don't really want anyone to know until I can make a formal announcement, which will probably be after I leave Hogwarts," Harry said.

"I'm not mad, Harry. It's just a bit of a shock," Dean said, "I mean, you know how unlikely it is to run across somebody from the upper classes in the Muggle world."

"It's one of the good things about Hogwarts," Sirius said, "all magical children are treated the same there. They stand shoulder to shoulder together for seven years, building bonds between them. Obviously it isn't a perfect system but it's better than what I hear about in the Muggle world."

"My mum always complains about some schools because they're 'posher'," Dean said, "she gets smug whenever her school's girls hockey team trounces them in games. Are the Noble families different? Is it kind of like Muggle nobility with bowing and courtesy and stuff?"

"I've got a book you can borrow that really helped me when I first learned about this," Harry said, "you don't mind, right? About all this?"

"Why would I mind? I'm guessing the Malfoy's are a Noble family and he's a git, so as long as you're better than him I'll be alright."

Hearing that filled Harry with relief. It was a worry that his friends would view him differently, or treat him differently. There was some justification for this view as it was what Ron and Hermione had done. He would need to keep an eye on Dean to make sure he didn't change, even inadvertently, but so far the denial was good.

"What's with the dirt?" Harry asked Sirius.

"Most of the rooms in this house are still uninhabitable after ten years of neglect, I wonder why there's dirt," Sirius said.

"Ha ha," Harry said flatly, "so you were cleaning?"

"Kreacher and I just finished with the Lord's study," Sirius said, "I was wondering what to tackle next, if there was anything that needed priority."

"How many rooms does this place have?" Dean asked.

"The Noble House of Black is an ancient bloodline. The homes of the Blacks have been crafted over generations to accommodate those skills the family prizes," Kreacher said, "as befitting their status, there are bedrooms to accommodate many guests, a large ballroom to host lavish celebrations, the greenhouses, the observatory and planetarium, the-"

Sirius caught the way Dean perked up at the mention of an observatory.

"Do you like Astronomy Dean?"

"I- I do sir," Dean said, slightly bashfully.

"The Black's have always had a flair for it. According to our history, the Black's were the ones who kept track of the approach of magical convergences on certain days by watching the stars. It started the tradition of naming children after stars and other astronomical phenomena," Sirius said, "Kreacher, I think the observatory should be next. It's been a while since I've got my old telescope out."

Kreacher nodded in approval, shuffling back out the door again.

"Well, if you need me, just give me a shout."

With that, Sirius left Harry and Dean alone. Dean still looked dumbfounded, and Harry wasn't sure how best to restart the good conversations they were having. Before things got too awkward, Dean shook himself.

"You can never just have a normal life, can you?"

"Apparently not," Harry agreed, "sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if my parents had actually been able to raise me."

"I can imagine. My dad ran out on my mum when I was born so it's just been the two of us since," Dean said, "it's not quite the same, but I do wonder what it would have been like if he'd been around. Maybe I could finally answer the question of whether I'm actually a Muggleborn or not."

"You don't know?"

"Mum's definitely a Muggle, but neither of us know if Dad was a Muggle or if he was secretly a wizard. It doesn't matter too much in the grand scheme of things, but it would be nice to know," Dean said, "it'd make understanding the magical world a little easier."

"Whenever Malfoy acts like wizards are so superior, I remember that we have to send letters via owls instead of using a telephone," Harry said.

"I know!"

They spent the remaining time until Dean had to leave to meet his mother talking about all the Muggle things that would be great to have in the magical world. Telephones would be great, but they also thought of television as a way to spread important information as widely and as quickly as possible. Dean wanted there to be more news options besides the Daily Prophet, but the magical population of Great Britain wasn't big enough for there to be many different papers. Harry mentioned computers as a way to easily access information, and they both bemoaned having to manually search through the library to find the right book.

The best part about the conversation was that instead of just talking about what they wanted, they tried brainstorming ways to actually make them. Neither of them were geniuses when it came to Charms, especially since they only recently finished their third year of school, but their theories still felt plausible.

"Messages can be imbued inside objects to be replayed later," Dean said, referencing Ron's Howler, "surely the same kind of principle would apply to open a direct link of communication."

"Even just a way to link two pieces of paper so that what is written on one appears on the other would be a start," Harry said.

They were so engrossed in what they were saying that when the clock chimed four o'clock, Dean physically jolted.

"Oh man, I'm gonna be late!" Dean said, jumping to his feet, "Mum'll kill me if I make us miss our train."

In a whirlwind, Dean hurried down the stairs, Harry following in wake. All Harry really registered from their parting was the brief, one armed hug Dean gave him before he disappeared out the front door. Harry watched him power walk down the street, before shutting the door. Sirius looked up from the Daily Prophet when Harry slumped into an armchair across from him.

"Have fun spending time with your friend?"

"Yeah," was all Harry could say.

Birthday gifts

Before Harry knew it, July 31st was upon them. His previous birthdays hadn't been particularly memorable, but never before had Harry been able to spend it with people who actually cared about him. He woke up to Hedwig landing lightly on his bed, nibbling his ear affectionately. Harry carried her down to breakfast on his shoulder to find breakfast already made and waiting in the dining room. Sirius greeted him with a warm hug, and Kreacher appeared to give a very disgruntled "Happy Birthday" before disappearing elsewhere into the house.

A small pile of presents was waiting for him in the living room, larger than in previous years considering his social circle had expanded. He opened Ron and Hermione's presents first to get them out of the way, but he couldn't see himself wearing the Chudley Cannons jersey, nor could he imagine reading *Giant Wars: From Middle Ages to Present*. Arthur and the twins had bought him a selection of Honeydukes chocolate.

"There was a package of homemade cauldron cakes as well, but they set off the mail protection spells on the house," Sirius said.

"They'll be from Mrs Weasley I imagine," Harry said.

From Sirius he got a leather bound journal.

"It was something the Mind Healer had me doing while I was recovering. She said that getting my thoughts out of my head and onto paper would help me sort through them easier," Sirius explained, "you've been through so much, and life still has curveballs to throw at you. Having somewhere you can write it all down might help. The book's enchanted so only you can read it. Just push a bit of magic into here."

Sirius pointed out the lion's head on the front cover. Harry pressed a finger to it and pulsed magic into it. The lion let out a small roar, the ruby red eyes shining for a moment before settling back to how it was before. Harry really appreciated the gift.

There was a brand new hat, scarf and gloves from Neville which would come in handy in the winter. To his surprise, there was also a package of little lemon cakes from Andromeda.

The final two presents, completely unintentionally, were from Seamus and Dean. Seamus got him a book titled *The Standing Stones of Ireland*. The two of them had talked at length about the runic magic of Standing Stones, with Seamus promising to take him to visit some if he ever visited Ireland, a trip Harry very much looked forward to. Dean sent him a brand new self inking quill, as well as a small box of Muggle magic tricks as a joke. Neither of them were particularly flashy or expensive, but they clearly had thought put into it, leaving Harry feeling warm inside.

"When I asked you what you wanted to do for your birthday, you said you had an idea but wouldn't tell me. Care to share now?"

"What would normally happen on a wizard's birthday?"

"Well it depends. In days gone by, a Lord or Heirs birthday was quite the occasion. Lavish parties, balls, dancing, that sort of thing," Sirius said, "nowadays most people don't do that unless it's a special birthday, like the eleventh or seventeenth. Enough of tradition though. What do you want to do?"

"When I had my inheritance, I inherited more than just titles, but properties as well. There's two that I really want to visit, but only one is in good enough condition," Harry said, "I'd like to visit Gryffindor Castle."

Sirius was stunned for a moment.

"Then that is what we'll do."

While Harry had been assured that Gryffindor Castle was safe now, there was still some trepidation as they stood in the living room. Sirius hadn't cleaned out the receiving room yet, so this was as good a place as any to travel from. With a word, Celio appeared, and the House Elf held out a hand to each of them. One second they were in Grimmauld Place, the next they were at the end of a long country lane before a stone archway. All around them were sloping hills of pale wild grasses. Through the arch ahead of them, the land rose up into two small mountains.

"Lord Potter should take the first step towards the castle. The view is quite spectacular," Celio said.

Harry took a deep, fortifying breath, then stepped through the archway. It was like sinking into a warm embrace as he crossed the boundary into the Gryffindor lands, a power in the air enveloping him and welcoming him home. He gasped. The fields at the foot of the mountains weren't plain as they'd appeared before, but rather they were manicured into perfect gardens. The lane was more compact like a proper path. Harry followed it upwards until his eyes fell upon the castle nestled between the peaks of the mountains.

Looking up at Gryffindor Castle was much like seeing Hogwarts for the first time. Harry found himself mesmerised, taking in the towers and turrets, the walls with its crenellations. He and Sirius walked along the path, past fountains and flower beds, winding their way up the hill to the Castle gate. A large lion's head wrought in gold decorated the thick wooden doors. They swung open as Harry approached. Before them lay a wide open courtyard, on the far side of which was the keep. The stonework was smooth, expertly cut and fashioned.

"If this was Godric Gryffindor's home, I can see why they built Hogwarts as a castle," Sirius said.

The keep was warm and welcoming. A large tapestry decorated one wall depicting the life of Godric Gryffindor, telling his story from when he was a young boy all the way to what looked to be his death. Celio appeared at their side.

"There is someone Lord Potter should meet," he said, "a moment please."

The Elf disappeared, leaving Harry and Sirius to admire the tapestry. It was an impressive piece, and Harry would definitely be asking Godric about it when he could. There was a crack, and they turned around. Celio had returned, along with Mun and an incredibly old House Elf. He looked far older than even Kreacher. Incredibly stooped, there was only the smallest wisp of hair on his head, and he leaned heavily on a short cane. When he saw Harry, tears filled his eyes.

"Lord Gryffindor?"

Very slowly, the Elf tried bowing. The movement was clearly difficult for him, and Harry rushed to kneel in front of him.

"You don't need to bow to me if it's too painful," he said.

The Elf straightened as much as he could.

"It has been so long since there has been a Lord Gryffindor. I never thought I would live long enough to see it."

He held out his hand, and Harry took it. There was a rush of magic, and before his very eyes, the Elf rejuvenated. It wasn't quite as dramatic as when Celio and the others had been refreshed by the Potter magic, but his stoop became less pronounced and there was less stiffness in his movements. This time when he bowed, it was much smoother.

"My name is Sun, last of the line of Gryffindor Elves. It is a pleasure to meet my Lord at last."

Harry gaped.

"You were one of Godric's Elves?"

"Not quite. I am of the line of House Elves that once served Lord Godric. We continued to serve his family until the Gryffindor line became dormant nearly 700 years ago. There have been six generations of Elves since then," Sun explained.

"I didn't think House Elves could live for more than a generation after their families died out," Sirius said, "I'm surprised you didn't seek somewhere else."

"Lord Godric was an excellent wizard. Though none after him ever claimed the title of Lord Gryffindor, he ensured that his descendants could still connect to our magic. The lingering echo of this connection sustained us for a generation after the last of Gryffindors descendants to be claimed by the Family Magic died. After that, there was the magic of Gryffindor that had soaked into the very foundations of this land," Sun said, "however, this magic was not being renewed. We were careful to not take more than was necessary but even then we knew it was not a sustainable solution. If the House Elves take much more, we risk damaging the Gryffindor magic, which is completely unacceptable. I am the last of the line of Gryffindor Elves. Before you arrived, there would be no others to carry on his legacy."

"But it should be better now? I've connected to the Gryffindor magic so you should be fine?" Harry said, "what do I need to do to restore the land?"

"Your presence here is enough to restore what the House Elves used," Sun then smiled, "and your magic has given me more time, but I am old Lord Gryffindor. My time is still coming to an end."

"Mun has been working to take over as the Head Elf of Gryffindor Castle, under Celio and Elder Sun's teaching," Mun piped up, "I have made sure the entire castle is prepared for Lord Potter to stay in whenever he pleases."

"That's great Mun. Thank you," Harry said, making the young Elf squeal in delight.

"Would Lord Gryffindor like to learn more about the Castle?" Sun asked.

The tour gave Harry the impression that the design of Hogwarts had been based on Gryffindor Castle. It had a large stone staircase leading up to its five floors. There were suits of armour, as well as various paintings and tapestries lining the walls. Sun explained that Lord Gryffindor had once housed his hand picked students here, which helped to explain why there were so many bedrooms. The most memorable room was a wide open room with a long raised platform down the middle. Racks lined the walls containing a variety of different weapons.

"In Lord Godric's time, it wasn't uncommon for wizards who interacted regularly with Muggles to carry swords. Lord Godric taught his students proper sword technique alongside duelling. Our stories say that this wasn't carried over to Hogwarts."

"Godric believed that a strong body was as important as a strong mind and strong magic. He taught the kids how to swim so they'd have some way to be active," Harry said.

"Is that why you started?" Sirius asked.

"He suggested it, but I needed some way to burn off steam that wasn't Quidditch."

The tour ended in the Lords Tower. It was like an apartment even within the castle, with a spacious lounge downstairs and a luxurious bedroom upstairs. Harry ran his hand across the furs on the bed, feeling just how soft they were, before stepping out onto the balcony. Stone birds perched on the corners of the balcony railings. The view was stunning, gazing out across the sloping fields of the countryside.

"Your ancestry really is something," Sirius said when Harry re-joined him in the Lord's quarters, the man not permitted to enter the Lord's bedroom.

"I still can't quite believe it," Harry admitted.

"If there's anyone who deserves the luxury, it's you," Sirius said.

Harry wasn't so sure about that, but he knew better than to say it aloud.

"There is one final part of the castle Lord Gryffindor must see," Sun said.

The Elf pressed his hand to a seemingly nondescript part of the wall, which melted open to form a door. A staircase spiralled downwards into the castle. The walls were carved with Celtic designs, and Harry traced a few of the lines with his fingers as they followed Sun down. It was hard to keep track, but he was sure they were heading all the way to the bottom of the keep. The only door they passed opened into the castle dungeon. They kept going down until the stairs abruptly opened up into a wide open cavern.

Curved arches of stone held up the ceiling, looking both natural and fashioned at the same time. It stretched far about them as a still lake. Harry estimated that at least ten full sized swimming pools could have fit comfortably within the cavern with room to spare. There was magic in the air, and Harry's eyes were drawn to the water. It was turquoise in colour, simultaneously crystal clear while also emitting light, illuminating the cavern. Harry carefully dipped his hand into the large pool, feeling the magic of the water seeping into his skin.

"It's not clear in our stories whether Lord Godric building his castle above this pool was intentional or accidental. What is clear is that Lord Godric called this the Water of Sanctity. He would swim here for hours, soaking in the soothing magic," Sun said.

Harry could see it easily. He was tempted to do the same. The pool had an almost otherworldly feel to it, luring him in in a way that didn't ever feel malicious.

They ended up spending the rest of the day at Gryffindor Castle. Sun and Mun cooked a delicious dinner, including a mouth watering treacle tart. Harry had never had such a good birthday, so when Sirius suggested they spend the night, he jumped to agree. Kreacher appeared with pyjamas and a change of clothes for them both, and they retired to their rooms. The Lords bedroom somehow felt grander than at Potter Manor. Perhaps it was the history encapsulated within the room, the knowledge that a thousand years ago, one of the legendary founders of Hogwarts had slept in the exact same place.

When Harry opened his eyes, it was to the endless ocean of the Ring Realm. James pulled him in for a firm hug, which Godric then joined as well, sweeping the pair up in his muscular arms. Salazar stood to one side, offering his regards when the affectionate scene was over. The four of them sat down on the water's surface as Harry told them all about his day.

"Gryffindor Castle is amazing. I can't believe I get to see it and experience it almost like you did," Harry said.

"Hogwarts became a home to me, but I will never forget the place where my children were born. I am glad that it is seeing life once again," Godric said, "I am also glad that the line of House Elves that served my family still lives. Their ancestors were always the most excellent companions."

"Did you see the Water of Sanctity?" Salazar asked, and Harry nodded, "this oaf loved that pool, and I admit that the magical properties of the water are fascinating. I only wish Godric would have shown a bit more tact with it."

"Why, I don't know what you mean my friend!"

"Godric, there is a reason there is a direct staircase from the Water to the Lords chambers, because you have little enough modesty when you swim at the best of times, but the entire castle did not need to see you traipsing back to get dressed!"

"That happened one time," Godric said good-naturedly.

"Anyway," James cut in before the two could start arguing, "have you had a nice birthday Harry?"

"I- I really have," Harry said, "it's one of the best I've ever had."

"Then allow us to add to it with a gift of our own," Godric said.

"You don't have to! Getting to talk to you already feels like a gift."

"Nonsense! You are my descendant, Lord of my family line. I would be remiss in my duties if I did not impart this to you," Godric said, "you may remember, many months ago now, we spoke of a ritual that I developed with dear Salazar and Rowena's help, yes?"

Harry did remember. He remembered that Salazar was grumpy that, despite extensively studying the rituals of ancient magic alongside Rowena Ravenclaw, he had not been able to create a new ritual, yet Godric had.

"I wish to give you the knowledge of this ritual. I believe it will aid you in your endeavours in the present," Godric said.

"If you'd like me to learn it, then I will," Harry said.

Godric smiled broadly at him.

"I called it the Ritual of Remembrance. Magic has a memory of sorts. By aligning the inner magic with the natural magic in the surroundings, a wizard may tap into this memory, gaining insight into events long past," Godric explained, "it requires only three things. The first is a Focus Stone. This will allow your internal magic to connect with the natural magic more easily. I believe mine should be within the Gryffindor Family Vault at Gringotts."

"If it's not, I should have one," Salazar said.

"The second thing you will need is inner calm and internal focus. You must practise meditation to focus your internal magic such that it can tap into natural magic's memory," Godric said, "incidentally, this same skill will also help with other forms of magic, such as Mind Magic. Occlumency is an oft overlooked but still useful thing to learn."

"Meditation can also help you get to sleep faster," James said, "especially on those nights where your thoughts are just a bit too active to be useful."

"The final thing you will need is an area of natural magic. It is highly unlikely this ritual will work in a heavily Muggle area as the natural magic hasn't been churned enough by a wizarding presence to record a memory. The more magic has been used in a place, the more that will be remembered," Godric finished.

"That sounds quite powerful," Harry said.

It was a lot to take in. Being able to view into the past of a magical place was incredibly interesting. The first thing that came to mind was trying it at Hogwarts and getting to see the famous acts that took place at the school with his own eyes, rather than reading about it in a book.

"It certainly is," Godric beamed.

"Are there any dangers?"

"None that I found, and Salazar and Rowena both checked as well."

"It is no more dangerous than viewing memories in a Pensieve. Indeed, Rowena and I believe that some lost form of this ritual may have been what inspired the development of Pensieves in the first place," Salazar said, "the only thing you need to be worried about is privacy, but there are plenty of wards that can help with that."

"Young Harry is a growing lad. I'm sure he's more than comfortable."

"Godric, once again your standards of modesty are revealed to be different to most people's," Salazar deadpanned.

Harry looked between the two founders, looking very confused. James was the same.

"The pair of us are missing something here," James said.

"I forget that Ancient Magic is barely studied in your time," Salazar said, "much of Ancient Magic involves directly harnessing natural magic through the use of rituals. In order to channel the magic as efficiently as possible, the sorcerer would remove as many boundaries as possible. The most common of these boundaries being clothing, as even when not actively using magic, your clothes become soaked in it, which can interfere with rituals. It is why paintings of ancient sorcerers performing rituals often depicted them as nude, as that is what they would have been."

"I could never get the Ritual of Remembrance to work while I was clothed, but once completely bare it worked fine," Godric said, "if you must wear something, thin underwear would probably not interfere with the ritual. I still don't get why you'd bother, but the option is available."

The Ring Realm slowly began to fade, indicating that Harry was waking up. These meetings, no matter how long they lasted, always felt too short. James quickly pulled him in for another hug, Godric apologised profusely for monopolising the time they had with his explanation, while Salazar cuffed him upside the head. Harry didn't regret hearing about the ritual. It was part of his heritage as Lord Gryffindor. Godric wanted to pass this on to him, obviously felt it was important enough to make Harry aware of it. It was another tool in his arsenal and Harry wasn't about to pass it up.

Sirius was intrigued by the Ritual of Remembrance when Harry told him about it at breakfast. Together they brainstormed possible ways to test it out. Harry planned to write to Ironclaw, asking for the Focus Stone to be retrieved from the Gryffindor vault. After that, it was a matter of practising meditation. Sirius was taught some techniques by the Mind Healer, and offered to teach Harry when they returned to Grimmauld Place.

It wasn't ... difficult learning how to meditate, but Harry had never had to calm his mind like this before. It would take practice before he felt comfortable enough to try the ritual, so every night before bed, Harry meditated. As he'd learned from swimming, it was best to make things a habit so he didn't come up with excuses to not do them. Unfortunately, there was plenty to distract Harry, demanding his attention when he should be organising his thoughts.

Two days after Harry's birthday, Harry and Sirius were enjoying breakfast in the dining room when Kreacher came storming into the room. The Elf was carrying a cage containing what Harry could only describe as a ball of feathers. It was barely bigger than a tennis ball, and it bounced around the cage, twittering madly with excitement. Hedwig, who had just delivered a letter from Seamus and was enjoying some of Harry's bacon as a reward, looked downright offended.

"Lord Black, Heir Harry, this ... owl arrived not long ago. I saw fit to contain it so it wouldn't damage the house," Kreacher said, "it was carrying a letter for Master Harry."

He placed the letter on the table, and Harry took it. His heart sank when he recognised the handwriting. Sure enough, the letter was from Ron.

Dear Harry,

DAD GOT TICKETS. He got tickets for us to go see the Quidditch World Cup and there's one available for you as well. Come on! It's a once in a lifetime opportunity, you have to come and see it!

Ask the Muggles if you can come and send a letter back with Pig. I think Mum's sending a letter as well. If they say yes, we'll come and pick you up this Sunday. If they say no, well, we'll still come and pick you up this Sunday. There's no way you can miss out on this because they're being prats.

Let me know as soon as possible,

Ron

"It's from Ron. Arthur managed to get tickets to see the World Cup," Harry said, "he thinks I'm still living with the Dursley's and they're going to come pick me up from them on Sunday regardless."

"Alright, first things first, do you want to spend any time with them?" Sirius asked.

"No!"

"Then we go with the original plan. Write back to Ron and tell him that, while you're very grateful for the offer, you were actually already planning to attend with me, and that there's no reason to come and collect you," Sirius said.

"I can do that," Harry said, calming down now that there was a solid course of action, "he said Mrs Weasley is sending them a letter as well."

"Kreacher, I need you to go to Harry's Muggle relatives and intercept that letter before they see it," Sirius said.

"Kreacher can do that. There was another letter for Master Harry," Kreacher said, leaving another letter on the table before disappearing with a loud crack.

Harry quickly opened the second letter.

Dear Harry

Just to let you know that I managed to get tickets for the Quidditch World Cup through a contact I have at the Department of Magical Games and Sports. From what I hear, you and Sirius Black will also be going. I'm really glad to hear that. I'm sure you'll enjoy it tremendously.

Ron insisted that I get an extra ticket so he could invite you as well. I tried telling him that you had other plans but I don't think he or Molly were listening. I saw them both writing letters so I thought I'd send my own to warn you in case either of them try anything. I won't go along with it, whatever they have planned.

Happy birthday, by the way. I thought I'd say that myself since I'm sure whatever gift you received from Molly wasn't appropriate.

Kind regards,

Arthur Weasley

Seeing Arthur's letter made Harry relax. He passed it to Sirius, who scanned over it.

"Seems like a good man," Sirius said, "too bad he's stuck with his wife."

"I know. Looking back on it now, the summer I spent with them was really smothering, but I was so starved for that kind of attention I didn't mind it," Harry said.

"That woman is not going to sink her claws into you again. None of them will. I'm sure we can come up with all sorts of excuses to avoid seeing them at the World Cup," Sirius said.

It was easy to lose himself in preparations for the Quidditch World Cup. Sirius had gotten them both some good tickets, but neither of them felt up to camping so they wouldn't be staying overnight. Harry didn't mind. He'd never seen a professional Quidditch match before, and he was excited to see how it differed from Quidditch at Hogwarts. Harry could barely sleep on Sunday, but he must have done because the next thing he knew, Sirius was knocking on his door.

"We'll be apparating to the venue. Hold on tight," Sirius said.

Well used to the slightly unpleasant sensation of apparition, Harry closed his eyes and suffered through the feeling of being squeezed through a tube. When it passed, the air felt warmer, smelled cleaner. The sounds of joy and merriment were all around him. They were in a roped off area in a small forest. A witch in navy blue robes looked up as they appeared, doing a double take when she saw them.

"Sirius Black. 2pm arrival," Sirius said.

The Ministry witch checked a long sheet of parchment and ticked off their names. They followed the path out of the woods. Fields stretched out into the distance, forming a sprawling sea of tents. All around them, wizards and witches went about their business. To hear magic being spoken of and used so openly was exhilarating.

"You ready?" Sirius asked.

"Absolutely."

The Quidditch World Cup

In an objective sense, Harry knew that there would be magical people from all over the world attending the match. Quidditch was the most popular magical sport after all. Even knowing this, to see everyone here, to feel the excitement palpable in the air, Harry couldn't help staring at just about everything.

Ministry wizards rushed about, desperately trying to keep everyone's decorations as inconspicuous as possible. They were camping on Muggle land after all, and the Muggle farmer who owned it was getting suspicious. A lot of the people they passed were doing an admirable job of things. Their tents were simple, but it was clear to Harry that none of them really knew how to function without magic. A few fiddled about with stoves half heartedly, casting furtive gazes about them before poking it with their wands to light the fire.

Then there were others who clearly didn't care. Multi-storey tents, tents with weathervanes, towers and turrets. Magical fireworks shot into the air, and small children rode toy broomsticks. When Sirius saw the latter, he chuckled.

"I got you one of those for your first birthday, and let me tell you, I was your favourite person that day. From what Lily said, it was a battle to get you off it, and James definitely worked off a few pounds chasing after you. I think I've still got a picture of it somewhere," he said.

As they walked, they passed vendors selling merchandise. Harry bought himself a program, as well as a rosette for both Ireland and Bulgaria. He didn't know anything about either team, so he didn't want to pigeonhole himself into supporting just one of them. Sirius bought them both something called omnioculars, telescope like devices that could zoom in, rewind and play events in slow motion.

"Trust me, at this level of play, we're going to need them," Sirius said.

More than once they bumped into somebody Harry knew from Hogwarts. He said hello to Ernie Macmillan and Susan Bones as they queued for the water tap. Oliver Wood, his former Quidditch captain, bounded over to him and greeted him heartily. Cho Chang, the Seeker for Ravenclaw, smiled at him as they passed. Sirius got a few cautious glances, but considering the man was no longer an emaciated skeleton, his warm and calm demeanour helped alleviate their worries.

Then they stumbled across a section of the campgrounds that made Harry rub his eyes to ensure he wasn't seeing things. The tents here were in the shapes of rolling green hills, golden shamrocks planted on them. Green, white and orange flags flew proudly, declaring this to be where the Ireland supporters were.

"Harry!"

Out of the hill like tents came a very familiar boy with sandy blonde hair.

"Seamus!" Harry called back.

Seamus pulled him into a firm embrace, then stepped back, beaming.

"It's great to see you! With how big the site is, I didn't think we'd bump into each other," he said.

"I didn't either, but then I found myself in the rolling hillside of Ireland," Harry said.

"The Ministry's been pulling their hair out trying to get them to change it," said the calm voice of Dean joining the two of them.

"You never said you'd be here."

"I almost wasn't, but Seamus sent me a letter saying they had a spare ticket suddenly available. I wasn't exactly going to say no."

"And quite right too."

A woman emerged from the tent. Short and with high cheekbones, the sandy blonde hair clearly marked her as Seamus's mother.

"It's a once in a lifetime opportunity to see the Quidditch World Cup final so close to home, especially when it's your home country playing." She smiled and held her hand out to Harry. "Aisling Finnegan, Seamus's mother."

"It's nice to meet you Mrs Finnegan. I'm Harry Potter," he gestured to Sirius, "and this is my godfather, Sirius Black."

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you Mr Potter. My son's told me lots about you," she then addressed Sirius, "and I've also heard a lot about you. I'm just glad it all turned out to be a load of rubbish. Well met, Lord Black."

"Well met Mrs Finnegan. Please call me Sirius. I can't stand such formalities in friendly company," Sirius said jovially.

"Are you supporting Ireland or Bulgaria?" Seamus asked, spotting the rosettes pinned to Harry's chest.

"Both? I don't know anything about either team so it didn't feel right to take a side. Honestly, I'm just excited to see proper, professional Quidditch."

Harry had a feeling he'd be explaining this many times over the course of the day. At least Seamus didn't seem to mind, pulling out a copy of the program so he could explain how the World Cup had gone to lead them to this point. It was interesting to listen to, and Harry wished he'd been able to see some of those games. Perhaps he'd invest in a Wizarding Wireless so he could keep up to date, or even just read the Quidditch section of the Daily Prophet.

Sirius and Mrs Finnegan shook their heads fondly at their enthusiasm, settling into their own conversation. Dean, who wasn't as passionate as Harry and Seamus about Quidditch, happily listened to them talk, occasionally chiming in with his own observation. It was only as 7pm

drew nearer and the call went out for people to make their way to the stands that Harry realised he hadn't thought about seeing Ron and the Weasleys all day.

Following the crowds through the woods, the stadium loomed large on the other side. Harry parted with the Ireland supporters as he and Sirius went to their designated seats. They were in a smaller box halfway up the eastern side of the stadium. Across from them, he could see the Top Box where the British and Bulgarian Ministers for Magic were sitting. Two other people were sharing their box; a slightly hooked nosed man with thick eyebrows, and a thin woman with long, sleek black hair.

"Well met Lord Krum," Sirius said, "Lord Sirius of the House of Black, and my Heir, Harry Potter."

Lord Krum eyed them both curiously, then his brows raised in recognition.

"Well met Lord Black, Heir Potter," he said in heavily accented English, "may I present my beautiful wife, Ilyana Krum."

"Charmed," Sirius bowed, pressing a kiss to Ilyana's knuckles.

Remembering the etiquette lessons Andromeda and Sirius had taught him, Harry bowed to both of them.

"I had not thought to once again be in the company of the Blacks. It has been too long," Lord Krum said.

"Indeed it has. Not since my grandfather was still alive," Sirius turned to Harry, "the Black's and the Krum's have done business together for many years, though regrettably those links faded after Lord Arcturus died."

"Now would be as good a time as any to renew, yes? Now that both families have Heirs, it makes sense to keep our relationship strong."

"Ivan, there will be time to talk business later. Now is not it," Ilyana said pleasantly, "we are here to support Viktor."

"Is Viktor your son?" Harry asked.

"Yes. He plays Seeker for the Bulgarian national team. We're both so proud of him," Ilyana said.

Harry flicked through the program to find the player profiles. Viktor Krum was listed there. Judging by his age, Harry guessed he'd be either going into his final year of schooling, or he had just graduated. Either way, he was the youngest player on both teams by at least three years. Harry was excited to see him play.

As more and more people entered the stadium, the noise level began to rise in a dull roar. Harry scanned the crowds with his omnioculars, gasping when he saw the Top Box. It had filled considerably since the last time he looked. Now along with Cornelius Fudge was a very familiar group of people. Ron and Hermione were both there, along with Fred, George,

Ginny, Percy, and Arthur. The other two redheads had to be Ron's eldest brothers, Bill and Charlie. In the row behind them was Draco Malfoy, with his parents Lucius and Narcissa. Judging by the looks of disdain on the three Malfoys' faces, he guessed they weren't pleased with the company they were currently keeping.

A jovial man wearing yellow and black striped robes bounded to his feet in the Top Box. He pressed a wand to his throat and his voice was suddenly magically amplified, introducing himself as Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports and this evenings commentator. Bagman announced short demonstrations by the mascots for each team, starting with Bulgaria.

"Veela," Lord Krum said with an approving nod.

A group of beautiful women with flowing, silvery blonde hair walked onto the field. The air was filled with a strange sort of music as the women danced. They were very pretty, the sort of girls that one would describe as the best looking in the entire world, but then Harry noticed the effect they were having on the people around them. All across the stadium, a lot of the men and a few of the women were completely entranced, love drunk expressions on their faces. In the Top Box, Ron was leaning so far over the railing, he would have jumped off had Hermione not grabbed the back of his shirt and yanked him back into his seat.

Eventually the Veela ended their performance and the strange effect ended. Sirius looked at him, amused.

"Anything you want to tell me?"

Harry was too distracted by the arrival of the Irish mascots to answer. A troop of flying leprechauns soared over the stadium. Flying in perfect formation, golden coins showered the stadium in their wake.

"Leprechaun gold. Looks real but will fade after a few hours," Lord Krum said when Harry picked one up to inspect it.

When the mascots finished and settled down at either side of the pitch, the players were announced. Loud cheers from the Irish and Bulgarian supporters erupted as each name was called. It was particularly loud for Viktor Krum. The players took to the air, the balls released, and when the whistle blew, the match began.

Harry had never seen Quidditch like this. The Quaffle changed hands so quickly, Bagman only had time to say the players names as the Chasers did furious battle. The Irish Chasers were completely in sync, anticipating each other's movements as though they were sharing thoughts. It was only the stellar efforts of the Bulgarian Beaters that allowed Bulgaria to disrupt their plays, though Ireland maintained a healthy lead. Each time a goal was scored, roars erupted from the crowd.

Krum went into a dive, followed closely by the Irish Seeker, Troy. At the last possible moment, Krum pulled up and Troy slammed into the floor. It was a manoeuvre the omniscient omniscient informed him was called the Wronski Feint. As medi-wizards rushed onto the pitch, Krum scanned the air for the Snitch.

The match grew more intense after that. The Beaters for both sides grew more vicious, aiming Bludgers with impunity at anyone they could. Ireland earned a few penalties from Bulgaria's fouls, increasing the lead in goals. Even the mascots got involved, and the grounds of the pitch was just as chaotic as the air above it as leprechauns fought against the suddenly bird-like Veela.

It all ended when Krum dropped into another dive, a second after Harry spotted the small glint of gold. Troy was on his heels, but Krum had the edge, grabbing the Snitch and pulling up as Troy once again slammed into the ground. The final score was 190-180, and Ireland was victorious. Harry's throat ached from the force of his cheering, yelling just as much for both teams when he saw a play he liked. The entire match had been exhilarating.

"Viktor did well," Lord Krum said.

"That he did. It's a shame he couldn't sneak the win," Sirius said.

"The Irish Chasers were too good for them to get the margin they needed. He decided to end it on his terms," Harry said.

He had nothing but respect for the Bulgarian Seeker. Lord Krum gave him an appraising look.

"You play, Heir Potter?"

"I'm Seeker on my house Quidditch team."

"And easily one of the best Seekers I've seen," Sirius said, "I've only been able to see one of his games, but he managed to catch the Snitch in the middle of a lightning storm."

Lord Krum looked impressed.

"Perhaps you should speak to Viktor. He is always interested in speaking with other players."

"That would be great," Harry said, fighting to keep his voice from shaking.

The evening had been one of the best in Harry's life. Judging by the sounds coming from the crowd, the celebrations would go on late into the night, and Harry didn't blame them. He hadn't even been playing but he could still feel the adrenaline coursing through him. It made him want to get on his broom and fly.

Though they weren't staying overnight, Harry and Sirius allowed themselves to be swept along with the crowds as they departed the stadium, in no particular hurry to find the apparition spot so they could go home. The atmosphere was vibrant and happy. The Ministry had completely lost control over keeping magic a secret as sparks and fireworks lit up the night sky. Harry drank in the festivities eagerly.

They ended up back at the Irish tents where the party was in full swing. Harry doubted any of them would be going to bed. Seamus appeared, his cheeks painted with the Irish flag, to drag Harry over to where his family were celebrating. Dean grinned, and the three of them began a loud play-by-play of the entire match from start to finish. Sirius joined in, as did Mrs

Finnegan. A few of Seamus's cousins drifted over and introduced themselves, but they were too absorbed in the revelry to really notice.

It was just getting to the point where Sirius was insisting that no, they really did have to leave, when there was a loud rumbling crash. It hardly caused a dent in the party atmosphere, but Harry felt the vibrations of it through the ground. In the distance, lights illuminated the clouds that had rolled over, and new sounds mixed in with the cheers. They were screams. More and more people began to realise something was going on. Outside the patch of Irish tents, people were running, screaming about an attack.

"We need to get out of here," Sirius said.

"Seamus, Dean, you stick close to me, you hear," Mrs Finnegan said, "head to the forest."

The five of them hurried, not wanting to separate from each other, which was difficult as the crowd began to panic. Sirius had a vice-like grip on Harry's arm. There was a loud bang, and Harry turned. A group of people in black robes and white masks marched through the campsite, blasting tents out of their way as they walked. They jeered at the cowering bystanders. Suspended above their heads was a family of four, all dressed in their pyjamas looking absolutely terrified.

"Move!" Sirius yelled.

They made it into the trees and didn't stop until the sounds of chaos from the campground were sufficiently muffled. Only then did Sirius's grip loosen, though he didn't entirely let go.

"Is everyone alright?" Sirius asked.

"As good as we can be," Mrs Finnegan said, "were those-"

"They certainly looked like it," Sirius growled.

"Mam?" Seamus asked.

"Not here. We'll talk when we get home."

The lights that had marked the path, as well as the random fireworks and glowing leprechauns, had all been extinguished, plunging the forest into darkness. Harry pulled out his wand, igniting the tip with a muttered "Lumos". The others did the same. There was a snapping of twigs that had them all pointing their wands at the bushes, illuminating a bushy haired girl and a red headed boy.

"Hermione? Ron?" Harry said.

"Harry!"

Hermione burst into their little clearing, throwing herself at Harry. Purely out of reflex, he caught her. Ron joined them a moment later.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, "where are the others?"

"It's bloody mental! Dad, Bill, Charlie and Percy all went to help save the Muggles. We ran with Fred, George and Ginny, but we got separated when we got into the woods," Ron said, "I don't suppose you've seen them, or a wand lying around anywhere?"

"We haven't, and there's no use trying to find them now. Stick with us, and when things calm down, we'll get you back to Arthur," Mrs Finnegan said, "what's this about a wand?"

"I can't find mine. I don't know if I left it back at the tent or if it fell out somewhere," Ron said.

"We were just about to search when we found you," Hermione added.

Movement nearby caused them all to fall silent. Sirius and Mrs Finnegan stood in front of the kids, trying to peer into the darkness. An unfamiliar voice said a spell Harry didn't recognise, and a bolt of light shot into the sky. It exploded into an eerie cloud of green light in the shape of a skull. From all around them in the forest came cries of fear. Harry only caught two words, and suddenly he understood.

Death Eaters. Those people in the masks were Death Eaters, followers of Lord Voldemort. The sign in the sky must be a symbol they used, and even thirteen years later, it still inspired fear in those who saw it. But why did it appear now? Why after thirteen years would they risk imprisonment to attack such a public place?

Figures appeared all around the clearing, and Harry only had a second to register the wands pointed at them before Sirius was dragging him to the ground.

"Stupefy!"

Bolts of red light flew overhead in all directions.

"Hold! They're civilians!"

The Ministry wizards approached them. Sirius looked angry, but Mrs Finnegan was furious.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Is it Ministry policy to attack on sight? You're lucky not a single one of those stunning spells hit their mark or I'd currently be stringing whoever cast it up by their entrails! What sort of moron apparates and fires blindly!"

"This was where the Dark Mark was cast. We wanted to act quickly to-" one of the Wizards tried to say but that just made Mrs Finnegan round on him.

"You should get yourself checked into St Mungos. I think you left your brain behind when you apparated, because this is not where the Mark was cast from! If you actually did your job, you would know it came from over there! If you had more than two brain cells to share between five supposed adults, you'd have learned that it was cast by a grown man, not a woman, five children and someone who has been with us the entire time!"

Harry couldn't help feeling slightly in awe of the way Mrs Finnegan tore apart the Ministry wizards. He leaned over to Seamus.

"Your mum's scary," he whispered.

All Seamus could do was nod.

A man in a sharp suit with a neatly cropped moustache strode over. His face was set and stern, carrying an air of authority with him.

"Has the culprit been caught?" he asked, immediately dismissing the small group, "why are these suspects not in custody?"

"Speaking of incompetence, here comes Barty Crouch," Mrs Finnegan sneered derisively.

"I'd watch how you speak to me," Crouch said.

"Zip it Crouch. A fancy title doesn't give you the right to authority outside your department. Snap decisions already got you kicked out of law enforcement once already!" Mrs Finnegan said, "and now you've just accused the Boy Who Lived of being a suspected Death Eater, along with a man who so recently was publicly shown to *not* be a Death Eater. Is that incompetence a natural talent or did you have to practise?"

Crouch's lips thinned but Mrs Finnegan ignored him, turning to the wizard she had originally been laying into.

"Now then, we've already told you where you could find evidence of your culprit, and what we saw and heard of the incident. Does the actual law enforcement professional have any questions?"

The wizard stammered and shook his head.

"Lord Black, do you have anything you'd like to say?"

"I think you've summarised things quite nicely," Sirius said.

"Then if you'll excuse us, we need to go and look after our children."

"I must insist that you stay!" Crouch said.

"And I insist that you remember your place at the Ministry, which is no longer with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, meaning I don't need to listen to a word you say on this issue."

Mrs Finnegan strode off, shepherding them all away. When his back was turned, Sirius shot Crouch a dark look. As they emerged from the woods, they saw small huddles of people all looking scared and confused. Many questions were asked in fearful voices but fortunately, none of them approached to ask.

"Where were you camping?" Sirius asked Ron and Hermione.

They weren't that far from the main path, two perfectly ordinary canvas tents that wouldn't have looked out of place on a Muggle campsite. As they drew near, a head poked out of one.

There was a gasp, then Fred and George came out, followed by Ginny and one of the older Weasley boys.

"Ron! Hermione!"

The two were pulled into an embrace by Fred and Ginny, while George looked over them both.

"They're fine. We came across them in the woods and kept them with us," Sirius said.

"Thank you so much," the elder Weasley said to Sirius and Mrs Finnegan, "everyone else made it back, but Dad was nearly having kittens when he saw they weren't here."

As though summoned by being mentioned, Arthur appeared. He hugged Ron and Hermione tightly before fussing over them.

"Thank goodness you're both alright. With how mad everything is, I was so worried," then under his breath he said, "Molly's going to have my head for this."

"Everything alright Arthur? How are the Muggles?" Sirius asked.

"Did you catch them Dad?" Ron asked.

"The Muggles are fine. We managed to catch them when the Death Eaters fled from the Dark Mark," Arthur said, "come on you lot. Back inside the tent. Lord Black, Mrs Finnegan, thank you for finding them and keeping them safe."

"It was no problem at all Arthur," Mrs Finnegan said.

Arthur bustled his charges back into the tent before anyone could say anything else. For a moment, Harry wondered how they were all going to fit, but then he realised that the tent was likely magical. Sirius and Harry accompanied the Finnegan and Dean back to the Irish supporters. Thankfully there didn't seem to be any damage here, but the once raucous atmosphere was now heavy and subdued. Harry didn't want to drift too far from Sirius, but he also wanted to check if his friends were alright. He kept catching their glances, and he hated the thinly veiled fear he saw there.

"Where were you staying?" Mrs Finnegan asked.

"We weren't. We travelled in just for the match, and were actually about to head home," Sirius said, "will you be alright here?"

"We'll manage. You stay safe now, you hear. Mr Potter, I expect regular reports from Seamus that you're staying in touch. In times like these, we need our friends more than we realise."

All Harry could do was nod, but Seamus caught him in a hug before he left, pulling Dean in to join them as well. The journey back to Grimmauld Place was a blur. He was vaguely aware of Kreacher appearing, taking both of their hands, and suddenly he was being pushed into a chair in the living room, a mug of cocoa held in his hands. Sirius sat next to him.

"Lord Black and Heir Harry will finish their drinks and then retire for the night," Kreacher said, "they need rest after ... what happened."

The old elf looked disturbed when he thought about the scene he'd arrived at.

"Thank you Kreacher," Sirius said, "I'm not sure what time we'll want breakfast tomorrow."

"Breakfast will be whenever the master wants it," Kreacher huffed, leaving them alone in the room.

There was silence, and Harry took a sip of cocoa. The gentle heat and sweetness filled him, restoring a bit of vitality to him.

"Sirius, were those really Death Eaters?" Harry asked.

Sirius sighed.

"They were. I recognised the robes."

"But why here? Why now?"

"I wish I knew. Not all of Voldemort's supporters were locked up in Azkaban. Some managed to convince the Wizengamot that they had been controlled or manipulated into serving him," Sirius said, "whatever their reason for getting the gang back together tonight, it doesn't bode well."

No, it really didn't. Harry had been so focused over the last year on the threat posed by his former friends and Dumbledore that he'd almost forgotten that Voldemort was still out there somewhere. It appeared that he was making his move. Harry may not put much stock in Divination, but he didn't like the look of the future the omens foretold.

Returning to Hogwarts

Chapter Notes

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

When they eventually took themselves to bed, Harry couldn't get to sleep. His mind was whirring and wouldn't slow down. Death Eaters attacked one of the most publicised events in the magical world. It was going to cause all sorts of trouble with far reaching consequences, but Harry felt that it was only just the beginning. What did the Death Eaters gain from that stunt? Was it simply a reminder that they were still out there, an attempt to rekindle some of the old fear that still lingered? But then why had they all fled from the Dark Mark, which was supposed to be their sign?

Hedwig flew through his window at 3am, and Harry gently stroked his fingers through her feathers. He must have dozed off at some point because he woke up a few hours later with a painful crick in his neck. Sirius was already downstairs when Harry went down, nursing a cup of tea. The shadows under his eyes showed he'd slept just as well as Harry did.

The Daily Prophet was in uproar. The attack was headline news, with many stories excoriating the Ministry for their supposed lack of security. There were talks about ejecting Britain from the International Quidditch Association for the incident, which Harry felt was unfair. It took two days for the chaos to die down somewhat. During that time, Harry's Hogwarts letter arrived.

"I've never done this from this side before," Sirius said as they walked through the Leaky Cauldron, "this'll be fun."

Diagon Alley was just as bright and vibrant as it always was. While the attack on the Quidditch World Cup made a regular appearance in the gossip that was thrown about, it did nothing to dampen the atmosphere in the Alley. People moved about their business as though nothing terrible had happened. Harry could at least appreciate that about this place, even if he felt the people should have been a bit more concerned.

Their first stop was Gringotts. Harry bowed respectfully to the teller, asking for a withdrawal, only for Sirius to cut across him.

"Heir Potter would like a withdrawal pouch connected to his family vaults," he said.

The teller raised an eyebrow at him. The goblin hopped off his stool then vanished into the bank, returning with a pouch made of purple velvet.

"Press your family ring to this gem stone," the teller said.

Harry pressed his Lordship ring to the small amethyst, which flashed brightly.

"This pouch is now connected by magic to your family vaults. Simply think of the amount you wish to withdraw and which vault you would like to withdraw from, and the money will

appear. As it is keyed to your magical signature via your ring, only you will be able to use it," the teller explained.

Harry accepted the pouch, expressing his gratitude in the appropriate way for goblins. That had to be the quickest trip to Gringotts he'd ever had. Their first stop was to Madam Malkins to get new school robes, then Sirius dragged him to a couple of the other robes shops in Diagon Alley since for some reason he was required to bring dress robes this year.

"Maybe we should have asked Andy to come with us. I was never very good at formal clothes," Sirius said.

"Then kindly sir, you should be quiet and allow me to work," said Mr Donoghue, a man who towered over them and seemed to be made of muscle, who was taking Harry's measurements with the utmost care and gentleness.

After the ordeal of clothes shopping was complete, it was off to Flourish and Blotts for his new school books. There weren't as many this year, with Intermediate Norse and Numbers & Composition being the ones which caught his eye the most. He picked out an extra few as well for some light reading. Sirius pointed him to a book on Transfiguration when he expressed interest in the animagus process. With his books purchased, they drifted around Diagon Alley to get the rest of the things Harry would need to for the coming school year.

The whole trip only took two hours, but when they returned to Grimmauld Place they still felt exhausted.

"Now imagine shopping with the Weasleys," Harry said.

"You poor thing," Sirius said.

"I only did it once, before second year. Last year I did it all before they were even back in the country, and when I heard them in the Leaky Cauldron I just hid in my room."

"Smart boy. It goes without saying that I don't want you to be alone with any of them this year."

"I'll try my best. I pulled away from them a bit last year but I'm still supposed to be their friend," Harry said, "my rings protect my food, and meditation should help me resist any attempts at manipulating me with spells."

"All the same, if anything feels off, send either myself or Andy a letter and request a health scan. We can't be too careful."

It didn't feel great having to live his life with such paranoia, but there was nothing else he could do until he had an excuse to fully pull away from Ron and Hermione. Once he did that, it would be a lot harder for Ginny to justify being close to him, and Dumbledore's machinations had always been less direct.

The final weeks of the summer holiday passed without incident. The Daily Prophet reported chaos at the Ministry which was only just starting to die down. Harry wrote to Seamus and

Dean constantly, which certainly helped alleviate his worries about the coming school year. There was a moment a week before September the 1st when he considered telling them the full truth about himself, about all the madness he needed to deal with, but he decided against it. It was bad enough that he had to suffer through it. He wouldn't drag anyone else into his messes.

Eventually, September 1st rolled around. Harry had his trunk fully packed and ready to go, but that didn't mean he wanted to leave. The two months he'd gotten to spend living with Sirius had been some of the best of his life, uncomplicated and peaceful. While he missed Hogwarts, going back meant returning to the secrets and the danger. Sirius understood his reluctance, as the night before he gave him a package wrapped in brown paper.

"This is something that James and I used to keep in contact with each other. Any time you want, whether something happens or you just want to talk, say my name into it and I'll be there."

Travelling to Platform Nine and Three Quarters was a lot less painful than Harry had expected. Harry and Sirius apparated to an empty waiting room at Kings Cross which was apparently the designated apparition point. It also contained a fireplace for those families which used the Floo network. The station was bustling with noise from the crowd of commuters, just as it always was. Harry approached the barrier between platforms nine and ten, his trunk and Hedwig's cage safely stowed on a trolley, and he subtly slipped through the brick wall.

Even though there was plenty of time before the train left, the platform was still busy with people. Harry found an empty compartment and heaved his trunk up into the luggage rack. Sirius waited on the platform by the open window.

"Incoming," he said.

Harry craned his head out of the window to see a large group of redheads making their way down the platform. He hurried back inside.

"I'll make myself scarce so I don't draw attention to you," Sirius said, "have a good year. You know how to get in touch with me if you need it."

He didn't want his godfather to leave, but he also knew that Ron and Hermione may spot Sirius and use that to figure out where he was. All he could hope was that somebody else came to sit in his compartment so he wouldn't have to be alone with them. As though answering his prayer, the compartment door slid open and in walked Neville.

"Hi Harry," his fellow Gryffindor said.

"Hey Neville. Did you have a good summer?"

"It was alright. Uncle Algie took me to Shetland to make up for not going to the Quidditch World Cup," Neville said, "there's a team of Herbologists growing Saltwater Orekelp off the coast there. I got to join them on a dive to check it out. It was amazing! It's like there's little bits of gold and silver in the fronds!"

"That sounds awesome. We've not learned about Saltwater Orekelp in Herbology, have we?"

"No. It's not the sort of thing we would learn about at Hogwarts since it's hard to grow and it doesn't get used for potions. One of the Herbologists said that Orekelp silver is used for making types of magical instruments," Neville said.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Harry said.

"Thank you. I heard that the World Cup was amazing, before the incident," Neville said, "did you get to go in the end?"

Harry was just about to answer when the compartment door bounced open. Ron and Hermione arrived, barging in and stowing their trunks loudly.

"Harry! Good to see you mate!" Ron said, clapping Harry on the back.

"We barely heard from you at all over the summer, and we didn't see you at the Quidditch World Cup," Hermione said.

Harry didn't point out that the only letter he received from either of them was the one from Ron inviting him to the World Cup.

"You two went as well?" Neville asked.

This suitably distracted Ron, who described (boasted about) how great the World Cup was. Apparently they had taken a portkey to get there, and they stayed in tents which were bigger on the inside. Hermione chimed in with various interesting things about the two nations that were playing. Only once Ron began to explain what happened during the game itself did Harry give his account of what happened.

"So you spent time with Seamus and Dean but not us?" Ron said.

"I didn't do it on purpose. The campsite was huge and I had no idea where you were," Harry said.

"You would have if you'd come to stay with us," Ron said grumpily.

"It was my first summer with Sirius."

Ron opened his mouth to argue, but Hermione cut across him.

"It's not the end of the world Ronald. Harry hasn't been able to get to know his godfather. He had twelve years to catch up on," she said, "but surely it would have been better to spend the night at the World Cup. That way Sirius wasn't apparating the pair of you all that way by himself."

"Kreacher was the one to apparate us," Harry said.

"Who's Kreacher?" Hermione asked.

"Sirius's house elf," Harry said.

For some reason, that made Hermione puff up in rage, and Ron groaned loudly.

"Don't start Hermione," he said.

"But it's so cruel! You have to agree with me!"

Harry looked to Neville, as though asking if he knew what they were talking about.

"How could you be alright with owning a slave Harry?" Hermione demanded, rounding on him.

"Slave? What are you on about?"

"House elves! They're perfectly sentient magical creatures who have been enslaved by wizards to do their bidding! They don't get wages or pensions or sick leave or anything! It's completely barbaric!" Hermione ranted, "how could you be ok with Sirius owning Kreacher after what you saw happen to Dobby?"

"Because I learned more about House Elves? I talked to Kreacher about his place in the family and what he gets out of it," Harry said, "the relationship is symbiotic between elves and humans."

"Complete indoctrination. Of course he'd say that!"

"What brought this on? I don't remember you being this passionate about it before," Harry said.

Ron cut in before Hermione could answer.

"Dad said that some Ministry official caught his elf outside his tent at the World Cup. Apparently he dismissed her on the spot."

"She was running away from the Death Eaters! Tents were being trampled, of course she'd be scared enough to run!"

It did seem odd to Harry. Usually there wouldn't be an issue with a House Elf leaving somewhere dangerous so long as there wasn't anything they'd been explicitly ordered to protect. There was nothing in Hermione's rant to say there was anything of the sort, and Ron wasn't forthcoming with details, so it sounded like this elf just had a bad master. Harry wouldn't say that, because he had no intention of getting on whatever bandwagon Hermione was setting up for herself. Kreacher had told him about the position House Elves held in the families they served, as had Celio and the other Potter elves. He was better informed about this than Hermione, but her ego wouldn't let her accept it.

Thankfully, bringing up the attack on the World Cup allowed Harry to fill Neville in on the match itself. Ron offered some details but Harry didn't let him lead the conversation. The account would be horrendously incomplete and biased if he did.

The train trundled on through the countryside. The trolley witch came and went, and Harry tried his best not to bang his head against the window. He hadn't realised it before but Ron and Hermione were both so loud. It was easy to set either of them off on a topic and fade into the background, and they rarely asked for his input so long as he made noises at the appropriate moments.

Thankfully, the journey eventually came to an end. The four of them put their robes on. Harry allowed himself to be led into a carriage with Ron and Hermione, Neville trailing after them. As they passed between the winged boar statues flanking the gates, Harry felt the rush of magic as Hogwarts welcomed him home. The carriages pulled up outside the oak front doors, and there was a rush of students heading for the Great Hall for the opening feast.

"Potter!"

The sneering voice of Draco Malfoy was not entirely welcome.

"Malfoy," Harry said with a polite incline of his head.

Other than that acknowledgement, Harry ignored Malfoy, making his way inside.

"Why did you do that? Malfoy doesn't deserve any politeness," Ron said.

"Because I'm tired of constantly butting heads with him, quite frankly," Harry said, "we all need to grow up eventually. If he wants to be a bully forever, that's fine, but I'm not stooping to his level."

"That's very mature of you Harry," Hermione said.

"Seeing all the people at the World Cup reminded me that we're going to leave Hogwarts eventually. I'd rather not carry a schoolyard grudge out into the real world."

"And quite right too. Honestly, I think the divisions at Hogwarts are really quite silly. House spirit is all well and good but when it comes at the cost of inter-house unity-"

Harry tuned her out as he took a seat at the Gryffindor table next to Fred. Ron took the free seat next to him and Hermione sat across from him. The Great Hall filled up quickly, and everyone waited for the first years to arrive for their sorting. The eleven year olds that Professor McGonagall led up to the front of the Great Hall looked far smaller than Harry remembered being when he was that age.

The sorting went by quickly. Harry clapped and cheered for the newest Gryffindors, while politely applauding those that went to other houses, even Slytherin. When it was done and after a few words from Dumbledore, the five tables groaned as they became weighed down by copious amounts of delicious food. Harry happily tucked into steak and kidney pie, though when he reached for the goblet of pumpkin juice in front of him, his ring heated up. The small bubble of rage that welled up within him threatened to boil over, but before he could do anything, Fred leaned over and snagged the goblet.

"Harry, Harry, Harry, surely you must know that pumpkin juice does not pair well with steak and kidney pie." He waved his wand over the goblet, vanishing the contents, and then poured from a pitcher of apple juice. "This will be much nicer."

Harry took a grateful swig.

"Thank you."

Considering Ron was too busy shovelling food into his face, it had to be Hermione who spiked his drink. That they would attempt to do so so soon was infuriating proof that they were still just as determined to bring him back under their control. He wasn't sure if it was because he was now in Sirius's custody, or if it was always the plan to try dosing him at the beginning of the year. Either way, Harry was glad he had his ring, and that the twins were watchful for anything being put in his meals. It was still maddening that he could never catch them doing it.

As the feast wound down, the plates cleared and all eyes turned to the high table. Dumbledore stood, arms sweeping wide as he addressed the students.

"Now that we have delighted in another truly excellent feast, I have a few important notices to give out before I dismiss you all to bed."

The doors to the Great Hall opened with a bang. A man walked in, leaning heavily against a wooden walking staff. Every second step made a clunking noise. Harry could only describe him as looking like a particularly gnarled lump of wood. His hair was thin, revealing much of his heavily scarred face. His right eye was a beady black, while the left was wide and vivid blue, whizzing about as it focused on various details in the hall. It seemed to lock on Harry as he stumped past.

The man reached the high table and shook hands with Dumbledore, exchanged a few words before making his way to an empty seat.

"This year, the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher will be filled by Professor Alastor Moody," Dumbledore gestured to the man, "I'm sure we will all wish the professor the best of luck in his new role."

"Of the next two announcements, one is unfortunately rather sad. It is my solemn duty to inform you that the Inter-House Quidditch Tournament will not be running this year."

This, rather predictably, caused outrage among all four houses. Harry was angry, thinking of how good it felt to fly and how being able to burn off excess energy helped him stay calm. Dumbledore allowed it for a moment before holding up a hand for quiet.

"The reason for this is another event that will be taking place at Hogwarts that will take up much of the school year," he said, pausing to build up some suspense, "I am delighted to say that this year, Hogwarts has been chosen to host the Triwizard Tournament."

"This tournament aims to bring together students from the three most prominent magical schools in Europe, to build ties of friendship and fellowship between people across many

different walks of life. A champion from each school will be selected to compete in three difficult magical tasks. The winner of the tournament will receive eternal glory and a sizable amount of galleons," Dumbledore said, "before any of you get ideas, due to the dangerous nature of the tournament, the Ministry of Magic has imposed an age restriction. Only those students who are seventeen before October 31st are eligible to compete. I will personally be making sure that this requirement is followed."

There was some more grumbling, especially from those students who would just miss the cut off.

"Our guests will be arriving at the end of October and remaining with us for the rest of the year. I trust that you will all be gracious hosts." Dumbledore clapped his hands together, smiling warmly. "Now, I believe I have kept you long enough. Off to bed! There is learning to be done tomorrow."

The Great Hall was filled with the sounds of scraping as the students all stood to head back to their common rooms. Harry walked with Ron and Hermione, who were both speculating about the tournament. The Gryffindor common room was as warm and inviting as Harry remembered. He bade Hermione goodnight and went up the spiral staircase. His dormitory now had a shiny plaque saying Fourth Years. Seamus, Dean and Neville were already there, setting up their things.

"It sucks that Quidditch has been cancelled, but this tournament should be exciting," Ron said, "can't wait to see what it'll be like."

"I'm sure it'll be very good," Harry said.

"What do you reckon? Fancy entering?" Ron asked.

"Not a chance," Harry said immediately.

"What? But we've done loads of stuff. I'm sure whatever's in the tournament can't be worse than that!"

"That's besides the point. I'll just be happy for the excitement taking place at Hogwarts to have nothing to do with me," Harry said.

"But eternal glory! The prize money!" Ron said.

"Fame's not really all it's cracked up to be," Harry said, "why don't you think about entering?"

"Me?"

"Sure. If you can figure out how to get past whatever Dumbledore has in mind, go for it. I'll be cheering you on in the crowd," Harry said.

He didn't particularly want Ron to enter the tournament either. If the age limit was seventeen, then it must mean that the magical knowledge required was way beyond what any fourth-year could handle.

"I'm just sad I won't get to see Harry try out any of the moves he saw at the Quidditch World Cup," Seamus said, "he was practically chomping at the bit to try out the Wronski Feint."

Ron snorted.

"Can you imagine doing that to Malfoy? Harry, you've got to try it on him!"

Harry bit back his grimace, turning to Seamus.

"Just because there's no Quidditch doesn't mean no flying. Honestly, I think I'll go stir crazy if I'm kept on the ground."

"Really? Do you think I could join you some time?" Seamus asked, "I'll probably never be as good as you, but the World Cup gave me the Quidditch bug."

"I can play as well!" Ron interjected.

Changing into his pyjamas, Harry pulled the hangings closed, effectively cutting off Ron's chatter. The journey had been tiring and Harry was looking forward to some sleep. The magic of Hogwarts wrapped around him like a warm blanket. Harry drifted off into slumber secure in its safe embrace.

The next morning, Harry woke bright and early. It felt good to get back into his normal routine. Towel and trunks in a bundle, Harry left Gryffindor Tower, heading through the empty castle for his secluded spot on the shore of the lake. It was the first day of classes so he hadn't expected anyone to be up and about, but he was still relieved to make it here without issue.

Living at Grimmauld Place with Sirius had been great, but it didn't leave Harry many opportunities to do the things he liked, namely flying and swimming. Harry got his flying fix when they visited Potter Manor, and he swam in the mornings by going to a Muggle gym. That pool had been alright, but it just wasn't the same. Sirius said he'd see about building a pool at Grimmauld Place for him, which had mortified Harry. He remembered so distinctly the various TV programs the Dursleys watched featuring rich people buying expensive houses. Private pools were always marketed as a luxury item.

Changing into his swimming trunks with practised ease, Harry struck out into the lake. The slight bite of the September chill was unfelt thanks to the warming charm. Harry swam comfortably. Taking a deep breath, he dived down. The water here wasn't as clear as the lake at Potter Manor, but it was clear enough in the top ten metres or so for Harry to see quite far. A shape moved in the water below him. It moved effortlessly and Harry found himself staring down at the Giant Squid.

Its skin was a pale red colour; a mantle with flaring fins like an arrow through the water. Eight powerful arms trailed behind it as it swam, and tucked within were two long tentacles. Harry didn't know how big normal giant squids were, but this one was easily the size of a whale. Completely submerged underwater, Harry met large black eyes without blinking, and he felt no hostility from the giant. It reached out an arm and poked him in the chest almost playfully, before jetting gracefully away.

Harry returned to the shore, still overjoyed by his encounter. He knew he wasn't the first student to interact with the squid, but very few people ever went so far into the water. It was usually the first-years crossing the lake by boat who got close enough. Perhaps he was being too sentimental about it, but he liked to imagine that the Giant Squid accepted him as another park of the lake.

The castle was more awake when he returned to Gryffindor tower. A couple of seventh years raised curious eyebrows at him when they saw him entering through the portrait hole, but they left him be. He headed straight for his dormitory. As usual, nobody else was awake, so Harry took a shower. As also had become usual, Dean joined him a moment later.

"I didn't wake you up, did I?" Harry asked.

"We've been over this. No you didn't. I'm a light sleeper," Dean said, washing his hair in the shower stall next to him, "did you have a nice swim?"

"It was much better than swimming in the gym pool. At least here I can be somewhat sure of what's in the water," Harry said, "like the Giant Squid."

"You saw the Giant Squid?"

"It poked me in the chest."

Dean stopped what he was doing, and looked over at Harry.

"Seriously?"

"It seemed friendly," Harry said with a shrug.

Dean continued to stare, and then snorted.

"Only you could somehow make friends with the Giant Squid. Sometimes I forget how weird your life is."

"Believe me, I wish my life was normal."

As they continued to wash, they chatted about their upcoming classes, speculating how much tougher the teachers were going to be. It was a given that McGonagall and Snape would be strict, but the other teachers might work them harder since there were going to be guests at the castle.

"It reminds me of Ofsted. Mum always says the teachers at her school get a bit mad when the inspectors come around," Dean said, washing off the soap suds.

"What would an Ofsted inspection of Hogwarts look like?" Harry said, "come to think of it, for how prestigious Hogwarts is supposed to be, it's a bit weird that there's no external evaluation. For all anyone knows, all the classes could be really bad."

"Most of the teachers here are really good," Dean defended.

"Professor Binns took what should have been a really interesting class for Muggle-raised students and turned it into an exercise in soul destruction," Harry countered.

"Fair enough," Dean said, "and I suppose there's the whole mess about changing Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers every year. What do you reckon Moody will be like?"

"Considering my track record, I'll be happy with average at best," Harry said.

They dried off and tied their towels around their waists. Just as Harry was about to open the door to the dormitory, it opened itself and he bumped into a bleary eyed Seamus. The sudden stop caused Dean to stumble into him as well.

"Woah there," Harry said, catching the boy in front of him before they both fell.

Seamus stared unseeing for a moment, then woke up faster than Harry had ever seen before. He stepped backwards, face going red.

"Sorry. I should have watched where I was going."

"It was an accident. Don't worry about it," Harry said.

"I am trying to wake up sooner," Seamus said.

"Then you'll be even more of a zombie," Dean said, "go on. The showers are free so you can wake up properly."

Seamus apologised once again and they passed one another. When Harry reached his wardrobe to get dressed, he realised his cheeks were warmer than usual. What exactly about that interaction caused him to flush, he wasn't sure, but he'd rather not dwell on it. Not now at least. It would help if the feeling of both his friends being so close would stop lingering in his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you very much for reading!

The fourth year chapters will be much closer to Ignite The Spark, which this story is inspired by. As I said in the end note in chapter 1, there will be parts which mirror what is done in that story but I have tried my best to adjust things so they match what I have established here so it doesn't entirely repeat. I will succeed in this more in some parts than in others. I hope this is ok with you.

Lessons on curses and history

Ron and Hermione acted as though nothing had changed from last year, and Harry did his best to keep up that façade. They'd already tried to dose him once. He didn't need them to keep trying. They received their timetables from McGonagall and headed off for classes. First period was Charms, and after a brief review of the previous year, Professor Flitwick had them practising the summoning charm.

It was only at the last minute that Harry remembered to keep his newfound power a secret. His first attempt at the summoning charm only made the foam ball he was practising on wiggle, which was better than Ron but not as good as Hermione. Ron gave a sullen grunt, waving his wand absentmindedly as he tried again. The room was soon full of flying foam balls as people worked on mastering the charm. By the end of the lesson, Harry had managed to get the ball to make a hop in his direction, which he felt was a good enough milestone for the level he presented himself at. Flitwick watched his final attempt and gave an approving nod.

It didn't stop him from having them practise the summoning charm as homework.

"Bloody mental. The first day back and we're already getting homework!" Ron grumbled.

"You say that as though McGonagall won't do exactly the same thing," Harry said as they headed to Transfiguration.

McGonagall did, in fact, do the same thing. She had them brushing up on switching spells, giving them a short quiz on the theory, then handing out teacups to transfigure into wooden boxes. Hermione was the only one to succeed, though Harry made sure to come close. His box still had a porcelain sheen to it, but it was better than his previous attempts. McGonagall set them an essay on Transfiguration between different materials, which earned another round of complaining from Ron.

"It'll be alright. We'll keep on top of things this year so we don't fall behind," Harry said.

"That's easy for someone like Hermione with her encyclopaedia for a brain. For normal people, it's a lot harder," Ron said.

"I think you'll find that a lot of normal people are able to keep up with homework," Hermione said testily, "most of our year manages, and Harry did as well last year."

"We can make a start on it tonight," Harry said.

"Since when were you a clone of Hermione?" Ron said.

"Like I told you last year, it's not hard to stay on top of it," Harry said, "actually it'll be a bit easier this year because I won't have Quidditch as well."

Hermione humphed, and Harry sighed, not wanting to get into another debate about the merits of extracurricular activities over schoolwork. He was glad when they reached the Great Hall for lunch, as food provided a suitable distraction for them both. Fred and George slid into the seats across from them, looking excited.

"Have you had a lesson with Moody yet?" Fred asked.

"Not yet." Ron checked his timetable. "We don't get him until Thursday."

"Just you wait!" Fred said, "it was awesome!"

"The man really knows his stuff," George said.

"Professor Lupin knew his stuff," Harry pointed out.

"He did, but not the way Moody does. Moody lived it for years, and Dad said he was the best Auror the Ministry had before he retired," George said.

Harry felt the need to reserve judgement. Of the three Defence Against the Dark Arts professors he'd had, one had tried to kill him and another tried to wipe his memories. Lupin was a good teacher, but he was truly incredible in comparison. Harry had heard a few rumours about Moody in the corridors. Some said that he was mad, others that he was overly paranoid and would jinx anything that moved. Hermione seemed to think so as well, speaking with an air of judgement tinged with curiosity.

The twins grabbed some food and left to who knew where. A hand landed on Harry's shoulder.

"You ready Harry?" Seamus asked.

"Sure."

Harry finished off the last of his scrambled eggs, slinging his bag over his shoulder, and following Seamus out of the Great Hall for Ancient Runes.

"Thanks for the book on Standing Stones by the way," Harry said, "it's really interesting magic."

"I know! My cousin took me to the ones near our home and I could make some of it out," Seamus said, "ok, I couldn't, but there were some pieces which I was sure made more sense than the last time I visited."

They were deep in conversation, two floors up, when Harry heard footsteps rapidly gaining on them. Hermione bustled up to them, looking distinctly ruffled.

"You could have waited for me as well," she huffed, "did you forget that I'm also taking Study of Ancient Runes too?"

"Sorry Hermione," Harry said genuinely.

"I mean, last year you always showed up to the class right at the last moment, so we kind of got used to walking by ourselves," Seamus said.

"Did you manage to get your summer homework done? I found it to be quite a fascinating topic that I hope Professor Babbling goes into more detail about," Hermione said.

"I managed. Some of the translation was quite tricky but I got there in the end," Harry said.

"I know! I remember staring at it for ages once I separated all of the individual pieces," Seamus said.

"From what I've read, we'll finish the topics in Introduction to Ancient Runes this year, and move into more advanced topics next year. Personally I can't wait until we study warding. Hogwarts: A History talks about the castle wards often enough that I'm dying to learn more about them," Hermione said.

Harry exchanged a glance with Seamus. Thankfully they arrived at the classroom shortly after, and Harry had never been more glad that he didn't sit next to Hermione in this class. It was almost worth her having irresponsible access to a dangerous magical artefact all of last year. Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott from Slytherin were already present, conversing in low voices which went quiet when they entered. Harry nodded politely to them, then turned away, leaving them to their own conversation as he and Seamus pulled out their supplies.

Professor Babbling spent her first lesson revising basic Norse, before introducing them to more intermediate vocabulary and grammar. It was a fun lesson, because she had them speaking to their table partner in Old Norse to practise while she floated around the room correcting things as needed. Harry was slower at putting together his sentences but they were usually correct, whereas Seamus came across as more fluid but he made more mistakes. On the table in front of them, Hermione and Ernie were battling with each other. Ernie took his time to ensure each sentence was correct in his head before speaking it, which made Hermione grow impatient with him. On the flip side, Hermione always second guessed herself, diving into the textbook to double check every detail before she would make an attempt, which likewise made Ernie grow impatient.

"Five sickles one of them asks Professor Babbling to switch desk partner," Seamus leaned in to whisper to Harry when Hermione and Ernie were too busy bickering.

"Alright, but five sickles if one of them asks either of us to switch instead," Harry said.

The two of them shook hands.

All in all, the first day of class went as well as it could be. Harry had a study break while Seamus and Hermione left for Care of Magical Creatures, a class he didn't take. He spent it in the library making a start on his Transfiguration homework. When lessons finished, he went down to the Great Hall for dinner. Ron and Hermione were already there, so Harry sat across from them next to Seamus, with Dean on his free side.

"Honestly Harry, I don't get why you dropped Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid's a surprisingly good teacher," Ron said, "today's lesson was awesome!"

"Really? What did you do?"

"We did the stupid safety briefing again with the hippogriffs, but this time we actually got to interact with them. They're this giant winged horse thing! It was so cool!" Ron said.

"I found it interesting that they're capable of taking offence. I know that magical creatures are often smarter than wizards assume, but usually what offends them varies from species to species," Hermione said, "I wonder what it is about insults that offends them? Do they understand the words being said or is it the tone of voice they interpret as insulting?"

"That sounds really good. I'm glad you guys enjoyed it, and that Hagrid's found his groove as a teacher," Harry said, "did Malfoy behave himself?"

"Bloody git. You know what he's like. Hagrid basically had to stand right next to him to make sure he didn't say anything stupid," Ron said, "I don't get why you thought it was a good idea to be polite to him of all people."

"It's called being civil," Harry said.

"Honestly Ron, I think Harry's right. The rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin is ridiculous but neither side will admit to any wrongdoing," Hermione said.

"Wrongdoing! Have you forgotten the awful things Malfoy says about us, about you?" Ron said.

"I haven't. It's not right and I don't have to like him for it, but it does no good to egg him on," Hermione said.

"It's not egging him on. It's defending ourselves!"

"There are better ways to defend ourselves," Harry pointed out, "reacting in kind hasn't worked. Why not try taking the high road instead?"

Ron stared at both of them in disbelief. Seamus and Dean looked amused by the interaction.

The rest of the week passed in a similar manner. Harry politely greeted the Slytherins when they went to the dungeons for Potions, and made a good start on their poison analysis. It helped that he was ignoring Ron's grumbling beneath his breath, and that he kept a close eye on his cauldron, just in case somebody tried to tamper with it. His polite greeting threw off most of the Slytherins to the point that they barely spoke to the Gryffindors. If Snape noticed the divide, he didn't comment on it, though Harry felt him giving him a few curious glances over the course of the lesson.

On Tuesday he enjoyed the first Arithmancy lesson with Dean, remembering to bring Hermione along with them so she wasn't grumpy. Professor Vector welcomed them back and then dove straight into the material, which was the Arithmetic breakdown of a simple spark spell. Breaking a spell down in such a way was undoubtedly complex, and it made sense why spell crafting was reserved for sixth and seventh years. It was still incredibly interesting, and he and Dean were full of theories after the lesson ended.

Before long it was Thursday and all the Gryffindors made their way to Defence Against the Dark Arts. There was excitement in the air. Rumours about Moody were tossed about as more of the school had been taught by him. Some called him brilliant, others called him mad. Harry was still reserving judgement. Ron was beyond excited, having heard loads of cool stories from Arthur, and for the first time in his school career, he sat at the front of the classroom. Harry, still playing the part of loyal friend, was forced to join him.

Moody wasn't present when the class filed in. Harry kept an ear out for the distinctive clunking noise the man made when he walked, but that was when he noticed a faint shimmer at the front of the classroom. His meditation practice had opened him up to feeling the magic around him, especially since Godric's ritual tapped into it, and he could sense something standing there, watching them. This had to be Moody. Shortly after the bell rang, the class started whispering amongst themselves, wondering where he was, when Moody crept up to Neville's desk.

"Sloppy!" he yelled, becoming visible as he slammed a hand down on the desk.

There were quite a few cries of shock, and Neville nearly toppled out of his chair.

"Not a single one of you noticed I was there and that's not good enough! A single instant, that's all it takes for an enemy to get the upper hand. Constant vigilance! Above all else, that is what I hope to teach you."

Moody's voice was low and growly, and most of the class was completely mesmerised by the display, but Harry was too distracted by what he was sensing. As he'd started sensing magic, he realised that everyone had a presence. For most people, it faded into the background. Dumbledore's presence was intense, beautiful as freshly fallen snow but deadly as a blizzard. McGonagall's presence was rigid and firm, a highland mountain beaten down by wind and rain but never breaking. For all the stories about Moody's career, Harry had expected his presence to reflect that, but that was not what he felt. He did not expect Moody to feel no more impressive than an average Hogwarts student. Less than that, Moody felt like the first years that had only just arrived.

This man doesn't have much magical power, Harry thought to himself, that's odd for an adult wizard.

"You all know who I am. The name is Alastor Moody. Ex-Auror, thorn in the Ministry's side, and your new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. I am here because Dumbledore asked me, one year of teaching and then I can return to my peaceful retirement," Moody said brusquely, "no questions! We don't have time for idle gossip."

He stumped over to the blackboard and wrote in big letters "Curses".

"Last year Professor Lupin gave you an acceptable foundation in dark creatures, but you are woefully behind when it comes to curses. Like all spells, curses come in a range of flavours and severities, but the worst have been given the name Unforgivable. Who can tell me how many there are?"

As expected, Hermione's hand went up and Moody called on her.

"Three sir."

"And why were they given that name?"

"Because they were deemed to be so unforgivable, using any one of them on another person would have you sent straight to Azkaban," Hermione said.

Moody scribbled down what she said on the board.

"Exactly! Now, the Ministry has deemed the lot of you too young to learn about these curses, but I say different! A dark wizard isn't going to care if you know what they do. Not knowing only makes you vulnerable. Discussing something related to a different class while I'm speaking makes you an idiot!"

Moody had been facing the other way, but he whipped around to glare at Parvati and Lavender, who had been discussing what looked like a horoscope.

"Now then, the curses. Who can tell me what they are?"

A few tentative hands went up, and Moody called on Ron.

"My Dad told me about the Imperius Curse," he said nervously.

"Your father would know a lot about that one." Moody mulled over his answer. "Let me show you why."

From behind his desk he picked up a glass jar containing three scuttling spiders. Ron immediately backed as far away from it as possible. Moody grabbed one of the spiders and put it on his desk, aiming his wand at it.

"Imperio!"

The spider stopped scuttling, and Harry felt a surge coming from the castle wards. It was like an alert went off in his brain, and then it was as though the alarm was silenced. Harry barely reacted as the spider was commanded to jump around the room, do all sorts of crazy tricks, only to then come to a stop at the edge of the partially open window. It was sickening to watch.

"Total control. There are ways to fight it, which I'll be teaching you this year, but if it hits you out of the blue, or when you're vulnerable, you could be forced to do an awful lot you would otherwise never do. You-Know-Who and his followers did a lot of damage with this curse, but therein lies the rub. How do you know if somebody was being controlled, or whether they were doing it of their own free will?"

Moody let the question linger in the air as he returned the spider to the jar, then asked for the next curse. Neville raised his hand, seemingly through great effort, and Moody called on him.

"The Cruciatus Curse," Neville said, his voice wavering slightly.

"Indeed. A particularly nasty one. It'll be easier to see if it's bigger," Moody said.

He retrieved the second spider and aimed his wand.

"Engorgio. Crucio!"

The spider twitched and writhed. Its long legs buckled and the whole thing curled into a ball as though trying to escape the torture. Harry felt another sharp surge through the wards that was likewise silenced. He could barely take his eyes off the horrifying display in front of him, but he managed just in time to see Neville pale rapidly. Moody didn't seem to notice.

"Stop it!" Harry said.

Moody's magical eye swivelled up to peer at Neville. He then stopped the spell, putting the twitching spider back in the jar.

"Pure and simple pain. The Death Eaters never needed anything as complex as thumbscrews when they needed to torture someone," Moody said, "now then Mr Potter, perhaps you can tell me the last curse."

Harry didn't know it, but he had a good idea. Of the three Unforgivable Curses, one gave the user complete control over another person, another caused unimaginable pain. The only thing Harry could think of which would classify as unforgivable was death. Moody didn't wait for an answer. He scooped out the last struggling spider and placed it on Harry's desk. It tried scuttling away, but Moody already had his wand trained on it.

"Avada Kedavra!"

A flash of green light struck the spider, and Harry flinched. That curse had caused the largest surge in the wards, but Harry had also seen that exact shade of green light before. It was the light that was followed by high, cold laughter as his parents were killed by Voldemort. This was the curse that killed them.

"The Killing Curse. Death in the form of a spell, and there is no counter curse. There is no blocking it. The only person to survive it is here in this room," Moody said, "I do not regret showing you these curses. You lot could all point your wands at me and say the words and I doubt I'd get more than a nosebleed. The knowledge is more important, the knowledge of what is out there. You're old enough to inherit, so it is my job to prepare you for the world you'll be moving into."

It was a very intense first Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson, but it had lost its lustre for Harry. He couldn't quite find it in himself to be enthused by it the way his classmates were when they left an hour later. Ron was beaming, calling it one of the best lessons they'd ever had in the subject, but all Harry could think about was the complete domination of another person's actions, the pain inflicted upon them, and finally, death at the utterance of a single spell.

Those curses had set the Hogwarts wards off, and somebody then silenced whatever alert was generated. The only person he could think of that could do that was Dumbledore. The headmaster had endorsed that lesson, showing those curses to fourteen year olds with no regards to how they'd react to it. Moody hadn't noticed that Neville was freaking out over the

Cruciatius Curse, and he placed the spider right in front of Harry to demonstrate the Killing Curse. Needless to say, his impression of Moody was not overly positive.

"Are you alright Harry?"

It was the end of the day. Ron was procrastinating doing his homework in the common room, so Harry had taken the opportunity for some peace and quiet in the dormitory. Seamus was already up there, writing a letter. Harry didn't mind his presence. He looked up at the other boy's question.

"I saw how you reacted when Moody used that final curse in front of you," Seamus said.

"It ... brought up bad memories," Harry said.

"You're not the only one. Dean took Neville for a walk to clear his head after all that. I get what Moody was trying to do by telling us about those curses, but actually demonstrating them? That was taking it too far," Seamus said, "do you think it'd be alright if I wrote to my Mam and told her about it? Plenty of people will have had family members affected by one of those curses during the last war."

"Go ahead," Harry said.

He should probably let Sirius know as well. No doubt he'd kick up a fuss about it, but Harry shook his head, lying down on his bed. That could wait till the weekend. Right now he just wanted to decompress for a bit after an intense day.

Later that night, when the lights were out and his roommates were all asleep, Harry found himself still awake. Every time he drifted off he was plagued by dreams of green light and cruel laughter. With a heavy sigh, he got up and rooted around in his trunk as quietly as he could until he found what he was looking for. It was an oval shaped stone about the size of his palm. It was completely smooth, part of one side cut away to reveal the deep red ruby embedded within it.

This was the Focus Stone that he had withdrawn from the Gryffindor vault and kept inside a sealed and warded compartment of his trunk. He could feel the steady beat of magic within it. The Stone practically hummed with it as natural magic freely flowed through it. Harry had been practising his meditation every night since his birthday, and now was as good a time as any to attempt Godric's Ritual of Remembrance. Godric had explained how to perform the Ritual and he felt confident he could do it. It was just a matter of calming his mind enough to allow his inner magic to interact with the natural magic around him.

Making sure his hangings were shut, Harry slipped off his pyjamas and pulled on a pair of underwear. It was the closest to nude he felt comfortable being until he figured out how to ward his hangings so that nobody else could open them. He lay back on his bed, the Focus Stone resting comfortably on his chest. Taking a deep breath, Harry worked to calm his mind. He imagined floating on his back on a vast lake, drifting with the currents as fluffy white clouds rolled overhead. It was similar to the Ring Realm, but he found that to be a peaceful image anyway.

Describing the feeling of his inner magic connecting with the natural magic was difficult. At first, all Harry felt was water of slightly different temperature brushing against him. When he didn't fight it, it happened more frequently, and he was washed with hot and cold water. Harry allowed himself to keep drifting until he felt a small pull at his magical core. It was like a door had formed between him and the force that was all around him. Godric would be so proud of him. Harry willed himself to pass through the door, and in his mental image, he felt something gently pull him beneath the surface.

He didn't fight it, because he knew that this wouldn't hurt him.

Harry opened his eyes to a strange sight. Rather, it shouldn't have been strange, but it somehow was. He was standing in a very familiar dormitory. The beds weren't four posters, just simple single beds. None of them were occupied at the moment. The room was dark, indicating it was night, but despite that Harry could still see perfectly clearly. It was then that he realised he was naked, but this too felt different. This nudity almost felt ethereal, otherworldly, like the statues of the Greek gods.

"What's going to happen?"

Harry spun around at the voice. As he had taken in this strange new experience, he somehow missed the people in the room. A group of five boys were gathered around the window, the two older boys leaning over the shoulders of the younger boys. All were in various states of undress, their clothes indicative of sleepwear.

"Nothing's going to happen. We're safe here," one of the older boys said.

"But Camran, we can see them," the young dark haired boy in front of him said.

Harry joined them at the window, looking past them all. They were in one of the high towers with a clear view over the lake. The sky was clear and stars glittered like jewels, but they weren't the only lights. Across on the far side of the lake, mostly hidden in the bend between two mountains, were small pinpricks of flickering orange light.

"It'll be alright," Camran said, "you know Lord Gryffindor will keep us safe. He'd sooner lay down his life than have anything happen to us."

"Camran!" the other, blonde haired older boy hissed.

One of the younger boys, who looked very much like the blonde haired older boy, turned and barrelled into his chest, clinging on tightly.

"I don't want Lord Gryffindor to die," he said, "please Jon, please say he's not going to die!"

The other younger boys all looked scared and upset. Jon shot Camran a scathing look.

"It'll be alright little brother. Lord Gryffindor's really strong. Hogwarts has plenty of defences those Muggles can't even dream of breaching," Jon said.

Camran knelt down, putting a hand on the other two younger boys' shoulders.

"And he's not alone. Lord Slytherin is with him, and Lady Hufflepuff and Lady Ravenclaw. They will keep us safe, just like they promised." Camran smiled warmly. "They've got it handled, so let's all do our best to get some sleep. We need to be well rested for our lessons tomorrow."

With some gentle nudging, Camran and Jon ushered the boys away from the window and tucked them into their beds. Jon gave his little brother a firm hug, and when he was lying down, he pressed a kiss to his forehead. Harry followed the two older boys out of the room. Whatever masks of composure they had left them as soon as the door was closed, and both of them looked extremely worried.

The Gryffindor common room was a lot like Harry remembered it, but still different. Scarlet and gold hung from the walls, and the chairs looked soft and comfortable, but they weren't the same squishy armchairs of the present day. Camran and Jon sat down next to a smouldering fire, which came back to life with a jab from Camran's wand.

"The Muggles are getting worse out there," Jon said, "this is the second time that an army has come near Hogwarts."

"There's not a whole lot we can do about it. If the Lords and Ladies left Hogwarts to deal with them, it would practically be a sign post telling them where we are," Camran said, "the best thing we can do is hope they move on."

"There has to be something!" Jon snapped, then sighed heavily, running his hands down his face, "Ari gets scared enough as it is. He shouldn't have to live in a world where even his own parents wanted to drown him for being born."

"They- is that what they did to you?" Camran asked carefully.

"Not to Ari, because I was strong enough by then to stop them. I got us out before they could kill us both," Jon said.

After a little while, Jon spoke again.

"We should go back to bed. Lady Ravenclaw isn't going to go easy on us tomorrow."

"Absolutely. We need to set a good example for the younger kids," Camran agreed.

Neither boy moved, and something within Harry knew that neither would move. They would both stay there, wands never far from their hands and a clear view of the portrait hole, right up until the sun rose again.

Harry wasn't sure why he was being shown this particular memory of magic, but their conversation made him curious. He walked over to the portrait hole and passed straight through it. Something within him told him that he was not bound by the laws of nature in the memory the way its inhabitants were, and with a mere wish, he found himself untethered from the ground as though he were a ghost. Moving more with thought than with action, he flew along familiar corridors, taking in Hogwarts castle as it had been when the founders still

lived. The night was still, but there was something in the air which unsettled him. There was tension and worry all around.

Down the staircase, he arrived at the Entrance Hall. The oak front doors were wide open, revealing Godric Gryffindor sitting at the top of the stone steps. His sword lay across his lap as he stared out across the lake to the flickering lights. Harry had rarely seen the man look so serious, but he understood why. Godric would move mountains for the children under his care, who were currently upstairs very scared of the army on the opposite shore.

"Are the children all asleep?" Godric asked.

Harry turned to see Salazar approaching on silent feet.

"They're in bed at least. I trust the older students to help them if they need it," Salazar said.

"Good. That is good."

"What isn't good is for you to burn yourself into the ground like this," Salazar said, "you need sleep as well, Godric."

"I must keep watch," Godric stated.

"Do you not trust our wards? All four of us will know the instant any of those Muggles are foolish enough to try and cross them."

"They're not even looking for us," Godric said, "this is a war between two alliances of clans, but both fear magic will be used against them."

He gestured to the army across the lake.

"I believe they have heard rumours of some great power in this land and are moving to secure it before their enemy does. They would likely slaughter any that dare oppose them. Man, woman and child," Godric said, "I swore an oath that I would protect these children, and I would gladly lay down my life for them. They deserve a chance to live happily."

"You stupid oaf," Salazar muttered, "I'm aware of your oath. I made the same one, as did Helga and Rowena. We built this castle as a place of safety for magical children, so they may learn without fear of attack. Everything we have done has been for that goal."

The skinny man approached the much broader one, placing a firm hand on his shoulder and drawing Godric's gaze away from the lake.

"Do you not have faith in our abilities? Do you think we were lacking when we built Hogwarts?"

"Of course not!"

"Then trust the protections we have put in place. Suil is nearby, and the other guardian spirits, including your own, are ready to defend the castle."

Godric looked out at the torch lights of the army once again, then hung his head.

"You are right my friend."

"I usually am."

With a heavy sigh, Godric stood and sheathed his sword. The pair of them stepped back into the castle and the oak front doors closed with a dull but resolute thud.

"How are you able to stay so calm?" Godric asked.

"Because I focus on the things in my power to control. I do not allow myself to become trapped in dire possibilities, and instead keep myself busy with other things," Salazar said, "which for you means only one thing."

"And that is?"

"Go upstairs and be with your lions. Comfort them when they wake up scared and ease their minds with a stupid grin. No doubt a few of them are still wide awake with worry. Camran's probably trying to show off for the younger kids."

"Young Camran is a very tough child. He sets a brilliant example!"

"He turned the entire castle into a near war zone last year with that stunt with the suits of armour."

"Ah, to be fifteen again."

"You are impossible," Salazar said, shaking his head, "go on you oaf. Go do what you do best."

As the two parted ways, Harry felt he had seen all he needed to. Much like with Camran and Jon upstairs, something within him told Harry that Godric went upstairs and found the two boys standing guard. He swept them into a tight hug, thanking them for their bravery. When neither boy would go up to bed, he stayed with them in the common room, a comforting presence throughout the night. And when the sun rose and Camran and Jon could no longer fight off sleep, Godric picked them both up as easily as if they were toddlers and took them upstairs, tucking them into their beds with care.

When Harry woke up in the morning, fully rested, he was torn between being ecstatic about successfully using the Ritual of Remembrance, and wondering at what he had seen. It was a side to history that he hadn't considered. In History of Magic, they only rarely covered the interaction between the magical and Muggle world's. The most in depth study they did was of the mediaeval witch burnings, but there it was presented as almost humorous. The Muggle attempts to locate an actual witch were so inept that they rarely ever succeeded. The memory he just viewed painted it in a very different light.

There, the people of Hogwarts were seriously worried about an army of Muggles showing up on their doorstep. The children spoke of horrible things that had been done to them, and Godric and Salazar had both spoken of defences that would keep them safe. Had it really

been so necessary? When they learned about the Statute of Secrecy, protection from fearful Muggles was given as much weight as Muggles demanding magical solutions to their problems. Had it really been that balanced?

There was one final detail that Harry couldn't help pondering: the idea of a great power lying at Hogwarts. It was likely that it simply meant the presence of magical people, but considering the castle had been built by four of the greatest witches and wizards of their age, he wouldn't be surprised if the Founders left something behind. Perhaps the guardian spirits Salazar mentioned. He'd have to ask them the next time he visited the Ring Realm.

Shifting the culture

The first week of Hogwarts finally ended, and already Harry felt his patience growing thin. Ron had been on fine form, refusing to do homework until the last minute and complaining every time Harry or Hermione suggested he get it done. Not for the first time, Harry wondered why he had ever thought the boy was a good friend. If he didn't have different classes from Ron, Harry may have snapped already. As it was, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy were welcome reprieves from the snappish and short tempered redhead.

It was not a break from Hermione, who had discovered that Hogwarts had House Elves after Nearly Headless Nick mentioned that Peeves had caused mischief in the kitchens. This had led to many rants from the girl about the slavery being perpetuated in the school. Nothing Harry said could dissuade her. It didn't matter that he had spoken to several House Elves and discussed these very issues. It didn't matter that Harry had asked the Hogwarts House Elves about it themselves. She didn't want to hear that the relationship between the elves and the wizards was symbiotic, that in exchange for their service the House Elves drew upon their families magic to sustain themselves and their own power. If House Elves became sick, they took time off, and as they grew older they shifted to an advisory role. It was different to human concepts of payment and reward, because House Elves were not human, and Hermione could not seem to accept that.

Harry told Sirius everything that had happened in the first week, including Moody's first lesson. Sirius hadn't been pleased at all to hear about it, especially when Harry told him about the wards being silenced when they reacted. They both agreed that somebody silencing the wards was not a good thing, and that Dumbledore was covering for Moody for some reason.

“Mad-Eye was always an odd one. Paranoid, jumpy, suspicious of others to a fault, but he was a damn good Auror, and from what I hear he was also a really good mentor. He should know the best way to get across the dangers of the world,” Sirius said, “teaching you about those curses is one thing. Showing you them is another thing entirely. There is no context in which using those curses is good.”

“Is there any way to get him to stop?”

“I don't have any contacts in the Office of Magical Education, so I can't kick up a fuss about it easily. I'll have a word with Andy, see if she knows anyone.”

Aside from that, Harry made sure to stay polite to the Slytherins. He remembered Sirius mentioning using the manners all Slytherin purebloods were brought up on against them, and he found it was working. When faced with somebody who didn't rise to any taunting, it was clear the Slytherins didn't know what to do, and fell back on aloof politeness to save face. It was quite funny watching Malfoy squirm as he was forced to act more civilly with Harry, lest he lose respect in his own house.

His new attitude was certainly being noticed. The others in Gryffindor had started to emulate him, with Ron being the only one who still went out of his way to insult the Slytherins. After

a couple of weeks, perhaps it was just Harry's imagination, but he was sure there was less tension in the air.

Hiding in the library to escape Ron, Harry was working on a translation for Ancient Runes. Normally he would work on this with Seamus, but the other boy had been dragged into a detention by Filch for bringing mud into the castle after Herbology. It was completely unfair, but there was little they could do about it. Somebody approached Harry's table. He glanced up to see Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott standing there.

"May we sit down?" Zabini asked.

"Of course."

They sat opposite him and Nott immediately took a book out of his bag and lost himself in it. Zabini was slower with getting his things out, eyeing Harry curiously as he returned to his homework without comment.

"You're different this year Potter," Zabini said.

"In a good way or a bad way?"

"That remains to be seen, but for now it's good," Zabini said, "I never thought I'd see the day when you and Malfoy would be able to tolerate each other's presence."

"There are more important things than Hogwarts houses," Harry said.

"True, but still, to change your outlook so suddenly. It makes me wonder," Zabini said, "you were like this last year as well, though not to such an obvious extent. You were always polite to me and Nott in Ancient Runes."

"I had no reason to be rude."

"And you had reason with Malfoy?"

"For someone who touts his own superiority, he has surprisingly bad manners," Harry said, and Zabini and Nott both snorted.

"That's brilliant! And so very true," Zabini said, "I must admit, it's been nice these last few weeks. Let's see if it can stay like this."

"That's the plan," Harry said.

Zabini nodded, then pointed at a word on Harry's parchment.

"Careful. That's the wrong word. It tripped me up for ages because the rest of the sentence didn't make sense."

Harry checked his work and found Zabini to be correct. He crossed it out and wrote in the right translation.

“Thank you very much.”

Zabini accepted his gratitude gracefully, and the three worked on their assignments in silence until an irate Ron came storming up to Harry. He froze when he saw the Slytherins. Seeing the inevitable explosion, Harry finished off the sentence he was writing and packed up his things. When he was done, he bade goodbye to Zabini and Nott, and left the library. Ron trailed after him, and Harry could practically feel his rage. What exactly had set him off initially was unclear, but Harry knew there didn't need to be much.

Ron held his tongue until they got back to Gryffindor Tower. Hermione was sitting by the fire, reading through a completed essay for Herbology when Harry and Ron sat beside her, and that was when Ron rounded on Harry.

“What the bloody hell were you doing with those snakes?” Ron hissed.

“What? What was Harry doing?” Hermione asked.

“I just caught him acting all buddy-buddy with a couple of Slytherins in the library!”

“I wasn't being buddy-buddy. I was doing my Ancient Runes homework and they just happened to be at the same table. We barely spoke,” Harry said, not bothering to hide his eye roll. Then to Hermione he clarified, “it was Zabini and Nott, who also have Ancient Runes with us.”

Of all the Slytherins, those two were probably some of the least problematic. Nott was quiet and bookish, not really speaking to anyone outside of schoolwork. Zabini was more sociable, but also tended to keep to himself and not get involved with the drama going on.

“Alright, what is going on with you?” Ron said.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean what do I mean? Are you just going to ignore everything that those slimy snakes have done to us over the years? How can you just forget all the things Malfoy has said? Why are you deciding to act like nothing ever happened?” Ron demanded.

“Do you really want to know?” Harry asked.

His tone was genuine and serious, and something about it must have registered to the others because both gave him their full attention.

“Spending the summer with Sirius gave me a lot of time to think and I realised, it has nothing to do with Hogwarts houses. Quirrell was a Hufflepuff and he tried to kill me. Lockhart was a Ravenclaw and he tried to wipe both of our memories. Voldemort was a Slytherin, yes, but Pettigrew was a Gryffindor and he arguably did just as much damage to my life by betraying my parents,” Harry explained, “if I've been hurt by somebody from each house, then what's the point in holding a grudge against one house in particular? It doesn't do anyone any good, and besides, we'll eventually leave Hogwarts. We'll become adults and go out into the world, and the people in school will become the people we have to live and work alongside. It's

better to start forging better relationships now than to try and salvage something that's been broken later."

"But Malfoy-"

"If Malfoy wants to hold onto a schoolyard rivalry, that's up to him. I can't control what he does. I can only control what *I* do, and what I want to do is get along the best I can. I'm not asking anyone to be friends with him, or any of the Slytherins for that matter, but we can at least be civil," Harry said, "it'll make this place a lot more peaceful if we're not constantly having to watch our backs."

"There is no way I would ever be friends with the likes of Malfoy!" Ron said vehemently.

"And that's fine, but at least try to not insult them like you're doing. All it does is give them ammunition to fight back," Harry said.

"Seriously? Even if they call Hermione horrible names?" Ron turned to face her. "How are you being so calm about this? The Slytherins have been awful to you!"

"I know that, and I agree that I don't think I can ever be friends with them unless they sincerely apologise first, but I think I also agree with Harry," Hermione said, "it's exhausting to deal with their comments, but I'd much rather try and foster a civil relationship than to stoop to their level."

Ron seemed completely taken aback that they'd both stand against him. He gaped like a fish, then crossed his arms in a huff. Harry took that opportunity to pull out a book he was reading for Potions while Hermione double checked her essay. Ron refused to do any work for a long time, not until it was very late and he remembered they had the Herbology essay due the next day. He tried copying Harry's but he claimed to be too tired to stay up and went up to the dormitory.

Seamus was sitting on his bed, wand out and practising the summoning charm. Books and spare bits of parchment lay in various places on the floor around him from his previous attempts.

"Accio," Seamus said.

The quill on Dean's bedside table jumped through the air. It didn't quite fly as it made an arcing leap across Dean's bed, landing on the floor between Dean's bed and Seamus's. Seamus groaned.

"Everything alright?" Harry asked.

"I can't seem to get it right. I can summon things towards me but they never fly the whole way and I have no idea what I'm doing wrong," Seamus said, sounding slightly dejected.

Harry could understand. Even with him holding back his magical power, he had managed to get this spell after a few lessons of practice. Seamus, Dean and Neville had also practised

with him in the evenings. Seamus was usually good at Charms, but sometimes his spells had a habit of exploding. Harry sat beside him on the bed.

“It’s more of a sharp flicking motion.” Harry gently took Seamus’s arm, adjusting his grip on his wand, and showed him the movement. “Try it like that.”

He didn’t notice Seamus going slightly red, but the other boy tried the spell, attempting to summon the book Harry had on his nightstand as Harry had shown him. This time the book actually flew towards Seamus, though it was wobbly and just barely made it before losing steam.

“That was great. Now it’s just a matter of having a clear enough focus on the object when you cast the spell, and you’ll have it down,” Harry said.

“Thanks a bunch Harry.” He looked around at the smattering of objects littering the floor. “I guess I’d better clean up before the others get back.”

Even though it wasn’t his mess, Harry still helped to tidy the dormitory. Neville was the first one back, followed quickly by Dean. Harry guessed Ron was still slaving over his Herbology essay. After quick showers, the four of them hung out in the dormitory, chatting about various things. It was much calmer than any time he hung out with Ron, but still full of life. Seamus could get quite animated about things, but he never yelled or let his temper get away from him. He could also take a joke.

They all turned in for the night, and that was when Ron came stomping back into the dormitory in a foul mood. He threw himself into bed without getting dressed and pulled his hangings shut without a word.

As September gave way to October, the weather grew steadily chillier. Grey clouds rolled over the sky, and even when the sun was shining it didn’t feel like there was much warmth in it. Harry wasn’t bothered by the change, as he had nearly a year to master the warming charm. It was the only reason why he could keep swimming in the lake even in the depth of winter. Dean called him insane for that, but didn’t try to stop him.

One Saturday morning, Harry finished his swim and dressed. As he walked back up to the castle, he saw Hagrid moving about outside his hut, a large crate on his back which he set down near a trestle table. Hagrid wasn’t usually up early enough to see Harry, but this morning he did, and he waved. Seeing no reason not to, Harry made his way over.

“Morning Harry!” Hagrid said in greeting, “what brings you out here so early?”

He spotted the towel bundle under Harry’s arm and the wetness in his hair.

“Were you swimming? In October?”

“I’ve been swimming since last year. I’m surprised you haven’t seen me before. It’s a good way to burn off some energy.”

“You must be mental.” Hagrid shook his head fondly. “But I can’t argue with that, what with the Quidditch Cup being cancelled.”

The reminder made Harry sad, but he was distracted by a clicking noise coming from the crate Hagrid had been carrying.

“What’s in there?” he asked.

“Come and see.”

Hagrid sounded excited, beckoning Harry to have a look. Inside the crate were about twenty ... things. Harry wasn’t sure how to describe them. They could have been grey, fleshy scorpions, only they didn’t have pincers or a sting. They also didn’t appear to have any eyes as they scuttled clumsily around the bottom of the crate.

“What are they?”

“They don’t really have a name, so I’ve been calling them Blast-Ended Skrewts,” Hagrid said proudly.

As though to punctuate his point, sparks exploded from the end of one the Skrewts, launching it forward a few inches.

“They’re, they’re um,” Harry wasn’t sure what to say, “what do you mean they don’t really have a name?”

“It’s an interesting story really. The Ministry keeps a close eye on the creation of new hybrid species, but occasionally one crops up out of the blue. Probably an illegal experiment escaping from a lab. Normally these hybrids die pretty quickly since they’re not stable, but if they are, the Ministry needs to figure out what was combined to make them before they can act.”

Hagrid reached into the crate and picked up one of the Skrewts between his thumb and forefinger.

"These have definitely got fire crab in them, but if you look here-" he flipped the Skrewt over "- some of them have got suckers, which fire crabs don't have."

“So how do you work out what it’s made of?”

“The folks at the Ministry have a bunch of spells they can try. Other than that it’s observation. What do they eat? When do they sleep? Are they territorial? Social? Things like that,” Hagrid explained, “all of that takes time though, so someone from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures asked if I could take some of the eggs. I reckon it’ll make a good project for the students, probably fit in nicely between now and Christmas.”

“You’re going to ask Ron and Hermione to observe these things?” Harry said, trying not to sound aghast.

“Nah. The seventh-years will be able to take a good crack at it. They’ll be up for the challenge, and there’s something on the NEWT exam about handling hybrids,” Hagrid chuckled, “no, I’ve been preparing the fourth-years for unicorns. It’s foaling season in December, so January would probably be a good time for it. I’ll show them an adult, and if we’re lucky one of the mums might allow her newborn to come so the boys won’t be left out. Only don’t tell Ron and Hermione this. I want it to be a surprise.”

Harry had no issue with that instruction.

“I didn’t think I would be good at teaching, but Professor Kettleburn left some good notes to follow. The hardest part is remembering that not everyone is as tough as me,” Hagrid said.

“Ron and Hermione seem to be enjoying it,” Harry said.

They talked about the lessons a lot, but Ron complained that Hagrid actually set them homework. It was never usually a lot, typically to read up on whatever creatures they were studying with a few short essays mixed in, but apparently they’d all forgotten that Hagrid had fifty years of experience with magical creatures. Every now and again he gave the class a question that on the surface seemed simple but turned out to be more complex than previously thought. Ron had moaned about that more than once, as it often led to him having to actually research things in the library. Seamus, Dean and Neville didn’t mind it, as they found the lessons and the research tasks quite interesting.

Harry left Hagrid to his Skrewts, making his way back to the castle. His hair was now dry, but he still needed to shower from being in the lake. When he slipped into the dormitory, Dean was sitting in bed reading, while Neville was slowly blinking awake. Seamus’s bed was empty, and Ron was snoring away. Dean looked over when he entered.

“Get held up?”

“I bumped into Hagrid,” Harry said, getting his things.

Seamus was standing beneath the shower spray when Harry went into the bathroom. Harry hoped it was the heat making his cheeks turn red, and it was an effort to wrench his eyes away from Seamus’s back. He took the shower stall next to the other boy.

“Either I’m getting up earlier, or you’re back later,” Seamus said as he scrubbed shampoo into his hair.

“The latter.”

With the warming charm, Harry hadn’t felt cold, but standing beneath the hot water was still nice.

“I still don’t get how you can get up so early, and to go swimming of all things,” Seamus said.

“It was hard at first, but now it’s a habit,” Harry said, “I really need it since there’s no Quidditch.”

Seamus hummed.

“Dad says that’s the best way to exercise. Make it part of your routine so it doesn’t then feel like a chore,” he said, “I try my best but it can be hard to find the time.”

“I could wake you up at six with me if you want,” Harry offered, shooting Seamus a smile.

“Do that I won’t hesitate to drown you,” Seamus said flatly, meeting Harry’s eyes over the chest high dividing wall.

Harry had to quickly look away because Seamus had moved on to scrubbing his body, and he just ... couldn’t.

It shouldn’t be weird. He had seen all of his roommates naked at some point. It came with the territory of sharing a dormitory, and the showers were open to the rest of the bathroom so there was no hiding it. It had never been an issue before, but now Harry felt something inside him stirring. Now was not the time to consider what that meant, something Harry realised was becoming a common occurrence when around Seamus and Dean.

It happened again when they were both finished. Dried and with towels around their waists, Harry spotted Seamus giving him a funny look.

“Seamus?”

“You’ve got muscle now,” Seamus said.

“I do?”

Harry looked down. Sure enough, while it wasn’t bulky, there was still clearly muscle on his body now. A year of good nutrition and regular exercise was having a positive effect. Harry’s cheeks flushed at the attention, but he couldn’t say he hated it.

They passed Neville as they went back into the dormitory. Ron was still sound asleep, and Dean turned a page in his book as they went through their wardrobes. Every now and again, Harry felt eyes on him, and when he glanced behind he caught Dean peeking over the top of his book, only to just as quickly look away. Strangely, much like Seamus’s comments in the bathroom, for some reason, Harry didn’t mind the attention.

Lessons continued, and with it, Harry continued the delicate balancing act of being friends with Ron and Hermione while looking for any opportunity to distance himself from them. Unfortunately there weren’t many of those. It was all Harry could do to not snap at Ron whenever he complained about homework. It didn’t matter how many times Harry didn’t let him copy, Ron still left it to the last minute. There was always something to complain about, and many times Harry had to make an excuse to step away and calm down.

Hermione was only slightly better in this regard. The main issue with her was that Harry had to be very careful not to let her see his work. Over the course of third year, he had been steadily increasing his overall scores in each subject now that he no longer had spells

interfering with his ability to focus, but he always played it as if he was just the same. Hermione always asked if he needed her help with the simplest things, and she always despaired whenever he didn't let her read through his homework before submitting it. Thankfully she had given up trying to make people take her stance on House Elves, but whenever a particularly complex dish appeared at the Gryffindor table, she scowled at it.

Lessons with Moody were as unpleasant as ever. After showing them the Unforgivable Curses, one lesson was spent trying to throw off the Imperious Curse. The tables and chairs were moved to the side of the room, and each student was brought out one by one and had the curse placed on them. Moody would have them do all manner of things, and then berated them when they couldn't throw it off. Harry didn't laugh no matter what anyone was forced to do. Each time the curse was cast, he felt the surge in the wards, but like last time it was quickly silenced.

Seamus wouldn't look anyone in the eye after being forced to imitate a teapot, and Dean was limping after a failed pirouette caused him to fall. After Parvati was released, and told her mental defences were weak, it was Harry's turn. Moody pointed his wand at him, and Harry reflexively tensed, hand inching towards his own wand. Moody looked impressed.

"Good instinct Potter," he said, "Imperio!"

A strange, almost blissful feeling washed over him. A voice was telling him to jump on a nearby desk, but Harry pushed against it. He didn't want to jump on a desk. He didn't want to be controlled by anyone! The voice insisted, the demand almost cutting through the sensation of bliss cushioning the world around him, but Harry had enough. He pushed back harder, and the world came back into focus. His entire body was tense, like every muscle was clenched.

"Would you look at that? That's what I was hoping to see!" Moody smiled, though it did nothing to make him look better. "Mental fortitude. That's what it takes to fight off the Imperius Curse. You need a will stronger than the person trying to control you. Potter was fighting from the very beginning, which meant the curse couldn't take root nearly as easily. Let's see if it was just a fluke."

This time Harry really did go for his wand when Moody aimed his. He wasn't fast enough though, and he fell back into the bliss of the Imperius Curse. Harry pushed back immediately, battering away the feeling even faster than before. When the room came into focus, he kept his wand trained on Moody.

"You shouldn't point a wand at someone unless you intend to use it," Moody stated, but then he smiled, "once again, you've got good instincts. Now put that away before you take someone's eye out."

Harry only did so after Moody put his own wand away. He re-joined his classmates and willed himself to relax. All it did was leave him aching all over. There wasn't as much enthusiasm as the class left at the end of the lesson. Nobody but Harry had been able to throw off the curse. Malfoy had come the closest, resisting for about ten seconds but was still forced to skip up and down the length of the room while singing the school song. When Ron tried laughing at this, Hermione snapped that he'd had to impersonate a chicken, which shut him right up.

After classes finished for the day, Harry put his bag back in his room, only to find a letter waiting for him on his pillow with the wax seal of Gringotts clearly visible. Making sure no one else was around, and closing his hangings for good measure, Harry opened it.

Dear Lord Potter,

We have completed our analysis of the item extracted from you during the summer. As we suspected, it can be used to locate the others. Given the nature of this item, we would be happy to do so free of charge. Our Curse Breakers will be able to track them down and make sure they are dealt with.

It would be better to discuss the details with you in person. However, as you have returned to Hogwarts, that is not feasible. In this case, Gringotts would be amenable to another acting as a proxy in your case. I would suggest Lord Black as a suitable candidate. If you prefer, we can wait until you are able to meet with us yourself. Let us know your decision as soon as possible. If you choose to have a proxy meet us in your place, for security purposes, please allow us to handle communications with them.

We will endeavour to keep you informed.

May your treasures prosper,

Ironclaw

House Potter Account Manager

So the soul fragment the goblins extracted from him could be used to locate the other pieces of Voldemort's soul. That could only be a good thing. Harry hurried downstairs, sneaking through the common room to avoid questions from Ron and Hermione, and made his way to the Owlery. He wrote a brief letter selecting Sirius as a proxy in this matter. His godfather was already informed of everything, so he was the best choice while Harry was at Hogwarts. Hedwig was just about to fly off to hunt when Harry entered the Owlery. Her amber eyes were curious, since most of the people Harry wrote to were at Hogwarts, but she let him tie the letter to her leg regardless.

Harry watched her fly off into the distance. Between classes, making sure he didn't get dosed by Ron and Hermione, and trying to figure out whatever it was that Dumbledore had planned, Harry had almost forgotten about Voldemort. Not entirely. He could never forget about him completely, but he hadn't been at the forefront of his thoughts. If Gringotts could succeed in finding the horcruxes, they could sever Voldemort's tethers to life so that even if he returned, he would be much easier to handle, and that was assuming he even could return again.

At least Pettigrew was in Azkaban. That was one less servant of Voldemort they had to worry about, but then Harry remembered the World Cup. There had been a whole group of masked Death Eaters causing havoc, and then there was whoever had cast the Dark Mark. Things could never just be easy for him, but Harry had long learned to accept that unfortunate fact about his life.

The Triwizard Tournament

A week before Halloween saw excitement building within the castle. Everywhere he went, Harry heard whispers about the incoming foreign students who'd be coming for the tournament.

"My cousin had a pen pal in Beauxbaton. She said it was a beautiful school somewhere in France. I wish I could go and visit!" a Hufflepuff sixth-year whispered to a friend one morning at lunch.

"They teach duelling at Durmstrang, officially not like that pathetic excuse for a club we had in third year," a Slytherin fifth-year was saying in the corridor, "I wouldn't be surprised if the Durmstrang student wins it all."

Hermione was very enthusiastic about the prospect of meeting the visiting students. She babbled away about the nine most prominent magical schools in the world, and gave her unprompted opinion that this ranking was highly biased as three of these schools were located in Europe. Harry listened, occasionally making a comment here or there, but otherwise let her rant. It was best to let her run out of steam when she felt self-righteous about things. The idea of different magical schools was interesting though. Hopefully Harry would get a chance to ask, or at least find a good book on the subject so he could learn without having it filtered through Hermione.

When there was a week to go until Halloween, the Heads of Houses led the school out onto the steps leading to the front lawn to greet their guests. The night air was chilly, with many trying to wrap their cloaks around them even tighter. Harry simply cast the warming charm under his breath.

"What time did Dumbledore say they'd be arriving?" Ron asked.

"6:30pm," Harry said.

"Why can't they hurry up!"

"It's only 6:28," Harry pointed out.

"But we've been out here for ages!"

"It's been ten minutes," Hermione said, "honestly Ronald, just be patient. Both schools are travelling from far away."

Ron huffed.

"How are they even getting here? The carriages? Hardly a glamorous way to get here," he said.

“Sirius said that when wizards get together they like showing off, so I imagine it’ll be something more exciting than that,” Harry said.

All the students watched and waited, scanning the path leading up from Hogsmeade Station for any sign of Beauxbaton or Durmstrang. The clock struck 6:30pm and there was a little squeak. A tiny Hufflepuff was tugging at his friend's arm, pointing at the sky.

“There!”

It was hard to see against the darkening sky, but Harry could make out what looked like a flying box. As it got closer, more details became clearer. It was two large powder blue carriages, each the size of a small house, being pulled along by a team of giant winged horses. Everyone was in awe as it approached, circled the castle once and then dipped towards the front lawns at speed. Despite that, the horses touched down gracefully with barely a jostle to the carriage.

“Beauxbaton has arrived,” Dumbledore said genially from the front of the group from Hogwarts.

The door to the first carriage opened. Two boys in silk uniforms a slightly darker shade of blue than the carriages hopped out, unfolding a set of stairs behind them. A dozen older teens came down the stairs, dressed in the same uniforms. The boys then unrolled a length of midnight blue rug onto the grass as the largest woman Harry had ever seen descended from the carriage. She wore a dress of black satin, a fur scarf draped around her shoulders. She strode forwards, her students hurrying behind her, until she reached the steps leading up to the castle.

“Professor Dumbledore,” she greeted.

“Madam Maxime,” Dumbledore gave her a bow, kissing the ring on her finger.

He only came up to her middle.

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” he said in a kind, grandfatherly tone.

“Has Karkaroff arrived yet?”

“It seems you have beaten him here.”

“Then may I escort my students inside? It has been a long journey and we are not accustomed to such cold weather this time of year,” Maxime said.

The Beauxbaton students were all shivering, huddling together for warmth.

“Not at all. Please, make yourselves at home,” Dumbledore said.

Madam Maxime nodded and then rattled off instructions in French. Her students seemed to appreciate whatever she said as she led them up into the castle.

“Hardly prepared for the weather,” Ron commented.

“It is a lot warmer in France than Scotland at this time of year,” Hermione said, “look, they brought younger students with them.”

Trailing at the back were four students who were a mix of ages, but all younger than the dozen leading them.

“That must be for the international magical community part of the tournament. Do you reckon they’ll be taking classes with us?” Harry asked.

“Oh I hope so. I can imagine the younger students will be able to make some really great friends,” Hermione said.

With Beauxbaton’s dramatic arrival, now everyone was scanning the sky for Durmstrang. However, it was a Hufflepuff again who cried out, pointing at the lake where a whirlpool seemed to be forming in the middle. A wooden ship suddenly emerged from beneath the water, sails unfurling as it came to a halt at the shore. Flying from the mast was a standard bearing a twin-headed red eagle beneath a twining ribbon. A plank was lowered and a group of people descended. At the front of the group was a man with sallow skin and a prominent goatee. He held a hand out to Dumbledore, who shook it.

“Albus, it is a pleasure to see you again,” the man said, showing off yellowing teeth.

“Indeed it is Igor. I hope I find you well and that your journey was not too difficult,” Dumbledore said.

“The seas were kind to us. I see Maxime has already arrived,” Karkaroff gestured to the Beauxbaton carriage.

“Not too long before yourself. She and her students have already headed inside.”

“Then we shall join them.”

By this point, the Durmstrang students had caught up to their headmaster. They didn’t seem bothered by the cold at all, wearing brown robes with thick, fur lined cloaks. Harry didn’t need Ron’s elbow in the ribs to spot what had made the redhead so star struck.

“Harry,” Ron hissed, “it’s Viktor Krum!”

Ron wasn’t the only one to notice him as furious whispers broke out amongst the Hogwarts students. Krum didn’t acknowledge this as he gazed up at the castle along with his fellow students. Karkaroff called for his students, and Krum led the group. A younger student walked at his side.

“Why didn’t I bring any parchment with me? I must have a quill somewhere. Hermione, can I borrow yours?” Ron said.

“No, you cannot borrow some parchment so you can bother our guests for an autograph!” Hermione scolded.

“But it’s Viktor Krum!”

“And he’ll be here all year. You’ll have plenty of chances to ask him, *politely*, for an autograph.”

The Hogwarts students were instructed to head inside now. As they passed through the Entrance Hall, they saw the Durmstrang students lingering near the entrance to the Great Hall, seemingly unsure of where to go. Beauxbaton were all at the end of the Ravenclaw table.

“Please sit at the Gryffindor table,” Ron begged beneath his breath.

This was followed by a muttered swear as the Durmstrang students seemed to make up their mind, sitting across the hall from the Gryffindors at the end of the Slytherin table. Ron mumbled darkly, glaring at Malfoy who had engaged Krum in conversation. Up at the staff table, Maxime and Karkaroff were sitting either side of Dumbledore.

“On behalf of everyone at Hogwarts, I would like to extend the warmest of welcomes to our guests from Beauxbaton and Durmstrang. I now invite you all to enjoy our most delectable feast, after which we will explain how the tournament will begin and introduce the objective selector,” Dumbledore said, “now then, dig in!”

Food appeared on all the tables. There was the usual fare that Harry had come to expect from Hogwarts feasts, but dotted here and there were dishes he didn't recognise, likely originating from wherever Beauxbaton and Durmstrang were. Ron turned his nose up at them and refused to touch them. Hermione had a few of the French dishes, but only the basic stuff. Harry, deciding to be daring, had a bit of everything. It was all delicious.

"Excuse me, are you finished with the bouillabaisse?"

An exquisitely beautiful Beauxbaton girl with silver hair flowing down her back had approached them. Ron gaped at her dumbly. Harry handed her the dish.

"Here you are. It was very nice," he said.

The girl nodded, seeming pleased, and took it back to the Ravenclaw table. Ron would not stop shamelessly staring until Hermione slapped his arm.

"That girl's got to be a Veela. There's no way anyone could be that beautiful otherwise," Ron said.

"Girls can be beautiful without needing to be a Veela," Hermione said stiffly, "it's no excuse to be a pig."

"You don't get it Hermione. Veela are just built differently. You saw it at the World Cup."

"I saw you nearly throw yourself out of the Top Box!"

"Back me up Harry!"

Truthfully, Harry hadn't noticed any strange effect coming from the girl, but now that he thought about it, she did look similar to the Veela at the World Cup. Hermione humphed as

though Harry had been just as rude as Ron, turning back to her pudding in a huff. Harry was more than fine with this as it meant he didn't need to answer.

Looking up at the staff table, Harry realised that there were two more people than he'd realised. Sitting next to Madam Maxime were two people that he recognised from the World Cup. There was Crouch, serious faced with a perfectly maintained pencil moustache, and Bagman, jovial and eccentric. Bagman waved to several students who cheered for him. It made sense that they were there, as heads of the Department of International Magical Cooperation and the Department of Magical Games and Sports respectively. They'd probably been insanely busy trying to organise both the Quidditch World Cup and the Triwizard tournament at the same time.

When everyone had eaten their fill, the chattering turned to murmurs as everyone looked up at the staff table. Filch brought in a large wooden box. Dumbledore rose and swept around to the front of the table. Crouch and Bagman joined him.

"I'd like to introduce you all to Bartemius Crouch and Ludo Bagman of the Ministry of Magic. It is thanks to their efforts that the tournament is taking place. They will now explain how the champions for each school will be selected," Dumbledore said.

"Thank you very much Professor Dumbledore. My, it is good to be back here," Bagman said, "I'm sure all of you are chomping at the bit to earn eternal glory for your school, and a nice thousand galleons for yourself, but only one student may represent each school. This is why we have our objective selector!"

As he spoke, Dumbledore opened the wooden box and took out a large stone goblet with runes carved into the rim. He placed it on top of the closed box, and from the goblets depths sprang silent blue fire.

"The Goblet of Fire. The student wishing to enter the tournament must write their name on a piece of parchment and place it within the goblet."

"The Goblet will remain in the Entrance Hall until Halloween, at which point we shall announce who the Champions will be," Crouch cut in smoothly, "you have all been informed by your headmasters but I will repeat that only those who are seventeen before Halloween will be allowed to enter. An age line will be placed around the Goblet to prevent younger students from entering. I highly discourage them from even trying."

As Harry stared at the blue flames flickering within the Goblet, he suddenly had a terrible feeling deep within his stomach.

The Hogwarts rumour mill was a slightly terrifying thing, and the new hot topic was who had entered their names to become a Champion. It was a given that all of the Beauxbaton and Durmstrang seventh-years were entering, but it was a bit scary how every time a new name was added, *everybody* knew about it within an hour. For Harry, this usually came in the form of Parvati and Lavender, the Gryffindor queens of gossip.

“I heard that Warrington from Slytherin added his name last night,” Lavender said, “I hope he doesn’t get picked. From what I’ve been told, he’s a complete moron. There’s no way he’d represent Hogwarts well!”

“But then there’s Diggory,” Parvati said, and both girls sighed dreamily, “he’d probably be a good pick.”

Seeing the Goblet of Fire sitting in the middle of the Entrance Hall reignited the wishful conversations among the Gryffindor boys about entering the tournament. Harry had no desire to, and he made that clear every time it was brought up.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go for it?” Ron asked, “I mean, we’ve done loads of crazy stuff. This seems right up our alley!”

“And we only got through most of that by pure dumb luck,” Harry said, “besides, the other Champions will have at least two more years of education on us. There’s no way we’d do well.”

“But eternal glory!” Ron said as though that was an argument.

“Fame isn’t really all it’s cracked up to be. It might be nice for a change if it was someone else in danger for once,” Harry said.

At the weekend, Harry joined Ron and Hermione in sitting on the marble staircase in the Entrance Hall to watch as people entered their names. After the flurry of names on the first day, it slowed down considerably. Harry didn’t think that there was anyone left who wanted to enter. The age line glowed silver on the ground, marking a region of six feet around the Goblet of Fire in every direction. Just when he was about to suggest leaving, Angelina Johnson came down the stairs with Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell. With a look of excited determination, she crossed the Age Line and put her name into the Goblet.

“Not going to try putting your name in?” Katie asked with a chuckle.

“Absolutely not,” Harry said, then to Angelina, “I really hope you get it. You’d make a great Champion.”

“Thanks. I wasn’t sure I wanted to, but then I thought ‘when I am ever going to get an opportunity like this again!’” Angelina said.

“But people have been seriously hurt in this competition,” Hermione said worriedly.

“Same with Quidditch but that’s not going to stop me from flying,” Angelina said, waving her off, “speaking of, I think I’m going to get my broom and burn off some energy.”

She and the other Gryffindor Chasers hurried back up the stairs.

Another change came to Hogwarts in the days after the arrival of the visiting students. As Harry and the others were getting their things out of their bags for Transfiguration, there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me, is this Professor McGonagall’s classroom?”

A Durmstrang student was standing there, peering around the room curiously but cautiously.

“It is. You must be Mr Dokken?” McGonagall said.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Very good.” McGonagall turned to address the class, “class, this is Viggo Dokken from Durmstrang Academy. As he is also a fourth-year, he will be joining you for some of your classes. Mr Dokken, if you could take the free seat next to Mr Potter, we will then begin our lesson.”

Viggo slid into the seat next to Harry. Not wanting to make the new student feel uncomfortable, Harry kept his glances to a minimum. Viggo had a lithe but still strong build, and his blonde hair was messy and cut short. What Harry tried not to stare at was his right eye. It was glassy and pale, with scars like cracks forming around it. McGonagall’s lesson was a welcome distraction from the newcomer.

When the theory part of the lesson was over, the class all pulled out their wands to practise. Viggo turned in his seat so his good eye could see Harry and he held out his hand.

“It is a pleasure to meet you Mr Potter,” Viggo said.

“And nice to meet you as well. You can call me Harry if you like,” Harry said.

“Then call me Viggo. I have heard a lot about you. Even in Durmstrang you are famous, though none of us are entirely sure what to make of you.”

“I try not to put much faith in those kinds of stories. I’m just trying to be me.”

“Yes, Viktor does much the same,” Viggo said, “you at least don’t seem to hide yourself away.”

They spent the rest of the lesson chatting while they worked. McGonagall swooped over them, mouth open to scold them, but when she saw two perfectly transfigured snails, she left without complaint. It turned out that Viggo was very good at Transfiguration, and he was looking forward to what the lessons at Hogwarts were like compared to Durmstrang.

“It is lunch after this, and then I have Care of Magical Creatures,” Viggo said, checking a piece of paper, “such a long name for a subject.”

“That’s with Hagrid out by his hut on the grounds. I don’t take that class unfortunately,” Harry said.

“No matter. It has been nice speaking with you.”

Harry escorted Viggo back to the Great Hall, where he went to re-join the rest of Durmstrang at the Slytherin table. Harry spotted an empty seat between Seamus and George, forcing Ron and Hermione to sit across from him.

“Having fun with your new friend?” Ron said.

“We had a nice conversation,” Harry said, “Viggo will be in Care of Magical Creatures with you and Hermione. Not sure about the rest of his timetable because he said he won’t just be with the Gryffindors.”

“You need to watch yourself around him, Harry,” Ron said.

“What are you on about?”

“He’s from Durmstrang. You hear all sorts of stories about people from Durmstrang. Not to mention he’ll be competing against Hogwarts.”

“Honestly Ron, there’s nothing wrong with Harry making friends with him. It’s not like Viggo will be competing anyway. He’s not old enough. I think that Harry made a good first impression,” Hermione said, “the whole point of the tournament is to make friends.”

“But seriously? Why him?” Ron turned around to glare at the Slytherin table, only to freeze, “why is he talking to Viktor Krum?”

Harry leaned over to peer between people. Sure enough, Viggo was sitting next to Krum. The pair of them were talking, occasionally pointing at things on a piece of parchment.

“It looks like they’re studying,” Harry said.

“Why? It’s lunch,” Ron said.

“Actually, it looks like they’re all studying, or rather, the older students are helping the younger ones study,” Hermione pointed out.

There were five younger students in Durmstrang. Unlike Beauxbaton, where the younger kids were sitting all together, they were mixed amongst the older students. Each of them were speaking with an older student, discussing something on a parchment or in a book. One of them had their wand out demonstrating movements.

“Maybe Durmstrang is really keen on peer mentoring?” Harry said.

“I think you’re right. It’s actually a really good system that I wish Hogwarts had in place,” Hermione said.

“All you need to do is ask Hermione. We’re right here,” George cut in.

“You? But didn’t you and Fred only get like three OWLS each?” Ron scoffed.

George shrugged.

“I wonder what the other younger students are doing. Are they joining our classes as well? How come it’s only Viggo?” Harry wondered aloud.

“I asked Flitwick about that,” George answered, “Beauxbaton brought second and third years with them as well, and Durmstrang brought only third years except for a single fourth year. Ginny will probably get a few in classes with her.”

“We’ll have to ask her about it,” Hermione said.

The Halloween feast was always a well anticipated event. The Great Hall would normally be decorated with a dozen giant carved pumpkins with live bats flying overhead. There was none of that this year. Instead, all anyone could think about was the Goblet of Fire and the announcement of the Triwizard Champions.

In the end, five students ended up in the Hospital Wing from stepping over the Age Line, spurred on by the mounting excitement. Ron was one of these, and he had grown such a magnificent beard that was long enough to touch his belt. Harry struggled not to laugh himself silly. The few times he’d chuckled had earned him glares, and Harry was reminded once again that the redhead could never take a joke at his own expense. Madam Pomfrey was deeply disappointed with it all, but had to admit that growing an embarrassingly long beard was a lot better than whatever injuries one might receive from going into the tournament unprepared.

On the night of the Halloween feast, there was an undeniable tension in the air. Most people didn’t eat as much as they normally would, playing with their food as they constantly eyed the staff table, waiting for them to finish. The Goblet of Fire had been moved from the Entrance Hall, and it stood out starkly, drawing all attention to it. Eventually, Dumbledore finished his food, looking up at the students with a familiar twinkle in his eyes. Bagman laughed loudly as everyone went quiet.

“Well it looks like we don’t have to do much to get your attention,” he said, then to the other staff members, “shall we make a start?”

Crouch nodded. All the plates in the Great Hall cleared. Bagman stood from his chair, beaming at the crowd.

“We are about to announce the Champions that will represent their schools, thus marking the official start to the Triwizard Tournament. When your name is called, please come forward along the staff table, and through that door leading off from the hall for further instructions. Once you’ve been informed of what happens next, we’ll bring you back to the Great Hall for what will no doubt be a raucous celebration,” Bagman said, “Dumbledore, if you’d care to do the honours.”

Dumbledore came out from the staff table and stood beside the Goblet of Fire. As he approached, the fire in the Goblet turned scarlet and in a bright flare, a piece of parchment was thrown upwards. Dumbledore snatched it from the air as it tumbled back down.

“The Durmstrang Champion is Viktor Krum!” he called out.

There was a great cheer from the Durmstrang students. The other older students didn't seem too disappointed to not be chosen as they slapped Viktor on the back and congratulated him. It must have been obvious to them that Viktor would be their Champion, and they easily accepted it. Viktor strode forward and left the Great Hall through a side door.

The Goblet flared red once again, and Dumbledore caught a second piece of parchment.

"The Champion for Beauxbaton is Fleur Delacour!"

The silver-haired girl from the first night stood to polite applause from her fellow Beauxbaton students. They looked far more upset at not being chosen, but they still congratulated Fleur as she made her way up to the staff table. Harry felt the competition at Beauxbaton must have been a lot closer. Once Fleur disappeared through the same door as Krum, the Goblet flared for the third time.

"And finally, the Hogwarts Champion is Cedric Diggory!"

The tumultuous applause and cheering was almost deafening as all four house tables congratulated their Champion. While each would have preferred somebody from their own house, if there was anyone that all houses could get behind and support, it would be a Hufflepuff. Harry clapped loudly as Cedric accepted the hugs and the cheers and the handshakes from his friends, slowly making his way towards the staff table. Everything was going well, but a twisting in Harry's gut told him it couldn't last.

All eyes were following Cedric as he reached Dumbledore, which was why they all saw it when the flames in the Goblet of Fire turned red for a fourth time. Silence fell as it flared and Cedric, almost automatically, caught the fluttering piece of parchment.

"What does it say?" Dumbledore asked.

"Harry Potter."

The Fourth Champion

Chapter Notes

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

It was like a buzzing filled the air. All eyes in the Great Hall turned towards Harry, who was staring at the Goblet of Fire. The flames were slowly going out, taking whatever hope Harry had of a normal year with it. Something within him knew that something like this would happen. There was no way it wouldn't, not with Dumbledore's machinations and whatever Voldemort had brewing, but that resignation was being drowned out by fear and terror.

"Harry, come up here please," Dumbledore called.

Harry didn't want to move. He did not agree to this, he did not put his name in the Goblet. There had to be some way he could refuse, but Hermione was pushing him out of his seat, whispering in his ear that he needed to go. He stumbled up to the staff table, and Dumbledore handed him the parchment with his name on it. It wasn't even his handwriting!

"Through the door Harry."

The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes was still present, but Harry was almost sure there was something else there as well, something ... triumphant, like Dumbledore wanted or expected something like this to happen. Harry tried catching the eyes of the teachers, but all of them looked just as confused as he did, with the exception of Snape who just looked angry.

The door off the Great Hall led to a short corridor into an antechamber. A fire crackled in the hearth and all the other Champions were gathered around it. They looked over when Harry entered.

"Do they want us back in the Great Hall for instructions?" Fleur asked.

"Harry?" Cedric said, sounding confused.

Harry didn't need to try to make his expression hopelessly lost and confused, but before he could say anything, the door opened and Bagman, Crouch, Dumbledore, Maxime and Karkaroff spilled into the room, McGonagall and Snape bringing up the rear.

"My word, what an exciting turn of events!" Bagman said, "I'm not really sure how to say this, but for the first time ever, we have a fourth Triwizard Champion!"

The other three Champions looked between Harry and the officials, unable to comprehend what was going on.

"But that cannot be true. Only three people may be chosen, and besides he is too young," Fleur argued.

"I quite agree on all counts Ms Delacour, but his name came out of the Goblet of Fire so he is bound to compete," Bagman said.

“This is utterly ridiculous,” Maxime scoffed.

Dumbledore had remained quiet throughout all of this. He kept trying to catch Harry’s eye, and Harry remembered something Sirius said about not making eye contact with him. His meditation would help him resist mental intrusion, but he wasn’t yet good enough to fully block him out. He didn’t want Dumbledore poking around inside his mind.

“Harry, did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire?” Dumbledore asked calmly.

“No!”

“Did you ask one of the older students to put your name in for you?”

“I didn’t!”

“Well of course he is lying,” Maxime said.

“I’m not lying,” Harry insisted, “this isn’t even my handwriting.” He thrust the piece of parchment towards McGonagall. “Here, tell them.”

McGonagall took it.

“I believe that Harry is telling the truth,” Dumbledore said, not taking his eyes off Harry, “he had no reason to put his name in the Goblet.”

“Except the obvious,” Snape said, earning a hissed reprimand from McGonagall.

“Mr Crouch, Mr Bagman, you are the ... *objective* judges. Surely you must see how inappropriate this situation is. For Hogwarts to have two Champions gives them an unfair advantage,” Karkaroff said, his voice soft and unctuous.

Bagman turned to Crouch, who eyed the entire situation dispassionately.

“I’m afraid the rules are absolute. The Goblet of Fire represents a binding magical contract. Whoever’s name comes out must compete. There is no changing it,” Crouch said.

“Then I must insist that names continue to be drawn until each school has two Champions! It is only fair!” Karkaroff said.

“The Goblet of Fire has already gone out. It won’t reignite until the next tournament,” Bagman said.

“Which Durmstrang will not be competing in!” Karkaroff roared, “months and months of planning to revive this tournament, the trust we placed in you Dumbledore, and here you are acting as though nothing has gone wrong! I will not accept this insult!”

“Insult, you say?” Moody came stumping through the door, magical eye fixed on Karkaroff. “As far as I can tell, the only one here who has a right to any offence is Potter, yet he’s not saying anything.”

“Of course he would say nothing,” Maxime snapped, “our students have all looked forward to entering their names into this tournament. The opportunity to become a Champion is a great honour for those who are chosen to compete.”

“Chosen to compete, even if it’s against their will. Very convenient,” Moody said.

“Convenient?” McGonagall said.

“Somebody put Potter’s name into the Goblet knowing that if it came out he would be forced to compete. It would have taken a very powerful Confundus charm to convince the Goblet that there are four schools competing instead of three, and by entering Potter under that fourth school, there was only one option. The Goblet reads the magical signature, not the name, and Potter’s already said that isn’t his handwriting, so somebody would have had to fake his signature.” Moody leaned heavily on his staff. “Either way, it’s way beyond the magic of a fourth-year.”

“Another one of your famous conspiracy theories, Mad-Eye.” Karkaroff spat. “As I recall, the Ministry sacked you for being so paranoid, did they not? And I hear that you’re passing that paranoia onto your students as well.”

“You’ll also recall that it was once my job to think like dark wizards do Karkaroff, something you should be very familiar with.” Moody growled.

“That’s enough Alastor,” Dumbledore said, the only one in the room who appeared to be calm, “what’s done is done. Harry has been chosen as a Triwizard Champion, and nothing we do can change that. All we can do is move forward. Mr Bagman, the instructions?”

Bagman seemed to bounce in place, excited to reveal the details.

“Very well, very well! Champions, your first Task will take place on November 24th and it will be a test of your courage. We won’t tell you what the Task will be, and you are forbidden from asking for or receiving help from any of your friends or peers. You will go into the Task with nothing but your wand and your magical training.” Bagman clapped his hands together. “The other students have been sent to their respective dormitories. Let’s not keep them waiting any longer!”

Maxime swept Fleur away, the pair jabbering away in rapid French. Karkaroff shot Moody one last venomous look before glancing at Viktor and pointing at the door. Harry practically ran from the room, chasing after Cedric before he could reach the Hufflepuff common room.

“Cedric!”

The older Hufflepuff sighed, stopping and turning to face him.

“What do you want, Potter?”

“I didn’t put my name in the Goblet. I don’t want to be in this tournament.” Harry hurried to say. “You’re the Hogwarts Champion. I do not want to take the glory away from you, and I’ll be cheering you on.”

That seemed to take Cedric aback.

“You were telling the truth?”

“Of course I was. I don’t like being the centre of attention, and I just wanted a normal year this year. When your name came out, I was really excited to get to support somebody else, but the universe seems to hate me and can never give me a break.”

“After everything that happened in your second year, I can believe that.” Cedric said, and when he smiled it seemed genuine. “Thank you for telling me. I’ll let the Hufflepuffs know.”

“Thank you. The last thing I want is for this to divide Hogwarts again after we were all starting to come together,” Harry said.

“I’ll make sure of it. Don’t worry.”

They parted ways, Cedric for the kitchens and Harry up to the seventh floor. He wasn’t looking forward to what was waiting for him in Gryffindor Tower. He just hoped that they believed him. When he reached the seventh floor landing, he found Fred and George waiting for him.

“Are you alright Harry?” Fred asked.

“Not in the slightest.” Harry said honestly.

He told the pair of them everything that happened when he left the Great Hall. The twins listened without interruptions.

“We believe you mate.” George said. “The way you acted when your name was called, nobody can fake that kind of reaction.”

“The others want to throw you a party, but if you want to just slip away up to your dormitory, we can make a distraction for you.” Fred said.

“That ... that would be really great.”

As soon as the portrait hole opened, Harry was met with a wall of noise. The Gryffindors were split between celebrating him becoming Champion and demanding to know how he got past Dumbledore’s Age Line. Harry kept repeating that he didn’t enter his name, but he may as well have been silent for all the good it did him. He shot Fred and George a pleading look, and the twins immediately started up with a demonstration of their fireworks. Harry slipped through the crowd, avoided Hermione who looked torn between trying to find him and scolding the twins, and managed to get up to the dormitory without issue.

Ron was sitting on his bed, a prominent crease in his brows. From the way his ears were flushed red, Harry knew the other boy was angry. The redhead looked over when Harry entered, and his face went forcibly blank.

“Congrats, I suppose,” Ron said, “how’d you manage it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t put my name in the Goblet of Fire.”

“Sure.” Ron scoffed. “You can tell me you know, we are best friends. I just thought that you’d remember that when you went off on another quest for glory.”

“What are you on about? I’ve been saying for weeks that I didn’t want to enter. You’ve been with me the entire time!”

“Of course you’ve been saying that.” Ron said. “Like I’m supposed to believe that after everything you’ve done, and don’t act like you don’t have an invisibility cloak! I’d have at least appreciated a heads up, or for you to offer to put my name in as well!”

“You actually wanted to enter? People have died in this tournament!”

“Of course! But obviously the universe can’t have precious Harry Potter losing fame now, can it? I bet you’ll be *so* happy with another front page article in the Daily Prophet and even more galleons to roll around in!”

With that, Ron stormed past him, leaving Harry stunned. He had accepted that Ron was not his friend, but those words still stung. Even when he was dosed and under their influence, Harry had hated his fame. He didn’t do the things he did because it would get him attention. They were the right thing to do, or it was a result of manipulation. Surely if Ron was supposed to pretend to be his friend, *his best friend*, then he would know this. Why would Harry want to enter a tournament that was likely some plot to get him killed? Why did those words sting so much?

The dormitory door opened and Seamus, Dean and Neville were there, all with various levels of concern.

“Harry?” Seamus asked.

“We saw Ron storming out. Is everything alright?” Dean asked.

“He didn’t believe me. I told him I didn’t enter the tournament and he didn’t believe me,” Harry said dully.

“Harry, we-” Seamus started, but Harry cut him off.

“I want to go to bed.”

He didn’t wait for whatever they wanted to say. All Harry wanted to do was curl up in his blankets and pretend that today was just a bad dream. Without changing, Harry closed his hangings, shutting out the rest of his roommates even as his body was at war between wanting company and not. His brain wouldn’t stop whirring. Sirius needed to be told, and Harry needed to come up with a plan for the tournament. The most important thing was to keep Hogwarts from splintering again. Harry supported Cedric as the Hogwarts Champion, and he would make that clear whether he was forced to compete alongside him or not.

Harry woke up even earlier the next day, not wanting to confront anyone until he had a chance to clear his head. He'd spoken with Sirius well into the night, discussing what they should do. Sirius was concerned by Crouch calling the Goblet of Fire a binding magical contract, stating that if that was the case, there should have been even stricter measures to protect it. He would work to try and get Harry out of the tournament, but failing that, he would do whatever he could to make sure Harry made it through alive.

The Durmstrang ship was moored too close to where he normally started his swims from, so Harry had to walk a bit further around the lake to find another sheltered little cove. He struck out into the water, then flipped over to float on his back. Drifting along staring up at the sky, Harry took a moment to just exist. Out here there was no chosen one, no fourth Champion, no Boy Who Lived. He was just one kid in a big wide world that seemed intent on crushing him down time and time again.

He felt something moving about beneath him, but didn't worry. It was only the Giant Squid. Something about the large creature made him feel safe. Harry floated on the lake for quite a while, then took a deep breath and tipped backwards into a dive. Completely submerged, he looked about at the weeds that grew like trees below him. The Giant Squid picked its way through the fronds, making Harry wonder what it ate. Perhaps Hagrid knew?

Eventually, Harry made his way back to the shore to get dressed. There was only so long he could hide himself away. Seamus and Dean came through the castle doors, each holding a stack of toast.

"Morning," Dean said, "you hadn't come back to the dormitory yet and weren't at breakfast, so we figured we'd bring you something."

"We weren't sure if you wanted to avoid people or not," Seamus said.

It was a very sweet gesture, so Harry led them back around the shore of the lake to the cove.

"It was all a bit chaotic last night. You and the judges all went through to the side room, and the prefects were told to escort everyone back to their dormitories. Nobody knew what was going on. The Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws all looked angry with you, but the older Slytherins looked happy. I reckon they think you'll be expelled," Seamus said.

"I'm not. Instead I'm being forced to compete in a tournament that might get me killed," Harry grumbled, "as if I'd ever want that."

"We know you don't," Dean said.

"Yeah, it's pretty obvious that you've never really liked being the centre of attention," Seamus said, "and only a blind person would miss how confused and scared you looked last night."

None of them mentioned the argument with Ron, which Harry was very happy about, and they finished their toast in peace.

Over the next week, Harry worked hard to keep Hogwarts from falling apart. He repeatedly told people that he didn't put his name in the Goblet of Fire, never wavering no matter the scorn or derision. Every chance he got, he proclaimed his support for Cedric as the true Hogwarts Champion. That seemed to cool a lot of people's tempers. This made Cedric roll his eyes whenever he heard it, but the fact that the older boy believed Harry and wasn't upset by him certainly helped.

An angry Sirius marched up the front steps the day after Harry's name was announced and demanded, loudly and vehemently, to speak to Dumbledore. He came out of that meeting even angrier than before, which he told Harry about as they walked to the gates together.

"He kept insisting that there was nothing to be done. Your name came out of the Goblet, therefore you are bound to compete. He refused to listen." Sirius growled. "Though he did let something slip, probably intentionally. He mentioned that there were dark forces at play, and until he knows more, events must be allowed to unfold."

"So Dumbledore thinks Voldemort is behind this?"

"Most likely. He's obviously got some plan in mind if he thinks dangling a fourteen year old along as bait is a good idea." Just before he passed through the gates, Sirius turned and put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "If you ever need any help, any advice, anything at all, do not hesitate to contact me. I do not care one bit about the rules. You're fourteen, at least two years behind educationally than the others, and you didn't want to enter the tournament in the first place. If I have to come down and personally coach you, then that is what I'll do, and Barty Crouch can shove his perfect moustache up his backside if he thinks he can stop me."

Sirius wasn't the only one to make him that sort of offer. The Monday after Halloween, McGonagall asked him to stay back after Transfiguration.

"I'm sorry Potter. I tried speaking with the Headmaster but he says there is nothing that can be done to exclude you from the tournament. It's too risky given the binding contract." She said, "I will continue to push for any and all investigations into how this happened. Rest assured, whoever put your name in that Goblet will be found and punished."

"Thank you for that Professor." Harry said.

McGonagall glanced at the door, and then spoke in a slightly quieter tone.

"I'm not supposed to offer this, and I'd appreciate it if you don't tell anyone, but if you need any help with anything during the Tournament, I'll do whatever I can. I can't tell you what you need to do, or give you answers of any kind since that would definitely be breaking the rules, but if, say, you had any particular spells that you wished for help in practising, then I should be able to do that."

"Are you serious?" Harry couldn't help asking.

"Potter, I needn't have to tell you that this tournament is highly dangerous, which is precisely why it was only offered to those who are already seventeen. When the options are watching

you struggle on your own and potentially die, and giving you a little help so that you can survive, my choice is obvious.”

After that first week, Harry no longer felt so terrible. The other houses were at least neutral with him, and he would continue to impress upon them how little he wanted to enter the tournament and how he hoped Cedric would win.

Ron wasn't speaking to him. After the argument they had after the Champion selection, the redhead did nothing but glare at him, storming off whenever Harry ignored him. Harry had no issue with this, having no desire to speak to his former friend. Hermione was being frustratingly neutral. Harry didn't want anything to do with her either, but surely it should be obvious which of the two of them were in the wrong here. It meant that Harry didn't have to deal with either of them, giving him time to spend with his actual friends.

Seamus, Dean and Neville had been absolute stars, spreading Harry's message when they could, and generally making sure he didn't have to deal with this alone. Fred and George were also with him, and they roped in the other members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Harry was surrounded by people who actually cared about him, and it made his heart soar. Parvati and Lavender, queens of gossip that they were, did question him a bit about what happened, but they seemed satisfied with his answers and moved on. They all pitched in to keep Ron away from him, which was an added bonus.

It was this small group of fourth years that were studying in the Library one afternoon. Seamus and Dean were working their way through a tricky Herbology assignment, occasionally asking help from Neville, who was comparing Harry's Charms essay to his own. Parvati and Lavender were discussing planetary Divination across from them, pointing at frankly ridiculously complex diagrams to make their points.

"Your librarian is not very helpful," Viggo commented as he joined them.

The fourth-year Durmstrang student didn't have every class with them. He had Charms and Defence Against the Dark Arts with the Hufflepuffs and Astronomy and History of Magic with the Ravenclaws, but he joined the Gryffindors for Transfiguration and Potions. In the week since he had started classes with them, Harry had learned two things about him. Viggo had zero brain-to-mouth filter and would often blurt out what was on his mind, and he also had a love for drama, which led to him getting along frighteningly well with Parvati and Lavender.

“What did she do now?” Harry asked.

“Your Library is large and well stocked so I asked her where I could find a particular book on elemental charms, but she looked like I had insulted her children. She acts like children reading books is a personal slight and she hovers over anyone she doesn't like,” Viggo said, “she's nothing like Madam Winifred at Durmstrang.”

“Is that your Librarian?”

“She is. She's this little old lady who's an absolute delight. I heard that one of the older years played a vicious prank on her because she had asked him to keep his voice down in the

library and it made her cry. Needless to say, everyone else made sure he was punished.”

“Ooo, what did they do? Did he get detention?” Lavender asked, eager to hear about the goings on in a different school.

“For a prank? No, the teachers wouldn’t bother with something like that. His Eldre Bror was told and he forced him to swim laps in the lake from sun up to sun down, then had him scrub the hallways by hand all night.” When they all looked at him aghast, Viggo just shrugged. “Nobody makes Madam Winifred cry. She’s like everyone’s oma, er, grandmother. How were we supposed to react? This was before my time anyway.”

Just then, a group of Slytherin seventh-years walked past them. Though they didn’t sneer at Harry like they had done after the Champion selection, they still gave him very severely disapproving looks. Harry simply sighed. Convincing the rest of the school that he didn’t want to be in the tournament was a work in progress. He just needed to be patient.

“Don’t worry, they’ll come around eventually,” Neville said.

“Yeah, you’ve been making your stance pretty clear,” Parvati said.

“Even in Durmstrang, we know you didn’t want to compete but were forced to.” Viggo said, eyeing the retreating Slytherin’s curiously. “It makes me wonder how these people can’t see it.”

“I have no idea,” was all Harry could say.

“Hogwarts is weird.”

Harry couldn’t argue with that.

Fortunately, another opportunity to make himself clear presented itself the very next day. Harry and the other Gryffindors went down to the dungeons for Potions. The Slytherins were already there, and each of them wore something on the front of their robes.

“Hey Potter, what do you think?” Malfoy turned, thrusting out his chest to show off a circular badge with the words ‘Support Cedric Diggory, the True Hogwarts Champion’ printed on it. “Some Hufflepuff was handing them out earlier.”

“I think it’s great! Do you have any spare that I could have?” Harry asked.

That seemed to take the wind out of Malfoy’s sails, and he struggled to rally.

“We made our own improvements to them. See!”

He pressed the badge and the words changed to ‘Potter Stinks’.

“Well that’s just unnecessarily rude, but I was serious about the badges. Where can I get one?” Harry asked.

The classroom door opened before anyone could answer him and Snape beckoned them inside. Since Harry was no longer speaking to Ron and Hermione, he joined the other Gryffindor boys on their table. This was for more than just Harry's benefit, as with the spells no longer clouding his mind, he was able to do better at brewing potions than he had ever done, and he was able to help keep Neville calm so he didn't completely mess up.

"Today we shall continue with our study of antidotes. You should all have everything you will need from the previous lesson." Snape tapped the board with his wand and instructions appeared. "You have one hour to complete your antidotes, and I insist that you actually try as I may be inclined to test them on the imbeciles who brewed them."

His eyes lingered on Harry, who showed no reaction to the provocation. Unfortunately, only ten minutes into the lesson there was a knock at the door. It was Colin Creevey, looking extremely nervous to be in Snape's presence.

"Um, excuse me, Professor Snape sir, I was asked to collect Harry by Mr Bagman."

"Potter has an hour left of this class. He will come when he is finished." Snape said brusquely.

"Please sir, I was told it was very important that he comes now." Colin squeaked at having to argue with Snape.

"Fine." Snape snapped. "Potter, go. You will come back during lunch to complete your potion."

"Um, I think it might take a while. I heard there might be photographs?"

"Potter, get out of my sight!"

Harry had never wanted to do anything less, but attempting to fight it with an irate Snape was a recipe for disaster. He packed up his things and followed Colin out of the dungeons.

"Are- are you alright Harry? I thought you'd be really happy about being in the tournament because it's such a big honour, but you've been really cross with everyone about it," Colin asked.

"Because I never wanted to be in the tournament. I don't like having to risk my life," Harry said.

"Oh." Colin looked down at his feet, slightly dejected. "Can I still support you?"

Harry sighed.

"If you want, but please don't make a big deal out of it. Just remember that Cedric is the Hogwarts Champion, not me."

They arrived at the room that Harry normally had Ancient Runes in. All the desks were pushed to the sides, except for a longer velvet coloured table at the front of the room. With the exception of Dumbledore, the other Champions and judges were all present, along with

two guests: a woman with immaculately curled blonde hair wearing vivid green robes, and a shorter man carrying a camera. Bagman beamed when he saw Harry.

“Excellent! We’re all here at last, so we can make a start with the Weighing of the Wands, an important ceremony where we check to make sure your wands are in perfect working order. After all, they will be your most important tools in the tasks ahead. Dumbledore will be bringing our esteemed expert down in just a moment, but in the meantime-” Bagman gestured with a flourish to the woman, “-allow me to introduce Rita Skeeter, a correspondent for the Daily Prophet, who is writing a small piece about the Tournament.”

“Well, maybe not a *small* piece,” Skeeter said, her gaze predatory when it landed on Harry. “Perhaps I could have a word alone with young Harry here, to add some flavour to the story.”

“I don’t see an issue with that,” Bagman said.

“I’d rather not,” Harry said immediately.

“Just a short interview. My readers are interested to know more about you,” Skeeter said.

Harry stepped back when she made to grab him.

“If they want to know about the Champions, then you should interview Cedric, Fleur and Viktor, since they’re the ones who actually put their name forward. If it must be the Hogwarts Champion, then speak to Cedric.”

“But you are the youngest Champion, and your entry is highly unusual. Everyone is dying to know how you’re taking all of this.”

“My age makes no difference. If we’re going by age, then I shouldn’t even be in the tournament.”

“Yet you are. Do you have any ideas as to how that happened?” Skeeter asked, her hand inching towards her crocodile skin handbag.

“Ms Skeeter, I am not being interviewed by you, and I better not see any form of quote from or about me in whatever piece you write,” Harry said, his voice serious and stern.

“I quite agree.” Cedric appeared at his side. “Frankly Ms Skeeter, anything you write isn’t worth the parchment it’s printed on. You came here to write a short piece on the Tournament. There will be no singling out of any Champion.”

“Indeed. Either you interview all of us, or none of us. If you don’t like that, then take your photos and be done with it,” Fleur said dismissively.

Viktor didn’t say anything, but the look he was giving Skeeter was full of disapproval. Before she could retort, Dumbledore arrived with Mr Ollivander.

"Are we ready to begin?"

Skeeter scowled as she was forced into a corner of the room. The five judges took their places at the velvet covered table as Ollivander was introduced as the esteemed expert.

"Ladies first, Ms Delacour," Ollivander said.

Fleur handed across her wand and Ollivander examined it carefully.

"Hm, rosewood, nine and a half inches, fairly inflexible with a core of ... is that Veela?"

"Yes. A hair from the head of my grandmother," Fleur said proudly.

"I've never used Veela hair for a wand before. I find it to be a very temperamental core, incredibly selective about who it chooses, but if it is family then I'm sure it works flawlessly."

Ollivander held it up and said *Orchideous*. A beautiful bouquet of flowers appeared from the end of the wand.

"And indeed it does." He said with a smile, giving the wand back. "Now then, Mr Krum."

Ollivander gave it the same careful examination as he had done Fleur's.

"This is a Gregorovitch creation, is it not?"

"One of his last," Viktor said.

"He was a truly remarkable wandmaker. Many things he did were unconventional, and not what I would do, but the quality speaks for itself." Ollivander eyed the wand. "10 and a quarter inches, hornbeam, and dragon heartstring. Thicker than one typically finds, quite rigid, but-" he muttered an incantation which caused several small birds to appear in the air, "-still in perfect condition."

"Mr Diggory next." Ollivander smiled warmly. "Now this is one of mine. I distinctly remember that this particular core contains the tail hair of an exceptionally energetic male unicorn. Twelve and a quarter inches, made of ash, nice and springy. I see you maintain it well."

"I polished it last night," Cedric said.

Ollivander made crystal clear water erupt from the end and handed it back. Then his pale eyes landed on Harry.

"And finally, Mr Potter. I remember this wand well. Eleven inches, made of holly, and containing one of the most beautiful phoenix feathers I've ever had the pleasure of working with."

Harry was suddenly reminded of all the other things that Ollivander had said about his wand. It would be disastrous if he were to repeat those things here, where Rita Skeeter looked chomping at the bit to get any sort of gossip on him. Thankfully, after producing several

shimmering silver smoke rings, he declared Harry's wand to be in perfect working order and gave it back without further comment.

"The morning lessons are nearly over, so why don't the four of you make your way down to lunch?" Dumbledore said.

"Photos Dumbledore, photos!" Bagman exclaimed. "What do you think Rita? A shot of the Champions and the judges."

"That sounds lovely, and perhaps some individual shots?" Skeeter's eyes lingered on Harry uncomfortably, and he resolved never to allow her to get what she wanted.

What should have been a fairly simple thing ended up dragging out to a ridiculous degree. The cameraman was enamoured by Fleur and kept bringing her to the front, only for Skeeter to dive in and try and force Harry in front of her. Harry refused every time, trying his best to hide at the back, where he was surprisingly joined by Viktor. There wasn't a camera angle which could capture Madam Maxime and all the others in a flattering way, so she was forced to sit down, which still made her the same height as the rest of them. By the time they got the group photo taken, the bell for lunch rang and Harry dived for the door, completely ignoring Skeeter's calls for him to wait.

"Couldn't get out of there quick enough, eh?" Cedric joked.

"I don't like that Skeeter woman. She couldn't take a hint that I didn't want any part of it," Harry said.

"There will always be journalists like her," Viktor said. "They act as though fame is permission to completely ignore privacy."

"Skeeter's one of the worst for that. Her articles can be absolutely vicious, but she usually sticks to people who can't fight back," Cedric said. "Dad can't stand her, but she sells too many papers for the Daily Prophet so there's no way she'll stop any time soon."

"At least all she got from that was photos," Fleur commented. "If she is as bad as you implied, I dread to think what she would have done."

"If she tried that, I would sue her to oblivion," Viktor said.

The two foreign Champions split off to return to their schoolmates, leaving Harry and Cedric alone to head down to lunch.

"You really weren't kidding when you said you didn't want this," Cedric said. "Not that I thought you were lying, but I didn't quite realise how willing you were to stand your ground on it. Most people would do a lot less for some fame."

"Believe me, if I could give up all of my fame and live a boring, ordinary life, I'd do it in a heartbeat," Harry said. "There's not a whole lot that's great about it, and it's really fickle. You saw the way everyone turned on me two years ago."

“I think you handle it well enough at least-” Cedric leaned in closer and spoke in a whisper, -”Heir Potter.”

Harry froze, quickly scanning their surroundings for any potential eavesdroppers, but there was no-one. No other students in the halls, no ghosts floating about, not even a portrait hanging on the wall.

“How did you know?” Harry whispered back.

“I remember my Dad telling me that the Potters were a noble family, and the way you handled Skeeter was all Lordship.”

“Can you please keep that a secret? I don’t want anyone to know that I know.” Harry asked.

Cedric looked surprised.

“How come? I mean, I know Hogwarts isn’t big on noble etiquette, but it’s not that big of a deal, right?”

“I only found out that my family was nobility at the beginning of last year when I got a letter from Gringotts about it. Somebody has worked very hard to keep me in the dark about my family's true place in the magical world, and given that I’ve been forcibly entered into a tournament where I’m likely to be injured and possibly killed, I don’t really want to tip my hand.”

Cedric’s eyebrows shot up into his hair.

“Seriously?” He asked. “That’s ... that’s quite a lot to handle. Don’t worry Potter. Your secrets are safe with me.”

They parted ways when they reached the Great Hall. Harry slipped into a seat beside Seamus. Ron was across from him, looking surly.

“Have fun at your interview?” Ron asked petulantly.

“It wasn’t an interview. They were checking our wands and took a few photos of all of us.” Harry said calmly.

“Yeah.” Ron scoffed. “As if you could stop yourself from hogging all the attention.”

Before anyone could respond, Ron stormed off.

“I don’t get why he keeps insisting you want the attention.” Seamus said, his face flushed with anger. “You literally keep saying it in plain English. How is it not sinking in?”

“I have no idea.” Harry said, tucking into his food.

Inwardly, he was celebrating. The longer Ron kept dragging out this childish behaviour, the easier it would be for Harry to justify breaking ties with him, and with Hermione refusing to take a side, it put her on shaky ground as well. He’d caught the looks Hermione kept sending

him and Ron, and he had a feeling that this wasn't going to be the issue that completely ended the friendship. There was likely to be some kind of public apology and making up, and Harry would be back to holding his tongue and acting like he forgave them.

For now, he would enjoy the time he got to spend with his friends, and try not to worry too much about the rapidly approaching First Task.

Chapter End Notes

So Harry's the fourth champion. The concept of a binding magical contract is an interesting one, because we never really get a sense of what it actually means in canon. In fanfiction, it's treated as a very powerful and dangerous thing. It makes you wonder why there wasn't anything more onerous than an Age Line in canon.

The First Task

November crept along slowly, and with it Harry's nerves began to grow as the 24th approached. Not knowing what was coming was only half of what scared him. It was that he didn't know what was coming, and that he *did* know that it was designed to be a challenge for older, much more experienced students than him. He kept having dreams of stepping out into some formless arena and coming face to face with all manner of horrors and being left utterly defenceless. The faceless crowd laughed, and Ron and Hermione emerged, holding bottles of potion.

"Really Harry, we know what's best for you. If you'd just done as we asked, none of this would be happening right now."

"Drink up mate!"

It made for very unpleasant nights. To avoid it, Harry meditated to clear his mind, which mostly worked. Occasionally he would try the Ritual of Remembrance, because it was much nicer to spend the night in a magical memory than to suffer through whatever his mind decided to conjure for him.

Two weeks before the First Task, Harry shut his hangings and took off his pyjamas, leaving his underwear on as he didn't know how to properly seal the hangings yet. He lay in bed, the Focus Stone on his chest, and he allowed himself to sync with the magic around him. It flowed and shaped, and formed a door for him to step through.

He opened his eyes and found he was still in the dormitory, exactly as he'd left it. Seamus, Dean and Neville were sleeping soundly in their beds, and Ron was snoring like a freight train. Judging by the calendar Neville had pinned above his bedside table, this memory was only from a day ago. Harry wasn't sure what magic was trying to show him, but he had a feeling it wasn't supposed to be here.

Ignoring the fact he was nude, Harry strolled out of the dormitory, peering about as though whatever he was supposed to be seeing was obvious. The castle was quiet, and aside from a single patrolling teacher, Harry didn't encounter anyone. He passed through the doors and onto the grounds. There was a stronger wind tonight, and the Durmstrang ship gently rocked on the lake. He wondered what it was like to sleep on a ship. Perhaps he'd ask Viggo about it, or he could go and have a look now if he ignored the fact he'd be spying on people. Just as he was about to make his way over there, he felt something tug at him, encouraging him to go the other way.

Harry untethered himself from gravity, and flew towards where he was being called. This had to be the point of the memory. The feeling led him around the Forbidden Forest. Despite the darkness of the night, Harry could see perfectly clearly. The path skirted the edge of the trees, and ended with a large arena. Raised voices shouted from somewhere behind it, and Harry rose up, flying over the arena to get a better look. He gasped when he saw it.

Four cages with thick metal bars were placed in a cleared section of the forest, and each one contained a very large, and very angry, dragon. Wizards rushed about, yelling orders and instructions. The green and the blue dragons snapped their jaws whenever anyone got near them. A stocky red one roared, the sound deep and powerful, but it was the black dragon which captured Harry's attention. It eyed the wizards, then reared up slightly on its shorter hind legs. Its wings flared and the wizards all yelled.

"Take cover!"

A great jet of fire shot from the black dragon's mouth. Two wizards dived out of the way, and a group of six advanced on the black dragon's cage.

"Nothing for it! Stunners on three!" a muscular redhead shouted, "1, 2, 3, *stupefy!*"

Jets of red light fired from the wizards wands, each dragon being hit simultaneously by multiple stunning spells. It was more than enough for them to drop to the floor. The wizards hurried forward, checking on the dragons.

"What the hell were they thinking? I know this tournament is supposed to be a challenge, but seriously Charlie? Nesting mothers? Are they trying to get those kids killed?" One of the wizards said to a redhead that Harry recognised as Charlie Weasley.

"I'm more surprised that the Romanian Ministry allowed us to transport them. You know how protective they are of the dragon reserve." Charlie pushed his sweaty hair out of his face. It appeared as though he'd been hard at work for a while. "At least they don't actually need to fight them, just get past them."

"Yeah, and steal something from a *nesting mother* ." His friend hissed.

"I don't like it either. Come on, we've got checks to do. Hopefully this lot'll sleep for a while. I don't like knocking them out like this."

There was a crack from the bushes and Hagrid emerged, crossbow in hand and Fang at his heels. His face relaxed at the sight of Charlie and then practically shone with happiness when he saw the dragons.

"Aren't they beautiful?" He shook himself out of whatever reverie he'd fallen into. "Everything alright here?"

"All fine Hagrid." Charlie gestured to the crossbow. "Out for a late night hunt?"

"Making sure the Thestrals were all safely in their paddock, and generally keeping an eye on things. I trust you've got everything contained, but there's quite a lot in the forest that're nervous about dragons being so close."

"We'll be out of everyone's hair after the 24th. I'm just glad it was you and not anyone else. We've already had to chase away Maxime and Karkaroff when they politely, and not so politely, inquired about what we were doing." Charlie sighed. "How's Harry? Dad was really worried about him in his letter."

“He’s doing as well as he can considering the circumstances. From what I hear, he’s been telling everyone who’ll listen that he didn’t enter and doing all he can to keep Hogwarts together. Harry’s a strong boy. I’m sure he’ll manage.”

“Right. Well, officially I’m supposed to say you can’t tell anyone anything about the dragons since they’re supposed to be a surprise, but considering Harry is underage, I’m sure I’d be willing to look the other way if you were to *accidentally* let it slip something about what he might be facing.” Charlie said. One of the other dragon keepers called out to him. “Got to go. Take care!”

Harry woke with a start, practically being thrown out of the Ritual of Remembrance by the force of the revelation. *Dragons!* Were all the adults in the magical world completely mad? There was friendly competition that could be quite dangerous, and then there were *dragons!*

He jumped out of bed and raced into the bathroom, the four-poster feeling too cloying for him to handle. Harry splashed water on his face to cool off, then leaned against the sink. How on Earth was he supposed to fight a dragon? He needed to contact Sirius as soon as possible, and talk with James, Godric and Salazar in the Ring Realm. Any advice he could get would be much appreciated.

“Harry? Are you alright?”

In his chaotic thoughts, he hadn’t noticed a sleepy Seamus stumbling into the bathroom. The sandy-haired boy looked at him with concern, stepping forward and placing a careful hand on Harry’s shoulder. The contact helped to ground him back in the moment, calming the torrent of panic that raged within him.

“It’s getting a bit cold for sleeping in your underwear, don’t you think?” Seamus said, trying to keep his tone light.

“Sorry. I just found myself getting really hot for some reason tonight.”

“That’s fine.” Seamus considered for a moment before speaking again. “Is it about the First Task?”

Harry hung his head.

“I just have a feeling it’ll be really bad.”

“Then we’ll help you-” Seamus said with determination, “-I know we don’t know any more than you do, but anything Dean and I can do to help you, you just need to ask. Neville too, and I’m sure Parvati and Lavender will as well.”

Hearing that offer being made so sincerely and without hesitation did wonders, and Harry gave Seamus a small smile.

“Thank you. Really, I mean it. That makes me feel a lot better.”

Seamus’ face flushed.

“Alright, well, you’ll feel even better if you have a shower because you’re quite sweaty at the moment. Try and get some sleep.”

Climbing back into bed ten minutes later, refreshed from the shower, Harry had no issues going back to sleep. No nightmares plagued him tonight, only pleasant feelings that he couldn’t quite place.

Harry didn’t go swimming the next day. He woke up at his usual time and immediately called Sirius via the mirror. His godfather wasn’t happy about being woken up at 6 in the morning, but when he saw Harry’s expression he sobered up immediately. They spent the next hour discussing strategies to keep Harry alive when facing a dragon. It would help if he knew what dragons he would be dealing with, so he made a note to look things up in the library.

He allowed Hagrid to track him down and invite him to his hut for a cup of tea, where they reminisced about Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback that Hagrid had foolishly tried to raise in his wooden home. Apparently Hagrid had been keeping in touch with Charlie and it turned out that Norbert was actually Norberta, a female, which would explain why she had been extra vicious. If Harry was feeling charitable, he would have to say that Hagrid’s continual hints about dragons and Charlie were surprisingly subtle for a man who wouldn’t know the meaning of stealth unless it was a giant monster he wanted to pet. Eventually though, Harry had to admit the truth.

“Hagrid, um, if you’re trying to tell me about the dragons for the First Task, I already know.” Harry said.

Hagrid was dumbfounded.

“How in the name of Merlin do you already know that?”

“You know how I go swimming basically every morning?” Hagrid nodded. “Well, a couple of days ago I swam close to the shore near the Forbidden Forest and I heard the roaring. I, uh, got curious?”

It was a lie, but there was no way Harry was explaining the Ritual of Remembrance.

“Blimey Harry. You certainly know how to stick your nose into places it shouldn’t be.”

Hagrid’s words were chiding, but there was a hint of fondness to them. They spent the rest of that visit talking about everything Hagrid knew about dragons, though knowing how to raise one wasn’t especially helpful. One thing Hagrid did do was confirm that Maxime and Karkaroff both knew about the dragons, and had likely already told Fleur and Viktor, leaving Cedric as the only one in the dark still.

Therefore, the first thing Harry did upon leaving Hagrid’s hut was to track down Cedric. He managed to catch him as he was heading to lunch, and they went to a nearby classroom. Cedric’s eyes widened when Harry told him about the dragons, and he paled quite considerably, but he thanked Harry all the same.

Later that week, Harry opened his eyes and found himself in the Ring Realm. James, Godric, and Salazar all looked very anxious when he filled them in on what the First Task would be. Salazar had gone on an impressive rant very similar to the dragon keeper about using nesting mothers, but he calmed down eventually. James wouldn't move away, keeping an arm wrapped around Harry.

"Honestly, if your mother had been alive, she would have stormed up to the castle and tore Dumbledore a new one right in front of everybody. I wouldn't be surprised if she burned Hogwarts to the ground to keep you from competing." James said, and from his tone, Harry completely believed him.

"I'm still stuck on why you have to compete in the first place." Godric said, head cocked to one side. "You said it formed a binding magical contract, but from my understanding, such contracts are bound to a person's magical core. Surely there would be no harm to you if you didn't compete?"

"Professor Moody thinks that whoever did it mimicked my magical signature so the Goblet would believe it was me."

"Mimicking a magical signature wouldn't change the magical core, not that I'd expect *Moody* to understand that." Salazar spat the name as though it personally offended him.

In a way, it had. Both founders had been outraged to hear about Moody using the Unforgivable Curses on Hogwarts grounds, and even more so when they learned that Dumbledore had suppressed any alarms that should have gone off.

"We can think about this later-" Godric crossed his arms, his expression serious, "-what is your plan to fight the dragon?"

"Do you have any dragon fighting experience?" Harry couldn't help asking.

"I am not Sir George, and don't change the subject." Godric said in return. "How are you going to get through the Task in one piece?"

"Easy, I'm going to fly." Harry said.

All three of them gave him funny looks.

"Harry, you do realise that dragons can fly as well." James said carefully.

"Of course, but Sirius and I had a long discussion about it. We know that Ron and Hermione have been trying to get me back under their control with the dosing, but so far I've not been acting that different to how I used to be. The spells I'm supposed to be under should impair my judgement while making me more courageous and less able to feel pain. What better way to act like a reckless idiot than to try beating a dragon in its own arena." Harry explained. "Besides, I'm a good flyer, and any spell I use is unlikely to be effective without showing off that I'm more powerful than I should be."

"But how are you going to fly?" James asked.

“I’ll summon my Firebolt from the castle.”

“Are you sure you can summon from that distance?” Salazar asked.

“Pretty sure, but I’ll be leaving my broom behind Hagrid’s hut. That’ll be more believable.”

“It’s not a fantastic plan, but for someone thrust into this with little time to prepare, I suppose it could be worse.” Godric said. “I would also suggest trying to learn another method to defend yourself. That way you can still act if your plan fails.”

“Sirius and I talked about that as well. He told me the book I’d need to learn the Conjunctivitis Curse.” Harry said. “I’ve been practising it as much as I can, but I don’t want to hurt my friends with it since it seems unpleasant.”

“It’s not the nicest thing in the world.” Salazar agreed. “I’d apologise for my student’s creation, but considering a dragon’s weak spot is its eyes, I think a bit of discomfort is worth it if it means you live.”

“Indeed. Dragons are exceptionally powerful magical creatures. It takes a lot to hurt them, let alone subdue them. The eyes are a good target, but they aren’t the only way.” Godric said. “While normally I’d abhor such tactics as dishonourable, distraction and subterfuge also work on dragons. There is a spell called the Thousand Chirping Birds. It creates many small balls of lightning which make a sound like a bird chirping. Directing these to swarm around the dragon’s head should distract it enough to keep it from noticing you, or failing at that, it should throw off its aim so it can’t do you any damage.”

“Either way, I’m sure you’ll do fine.” James said consolingly, squeezing Harry against his side.

Harry thought so too. Any chance he got, he went to the empty classroom on the Transfiguration corridor that McGonagall let him use to practise the summoning charm and the Conjunctivitis Curse. More often than not, he was joined by Seamus, Dean or Neville, occasionally all three of them, as they worked on those two spells. They didn’t ask why Harry wanted to learn them, but true to their word, they were supporting him however they could.

The worst part about his plan was that he was still trying to hide who he was from Dumbledore. The Headmaster had been distant even when it looked like Harry was slipping out of his grip. Harry could only hope that his playing along with being friends with Ron and Hermione was enough that he wasn’t suspicious of him, but he would know immediately if he started using lots of power against a dragon.

Harry froze at the clunking sound approaching from down the corridor, heralding the arrival of Moody. The man was clearly trying to look approachable, but the effect was completely ruined by how mangled his face was.

“Potter, come with me please.” He growled.

He followed Moody to his office, which was filled to the brim with dark magic detectors. It seemed darker than it had when Lupin and Lockhart used it.

“Very noble of you to let Diggory know.” Moody chuckled. “I won’t ask how you know about the dragons. Cheating’s been a part of the tournament since the very beginning, no matter what Albus would like to believe. So what is your plan for getting past the dragon?”

“Oh, well, um, I’m not sure.” Harry said, deciding that playing dumb would be the best way to go about things.

“That’s fine. I can work with that. Oftentimes when you’re not sure what to do, you should play to your strengths, so what are you good at Potter?”

“Nothing really. Definitely nothing that would help with a dragon.”

“Everyone has something they’re good at.” Moody growled. “So what are *you* good at?”

“I mean I can fly. I’m a fair flyer.”

“Better than fair the way I heard it.” Moody said.

“But I’m not allowed a broom.”

“Maybe not, but it’s a start.”

Harry left Moody’s office with a vague, cryptic suggestion to use a ‘simple’ spell that would ‘get him what he wants’. It was like a cover story had been given to him on a silver platter.

Despite the details of the First Task supposedly being secret, somehow everyone seemed to know what Harry would be facing. The Hogwarts rumour mill was a terrifying thing in that way. Nobody said anything outright, but Harry caught more than one person giving him commiserating looks when they thought he wasn’t looking. Hermione had tried engaging him in conversation about new bludger dodging techniques she’d read about, which was the least subtle way of trying to help him Harry had ever seen.

In the days leading up to the First Task, Ron stopped scowling at him whenever he saw him. He and Hermione had been trying to get close to him again, likely realising they’d messed up by pushing him away. Harry thought it more likely they’d been ordered to, considering he’d spotted Dumbledore frowning when he saw they weren’t sitting together. There would likely be a big public apology, and Harry would have to forgive them. It sucked, but at least the groundwork had been clearly laid for him to pull away if they ever did anything like this again.

And they would. They were predictable like that.

On the morning of the First Task, Harry struggled to eat his breakfast, only managing to force down a few pieces of toast with Seamus and Dean’s urging. Before long, Professor McGonagall told him that the Champions needed to make their way down to the arena now.

He saw Cedric standing at the Hufflepuff table, and Viktor and Fleur were already walking towards the door. They ended up in a large group as they walked down the lawns towards the Forbidden Forest, following the path to where the dragon arena had been set up. All of them looked very tense, dreading what was to come.

“Let’s get it out in the open.” Harry said. “We all know what we need to do and there’s no point in hiding it.”

Some of the tension leaked out of the group.

“They must be insane. Nesting mothers are vicious.” Viktor said.

“And dragons are nearly impossible to subdue on your own. There must be some trick to this.” Cedric said.

They arrived at the arena and were guided into a waiting room. Each of them had a curtained off area and a set of robes to get changed into. Harry frowned when he saw his. It was a simple top and pants, coloured in red and black with the Gryffindor lion on the breast and back. It seemed odd since he was supposed to be representing Hogwarts, not Gryffindor, but his eyebrows raised even further when he saw Cedric’s robes. They were exactly the same as his, only yellow instead of red, and with the Hufflepuff badger instead of the Gryffindor lion.

“Does this feel odd to you as well?” Cedric asked.

Fleur stepped out in robes of sky blue and silver, the colours of Beauxbaton, and Viktor in robes of pale brown and red, for Durmstrang.

“You are representing your houses?” Viktor asked, sounding confused.

“We shouldn’t be. If I have to be in this tournament, I’d rather be a Hogwarts Champion.” Harry said.

“Yeah. We’re not representing Gryffindor and Hufflepuff.”

“I could change it for you if you’d like?” Fleur asked, holding up her wand.

“Could you?” Harry said.

“Of course. Stand together please.”

Harry moved to stand by Cedric, and Fleur moved her wand in a complicated waving motion, almost like she was conducting an orchestra. The red part of Harry’s robes changed to lilac.

“That’s some impressive spell work. I always accidentally damage the clothes when I try making changes like that.” Cedric said, inspecting his newly lilac robes as well.

“They are spells we learn early at Beauxbaton. How you present yourself to the world is important, and sometimes outfits must be modified at a moment's notice to avoid insult or offence.” Fleur said.

The tent flap opened and in walked the five judges. Dumbledore had his grandfatherly expression, but Harry caught the slight twitch of his eye when he saw what Harry and Cedric were wearing.

“Morning all! I hope we’re feeling confident!” Bagman said, sounding far too pleased with himself, “if you’d all be so kind as to reach into this bag so that we can explain what you will be doing.”

Bagman held out a small bag to each of the Champions in turn. Fleur, Krum and Cedric each reached into it and pulled out a miniature model of one of the dragons. Harry held back a grimace when his own was revealed to be the menacing black dragon, the Hungarian Horntail. The little model snapped and snarled in his hand.

“Each of these represent very real dragons that the four of you will have to face. Your task is to retrieve from the dragon a golden egg, which will contain a clue you will need to complete the second task. Dragon keepers will be on standby to make sure things don’t get too out of hand, but other than that, you’re on your own.” Bagman clapped his hands together. “Now then, we shall start with Ms Delacour at the sound of the cannon. Harry my boy, may I have a word?”

The four Champions dispersed to wait for their turn, and Harry followed Bagman to the side of the tent.

“How are you feeling lad? Confident?”

“I think so sir.”

“That’s good to hear, though if you’re in need of any advice, feel free to ask.”

“Thank you for that sir, but I don’t think it is needed.”

Harry didn’t give him a chance to respond, leaving him and walking over to Cedric.

Ten minutes later, a cannon blew and Fleur left the tent. The air was filled with the sound of angry roaring, excited cheering, and Ludo Bagman’s magical amplified voice. Hearing only this one sided commentary did nothing for Harry’s nerves. There was a loud, tumultuous cry from the spectators, Bagman announced that Fleur had succeeded. Cedric was up next.

He did his best to tune everything out, focusing on his plan. Viktor was clearly doing the same, pacing a small circuit in the tent. When it was his time to face the dragon, Harry was left alone. Before too long, there was another almighty cheer and suddenly Harry’s name was being called. He left the tent and walked through a short tunnel into the arena.

Harry immediately spotted the dragon. The arena was full of large grey rocks, and at the centre, curled up on a raised bed of stones, was the great black beast. It snarled and growled at him, lashing its spiked tail like a whip. Wasting no time, Harry aimed his wand into the air.

“*Accio firebolt!*”

The dragon shot a blast of fire at him, forcing Harry to duck away. Another blast had him pinned behind a rock. The heat was almost unbearable as fire licked around the boulder. He could hear a faint whistle as something cut through the air towards them. Peeking his head around the boulder, Harry dashed, jumping onto his broom as it soared past and avoiding the dragons snapping jaws.

Up in the air, all his worries melted away. He flew high, keeping out of range of the Horntails fire. The dragon clearly realised this, roaring angrily at him but not moving from where he could now see the clutch of eggs it was guarding. In the centre gleamed an egg made of gold. Then Harry heard something. Beneath the roaring and the cheering, there was an odd sort of hissing sound, only Harry heard more. The hissing was strangely like words.

Must ... protect ... eggs ... keep safe

Was he hearing the dragon? That was impossible. Dragons didn't have a language. *But snakes did*, Harry thought. Were dragons related enough to snakes that he could understand the dragon with Parseltongue?

Enemy ... eggs ... keep safe

"I am not your enemy. I mean you no harm ," Harry spoke in Parseltongue.

The dragon froze, then it roared even louder, the sound far angrier than anything Harry had heard before.

Challenger ... must kill ... must defend eggs!

In one fluid and sudden movement, the dragon reared and opened its wings fully, and with one snap it was charging through the air towards Harry. Harry hesitated for only the merest moment, but he was used to flying on instinct. As though he was in a game of Quidditch and one of the opposing Chasers had made an unexpected manoeuvre, Harry shot downwards, easily slipping past the dragons snapping jaws. He snatched up the golden egg, and the dragon keepers rushed onto the field, firing stunning spells at the Horntail, which was thankfully low enough to not be hurt when it crashed to the ground. Only then did Harry land. The roar of the crowd registered for the first time.

"And he's done it! Harry Potter has retrieved his egg!"

Harry was hustled out of the arena and into a nearby tent. Madam Pomfrey immediately began fussing over him.

"Honestly, dragons! What were they thinking? You're lucky you didn't get worse than a scratch!"

"A scratch?"

He hadn't noticed himself getting hurt, but as soon as she said it, there was a painful twinge across his back. The dragon's tail must have just caught him as he zoomed past. Madam Pomfrey examined it carefully, running a salve over it then waving her wand.

“Fortunately it isn’t very deep. Once you get your scores, I’ll finish healing it,” she said.

Fleur was in the bed next to him, her right arm wrapped in bandages.

“Your dragon got you as well?” Harry asked.

“It wouldn’t have if it hadn’t snored,” Fleur said.

“Snored? You put it to sleep?”

“Powerful Veela can hypnotise others and put them into a sleep-like trance. I am the strongest Veela in my family in generations so it was easy for me to do, and it wasn’t magic that a dragon could easily resist,” Fleur explained, “I would have been unharmed but as I said, it snored in its sleep and blew out some fire which caught me. I was a lot better off than your schoolmate.”

She gestured to the bed across from them where Cedric was lying. Half of his face was covered in a thick orange paste, and he looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“I’m not sure what he did. I think he aimed to distract the dragon but it wasn’t as effective as he hoped,” Fleur said.

Cedric opened his mouth but then Madam Pomfrey rounded on him.

“Mr Diggory, absolutely not! I’ve already told you not to talk! You’ll break all your new skin!”

At that moment, Viktor entered the tent.

“You fly well,” he immediately said to Harry.

“Coming from you, that’s quite the compliment.”

“Mother and Father mentioned that they met you at the World Cup,” Viktor said, “they said you play Seeker. I could certainly see it.”

“I’m the Gryffindor Seeker, and Cedric’s the Seeker for Hufflepuff,” Harry said, and Cedric gave a thumbs up in acknowledgement.

“Then perhaps we should play a Seekers game? I am interested in seeing how we compare.”

“Honestly, that would be great. I’ve really missed flying this year. Our Inter-House tournament was cancelled because of the Triwizard,” Harry said.

“That seems odd. You should not have had to deprive budding players from valuable practice time,” Viktor said.

“May I join this Seekers game as well?” Fleur asked.

“You’re a Seeker too?” Harry asked.

“I am my team's Keeper, but my friend Martin is the Seeker and I help him practise. It's interesting getting to try different positions.”

They continued making arrangements until Harry was called out to receive his scores. He was awarded 45 points, tying with Viktor. Fleur was in third with 42 points, and Cedric was in last with 40 points. Harry was pleased. Even if he wasn't trying to win, it was still nice to see his hard work paying off, and judging by the expressions on the teachers' faces, nobody was any the wiser. He walked back up the castle with the other Champions before everyone separated.

There was a loud and raucous party waiting for him in the Gryffindor Common Room. Everyone was excited to hear about his plan to face the Horntail, and Harry learned what the other Champions had done. Cedric had apparently tried transfiguring a rock into a dog to distract the dragon, which worked for a little while before the dragon lost interest. Viktor hit the dragon with some kind of curse to blind it, but he lost points because it damaged some of the real eggs. Harry regaled them with his point of view, leaving out trying to speak to it, and thankfully nobody brought up anything they heard.

The only bad part was that he could see Ron and Hermione slowly working their way towards him. After dodging an attempt by Ginny to speak with him, he could think of no further excuses and allowed them to approach.

“Harry, could we speak to you?” Hermione asked nervously.

“That depends on what you have to say,” Harry said.

“We believe you,” Ron said, “you'd have to have been a lunatic to put your name in for this madness.”

“Which is what I've been telling everyone for months,” Harry pointed out, “everyone else believed me, but not my two best friends.”

“We're really sorry Harry. We should have been by your side, and I'm sorry in particular for trying to stay neutral,” Hermione said.

“Do you forgive us mate?” Ron asked.

Harry really wanted to say no. He really did, but in the grand scheme of things, this wasn't the kind of thing that one could believably end such a close friendship over.

“I'm really hurt by what you did, but yes, I forgive you.”

Ron grinned, slapping him on the back before murmuring an apology when Harry winced. Harry ignored Ron's attempt to narrate what the other Champions did, as the boy really had no skill as a commentator, and Hermione kept trying to talk to him about how he did the summoning charm so well. He was saved when Angelina dropped by to congratulate him on out-flying a dragon. In the distraction, he caught Seamus and Dean's eyes over Hermione's shoulder. Neither of them looked happy, so Harry let them see a small grimace.

He didn't want to be friends with Ron and Hermione any more, but they had a precedent for doing things that pushed him away. They did so last year with the Crookshanks debacle, and neither of them had improved at all since then. They would do something, hopefully soon, which would allow him to sever ties for good in a way they couldn't dose away, and then Harry would get to spend time with his real friends.

Flying with the Champions

Chapter Notes

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

Harry truly wondered how he managed to not yell at Ron and Hermione for the first two months of the school year. Ron kept trying to talk about what happened during the first task, saying stuff like 'awesome' and 'wicked' as though it had been a spectator sport and not Harry's life on the line. Hermione kept pestering him about the summoning charm, asking how much practice he had done to get it to that level, whether he thought he could do something like that again. While she praised him, it didn't feel like the same praise he got from Professor Flitwick. It felt more like an interrogation, demanding to know how he could have performed a spell better than her.

Both of them openly and loudly theorised about who could have put Harry's name in the Goblet of Fire, at which point Harry tuned them out. While he would very much like to know the answer to that question, he didn't want Ron and Hermione using it as a reason to stay close to him. He just had to keep reminding himself that this wouldn't last for much longer. The pieces were moving into place for him to sever this 'friendship' for ever, and it would all be Ron and Hermione's fault. It didn't mean it didn't suck having to put up with it now. The only time he was free from them was during his optional classes, but even then Hermione was there. She not so tactfully asked if she could sit with Harry during Ancient Runes, but Seamus told her no.

Harry held out a hand to Seamus after the lesson, pointedly raising his eyebrow. Grumbling, Seamus handed across five sickles.

It was a relief then when Saturday arrived. Harry woke up, excited to go flying with the other Champions. As he changed into his Quidditch robes, Dean stirred.

"Not going swimming this morning?" Dean asked.

"I'm flying with the other Champions," Harry said.

"That sounds really cool. Do you think they'd mind if Seamus and I came to watch?" Dean asked, "I'd hate to interrupt your time together, but I know Seamus is really missing Quidditch since it's not on."

"I'm not sure. Why don't you come down and you can ask them?"

Dean looked excited and hurried over to Seamus's bed to begin the task of waking him up. Harry left him to it, walking down to the Quidditch pitch. It was a beautifully sunny day, with only a slight chill to the air. He met Cedric on the way outside, the Hufflepuff likewise dressed in his Quidditch robes. Viktor strode across from the Durmstrang ship, but as they approached the pitch, they heard the murmur of voices increasing in volume.

"I wish things could stay secret around here," Cedric sighed as they collected the balls and brooms from the equipment shed.

"At least my friends asked if they could come rather than just showing up," Harry said.

"I do not mind your friends coming to watch, and the spectators shouldn't be an issue. This happens often at Durmstrang," Viktor said, "my friends will make sure that they do not disturb us."

Fleur was waiting for them on the pitch, dressed in robes of midnight blue.

"I was not aware we had invited guests," she said, gesturing to the small crowd that had assembled in the stands.

"The only people I thought would be here are my friends, but they asked before turning up," Harry said.

"That's very polite of them. Is that them?" Fleur pointed to where Seamus and Dean had just arrived in the stands .

"It is."

Harry waved and gave them a thumbs up. He saw a couple of Durmstrang students, including Viggo, making a sweeping motion with their wands. Viggo then nodded to Viktor.

"It is done. Now all the crowd will hear is a dull roar like it is very windy. We can speak without fear of eavesdropping."

"Then I suggest we make a start," Fleur said, "I have been quite excited to try Seeking."

As one, they kicked off from the ground. From a small velvet pouch, Cedric pulled out a tiny golden ball. It came to life, flying around each of their heads as though registering who would be Seeking it, and like that the Snitch vanished. Cedric counted down from ten, and then the four Champions got to searching.

Getting to fly and compete, even if not in actual Quidditch, was exhilarating, and Harry had missed it tremendously. He scanned the pitch, searching for the tell-tale flash of gold from the Snitch. It took nearly fifteen minutes before the crowds gasped. Viktor had gone into a dive, Cedric hot on his heels. Fleur followed them, but Harry followed Viktor's line of sight, but there was no sign of the Snitch. There! It was hovering near the goalposts. Harry shot towards it. In his peripheral vision, he saw midnight blue giving chase. He reached out and grabbed hold of the tiny golden ball.

"Well played," Cedric said when they joined back together again.

"How did you figure out I was feinting?" Viktor asked.

"I saw you do the same thing at the World Cup," Harry said, then to Fleur, "you flew really well."

“Seeking is very different to Keeping. I wasn’t sure if Viktor had actually seen it, so I changed to follow you instead,” she said.

“Shall we go again?” Cedric suggested.

Harry answered by releasing the snitch. The next three games were hard fought. Cedric followed Viktor turn for turn as they chased down the Snitch, managing to snatch it at the last second. In the third game, they used a newer, more rested Snitch, and Harry was the one to spot it first. This time it was Harry and Cedric neck and neck. The Snitch darted to the left at the last moment, closer to Cedric, but before he could catch it, Fleur appeared. Her eyes were narrowed on the ball and her fingers came within inches of catching it. Cedric readjusted and caught the Snitch.

The final game was another close match. The Snitch was particularly elusive, and while Fleur wasn’t as good at finding it, she more than made up for it with her good judgement and ability to mark players. Harry and Viktor dived for it as the Snitch shot towards the ground. Unfortunately Viktor was taller, and those extra few inches let him grab the Snitch before Harry. They both pulled out of their dives sharply. Harry rolled over on his broom, hanging on like a sloth, and he swore he felt the grass brush against his back before he was able to right himself.

“Your godfather was not mistaken in your abilities as a Seeker,” Viktor said, “many professional teams would be glad to have someone like you.”

“I’ve never really thought about playing professionally. I just like the game,” Harry said.

“For someone who’s not a Seeker, you did really well,” Cedric said to Fleur.

“I help the Seeker for our team practice. He says that it doesn’t feel right if he doesn’t have someone chasing after him,” Fleur said, “when we learn to fly at Beauxbaton, we get to try all the positions to give us different objectives while we’re flying. It helps the team captains spot potential in the first-years. I liked being a Chaser, but I much prefer Keeping.”

“I’ve never tried any other position besides Seeker before,” Harry said, and Cedric also shook his head.

“I was a Beater in my second year before our Seeker retired and I took over,” Viktor said, “never Chaser.”

“Well you have a Quaffle, yes? Would you like to try your hand while we’re here?” Fleur suggested.

They easily agreed, and Fleur took her position by the Gryffindor end goal. Harry found Chasing to be a lot harder than Seeking. They each took turns trying to score against Fleur. Harry could fly well enough with the Quaffle beneath his arm, but he had to completely stop to shift his grip so he could shoot a goal. Cedric was much the same. Viktor was better, but it was clear how hard he was concentrating. Needless to say, none of them scored a goal, but it was fun getting to try, and Fleur said they’d each started doing much better by the end.

Eventually they had to stop. It was nearly lunch time, and all four of them desperately needed showers. The crowd in the stands saw them leaving and began to disperse.

“I wish we could do this more. Hogwarts without Quidditch seems to empty,” Harry said.

“Well why don’t we?”

The three of them turned to Cedric, who looked slightly unsure now with the attention.

“I mean, we all want to play, so why don’t we put some teams together and have a little tournament? Not for points or glory or anything, but just something for fun.”

“That sounds great! I know Angelina was really disappointed because she was hoping to be made Quidditch captain this year,” Harry said, “we’d need a Keeper though.”

“My Yngre Bror Viggo is training to be a Keeper. I am sure he would join your team if you asked him,” Viktor said, “we would need to borrow some Chasers.”

“Same for us,” Cedric said, “I think Cho might do it.”

Harry didn’t comment on the slight redness in his cheeks.

“Neither of our Beaters came here with us,” Fleur said, “would your friend Cho happen to know of any good Beaters?”

“I can see if the Ravenclaw Beaters would like to join you,” Cedric said.

“And why not ask the Slytherin’s if any of them would like to join your team as Chasers?” Harry suggested to Viktor, “that way, all schools and all houses are represented. I remember the Slytherins having pretty good Chasers.”

“If not them, then I’m sure there are other people, in Slytherin or not, who’d be happy to play with you,” Cedric said.

“I shall think about it,” Viktor said, thoughtfully.

As they walked back up to the castle, Seamus and Dean came up to him.

“That was awesome!” Seamus said, “though unless you practise, I think you should stick to Seeking.”

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of switching positions.”

“Just a heads up, I think Ron’s mad at you,” Dean said.

Oh, right, Harry hadn’t told him about this. When they sat down to lunch, Ron stormed up to him, completely red in the face.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were playing Quidditch?” he demanded.

“It honestly slipped my mind. We only arranged it a week ago,” Harry said, “and it wasn’t Quidditch.”

“It was still flying, and you didn’t even think to invite me!”

“Because it was only supposed to be the four of us as a way to unwind after the First Task,” Harry said.

“Did you at least manage to get Krum’s autograph?”

“No? I wasn’t going to bother him with something like that,” Harry said.

“You’re hopeless!”

Ron stood up from the table abruptly.

“Where are you going?” Hermione asked.

“*I’m* going flying, since my best friend didn’t even think I’d want to join him.”

Ron stormed off, and Hermione sighed heavily. Harry didn’t say anything. It was like Ron was begging him to cut him off again, and Harry expected to be dodging more dosed meals in the near future because of it.

“You’re a stronger man than me. I’d have dropped him like a sack of spuds for the way he’s behaving,” Sirius said.

“Seriously, don’t tempt me. Neither of them are leaving me alone any more. It’s all I can do to get even a few minutes to myself. If I didn’t have my optional classes away from him, I wouldn’t be surprised if Ron tried completely monopolising my time,” Harry said, “want to know what he did the other day?”

“It wasn’t anything bad, was it?” Sirius asked, frowning.

“Not too bad, just really annoying. He followed me into the showers.”

“But aren’t the Gryffindor showers open except for the dividing walls?”

“They are, and none of us really mind that any more since it’s basically an unspoken thing to not comment whenever someone’s in the showers. I normally shower in the morning after my swim, but the other day we had double Herbology and the Venomous Tentacula had a massive tantrum and threw dragon dung everywhere.”

Sirius winced.

“Most of the class was fine, but I was covered in it. That was when Ron followed me into the shower. He wasn’t even getting washed himself! He was just standing there leaning against the entrance to the showers as if he wasn’t talking to someone who was naked,” Harry said,

“I’m normally fine with talking while I’m showering, but that’s usually because the other person is also showering, but I was really uncomfortable with Ron. It took me ages to get him to leave so I could finish.”

“That boy sounds like he has no manners whatsoever. Why he thought that was a good idea, I will never know.” Then Sirius’s look turned mischievous. “So, you chat while you shower?”

“Um, yeah? I mean, Dean is up when I get back from swimming so we shower at the same time, and Seamus would usually be showering at about the same time I got back from Quidditch practice in the evenings last year. Why are you so interested?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Just curious because I remember when I was at Hogwarts, even when we showered at the same time, none of us really spoke. I just wondered if there was anything else you’d like to tell me?”

Harry thought for a moment, confused as to Sirius’s meaning. Why would him talking in the shower be a bad thing? Only, now that he thought about it, he didn’t just talk to anyone in the showers. He didn’t do it with Neville, and he never remembered doing it in first and second year with Ron. It was only with Seamus and Dean. There was always an odd fluttering in his chest whenever he was around them.

“Sirius, I-”

“It’s alright Harry. You don’t need to tell me anything if you’re not ready.”

“It’s not that. It’s just, I know that the magical world has different views than the Muggle one,” Harry said, “is it bad ... to like boys ... if you’re a boy?”

“Not at all,” Sirius said immediately, “I can’t say it’s *super* common, but it definitely happens. The main objection to it in the past was that same sex couples couldn’t have children to pass down Family Magic, but even by the time of the founders, a potion was developed to allow two men or two women to have children. After that, even the old pureblood families stopped caring for the most part. I can only think of two families that continued to take issue with it, but you’re never going to interact with them as they’re either in Azkaban or the family line has ended.”

“So ... I’m not bad?”

“No Harry. You’re not bad,” Sirius said.

It was like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Uncle Vernon had made his opinions on ‘poofs’ and ‘dikes’ very obvious growing up, and while Harry understood that that man was wrong about practically everything, sometimes it was still hard to shed the thoughts and feelings that had been drilled into him. Now there was just the issue of which of his friends he actually liked in that way, but he wasn’t going to tell Sirius that.

“If I may offer some advice, Harry, learn to dance,” Sirius said.

It was so completely off topic that Harry actually jolted.

“What?”

“You’ll likely be told about this soon, but it’s traditional for there to be a ball at Yule during the Triwizard tournament, and the Champions are the ones to open the dance.”

“I have to dance!”

“Yes, you’ll have to dance. It’s unfortunately something you’ll be expected to know anyway as a Lord of a Noble and Most Ancient House when you entertain guests at formal occasions,” Sirius said, “had you been able to grow up normally, we would have taught you. I know Lily loved to dance.”

Harry groaned.

Two days after that conversation with Sirius, a notice went up in the Gryffindor common room announcing the Yule Ball. Only fourth-years and above were allowed to attend, unless they were invited. Professor McGonagall gathered them all in a large empty classroom to read them the riot act about comporting themselves in an appropriately respectful manner. Her eyes lingered obviously on the Weasley twins. After that, she instructed them all how to dance.

It was a slightly mortifying experience, but Harry was determined to get it right. It was hard not paying attention to his feet, and he stammered apologies whenever he accidentally stepped on Parvati’s toes. She was much better at this than he was.

The worst part though was that Harry suddenly found himself the centre of attention of a sizable chunk of the female population of Hogwarts, which seemed much larger than it had previously been. Everywhere he went, girls looked at him and giggled. He heard them whispering as they walked around in large packs, encouraging each other to ask him out. It was awful.

“I just wish they’d leave me alone,” Harry complained to James, Godric and Salazar in the Ring Realm.

“It makes me happy to see my young nephew surrounded by many suitors. It reminds me of my days as a dashing knight in my king’s court,” Godric said, earning a light slap from Salazar.

“Just ask one of them out and be done with it. That’ll stop the rabble from bothering you,” Salazar suggested.

“Oh Salazar, I think we’ve found the one topic you just don’t understand,” James said.

“I beg your pardon! I think you’ll find that I am very knowledgeable in this matter. How else do you explain the fact that I was able to find a wife and have several children?”

“But *how* did you find your wife? Did you circle around one another for years, too nervous to act on your crush, until the pair of you were pushed together by your friends because it was too painful to watch any longer?” James said.

“That seems very specific,” Godric commented.

“Of course not. Erin was a very talented witch who I met when we helped cure a village of Sleeping Sickness together. Our interests aligned and we grew fond of each other. Marriage and family naturally followed,” Salazar said, “neither of us cared for teenage dramas. The world was not kind enough for that.”

“And *that* is precisely why you don’t understand. Now that the world is safer, relationships at that age are *all* about dramas, if not for the people involved then for the people around them, and Hogwarts is awful for it,” James said.

Harry groaned.

“Anyone I ask to the Ball will be hounded for the rest of their time at Hogwarts. Even if I make it clear I only want to go as friends, everyone will assume that we’re dating.”

“My friends, I believe we are making this much more complicated than it needs to be,” Godric said.

“Just because you were able to marry your childhood sweetheart, that does not make you an expert,” Salazar snapped.

“Of course not. I was merely hoping to point out a solution to young Harry’s relationship dilemma,” Godric said, “after all, does the castle not currently have guests? I’m sure a nice lad or lass from one of our sister schools would be more than willing to accompany Harry to the ball?”

“That would actually be a very good idea. Even if people assume a romantic relationship, whoever you ask will be gone at the end of the year,” James said.

“It doesn’t change the fact that I’ll need to dance at the Ball, and I suck at it,” Harry said.

James frowned, then got to his feet.

“Come on. Up!”

Harry did so, very confused. Godric and Salazar rose as well.

“What are we doing?” Harry asked.

“I am going to teach you how to dance, just as I taught your mother. You are going to step out onto that dance floor and show them how a lord is supposed to move!”

Learning to dance in the Ring Realm was an interesting experience, not least of which because Harry felt like he could actually perform the moves James had taught him in the waking world. He was filled with a thrill of determination. There was no way he was going to mess this up. He was going to make his family proud.

The first week of December was the first of the Champion Quidditch games, Fleur against Cedric. The Beauxbaton Chasers were mesmerising to watch, clearly very experienced in working together. Fleur hovered by the goalposts, watching every move the opponents made and making several very spectacular saves. Cedric's team trailed behind in points, and that was when the two Seekers dived. The spectators gasped as Cedric kept a lead on the Beauxbaton Seeker, pulling out of the dive with the Snitch clutched in his raised hand. Harry cheered for both sides.

The Quidditch game filled the castle with a buzz and everyone was looking ahead to the Yule Ball. Girls had started coming up to him at random times to ask if they could go to the Ball together. There were even a couple of boys that asked him. Harry politely declined them all, but knew he needed to get a move on. The longer he waited, the more likely it was that Ginny would ask him, and that was a recipe for disaster. He had caught the demure glances she'd thrown his way from across the common room, as though trying to entice him in with her looks. It wasn't going to happen, but rejecting her without a good reason would only cause drama.

It was these thoughts that filled his head as he left the dormitory to go swimming. Coming down the spiral staircase, Harry was surprised to find the common room not empty. Sitting by the gently smouldering fire was Parvati. Star charts were laid out in the seat beside her, though whether they were for Astronomy or Divination he had no idea. She looked very tired.

"Parvati?"

Parvati jumped.

"Oh, Harry. I wasn't expecting anyone else to be up."

"Neither was I. Everyone's usually asleep at this time."

"So why are you up?" Parvati asked, eyeing the towel bundle he was carrying, "I'd heard a rumour that you woke up early and left the tower, but nobody has any idea where you go."

"I just go down to the lake to swim, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone. I don't want to be harassed so early in the morning," Harry said, heading off the possible theorising before it could start, "but what about you? How come you're up so early?"

Parvati sank into her seat with a heavy sigh.

"It's nothing really. I keep having these really weird dreams."

"What kind of dreams?"

"They're really vivid. Most of the time it's just strange lights and raised voices, but sometimes I *see* things." Parvati leaned her head back to stare up at the ceiling. "Last night, I saw a room. It looked high end, but really old and dusty at the same time. A woman was cowering before a high backed chair, but I couldn't see what was in it. She was begging somebody to let her go; that she told him everything she could and did everything he asked.

There was really cruel laughter and a bright green light, and that's when I woke up. I couldn't really get back to sleep after that. High pitched laughter should not be that scary."

Something cold ran down Harry's spine. Cruel, high laughter and a bright green light. It almost sounded like Parvati was dreaming about Voldemort, but that was impossible. Then again, Harry had somehow been entered into a death tournament against his will, and Voldemort was the most likely suspect. But who was the woman? And where was Voldemort now?

"Maybe you should write these dreams down?" Harry suggested.

"That's what Professor Trelawney told me to do. She thinks my prophetic resonance may be dreams, but we don't start dream interpretation until next year. Hopefully then I can make sense out of this."

Harry was very distracted as he swam, so much so he decided to stop earlier than normal. The Beauxbaton students arrived at the Great Hall at the same time as Harry. In a group near the back was Fleur. Remembering Godric's advice from the Ring Realm, he waved off Ron and Hermione and went over to her.

"Fleur, could I talk to you for a moment?"

She raised her eyebrow curiously, but stood aside and let the rest of her school pass by.

"What is it?"

"I was just wondering if you could do me a favour," Harry said, "I need to ask somebody to the Ball but I'm terrified that if I ask anyone from Hogwarts then everyone will cause a drama and accuse us of dating. Is there anyone from Beauxbaton who'd be willing to go with me just as a friend, and could you help introduce me?"

Fleur eyed him appraisingly.

"It is an interesting proposal. I think I can help you. Girl or boy?"

"Um, excuse me?"

"Would you prefer to go to the Ball with a girl or a boy?" Fleur asked.

Harry thought about his conversation with Sirius, and almost said boy, but then his gut squirmed. The thought of going to the Ball with a boy made him think of Seamus and Dean, and he didn't know what to think of that, but it wouldn't feel right going with anyone else.

"I think a girl," he said.

"Probably for the best. Martin, our Seeker, would have been a wonderful date and has done so for many of my classmates at various formal occasions, but he can be a bit of a romantic," Fleur said, "I think my classmate Melonie would work. She does not enjoy dating, much happier to focus on her spellwork. I can ask if she would go with you."

“Thank you so much.”

“However, I would like something in return,” Fleur said.

Harry should have expected that.

“What do you need?”

“Tell me who in this school I should ask to go to the Ball with. I grow tired of being pestered for a date,” she said.

“Oh, I can do that. Boy or girl?” Harry asked.

“I can make anyone I dance with look good, though girls often do not appreciate being outshined by me when I’m with them, so I think I’d prefer a boy,” Fleur said, “no younger than you.”

Harry scanned the house tables, trying to recall every possible piece of gossip he’d absorbed from Parvati and Lavender. Cedric would likely be going with Cho. Those two had been circling each other for ages, and it was adorable the way they kept blushing at each other after the Quidditch game.

“I think Lucas Macintosh from Slytherin would be a good date for you. He’s a sixth year, so only a year younger, and the Macintosh are a minor Noble house so he should have been taught how to dance. From what I hear, he isn’t all that interested in dating either so I’m sure he wouldn’t expect anything from you.”

“Point him out to me.”

Harry did so and Fleur nodded.

“That will work. Sit with us at dinner and I will introduce you to Melonie. No doubt our invitations will cause quite a stir,” Fleur said, “now away with you so I can eat.”

Dinner that evening was an interesting affair. Fleur curtsied gracefully before Lucas and asked him to the Ball, which he happily accepted. That sent the entire castle into an uproar of furious murmurs as everyone discussed this latest development. Lucas joined Fleur at the Ravenclaw table for dinner, and everyone was so distracted that they didn’t realise that Harry was also there, getting to know Melonie over a nice meal. Harry planned to ask her tomorrow morning at breakfast, likely causing another storm of gossip. Melonie completely agreed, more than happy to weather the storm. Across from them was Martin, the Beauxbaton Seeker and Harry’s other potential date, and he grinned at their plan, offering to help them plan it for maximum romantic drama. Harry respectfully declined.

Pleased with himself for acquiring a date, Harry returned to the common room to work on homework. Seamus, Dean and Neville joined him. They mostly worked in silence, but then the topic of the Yule Ball came up.

“Gran wants me to go, but I’m too scared to ask anyone,” Neville said, “I thought I’d ask Hermione since she’s been nice to me in the past, but she can also be really forceful and I

don't think I could handle that all night."

"I get what you mean," Seamus said, "it sounds like it'd be a good time but I have no idea who to ask."

He sounded very forlorn and Dean patted him consolingly.

"What about you Harry? I heard that it's traditional for the Champions to open the dance part of the Ball," Dean said.

"I've made arrangements to take somebody," Harry said.

"Really? When did you do that?"

Lavender suddenly appeared at his right side, with Parvati appearing at his left.

"How did we not know about this?" Lavender asked.

"Because I'll be asking them very soon. Please don't tell anyone before then. I don't want people to make a big deal out of it like the Hogwarts gossip mill usually does."

He half expected denial, but Lavender just shrugged.

"Fair enough," Parvati said, "though we would be failing in our duties if we didn't help our boys get dates. I'm guessing none of you three have one?"

Seamus, Dean and Neville all shook their heads.

"Then you'll be pleased to hear we have a plan," Lavender said, "Seamus, Dean, would you like to go to the Ball with Parvati and me?"

"What?" Seamus spluttered.

"Seriously?" Dean said.

"Absolutely," Lavender said, "relax boys. This doesn't mean we're boyfriend and girlfriend. All it means is that we get to go to the biggest social event of the year and have a fun, enjoyable evening as friends."

Seamus and Dean exchanged a look.

"I think that would be alright," Dean said, "if you're sure."

"Don't feel you have to because of pity," Seamus said.

"The only thing I'm pitying is the standards of the rest of Hogwarts that such obvious catches such as ourselves have not already been asked to the Ball," Lavender said.

"Maybe because girls always move around in packs and that makes them terrifying to talk to," Harry said.

Parvati and Lavender ignored him.

“You four are obviously excluded from that statement because bros before hoes,” Lavender said, making Dean snort.

“Where on earth did you hear that?” he asked.

“It was something Sally-Anne used to say before she transferred out last year,” she said.

“Don’t think we’re leaving you out of this Neville,” Parvati said, “Padma asked me to ask you if you’d already found a date for the Ball. If you hadn’t, she’d be happy to go with you.”

The three boys all exchanged slightly overwhelmed looks, but they all agreed. Parvati hurried away to meet up with her sister, but Lavender stayed behind to work on homework with the boys. Before any of them could get very far, the portrait hole opened and a shell shocked Ron entered the room, being supported and guided by Hermione and Ginny.

“What happened to you?” Harry asked.

“He just asked Fleur Delacour out,” Ginny said.

“What!” Lavender exclaimed, and Harry didn’t blame her.

This was quite the development, especially since Fleur had so publicly invited somebody already.

“I saw her talking to that snake from Slytherin, and then she was walking by. You know how I like it when they walk. It’s very nice to look at. I don’t know what happened. It just sort of slipped out,” Ron said, his voice a mixture of mortified and dreamy, “then she was looking at me and didn’t say anything, so I ran for it.”

“I mean, you did scream it at her. I don’t blame her for being startled,” Ginny said.

“Honestly, she must be a Veela. There’s no other reason why boys act so stupidly around her,” Hermione said sniffily, her tone full of accusation.

Fleur was actually at least part Veela, so Hermione wasn’t entirely wrong, but Harry kept that to himself. Fleur had confided during the Seekers game that she was well aware of the effect she had on men and often found it to be very detrimental, as she could never be entirely sure that the people who grew close to her were doing so because they actually liked her or because they were lured in.

“Never mind that. I need details! What happened next? How did she react?” Lavender said, “you do realise she’d already asked someone?”

As Lavender went into full gossip detective mode, Harry decided to retreat to somewhere more peaceful. Just as he gathered his things and headed to the dormitory, he felt an arm on his shoulder. He whirled around, seeing it was Ginny, and he stepped backwards so she was no longer touching him. Ginny had a hopeful, almost longing look in her eyes.

“Harry,” she said, giving off the impression that she was shy and nervous, “I was wondering if you’d like to go to the Ball with me?”

He stifled the urge to immediately say no. Her act was very impressive, but when she asked the question, Harry had caught the flash of something else in her eyes, something almost ... vulgar. It made him want to shudder.

“I’m sorry Ginny, but I can’t.”

“Oh. You’ve already asked someone?”

“Something like that.”

“I just thought that, well, we’ve known each other for so long, I thought you’d might like to go with me,” Ginny said, “who did you ask?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Harry said, “besides, you’re Ron’s sister.”

“He wouldn’t mind,” Ginny said quickly.

“That’s not the point. It wouldn’t feel right to me,” Harry said, “I’m sorry.”

Not giving her a chance to respond, Harry escaped up into the dormitories and collapsed onto his bed. The thought of going to the Ball with Ginny made his skin crawl. It was too close to what the Boggart had shown him in his Defence Against the Dark Arts exam at the end of the last year. There was no way he was letting her get close to him. Ginny would never become Lady Potter like she so clearly wanted. Whether she wanted it because her mother or Dumbledore asked her to do it, or whether she wanted it on her own, it didn’t matter. Hopefully someday soon, Harry would be free of them all.

And then maybe the little vision of the future that had become forming in his deepest of dreams could actually take place. A dream where Harry was happy, where two particular people were at his side.

Chapter End Notes

Some bonding with the Champions, also hints of things to come.

A thought I had while writing this chapter. The Inter-House Quidditch Tournament basically runs itself, and aside from the Third Task, the Quidditch pitch wasn't used at all throughout the year. Surely it wouldn't have been that much extra effort to allow Quidditch to run, since there were only three tasks each separated by many months. I get why Rowling probably decided to cancel it, as she has said that writing interesting Quidditch games grew more and more challenging with each book, and having to do so alongside writing the tasks would have been more effort than it was worth.

The Yule Ball

The fallout of Harry asking Melonie to the Yule Ball was as dramatic as he expected it to be. At breakfast the next day, Harry approached her as the Beauxbaton's were arriving and asked her loudly enough for it to carry quickly. Parvati and Lavender were nearby when it happened, and both looked positively giddy at being first hand witnesses to the school's hottest gossip. For the rest of the day, Harry faced the ire of many girls who were deeply disappointed they couldn't go with him.

Ginny looked furious, and surprisingly so did Hermione, but there was nothing either of them could do.

The only reason the news died down was because, as the Gryffindors were coming down for dinner that evening, Viktor stopped Katie Bell on the stairs and asked her to accompany him to the Ball, which she happily accepted. The girl was a blushing mess as Angelina and Alicia pestered her for details.

"We met when he asked Angelina about the best time for the Durmstrang team to practise on the pitch. After that we bumped into each other a few times in the Library and I helped him find what he needed, but I didn't think he actually noticed me!"

Harry glanced over at the Hufflepuff table to see Cedric and Cho sitting together, both looking very happy. Whenever they'd asked each other had obviously slipped everyone by, or else was considered so inevitable that it wasn't front page gossip. Either way, the news that all the Champions now had dates made everyone else incredibly excited about the Yule Ball. There had never been so many people staying at Hogwarts over Christmas.

Ron sulked that Harry managed to find a date and not him. Not knowing what else to say, Harry kept silent, watching as Ron proceeded to ask Parvati and Lavender if either of them would like to go with him. It was almost funny watching him be rejected. He sat back down in his seat in the Gryffindor common room, and Hermione huffed.

"You know Harry, you didn't need to be so mean to Ginny," Hermione said.

"What are you on about?" Harry said, only for Ron to speak over him, "what did Harry do?"

"Ginny asked to go to the Ball with him before Harry asked that Beauxbaton girl, and he rejected her by lying that he was already going with someone."

Ron whipped around to glare at Harry.

"I didn't lie to anyone. I had already spoken with Melonie at dinner and we agreed to go to the Ball together. We decided to wait to make it public until breakfast since everyone was going crazy over Fleur," Harry said.

"So my sister wasn't good enough for you? You should have just gone with her!"

“I had already agreed to go with Melonie, and the fact that she’s your sister is one of the reasons I wouldn’t have been comfortable going with Ginny,” Harry said.

“You could have been nicer about it though Harry. You know she’s always liked you,” Hermione said.

“Don’t bother Hermione. Harry obviously doesn’t care what we think,” Ron said, storming off.

The pair of them watched him stomp up to the dormitory.

“He didn’t mean that. You know how protective he gets over his family,” Hermione said.

“And that makes it alright to take it out on me?” Harry said, “this happens far too often Hermione.”

“Just give them both some time. Ron will cool off,” Hermione said, “and maybe in the future you’ll think differently about Ginny.”

That immediately made Harry’s hackles rise. For the rest of the week, Harry made doubly sure that none of his food was dosed with potions. Whatever plan was being concocted around him, Hermione at least knew that Harry falling in love with Ginny was a part of it. There was no way he was letting himself be pulled back in by them again.

The school term came to an end in a flurry of snow and tests. Harry felt confident in his performance. He’d been slowly showing more and more power in his classes, not enough to be suspicious, but enough that an observer would think it was the natural development of his magical ability. Between that and the lack of potions inhibiting his brain, he wouldn’t be surprised if he was one of the top students. Not the very top, but still high in the rankings.

The worst exam was Defence Against the Dark Arts. Moody gave them a gruelling test on all the curses they’d been learning about, along with a test on poisons and potions to avoid. Harry was lying on his bed, feeling his stomach twinging from the potion he’d had to drink to demonstrate he could resist its effects without the antidote. Moody had been pleased when he could, but he still felt ill. The other Gryffindor boys, besides Ron, were also in the dormitory.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to Madam Pomfrey? I’m sure she’s got an antidote to whatever it was that Moody gave you,” Dean said.

“I’ll be fine. It’s going away, just slowly.”

“Why Dumbledore thought that was a good test is beyond me,” Seamus said, “Mam’s furious about it, but she doesn’t have enough pull with the Ministry to get them to investigate.”

“Gran’s tried as well, but Dumbledore keeps denying things and spinning them so everything looks above board,” Neville said, “unless we get some solid proof of wrongdoing, there’s only so much of a fuss she can kick up.”

“Our friend ill in bed isn’t good enough?” Seamus said, his cheeks flushing red in anger.

“Seamus, I’m fine!” Harry insisted.

Seamus let out a breath, apologising for his outburst. He sat down on Harry’s bed and put a hand on his back.

“It feels like something bigger is going on. I mean, none of the rest of us reacted like this to the potion Moody gave us. You don’t think he tried to poison you,” he said.

“I don’t think so. Everything he gave us came from the same cauldron on his desk, and he didn’t have a chance to slip anything else in,” Harry said, “I read that some people can be allergic to certain potions. I guess I’m just unlucky enough to be allergic to this one, at least mildly.”

The hand rubbing gentle circles into his back helped immensely.

“Do we all have dress robes?” Neville asked, effectively changing the subject.

As the others chatted away, Harry felt content. Despite the slight ache in his stomach, he found himself dozing off, surrounded by people who made him feel safe.

Christmas Eve arrived. Harry joined in with the Weasley twins for a snowball fight, which turned into an all out snowball war as Viggo and the other younger Durmstrang students joined in. The battle continued after lunch, until people began heading back to the castle to get ready for the Ball that evening. Ron had been complaining about his dress robes for days and he refused to let any of the other Gryffindor boys see them, locking himself in the bathroom in embarrassment. Harry changed with the others in the dormitory.

Harry would freely admit that he wasn’t the best at fashion. Sirius wasn’t either, so when they bought his dress robes, he simply let the tailor choose what worked best. The result was a set of auburn robes which fit him perfectly. When he finished, the others were all changed as well. Wearing these robes made the training Sirius gave him kick in. He stood straighter, shoulders relaxed and head held high and proud. Neville nodded in approval, while Seamus and Dean couldn’t help staring.

“Er, nice robes Harry,” Seamus said, shaking his head.

The four of them went down to the common room, where many other Gryffindors were waiting for dates or friends to finish getting ready. Fred and George were there, along with Katie, Angelina and Alicia.

“You scrub up nicely,” Fred said.

“So do you,” Harry said in return.

Both Fred and George were dressed in grey robes with orange trim.

“Mum wasn’t able to get us robes for the Ball. Something about ‘not being able to make it work this year but I’m sure you’ll manage’,” George said, “so we asked Dad, and he asked

Charlie, who dropped off some of his old robes when he was here for the First Task.”

The robes certainly looked nicer than Ron’s, who had just come down the spiral staircase, completely red in the face. There was lots of frill lacing, and the whole thing looked like it might have been made from an old, second hand curtain.

“What the hell are those!” Ron demanded, storming up to Fred and George.

They simply repeated the explanation they gave Harry.

“And he didn’t leave any for me?”

“Mum said you already had some,” Fred said.

Ron whipped around to glare at Harry, as though somehow this was his fault, but at that point, Parvati and Lavender had arrived. Both looked very pretty in dress robes of gold and lilac respectively.

“Are we ready boys?” Lavender asked.

“We’ll be meeting Padma in the Entrance Hall,” Parvati said.

She and Lavender linked arms with Seamus and Dean, and then Lavender hooked her other arm around Neville’s. Harry held an arm out to Katie.

“May I escort you to your date?” Harry asked, even though they’d already arranged this.

Katie shook her head fondly but took his arm. Without a backwards glance to a still fuming Ron, Harry led the small group down to the Entrance Hall. It was a cacophony of noise when they arrived as people from different houses called out greetings to one another. The oak front doors were open, and the Beauxbaton and Durmstrang students entered. Viktor spotted them immediately and his face lit up. He beelined for them and bowed before Katie. Harry made a show of passing her across to him.

“Honestly,” she said, shaking her head again at the dramatics.

Cedric arrived with Cho, and a moment later Fleur appeared with Lucas and Melonie. Harry bowed to Melonie, who curtsied back.

“Look at you all,” Fred teased, patting Harry on the head, “don’t you all look lovely.”

“I know. Hold on a moment, let me get my camera,” George said.

“Not sure a picture would be able to handle the sheer attractiveness in one place,” Fred said, “though it wouldn’t matter because the camera already broke from how gorgeous my date is.”

Angelina laughed along with him.

“I think you’ll find that my date is more gorgeous,” Cedric said, jokingly.

“No, mine is,” Viktor said.

“It’s actually mine,” Lucas said.

“Enough of this you silly boys. All our dates are gorgeous,” Melonie said, “but I think mine is the most gorgeous.”

Harry fought to hide his blush. The doors to the Great Hall opened and McGonagall ushered everyone besides the Champions inside.

“Have fun! Stay safe!” Fred said.

“Don’t do anything we wouldn’t do!” George said.

“Hurt her and they won’t find the body!” Angelina and Alicia called back to Viktor as they entered the Great Hall.

“Those twins are strange,” Fleur said, “amusing, but strange.”

“They remind me of Marie and Pierre. Full of mischief that makes school less dull,” Melonie said, “though yes, they are strange.”

“All Beaters are strange,” Viktor said.

“They’re good people,” Harry said.

Harry watched as Seamus, Dean and Neville entered the Great Hall with Parvati, Lavender and Padma. He pretended he didn’t notice the glowering expression on Ron’s face as he came down the stairs, which faded into boredom as he strolled through into the Great Hall, an embarrassed Hermione following beside him. Hermione’s dress robes were made of a floaty, periwinkle material, and objectively speaking she looked quite nice, but right now she just looked mortified to be seen with Ron.

Once everyone else was in the Great Hall, it was time for the Champions to enter. They were arranged into a line. Fleur and Lucas were at the front, and Viktor and Katie took the back, leaving Harry and Melonie and Cedric and Cho to fill in the middle. The four Champions and their dates proceeded inside. The long house tables had been removed, replaced instead by many smaller circular tables. Harry’s friends had managed to claim one for themselves, leaving Ron and Hermione to sit elsewhere. Harry and the other Champions took their place at the high table. Ludo Bagman was sitting there, looking delighted with the proceedings, and Harry was surprised to find Percy Weasley there representing Mr Crouch.

After Dumbledore demonstrated how to order food, everyone tucked into their meals. Harry had to stifle a snort when he looked out across the Great Hall and saw Ron and Hermione. Hermione’s plate was empty and she seemed to be in the middle of a passionate rant to Ron, who was trying to enjoy his food in peace.

“We have a castle at Durmstrang. Not quite as big as this one, but our grounds are much larger. We often fly over them during the summer,” Viktor, who was next to Harry, said to Katie.

“We don’t normally fly except for Quidditch,” Katie replied, “it’s a shame because Hogwarts is a really pretty place.”

“I do like the look and feel of British castles,” Fleur, on Katie’s other side, said, “the palace of Beauxbaton is certainly grand though. Like here, we don’t fly except for Quidditch, but we make up for it with ballroom dancing.”

“I’ll do my best to not drag you down then,” Harry said to Melonie.

“If you dance as well as you fly, I do not think that will be an issue,” Melonie said, “though it does make me wonder what else you do here for fun? Surely it can’t just be Quidditch?”

“There used to be a duelling club but that stopped before any of us got here. When they tried setting it up again, it was a bit of a disaster,” Cedric said.

“How so?” Viktor asked.

“The teacher running it was a moron who had us duel each other without teaching us anything,” Harry said.

“It’s such a shame because Professor Flitwick is apparently a really famous duellist. I’m sure it would be great getting to learn from him,” Cho said.

“Filius Flitwick? You would indeed. We are taught duelling in Durmstrang and he is commonly mentioned as among the best duellists alive today,” Viktor said.

“You learn to duel? Is that why I can sometimes see flashes of light from the Durmstrang ship?” Harry asked.

“It is the responsibility of the older students to ensure the younger students do not lose their skills in the time they are away from school,” Viktor said.

Maxime and Karkaroff both barely concealed looks of irritation at the ease with which the Champions and their dates talked with one another. The grandfatherly twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes was gone, which Harry took great pleasure in. For a tournament that was supposed to be about promoting international relations, the heads of the schools seemed awfully keen on promoting division.

When the last bite of food was eaten, Dumbledore waved his wand. The tables and chairs moved to the sides of the room, opening up a large open space in the middle. The Champions took their dates by the arm onto the dance floor. Harry felt nerves begin to flutter in his chest, but Melonie was calm, which in turn helped keep him calm. An orchestra began playing, and Harry was beyond happy that the lessons James had given him transferred into the real world. As the Champions danced, Harry found himself relaxing. More and more people came onto the floor. When the song ended, Harry bowed to Melonie.

The next song began and Harry changed partners, dancing with Fleur. She moved with a grace unlike anything Harry had ever seen, and even though he was nominally the one

leading them, Fleur was the one in control. He fully believed her now when she said she could make anyone look good.

With each change of the song, Harry found himself dancing with somebody new. Cho, then Angelina; a sixth year Hufflepuff Harry had never met before; Parvati and Lavender. It was an eclectic mix of people from Hogwarts, Beauxbaton and Durmstrang. Katie ended up his partner and the pair chatted away. Then all of a sudden, Harry was faced with Fred. The redhead grinned, pulling Harry around in the dance. Quite a few people laughed at Fred's exuberance as he strong-armed Harry across the dance floor, and Harry did too.

Despite his reluctance when he first found out about the Yule Ball, Harry was enjoying himself tremendously. In the chaos of changing partners, Harry escaped the crowd and joined a small group of people at the drinks table.

"Need a break?"

Cedric came up beside him.

"It's a bit mad," Harry said.

"You looked like you were having fun," Cedric said, then lowering his voice, "and a proper Lord in the making. Not bad at all, Heir Potter."

"Thanks. If all Balls are like this, then I don't think it'll be so bad."

"Get ready. I hear the Ball portion of the night will be ending soon, and the party will really begin," Cedric said.

"I thought you said Hogwarts didn't have Balls," Melonie said, appearing from the crowd, "you're all doing exceptionally well."

"We were warned in no uncertain terms that we were not to make a fool of ourselves at this dance," Harry said.

"A lot of the people here will have had some education in dancing, just not from the school," Cedric said.

"I suppose that makes sense," Melonie said.

She glanced back into the crowd and snorted.

"And it seems that Martin will never change." She gestured to the edge of the crowd. "Fleur said that he was the other person she was considering introducing you to. While I'm sure you would have had a wonderful time, I think it might have been slightly uncomfortable for you."

Harry followed where she was looking. The blond Beauxbaton boy was waltzing perfectly with his partner, and Harry did a small double take when he saw that it was Colin Creevey. Colin was being led through the dance, utterly mesmerised by the older boy who was singing along to the music softly in French. Fleur had described him as a romantic, and when Martin twirled Colin around, Harry could certainly see it.

After their brief rest, the three of them re-joined the throng of dancers. The Champions and their dates were together in a group, and they danced until the music came to an end. Everyone took the chance for a breather to get something to drink. By the time they came back, the magical rock group The Weird Sisters had taken to the stage. Harry had never listened to them before, but he didn't care much. He let himself move along with the beat of the music and had fun.

It was hectic. It was chaos, but it was such a blast. Harry was buffeted by the crowd, moving between different groups of people. Cedric and Cho were close together, enjoying the press of bodies. Fred and Angelina were dancing so wildly and vigorously it was a hazard to those around them. In any other situation, Harry would have hated being so penned in and pressed around, but tonight he didn't feel it. Somebody bumped into him, but before he could fall, an arm pulled him up. It was Dean, dancing along with Seamus. Harry grinned, joining the two of them for the first time that night, and something about it felt right.

"Not gonna invite your friends?" Dean yelled over the music.

Harry glanced over to the tables, where Ron and Hermione were still sitting. Ron was glaring sullenly at his shoes, looking utterly bored, while Hermione alternated between glaring at Ron and the dance floor.

"Nah! I just want to enjoy myself!" Harry yelled back.

He stayed with Seamus and Dean for a while, enjoying the push and pull of the songs the Weird Sisters played. In the mass of bodies, it was impossible to not come into contact with them, but that was alright. It felt right to do so.

Eventually, Harry was spat out on the other side of the dance floor. Melonie joined him a moment later. Both of them were out of breath.

"Have you had fun?" Harry asked her.

"Indeed I have. Normally the Balls at Beauxbaton aren't so informal. I like it, but it is very tiring," Melonie said, "I think I have done enough dancing for one night."

"Would you like me to escort you back to your carriage?" Harry asked.

"Kind gentleman, that would be much appreciated."

Arm in arm, they made for the Entrance Hall so that Melonie could collect her cloak, where they were met with the sight of Ron and Hermione in the middle of a fierce row.

"Why did you even ask me to come if you didn't want to dance!" Hermione yelled, "I just wanted to have fun!"

"Who in their right mind would find that fun! Screaming and shoving against each other! It's mental!"

"You should have said so earlier so I could have come to the Ball with somebody who actually wanted to have a good time!"

“It’s not my fault that nobody asked you! Don’t take it out on me!”

“You complete arse Ronald Weasley!”

Hermione took off her shoes and threw them at Ron, storming up the marble staircase. Ron stood flabbergasted for a moment, before picking up the shoes and chasing after her, calling her name.

“Those two are very ... spirited,” Melonie said.

“That’s one way to describe them,” Harry said, then he gestured to the door, “shall we?”

They collected Melonie’s coat and went out through the open front doors. The front lawn had been decorated with paved paths lined with flowering bushes. Fairies twinkled amongst them, filling the air with a soft and soothing light. They passed a tinkling fountain as they headed for the Beauxbaton carriages.

“Your castle certainly looks beautiful when it wants to,” Melonie said, “though the younger Beauxbaton students say it can be quite confusing getting around.”

“It’s part of Hogwarts’ charm. You get used to it after a while,” Harry said.

“Indeed. Magical buildings are very interesting. Nobody knows for sure, but everyone thinks that Beauxbaton Palace has favourites. It’s a shame we don’t get more of a chance to explore here.”

“How come? Do you have to stay in the carriages?” Harry asked.

“We’re not sure. It used to be traditional for the host school to offer accommodation for the guests to stay in for the tournament. Madam Maxime wouldn’t say more about it when we asked,” Melonie said, “we don’t normally question our Headmistress about things like this. Through it all, we know that she has our best interest at heart.”

She gestured to the carriages.

“And at least we are not short on space.”

They arrived at the front carriage.

“Thank you very much for tonight. I very much enjoyed myself,” Melonie said.

“It was my honour, and thank you for coming with me.”

“Whoever you end up courting will be very lucky indeed.”

With a final goodbye, Melonie disappeared inside the carriage. The walk back to the castle was pleasant. He could feel that there should be a chill in the air, but the bushes must have been enchanted, because Harry didn’t feel cold at all. Ahead of him, he saw Snape snarling, brandishing his wand to chase students out of the bushes with less than all of their clothes on.

When he caught sight of Harry, his snarl deepened but as Harry wasn't doing anything wrong, all he could do was point back up to the castle.

When he re-entered the Entrance Hall, Martin was giving Colin a very flamboyant goodbye, bowing low and pressing a kiss to the back of his hand while thanking him for the lovely evening. It left Colin a blushing mess, and when the Beauxbaton boy left, Colin had a bright smile on his face. He practically skipped up the stairs. Harry hung back a bit to give him some time.

Ron's hangings were shut when Harry returned to the dormitory. The other boys were passed out in their beds. Judging by the crumpled heap beside the bed, it looked like Seamus had simply taken off his dress robes and crawled in, forgetting to pull the blankets up. As the sandy haired boy had said to Harry a month ago, it was getting too cold to just sleep in underwear, so Harry gently pulled Seamus's blankets up. Not wanting to disturb the other boys any longer, he got ready for bed quietly.

Rendezvous in the prefects bathroom

It was a very slow start when everyone woke up the next morning. A pile of presents was waiting for him at the end of his bed when Harry woke up. Nobody else in the dormitory was awake, so Harry settled back and relaxed. It didn't take long for the others to stir. Both Neville and Dean were pleased to see presents. Harry wasn't sure if Seamus actually registered them or not. He wasn't the most functional in the mornings at the best of times, but after an energetic evening and a later night than usual, it was impressive he was even awake.

After swaying where he sat for a little while, Seamus eventually pulled himself fully out of bed, stumbling towards the bathroom. Harry had to quickly avert his eyes because Seamus hadn't bothered to get dressed, so he was still only wearing underwear. Five minutes later, the boy emerged in a towel, looking much more awake, and after putting on pyjamas, the four of them got to opening presents.

Harry received the usual gifts of homemade fudge and a knitted jumper from Mrs Weasley; Ron gave him a book called *Flying with the Cannons*; and Hermione gave him a brand new quill and ink set. Hagrid sent him a mokeskin pouch, explaining that anything he placed in it would be kept safe from thieves. There were also presents from the other Gryffindor boys. Neville bought him a new pair of dragon-hide gloves. From Seamus, he received a comprehensive book on dragons, and from Dean he received a large collection of Honeydukes chocolates and a hand drawn picture of Harry snatching the golden egg from the Hungarian Horntail.

"Thanks so much guys," Harry said to his roommates.

"I should be the one thanking you," Dean said, holding up the small star globe Harry had given him.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" Seamus said.

On the bed in front of him was a box containing a set of magical weights.

"You were the one that said you were trying to get back into exercising," Harry said.

"I'm not complaining. These are awesome!"

Neville thanked him for *Magical Waterplants of the Highland Lochs*. They weren't exactly trying to keep their voices down, so Ron eventually woke up, and he launched himself at the pile of presents with gusto.

Sirius got him a *Charms* book and a *Transfiguration* book. When he opened them, both had notes written in the margins.

Harry,

James was great at Transfiguration and Lily was one of the best at Charms I've ever seen. Both of them could have easily gone on to do Masteries. I managed to track down their old textbooks where they made tons of notes. Hopefully these will be useful for you.

When you come home for summer, I can show you their notebooks.

Merry Christmas,

Sirius

He was incredibly touched, his hand ghosting over the writing. James and Lily had written these. Their hand had scribbled these notes, proving that they had been as excellent as everyone said they were. He would contact Sirius later via the mirrors and thank him for this.

After opening a book on defensive spells from Lupin, Harry only had one gift left which had a note attached, as well as a letter. He opened the present. It was a new pair of swimming trunks and a pair of goggles. Harry read the attached note.

Merry Christmas Harry, and may you have a peaceful Yule.

I've been keeping in touch with Sirius now that he's completely cleared and healed. He's told me all about what's happening to you at Hogwarts. As always, if you ever need anything, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sirius mentioned that you've continued swimming so Ted and I worked together on this gift. The trunks have been enchanted so they'll always fit you, though Ted assures me they're supposed to be skin tight. Either way, they should always fit comfortably and perfectly. Sirius also told us about the warming charm so we've incorporated that into the trunks. They should keep you warm no matter the temperature of the water you're swimming in (obviously keep your wand with you just in case). Why you would want to swim in the cold is beyond me.

The goggles are also enchanted. They should fit comfortably over your glasses and by pushing magic into them, they should become transparent so they don't obscure your peripheral vision. We didn't know if these were needed but thought it would be a nice addition.

Kind regards,

Andromeda and Ted Tonks

Harry smiled at the gift. While the trunks were supposed to be skin tight, Harry felt that his old ones were getting a bit *too* tight as he'd grown stronger. These would be the perfect replacement, and while he could open his eyes underwater, the goggles would still be helpful.

The last thing was the letter, so Harry opened that. It was a fairly short one from Arthur.

Dear Harry,

Merry Christmas! I hope this letter finds you well.

I wanted to send another gift since the one from Molly has likely been tampered with, but work has been tight recently and I didn't have the money to spare. I sincerely apologise.

At the risk of bringing down your Christmas cheer, I felt I should tell you that, while I haven't been able to find where Molly, Ron and Ginny have been keeping the money they stole from you, I get the impression that they're running low. In the run up to Christmas, Molly was acting very odd whenever the topic of spending came up, and she kept insisting I take extra hours at the Ministry. I have no idea if Ron and Ginny are the same, but I wouldn't be surprised if Molly at least runs out by the summer. Then I'll be able to exert a little bit of control since I'll be in control of the family finances.

Hopefully this helps and doesn't ruin your Christmas Day!

*Best wishes,
Arthur Weasley*

He glanced over at the redhead tearing open wrapping paper on the bed next to him. Ron didn't seem worried about money any more than he usually did, and he hadn't picked anything up from Hermione either. Perhaps they still had enough left over? Two fourteen year olds weren't as likely to spend money the way an adult would. Harry could clearly imagine what would happen when Ron eventually did run out. No doubt it would become Harry's problem somehow.

Christmas Day at Hogwarts was normally a very bombastic occasion full of celebration, but this year it was quiet and peaceful. Harry quite liked the atmosphere, especially in contrast to the Yule Ball the previous night. At breakfast, everyone traded stories about the Ball. Ron and Hermione were very icy with one another. Nothing was said aloud by either of them, but everyone correctly assumed they'd had another fight.

"Thanks for the new hats and gloves," Fred said.

Harry had managed to escape the surly Ron and Hermione and went to visit Fred and George. They were holed up in an unused classroom on the fifth floor. Though nothing was out of place, Harry was sure there were all sorts of pranking equipment hidden about the place.

"I couldn't think of what to get you," Harry said, "I'm rubbish at buying gifts."

"I don't know. I think you've done pretty well this year," George said, "Neville seemed to like his book, and Dean's star globe is an incredible piece of magic."

"Neville really likes Herbology and Dean likes Astronomy. They were easy to get things for."

"Maybe, but any gift from you comes across as thoughtful because you're so humble about it," Fred said.

"Yeah. You even managed to placate the terrible twosome," George said.

"A box of chocolate frogs and a new book. Hardly very thoughtful gifts," Harry said.

“It’s better than they deserved,” George groaned, “Ginny’s been a nightmare. She keeps complaining that she had to spend the night in the dormitory with the ‘kiddies’ since nobody invited her to the Ball.”

“Never mind the fact that she’s the same age as them, and that basically nobody in third-year and below was invited,” Fred said.

“Colin went. He seemed to really enjoy it,” Harry said.

“And Ginny is not happy about it. We’ve already had to have very pointed words with her to leave him alone. Merlin’s beard, it makes me feel like Percy,” Fred said.

Harry frowned. Colin had mellowed out a lot since he first came to Hogwarts. He was still very much a Harry Potter fanboy, but he no longer followed Harry around everywhere with his camera. His little brother Dennis came to Hogwarts this year, and Colin seemed determined to set a good example for him. When Harry came down to the common room this morning, Colin had been sitting with a group of his friends, jabbering away with a smile and a blush on his face about the Ball. He seemed very happy, which made Harry happy.

“Is it because Colin went and she didn’t, or because Colin went with a boy?” Harry asked.

“Honestly, it could be either. Dad doesn’t care about stuff like that. He just wants his kids to be happy, but Mum always gets this look on her face whenever homosexuality is brought up.”

It was a lot like the Dursleys. Sirius said that most pureblood families didn’t care, but he supposed it was too good to be true to expect that everyone would be like that. He wasn’t sure what to make of the fact that it was affecting him so much.

The rest of the school returned in early January, and classes resumed. This side of the Christmas holidays, the second task seemed so much closer. The golden egg had remained safely stowed away in his trunk. When the dormitory was empty, Harry tried opening it, only to be deafened by an awful screeching noise. No matter how much he listened to it, trying to glean any kind of insight into what it meant, he was no closer to figuring out the clue.

With the return of school came the next Champion Quidditch game. This time it was Harry against Cedric, almost a repeat of their famous match in the lightning storm. In clear weather, Cedric was a much harder opponent. He matched Harry turn for turn, blocking him whenever he saw the Snitch. It was smart, since Harry had the faster broom.

Below them, the Chasers were playing a fantastic game, aided by the Beaters. Viggo floated at the Gryffindor goals, looking completely relaxed in the air. Every time the Quaffle came near, he focused on it with laser-like precision, and he proved his skill with some spectacular saves. The score was so close that after nearly an hour of intense play, the crowd cried out when Harry and Cedric suddenly shot up into the sky. Cedric was inches ahead, Harry racing to catch up. He urged his Firebolt to go faster. He lunged his hand forward at the same time Cedric did. Harry felt Cedric’s nails scrabbling against the back of his glove as his hand enclosed around the Snitch.

“Who caught the Snitch!” Lee Jordan yelled from the commentary box.

Harry looked down, and then let out a loud laugh. The Snitch was clutched in his hand, and in Cedric’s hand were the wings which he’d managed to pull off.

“What happens now?” Harry asked.

“The Detection charm has registered the game has ended, but it is unclear which of the Seekers has caught the Snitch! Madam Hooch is on her way to investigate!” Lee announced.

Madam Hooch flew up to Harry and Cedric.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise? I believe this is the first Seekers draw we’ve had at Hogwarts in all the years I’ve been here,” she said.

“Seekers draw?” Harry asked.

“It’s where both Seekers grab the Snitch at the same time, which unfortunately usually ends with it being dismembered. Which of you has the main body and who has the wings?”

Harry held up the little golden ball and Cedric showed her the wings.

“In the case of a Seekers draw, the one who caught the main body receives 100 points while the other receives 50.” She blew her whistle and sent up red sparks with her wand. “Team Potter wins!”

The crowd went nuts. The Gryffindor team shot towards him, crashing into him and forming a chaotic ball as they all hugged him tightly. Everyone was in high spirits as they walked back to the castle, and Harry found himself walking with Cedric at the back of the group.

“Any other Hogwarts Quidditch records you feel like breaking?” Cedric asked jovially.

“I don’t know what you mean. I’ve broken records?”

“Of course you have! You’ve got the record for the shortest Quidditch game played at seven minutes during that game three years ago that Snape refereed, and the record for catching the Snitch in the worst weather conditions. I think that game also gave you the record for the first person to catch the Snitch while technically not on their broom,” Cedric said, “now we both broke the record for first Seeker draw at Hogwarts.”

“Huh,” Harry said, “maybe I should look into playing professionally? These all seem like signs to me, and I don’t even take Divination.”

“You should.” Viktor and Fleur came over to join them. “Any team would be lucky to have someone who can fly so well. You as well Cedric.”

“Thanks for that, but I’m not that good,” Cedric said.

“Nonsense. I may not be a Seeker but even I can see the three of you are all excellent players,” Fleur said, “but as fun as this has been, there’s something else rapidly approaching.”

“The second task,” Harry said.

“Have you three figured out the clue yet?” Fleur asked.

Viktor and Cedric both nodded.

“It took me ages,” Cedric said.

“I only got it by sheer luck.”

Harry sighed.

“I don’t even know where to start with the egg. The screeching is horrible,” Harry said.

The other three Champions exchanged a look.

“You know, there’s nothing in the rules that says the Champions can’t work together,” Cedric pointed out.

“And we all received some help preparing for the first task,” Viktor added.

“What? You guys don’t need to do that for me. I’ve still got a month to figure it out.”

“These tasks are difficult but at least the three of us volunteered for it. You didn’t have a choice, so it isn’t fair to you to expect the same as us,” Fleur said, “and this isn’t said out of pity either. After what you did with the dragon, I’m sure you’ll be able to come up with something just as exciting if you have the time to prepare.”

“If it makes you feel better, we won’t tell you the answer,” Cedric said, “but we can give you a hint that should help. Once you’ve had a chance to figure it out yourself, we can all meet to discuss what we’re going to do.”

Harry frowned, but couldn’t deny that he needed the help. It wasn’t like he asked for it either. Cedric, Fleur and Viktor were offering it freely.

“Alright.”

“Take your egg to the prefect's bathroom on the third floor. Nobody really goes in there so you should have plenty of privacy. I found that mulling things over there was very helpful,” Cedric said, “the password’s pine fresh.”

It was certainly an odd hint but Harry nodded and thanked them anyway. They arranged a time to meet at the end of the week to discuss the second task, giving Harry until then to figure the clue out on his own.

For the rest of the day, Harry thought over Cedric’s words, but nothing came to mind. Why would going to a bathroom help him at all? Unless there was some hint to the clue in the bathroom? It was very confusing, and he lay on his bed, staring at the egg as though it would suddenly spring to life and reveal its secrets. The egg remained stubbornly silent, and Harry had no desire to open it and listen to the screeching.

“Thinking hard there?”

Harry jumped at Dean’s voice. The dark skinned boy chuckled from where he was sorting out his school bag on his bed.

“I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing,” Harry said.

“That’s always a good start.”

“The task is a month away. I have a horrible feeling I’m going to completely fail.”

“I’m sure you won’t,” Dean said, “but like we said before, if there’s anything we can do to help, just let us know.”

“I really appreciate that,” Harry said, then he sighed, “I’ve been given a hint on how to solve it, but the hint is almost as confusing as the clue.”

“How so?”

Dean sat down on the end of Harry’s bed.

“I was told to take my egg to the prefect's bathroom. I have no idea how a bath is supposed to help me figure it out.”

“Hmm. Maybe something in the bathroom is supposed to help. A portrait or a mural? I doubt it’ll tell you the answer, but there has to be something,” Dean paused, “unless you think the person who gave you this hint is messing with you.”

“He isn’t.” Or at least Harry hoped he wasn’t.

“So are you going to go?”

“I think so? It can’t hurt to check it out at least.”

“Do you need anyone to come with you? Two heads can be better than one,” Dean offered.

“Come with you where?”

Seamus had just entered the room and was looking between Harry and Dean with curiosity. Harry quickly filled him in on what they’d been discussing.

“Sounds pretty sketchy. I know Diggory’s a good guy, but he couldn’t be more direct about it,” Seamus said.

“I wanted the chance to work it out myself. I think they would have told me if I asked.”

“Still, you should probably take somebody with you just in case it is a trick.”

“Alright,” Harry said, thinking carefully, “but we’ll have to sneak out. I don’t want Ron and Hermione to find out and complain.”

“Wait, the three of us?” Dean said.

“Are we going to find out how you and Ron always managed to go on those big adventures in first and second year?” Seamus asked, sounding excited.

“Well, yeah, if you want?” Harry said.

Seamus nodded, and so did Dean. They planned to sneak out after lights out when everyone was asleep. That way they’d have the longest amount of time to search the prefect’s bathroom for any hint to the clue without being interrupted. When Neville came into the dormitory, they filled him in on what they were doing. To Harry’s surprise, he happily agreed to keep it a secret, a knowing smile on his face.

It was slightly difficult to concentrate for the rest of the evening. Dean did a good job of maintaining a calm façade but Seamus was brimming with excitement. Unable to sit still in the common room, he took himself back up to the dormitory. When Harry and Ron went to bed, they saw him working out with his new weights. The five Gryffindor boys went through their nightly routines and then the lights went out, goodnights were called, and everyone shut their hangings to go to sleep.

Harry stayed awake. Out in the dormitory, he heard Neville’s soft snoring and Ron’s foghorn, and that was when he crept out of his bed and went through to the bathroom. A moment later he was joined by Seamus and Dean.

“Sneaking around the castle in our pyjamas feels strangely cool,” Seamus said.

“What I’m about to show you you can’t tell anyone about,” Harry said.

When he got agreements from both of them, he pulled out his invisibility cloak. Dean didn’t get what it was, but Seamus gaped.

“Bloody hell. No wonder you’re so great at sneaking around at night. That’s an invisibility cloak. Where did you get it?”

“It was my fathers. It’s been in my family for generations,” Harry said.

While Seamus ran his hands reverently through the invisibility cloak, Harry pulled out the Marauders Map. Dean looked at him curiously when he tapped it, and his eyes widened when he saw the map of Hogwarts spread out across the parchment.

“A joint venture of my father and godfather,” Harry said.

He scanned the route from Gryffindor Tower to the third floor. It seemed clear. Peeves was bouncing around in the Astronomy Tower, Filch was in the dungeons, and there were no other patrolling teachers or prefects. His eye caught on a dot moving about in Snape’s office labelled Bartemius Crouch, and he frowned. What was a Triwizard Tournament judge doing at Hogwarts in the middle of January? He shook his head. That wasn’t important right now.

“We’re going to sneak there underneath the invisibility cloak. Make sure not to make any noise,” Harry said.

As the tallest of them, Dean held the cloak over Harry and Seamus. Seamus carried the egg while Harry led the way via the map. They were quite a bit taller than Harry was in first year, so they all had to hunch to not have their feet showing. Going down four floors like that would be uncomfortable, and Harry wished the cloak could be a little bigger. To his surprise, the cloak lengthened, and they were able to stand up straight.

It was a very different experience sneaking around with Seamus and Dean than it was with Ron and Hermione. The three of them moved easily together, stopping frequently so Harry could check the map. The only downside was being so close to the other boys. Dean's arm was around him, and Seamus was pressed against his side. They managed to reach the third floor without issue. When they found the correct door, they took off the cloak.

"Pine fresh," Harry said.

There was a click, and the door opened.

"This cloak is amazing," Dean said when the three of them were inside, "it doesn't look any bigger than it did when we first put it on but I'm sure it grew bigger so it would fit us all."

"Never heard of an invisibility cloak that could do that," Seamus said.

His cheeks were slightly red.

"I'm not sure exactly what enchantments are on it," Harry said, willing his own cheeks to cool down, "all I know is that it's been in my family since Lucinda Peverell married into the family about 500 years ago."

Dean carefully folded the cloak up. The prefect's bathroom was a large room with tiled floors. A row of toilet stalls lined one of the walls, but most of the space was taken up by a wide and deep bathtub. A portrait of a mermaid lounging on a rock hung on a wall.

"Shall we see if there are any hints for the egg?" Harry suggested.

The three of them searched what felt like every inch of the room. Harry remembered how the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets was marked by a small carving of a snake etched into one of the taps, so he inspected all of them carefully. Dean went through each toilet stall, while Seamus lowered himself into the empty bathtub to see if there was anything down there. Every few minutes they called out to one another, but that only served to tell Harry that there was nothing. After half an hour of searching, they met back up again.

"What did Diggory tell you again?" Dean asked.

"He told me to bring my egg here and mull things over."

The only thing which stood out about this place was the portrait of the mermaid, but all three of them had at some point checked that for secrets, and there was nothing.

"There has to be something we're missing here," Dean said, "I find it hard to believe that Beauxbaton and Durmstrang would accept an important clue for one of the tasks requiring entrance to a specific bathroom at Hogwarts that their Champions wouldn't have access to."

They were interrupted by a fragrant smell filling the air along with the sound of rushing water. Seamus had fiddled with one of the brass taps that lined one side of the large bathtub. The water coming out of it was pale pink in colour. Seamus turned another tap. Pale green water came out of this one with a different nice smell. Each of them tried turning the taps. They watched in amazement as the air was filled with enormous purple bubbles, jets of water that bounced in arcs across the surface of the filling tub, and all sorts of different fragrances that somehow didn't conflict with one another.

The bathtub filled surprisingly quickly for its size, covered in a layer of foamy bubbles.

"I wish the bath back at home was as cool as this," Seamus said, "the only thing Dad would let Mam do to it was add charms to keep the water from getting cold."

"My flat doesn't have a bath. The bathroom isn't big enough," Dean commented.

"Then why not give this a go?" Seamus suggested, "we've got plenty of time before we need to get back to the common room, and it's not like we've managed to do anything else productive here. Maybe that's what Diggory meant by mulling things over."

"He wanted me to take a bath," Harry said flatly.

"It's supposed to be quite relaxing, and you can't say that this hasn't been stressing you out," Dean said.

Harry wasn't sure. He looked between Seamus and Dean. Seamus was sitting at the edge of the tub, running his fingers through the water and not looking at either of them. Dean seemed calmly thoughtful.

"Alright. I suppose it can't hurt."

It shouldn't have been a big deal. Harry had showered alongside both of these boys before many times, but for some reason he was overcome with shyness when it came time to take off their clothes. Dean found a cupboard full of fluffy white towels and retrieved one for each of them. The three of them turned around to give each other some privacy as they undressed. Harry heard the sounds of the pair of them slipping into the water. When he turned around, all that was visible was their heads. Everything else was hidden beneath the thick bubbles.

The bathtub was deep. Near the edge, the water came up to his neck, but when he drifted towards the middle he was forced to tread water. There had to be something other than soap in this water, as Harry felt his muscles beginning to unwind as he soaked. It was quite soothing. Judging by the relaxed expressions on the others' faces, they felt the same. None of them said anything for a while, quite happy to let the water do its work.

"Anyone have any epiphanies?" Harry asked.

"That it would be worth becoming a prefect just to have access to this bath," Seamus said.

"Maybe the heat from the water will do something to the egg?" Dean suggested.

It was worth a try. Harry averted his eyes as Dean pulled himself from the water and retrieved the egg from near Harry's clothes. He and Seamus only looked back again when he was back in the water. Dean passed the egg to Harry, who held it beneath the surface. The cool metal quickly heated up.

"Here goes nothing," Harry said, lifting the egg back up and opening the hatch.

The horrible screeching noise was even worse in the bathroom. The tiled floors and stone walls caught the sound and reflected it back, amplifying it tremendously. Harry clapped his hands over his ears, dropping the egg. Dean and Seamus did the same thing. Dean's eyes were fixed on the door, and they waited many tense minutes for any sign that they'd alerted somebody.

"Sorry Harry. I guess I was wrong," Dean said.

"It's alright. It was a long shot."

"Hey guys, do you hear something?" Seamus asked.

Harry's heart leapt. Was someone on their way? He strained his ears, but the next moment, he heard it. It was like a very distant, muffled singing. Harry swept away a patch of bubbles. A dim golden glow was coming from beneath the surface of the water.

"Are we idiots? Diggory told you to bring the egg to a bathroom with an enormous bathtub and not once did we think of opening it under the water!" Seamus said.

"There's no use whining about it now. Come on!" Dean said.

The three of them took deep breaths and submerged, swimming right to the bottom of the tub where the egg rested. The inside of the egg was calm, glowing faintly with a gold light. It was a far cry from the fierce bubbling and searing light every other time he'd opened it. The singing was almost ethereal, coming from the egg yet carrying through the water so that it almost came from all around them.

Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're looking ponder this;

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took,

But past an hour, the prospect's black,

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.

It was singing words, the words were the clue! Harry glanced up to see Seamus and Dean both looking stunned.

“You’ve got to solve a riddle,” Seamus said when they emerged.

“Something of yours is going to be taken, and you’ve got to get it back, but you’ll only have an hour to do it,” Dean said.

“Seems like it,” Harry said.

The three of them treaded water in the middle of the bathtub.

“But where do you reckon it’ll be? The Forbidden Forest?” Dean said.

“There’s too much in the Forbidden Forest for them to safely do a task there. I doubt the creatures that live there would appreciate it,” Harry said.

“There’s probably more to this clue than we’re thinking,” Seamus said, “I mean, Diggory basically told you to take a bath with your egg. Maybe there’s something we’re missing.”

Harry took another deep breath to listen to the egg's clue. Two more full listens gave him no further information, but perhaps it didn’t need to. When he rose back up to the surface, he was deep in thought.

“I could only find out the clue by listening to the egg underwater. Maybe it’s referring to something underwater,” he said.

“That makes sense, but what would live underwater and take something valuable from you?” Seamus said.

Harry’s eyes came to rest on the portrait of the mermaid, and the answer became clear immediately. Something of his was going to be taken from him and given to the merpeople living in the lake, and Harry would have an hour to get it back from them. When he told the others this, their eyes widened.

“Seriously?” Seamus ducked down to listen to the egg’s clue again, “I think you might be right. Merpeople are known for their singing as well.”

“Harry should be fine for swimming, but we’ll need to find some way to let him breathe underwater,” Dean said.

“I’m sure that’s perfectly simple to do. I reckon there’ll be a whole section of the library devoted to water breathing,” Seamus said sarcastically, “bloody hell. They’re not asking for much with these tasks.”

Harry let out a snort. Seamus had emerged through a patch of undisturbed bubbles and now was sporting a large bubble afro. When he pointed it out, Dean laughed as well. Seamus reached his hands up and styled it a bit, before pouncing forward onto Harry.

The two play fought in the water, eventually dragging Dean into it as well as they each tried to pounce and catch each other. Harry was the superior swimmer, easily diving beneath the water to evade them and tug on legs in passing. It didn't mean that he didn't get dunked. All three of them did, and the bathroom was filled with the sounds of laughter and messing around.

It was a welcome distraction and helped keep the small pit of terror that had opened in his chest from getting any wider. How on earth was he supposed to breathe underwater for an hour? Was it even possible? As soon as he could, he would contact Sirius and have a nice long chat with him. He would meet with the other Champions as well. Now that he had worked the clue out, they could share their ideas together.

Harry was brought back to the present when he and Seamus worked together to pounce on Dean. They tipped down into the water, somehow managing to get their legs under each other so they could breach the surface again, clinging to one another. There were smiles on all their faces, and Harry wished he could exist in this moment for a bit longer, but the muffled singing of the golden egg was heard.

"How are you feeling Harry?" Dean asked.

"I'm-" he was about to say he was fine but Seamus's arm around his shoulders tightened slightly, "I'm scared, but I think I'll be alright. I'm not alone."

"Of course you're not. You've got us," Seamus said firmly, "Neville and the girls will help as well. There's no way any of us are letting you get hurt because some nutter put your name in the Goblet of Fire."

"We'll help you look in the library for ways to breathe underwater as well, and we can ask Hagrid in Care of Magical Creatures what you might find when you get down there," Dean said.

The lump in Harry's throat prevented him from speaking. Eventually he was able to say in a quiet voice, "thank you." Seamus's arm across his shoulders and Dean's arm around his waist tightened again.

Something brushed against his hip, and Harry blushed at the reminder that the three of them were currently naked in a bath together, but he did nothing to move. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to look either of them in the eye for fear of what he might see there. Harry had never been very good with feelings, especially his own, and the feelings he'd been having for both Seamus and Dean recently were hard to work through. Sirius said it was alright to like boys, but two at the same time?

Harry wasn't sure if he was feeling this way because he genuinely liked them that way, or if it was just a result of him latching onto them after finding out about Ron and Hermione's betrayal. He didn't have many friends, and no doubt it would ruin the good relationship they had if he were to say anything. At the same time, he didn't want this moment to end. He wanted to have more moments like this. Stuck in his own thoughts as he was, Harry missed the look that was exchanged between the other two boys.

Nothing more was said about the moment they'd just shared. The golden egg was retrieved from the bottom of the bath, and the three of them got out. Once they were all dried and dressed, they walked back to Gryffindor Tower just as they had done earlier that night. The common room was empty and the dormitory was silent, save for Ron's snoring. With a final glance at the pair of them, Harry crawled into bed. Nothing else was said between them, and the next morning when Ron woke up, he commented that the dormitory smelled nicer than it usually did.

The second task

Chapter Notes

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

“So you’ve got to retrieve something from the lake,” Sirius said.

“Yeah. Apparently whatever it is is going to be something we’ll sorely miss,” Harry said, “I’m planning on making sure all of my valuables are locked away somewhere so that nobody can steal them.”

“That’s a good idea. Have one of your house elves take them to Potter Manor, or Kreacher can bring them here. I highly doubt they’d take possessions but it doesn’t hurt to be prepared,” Sirius said, “now we just need to figure out how to keep you alive for an hour underwater. What did the other Champions think?”

A couple of days after Harry’s adventure to the prefect’s bathroom with Seamus and Dean, Harry met with the other Champions at the shore to the lake. All of them agreed with his assessment that something would be taken and given to the merpeople.

“Fleur and Cedric are going to use the Bubble Head charm, but Viktor isn’t so confident he’d be able to sustain a bubble for the whole time so he’s going to do something with Transfiguration instead.”

“Both reasonable approaches, but I’m guessing neither of them are suitable for you,” Sirius said.

“I’ve been practising with the Bubble Head charm to see if I can use it, but at the skill level that I’m presenting to everyone, I can’t get it to last for longer than ten minutes, and we’ve not learned human Transfiguration yet.”

Noise came through on Sirius’ end. Sirius looked up at somebody Harry couldn’t see, a smile appearing on his face.

“Since you’re here, you might as well help.” Sirius moved, doing something with the mirror. The view expanded and Harry saw Lupin sitting on the sofa with Sirius. “Say hello to Moony.”

“Professor Lupin? What are you doing there?” Harry asked.

“Please, call me Remus Harry. Being called Professor feels a bit weird now that I’m no longer a teacher,” Lupin said, “I didn’t mean to interrupt your conversation. I’ve been helping Sirius with fully cleaning out Grimmauld Place so that the whole house is habitable. It’s been slow going since a lot of the rooms contain artefacts that need handling carefully.”

“Enough of that though. Remus, how are we going to keep Harry alive underwater for an hour?” Sirius asked.

They quickly filled Remus in on what Harry had to do for the second task.

“That is completely ridiculous,” Remus said under his breath, “there are a number of spells that might be useful, though whether you’ll have time to learn them is a different matter. I think your best bet would be some sort of potion or magical plant.”

“There’s a potion that’ll let me breathe underwater?”

“Of course there is. How else do you think Herbologists study underwater plants,” Remus said, “though if I remember correctly, you wouldn’t learn about it until NEWT level as it can be quite tricky. I think it also takes three weeks to fully brew.”

“Meaning I don’t have enough time. The task is two weeks away,” Harry said.

“There was a plant I remember coming across that should work. Gilly- something, I can’t quite remember the name,” Remus said, thinking hard.

“Gillyweed?” Sirius said.

“That’s the one! Gillyweed will allow you to breathe underwater for approximately an hour. All you need to do is eat it,” Remus said, “that’ll likely be your best bet.”

“I’ll look into getting you some since it can be quite rare. I’ll send it to you in time for the task,” Sirius said, “in the meantime, keep practising the Bubble Head charm as a back-up. I know your plan is to keep hiding how much magical power you have, but down in the lake, if you have to choose between keeping your secret and staying alive, I’d much rather you choose the latter option. We can handle any fallout from it later.”

“Speaking of fallout,” Sirius continued, “have you secured the hangings like I showed you?”

Harry nodded. Sirius had shown him a set of spells he could use to ward the hangings around his bed. Nobody else would be able to open them, and nobody could see or hear through them either. It felt good knowing he could speak freely with nobody overhearing.

“Good. I spoke with Ironclaw the other day about their search for the horcruxes,” Sirius said.

“Have they found any?”

“The piece of Voldemort's soul they extracted from you was tiny, so it was hard for them to get an exact location. It’s mainly a hotter-colder kind of thing, but doing so allowed them to find one,” Sirius huffed, “it was actually in Gringotts itself in one of the old Lestrage vaults.”

“Is that going to be an issue?” Harry asked.

“Not at all. Gringotts doesn’t have many restrictions on what can be stored in their vaults, but horcruxes are one of things they prohibit. Once they discovered that a horcrux was stored there, it was removed and the vault itself fined for housing it,” Sirius said, “even if they didn’t, the vault in question belonged to my cousin Bellatrix, who married into the

Lestranges. Since she used to be a Black, I would be able to give permission for the goblins to enter and retrieve the horcrux.”

“That seems a bit strange.”

“For once we can thank the archaic thinking of some pureblood families. Most families, even pureblood ones, have moved on from these attitudes, but the Lestranges, and until recently the Blacks, held that the male head of the family had authority over all family members. This included female members who married into different families,” Sirius said, “the Lestranges are also one of the families that still had an issue with homosexual family members. Thankfully, the only remaining Lestranges are in prison.”

“The important part is that the goblins retrieved the horcrux from Bellatrix’s vault,” Remus looked deeply upset, “you’ll never believe what it was.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“It was the legendary Cup of Hufflepuff, a lost relic made by Helga Hufflepuff herself, and that bastard decided to stick a piece of his soul into it,” Sirius snarled, “we always knew he was a monster, but to defile such a pure piece of magic like that is disgusting.”

“Did the goblins destroy it?” Harry asked.

“Thankfully they were able to extract the soul fragment and save the Cup. I’m sure whoever Hufflepuff’s descendants are will be very grateful,” Sirius said.

“So that’s one down, four to go,” Harry said.

“Two down. The piece in Hufflepuff’s cup was larger so they could use that as a more detailed locator of the others,” Sirius said, “they managed to locate one in an old shack which used to belong to the Gaunt family. He made a horcrux out of the Gaunt family ring.”

“Why would he do that? I mean, how did he even get a hold of that ring?” Harry asked.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Remus said, “Voldemort’s real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle. Knowing that he was supposedly descended from Slytherin, Andromeda and I have been trying to trace his descendants. The Gaunt family claimed a direct line of descent from Slytherin, which seems to be accurate.”

“Though by the end the Gaunt family was so inbred, they were practically squibs,” Sirius said, “and they lost their seats in the Wizengamot a few generations before the line died out.”

“The last head of the Gaunt family was a man named Marvolo. He had a daughter named Merope. The village they lived in had a wealthy family living there whose son was named Tom Riddle,” Remus said.

“Voldemort’s mother and father,” Harry breathed out in shock.

“Indeed. It also seems to explain why Voldemort made a horcrux out of the Gaunt family ring. It must have represented his connection to the magical world, specifically the

purebloods, considering Tom Riddle senior was a Muggle,” Remus said.

“Regardless, we’ve managed to destroy two horcruxes. Two of the others are hidden behind wards and the goblins can’t find them, and there’s no sign of the third,” Sirius said.

“Voldemort must have hidden it very well then,” Harry said.

“No, I mean there’s no sign of it at all, which is weird because so far, none of the horcruxes they’ve found have been big enough fragments of his soul to have been his first,” Sirius said, “it’s possible that it might have already been destroyed, but there’s no guarantee.”

If it was already destroyed, then it was one less thing for them to find, but Harry would need proof of that before he could accept it. Voldemort needed to be stopped once and for all. It would be terrible if they failed because they didn't stop to double check if they'd missed one.

Only what could it be? Harry trusted the goblins. So far they hadn’t failed when they set out to do something. With that in mind, Harry tried racking his brain, going over the two times he’d encountered Voldemort to see if there was any clue that could point them towards the final horcrux. Voldemort had been a wraith when he possessed Quirrell, which was likely to be the essence of the man that was housed in his living body. The other time had been a memory preserved in -”

“Tom Riddle’s diary!” Harry said.

He quickly explained everything that happened in the Chamber of Secrets, including how the Riddle in the diary had possessed Ginny and almost seemed to become more solid as he drained her of life.

“That doesn’t seem like just a recorded memory,” Sirius said, “from what I’ve been able to read up on horcruxes, that seems like something a large enough piece of soul would be capable of doing.”

“But that means I’ve already destroyed it. I stabbed it with a basilisk fang!”

“Then that just leaves the two which are hidden behind wards,” Sirius said.

“What should we do?”

“Remus and I will keep looking for them, as well as trying to find out who your magical guardian is so we can unravel that web of lies,” Sirius said, “as for you, *you* need to worry about the second task.”

“But Sirius-”

“No Harry. I know that this is important to you, but the most important thing right now is for you to make it through that tournament alive. Somebody has been very keen for you to risk your life this way, and they’ve already missed their first chance. We all need to be vigilant until this danger passes. Merlin knows I’ll sleep a lot better when the tournament is over.”

Harry ducked his head. Sitting here at Hogwarts while Sirius and Remus were hard at work made him feel useless, but what else could he do? They were right. Somebody had manipulated things so that he would be in this tournament. He made it through the first task easily enough. There were only two chances left for him to get killed. Before they left, Sirius reiterated what Harry needed to do. Keep practising the Bubble Head charm as a back-up. Make use of any resources he could to get help. Keep Sirius informed of any developments.

With a plan in mind, Harry felt a lot better about the upcoming task. He assured Cedric and the others that he would be fine, which helped them all relax as well. The downside was having to deal with Ron and Hermione after they'd made up from their argument at the Yule Ball. He hadn't been speaking to him in the run up to the first task, but now he found himself being pestered by them constantly. He hadn't told either of them about figuring out the egg, which seemed to be making Hermione panic over it.

"Harry, you need to get a move on! The task is only a week away!" she said to him at breakfast.

"I'm doing my best, Hermione, but it's not that simple. Remember, these tasks were designed for seventh-years to complete."

"Well, if you'd just let Ron and I help you, you might get somewhere," she said.

"I'm sorry, but I was told quite clearly that the Champions aren't allowed to receive help from anyone."

"Then how did you manage the dragon?" Hermione asked.

"Like I said, sheer dumb luck," Harry replied.

It was only practice that let him ignore the slight to his ability without comment.

"Leave him alone, Hermione. If he can handle a dragon, I'm sure he can handle whatever the second task will be," Ron said, causing Hermione to be in a huff with both of them.

Not receiving help from anyone was a massive lie. In Harry's free period when Ron and Hermione had Care of Magical Creatures, he went up to McGonagall's Transfiguration classroom. While the teacher marked homework, Harry practised the Bubble Head Charm. Occasionally McGonagall would give him a piece of advice when he was struggling, but he wasn't sure she could help him increase his time limit.

"The bubble produced by this charm can be quite delicate," she said to him when it popped once again, "most people who use it imbue it with a minor shield charm to make it more durable. That may also increase its longevity."

"I don't know any shield charms," Harry said.

McGonagall rose to her feet and rounded her desk.

“Then I shall teach you one. After all, it’s very useful knowing how to defend yourself, not just for the tournament.”

For the next half an hour, McGonagall taught him a very basic shielding charm. It wouldn’t help him block spells, but it should reinforce whatever he cast it on. When he tried it on the Bubble Head charm, it doubled the time before the bubble burst, but twenty minutes still wasn’t good enough. McGonagall looked like she wanted to help more, but she was already pushing the boundaries of the rules as it was.

The morning of the second task came, and with it came Harry’s nerves. Knowing he’d be going into the lake, he put on his swimming trunks beneath his pants. An owl delivered him a letter from Sirius, telling him that a package was waiting for him on his bed. Harry raced back upstairs, claiming to Hermione that he forgot something.

Sitting on his pillow was a small box. Inside was a pouch containing a slimy green weed. There were also a couple of jet black seeds.

Harry,

Here is the Gillyweed. According to the apothecary I got it from, once eaten, it will allow you to breathe underwater for just over an hour. That should be more than enough time for you to complete the task. You’ll have the Bubble Head charm as a back up as well.

Also included are a couple of seeds. They won’t help you with the task, but I’m sure Professor Sprout will love you forever if you tell her about them. She’s been dying to grow more challenging plants.

Best of luck in the task,

Sirius

To Harry’s surprise, the other Gryffindor fourth-years besides Ron and Hermione were waiting for him in the common room.

“You’ll need to head down to the lake soon, so we wanted to come and wish you good luck,” Neville said.

“I know you’ve been big on Diggory being the Hogwarts Champion, but we’ll be rooting for you,” Parvati said.

“Thanks guys.”

“Are you all set?” Dean asked.

Harry patted the pouch containing the Gillyweed.

“I am.”

“That’s good.”

Seamus clapped his shoulder, a complicated expression on his face.

“Be careful out there,” he said.

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m always careful.”

“Your history begs to differ.”

“History is full of over exaggerations. I wouldn’t trust it.”

Harry’s own expression softened.

“I’ll be fine.”

With a final round of good luck, Harry headed down to the lake. Cedric, Fleur and Viktor joined him on the walk down. All four of them looked nervous but determined.

“Anyone figure out what was taken?” Harry asked.

“All my stuff was still in the dormitory,” Cedric said.

“As was mine,” Fleur said.

“I asked Viggo, and he said that nobody from the judging panel had taken anything from my quarters on the ship. Professor Karkaroff is the only one of them who has been anywhere near it.”

They reached the shore of the lake and were ushered into a tent. Once again, clothes had been laid out for them to change into. Harry’s were a skin tight tank top and skin tight shorts that came down to his mid thigh. If Harry wasn’t so used to only wearing his swim briefs, he might have been a bit self-conscious about it. The most annoying thing was that it was once again in Gryffindor red. Cedric and Viktor were dressed in the same thing as him, and Cedric was in Hufflepuff yellow. Fleur was in a simple, one piece bathing suit.

“They did it again,” Fleur said, gesturing to Harry and Cedric.

“They did. Could you change the colours again?” Harry asked.

“Of course.”

The pair of them stood together as she pulled her wand from her holster. With a complicated wave, both Harry and Cedric wore the Hogwarts colours.

“I don’t get why they keep pitting you against each other,” Viktor said.

“It doesn’t make sense. Would they have done this if Harry wasn’t chosen as well? I love my house but I wanted to represent Hogwarts not Hufflepuff,” Cedric said.

“Somebody seems very determined that I should follow a particular destiny, one that is distinctly Gryffindor. Obviously I should fly the correct colours,” Harry said.

“You’ve hinted before that there is more at play here. Is this the same?” Fleur asked.

All Harry could do was nod because by that point they were being ushered out of the tent. Bleachers had been set up along the length of the shore, which were full of spectators. At the front was the judges table. Dumbledore’s eye twitched in anger when he saw Harry and Cedric wearing the same colours. Suspended over the water of the lake were four large screens, likely so the judges and the spectators could see what was happening beneath the surface. Harry would need to be careful not to show off too much skill.

“Champions, please step forward!” Ludo Bagman said cheerily.

The three headmasters seemed displeased with how familiar the Champions were to one another, but Harry was surprised to see Percy Weasley there. He had filled in for Crouch at the Yule Ball, but was Crouch still so ill? Harry had seen him on the Marauders Map only two weeks ago.

“Excellent! We can make a start. *Sonorus!*” Bagman’s magically amplified voice echoed around the area. “Welcome everyone to the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. The four Champions have had these last few months to work out their clue to prepare for this event. Something precious has been taken from each of them and placed somewhere in the lake. They will have one hour in which to find their precious thing and bring it back to the surface. Points will be awarded based on the order of their return and on their performance in the lake. Champions, take your marks!”

Each of them walked to the water's edge. It lapped over their toes and Harry was very glad for the warming charm that spread over him from his trunks. Harry took the Gillyweed from the pouch and shoved it into his mouth. It was like chewing rubber and tasted foul, but he bore through it.

“At the sound of the cannon, you may begin!”

Harry swallowed. A second later, a cannon went off and all four dived into the water. The sides of Harry’s neck burned and when he gasped, he found that he could breathe easily from the gills that had formed. Webbing spread between his fingers and when he looked down at his feet, he saw long flippers. Harry struck out into the lake. His eyes must have changed as well because the water seemed a lot clearer than it normally did.

Deeper and deeper he swam, making sure to stay above the kelp beds to avoid the Grindylows. He could hear them chattering away. His foot hit something bony and hard, and Harry sped up. Whipping out his wand, he saw several Grindylows trying to sneak up on him. He tried casting a spell, but all that came out of his mouth with a big bubble. Boiling water streamed from the end of his wand, and the Grindylows all dispersed.

A shadow loomed over him. The Giant Squid approached slowly. It was hard to tell, because it was a squid, but Harry was sure it was curious what he was doing so far down in the lake. One arm reached out to him, like it had done many months ago, and prodded him lightly in the chest. The tip of the arm turned and pointed in a particular direction. Harry nodded and followed it as the squid jetted off.

Whatever had been taken from them was likely given to the merpeople for safekeeping. From Harry's research, he knew that merpeople tended to live in the deepest parts of lakes, and that was where the Giant Squid had directed him. As he approached, he heard singing fill the water. It had the same ethereal quality as what came out of the golden egg so Harry knew he was getting closer. Rounding several large rock formations, he reached the edge of the mer-city.

Actual merpeople looked very different to Muggle portrayals. With mossy green skin and weed-like hair, they looked remarkably fish-like. The buildings at the edge of the city were smaller, made of a combination of stone and coral kept clear of barnacles. Kelp was planted in the gardens and a Grindylow was tied to a post like a pet in one of them. The merpeople watched him as he swam by but didn't interfere. The buildings grew bigger and more numerous as he approached the centre of the city. Merpeople wielding spears stood guard.

Tied to ropes in the centre of the city were four people. They floated with their eyes closed, small trails of bubbles leaking from their mouths. Harry rushed towards them. Ron was obvious by his bright red hair. Next to him was Cho, and there was also Katie and Lucas McIntosh. The other three were Cedric, Viktor and Fleur's dates to the Yule Ball. Ron must have been chosen because he was supposedly Harry's best friend. Inwardly Harry scoffed at the notion, but he dutifully swam to Ron's ankle and tried untying the knot. The rope was slimy, so he looked around for a sharp rock to hack at it. He highly doubted the merpeople would let him use a spear.

A commotion behind him made him turn. Fleur was swimming towards him, a small cut on her leg.

"Cedric is right behind me and Viktor is on his way," she said, her words distorted through the bubble surrounding her head.

Sure enough, Harry could see Cedric about ten metres behind her. Fleur slashed with her wand and all four hostages were cut free. Harry held onto Ron to make sure he didn't float away. Fleur took Lucas and began swimming to the surface.

"Relax, you don't need to wait. Viktor's almost here," Cedric said, taking Cho and swimming after Fleur.

That may well be true, but Harry had no intention of winning the tournament. He would much rather be sure Katie was safe. There was another outcry from the merpeople as Viktor launched himself through the water. Less confident in his ability to produce a stable Bubble Head charm, Viktor had opted to transfigure his body, giving himself a shark's head to allow him to more easily cut through the water as well as breathe. He grabbed Katie's hand and swam upwards. Satisfied, Harry did the same.

It was harder to swim without the use of his hands. The merpeople rose up with him, keeping guard. With a final push, Harry reached the surface. Ron spluttered and panicked at the surface, but Harry managed to calm him down while waiting for the Gillyweed to wear off. Once it did, he left the lake, only to be accosted by Seamus.

"Here, let's get you warmed up," he said, wrapping Harry up in a towel.

The other Champions and their hostages were already in towel bundles of their own, shivering away as Madam Pomfrey fussed over them. Dean was helping Ron, and he smiled when Harry entered the tent.

“Had to wait for the Gillyweed to wear off?” Cedric asked.

“Yeah. At least it worked.”

“How are you not cold? I’m freezing,” Fleur complained.

“Warming charm. It works wonders,” Harry said.

At Fleur’s prompting, Harry took out his wand and cast the charm on everyone. They sighed in relief, though Cedric and Cho remained curled up together in their towels. Curiously, Viktor also had his arm around Katie. The four Champions chatted away with their hostages. Seamus and Dean, as well as the other students who volunteered to help Madam Pomfrey were chivvied away as the nurse gave each of them a dose of Pepper-Up Potion.

To Harry’s surprise, Ron looked unhappy to be there. Harry thought he’d be over the moon to be considered precious to him, and considering how much he moaned about Harry getting close to the other Champions, he didn’t seem to be enjoying being in their presence. Not even Viktor Krum, who Ron hadn’t even glanced at.

Changing into dry clothes, they were brought back out to receive their scores. Cedric came in first, beating Fleur by a single point as he arrived back just behind her and Fleur had run afoul of the Grindylows. Harry scowled when he was given more points than Viktor despite coming in last. Judging by the unhappy expressions on Maxime and Karkaroff’s faces, and the pleased looks on Dumbledore and Bagman, he had a very good guess as to what happened. At least they were dismissed to head back to the castle.

“It was a bit mad. Professor Snape took me to Professor Dumbledore’s office after dinner last night,” Lucas said.

“Professor Flitwick did the same,” Cho said.

“And McGonagall,” Katie added, “the judges told us what would be happening and then we were put under a spell. I didn’t even know I’d been put in the lake until I broke the surface.”

“It was very spooky seeing you like that. You looked like you’d drowned,” Cedric said, his arm tightening around Cho.

“But we didn’t, and I’m fine,” Cho reassured him.

“I am just glad we all made it through safely,” Fleur said, “this tournament is not shaping up how I expected it to.”

Fleur and Viktor departed for the Beauxbaton and Durmstrang accommodations, leaving Harry and Cedric to escort Cho, Katie and Lucas back up to the castle.

“So,” Cedric said, raising a teasing eyebrow at Lucas, “you’re precious to Fleur?”

“It’s not like that,” Lucas laughed, “we went to the Ball as nothing more than friends. My parents told me I needed to go to the Ball and there wasn’t anyone I wanted to go with since Samuel graduated last year. I had a good time with Fleur, but she didn’t expect anything from me so we were both happy.”

“You were probably the closest thing they could think of to a precious person for her,” Harry said.

“That and they wouldn’t need to ask for permission,” Lucas said, slightly darkly.

“What do you mean?” Katie asked.

“Didn’t you notice how all the hostages were Hogwarts students?” Lucas said, “that’s because if they wanted to use any of the visiting students they would need to ask for specific permission from their families. They don’t need that for Hogwarts students since we’re already under the care of the school while class is in session.”

“That doesn’t seem right. So they could do anything they want with us and they wouldn’t even need to ask,” Harry said.

“Not quite, since they wouldn’t want people to complain to their parents, but technically they could.”

“I know I’ll be letting my Dad know so he can formally apologise to Cho’s family for putting her in danger,” Cedric said.

“Don’t be silly. You don’t need to do that,” Cho said, “there’s no use in dwelling on it now. We all made it through the task in one piece. Let’s celebrate that.”

“I agree. No doubt there’s already a very loud party going on in the Gryffindor common room, and probably a much more peaceful one in Hufflepuff,” Katie said.

“I don’t know. You’ve never seen us after a Quidditch match. Remember who has easy access to the kitchens,” Cedric said, grinning, “you’re welcome to come to our party Cho. Lucas as well if you’d like?”

“No invite from the Gryffindors?” Lucas asked, though Harry could tell he was teasing, “I think I’ll take you up on that offer, Diggory. As much as house relations have improved this year, I think there’d be a few heart attacks if a snake turned up in the lion’s den.”

Harry and Katie bid goodbye to the other three as they made their way up to Gryffindor Tower.

“Are you and Ron fighting again?”

“Honestly, I have no idea what’s wrong with him,” Harry said truthfully.

As soon as they’d been dismissed, Ron had stalked off. He didn’t speak to anyone as he stomped back up to the castle, not even Hermione when she’d hurried up to him.

“He’s been really weird with you this year, more than usual I mean,” Katie said, “I know he’s your friend Harry, but is he always that quick to fly off the handle over every little thing?”

“He’s always had a short temper. Normally I can handle it, but it’s been hard this year, especially since he didn’t believe me when my name came out of the goblet.”

“You’re at that age where people start changing. Perhaps you’re just growing apart?” Katie suggested, “or maybe he’ll come around once he’s had a chance to clear his head?”

“Maybe.”

If Katie was the one bringing this up, then Harry’s attempts to distance himself from Ron must be working. Given that she was only talking about the other boy's behaviour, Harry was obviously being subtle enough to defer suspicion from himself. This was good. If Katie was thinking like this, then others would be too, which meant that it would be even more believable when Harry finally cut ties with Ron for good.

They were met with a wall of noise as soon as the Fat Lady swung open. Everyone was in very high spirits. Even though they had seen what happened in the lake via the screens, they still peppered Harry with questions about everything that happened. From the scattered accounts from the crowd, Harry learned that Fleur had been attacked by a mob of Grindylow in the weed beds. When Cedric went to help her, they turned on him as well, and were only scared off by the Giant Squid.

“I nearly had a heart attack when it suddenly appeared. It was bad enough when it nearly grabbed you! I thought it was going to eat you all!”

Harry didn’t say that he hadn’t felt any hostility from the Giant Squid. In fact, he was very glad that it had helped protect Fleur and Cedric.

Fred and George had gathered a load of food from the kitchens, and the party was in full swing. Harry enjoyed himself tremendously, chatting with all sorts of people about the task, but also about other things. As loud and chaotic as it was, there was also a sense of comradery in the air, which Harry very much liked.

He made his way to get himself a plate of food when somebody grabbed his arm. Harry spun around to see it was Ron. Ron’s expression was blank, but there was something in his eyes that unsettled Harry.

“Everything alright Ron?”

“You need to tell everyone that I’m not gay.”

“Ok? Why can’t you do it yourself?”

“You don’t understand. I’m not gay!”

“So tell people that. I don’t see why it’s such a big deal,” Harry said.

“Of course it’s a big deal!” Ron’s grip on Harry’s arm grew tighter and he shook him slightly. “All the other Champions rescued their dates to the Yule Ball, and you rescued me. Now everyone’s going to think I’m gay because of you!”

“It’s not my fault. I wasn’t the one who chose you. Besides, who cares if you’re gay?” Harry tried stepping back but couldn’t because of Ron’s grip. “Ron, let me go.”

Ron pulled his arm.

“I am not a poof Harry! You need to make sure that people know that!”

“Something wrong over here?”

Seamus appeared. He and Dean flanked Harry.

“Got a problem with poofs?” Seamus asked.

“Of course I do! They’re disgusting!” Ron said.

“Surely you can’t think that,” Harry said, “I mean, I’m not disgusting, am I?”

Ron froze. The crowd around them went quiet, but that didn’t seem to register to the redhead.

“You- you’re one of them?”

“I think so? I’m pretty sure I like guys at least. Sirius said there’s nothing wrong with that,” Harry said, trying to be nonchalant about it.

“Oh my god, you’re a poof. I’ve been sleeping in a dormitory with a poof!” Ron’s nose turned up, as though he was smelling something foul. “You pervert! You’ve seen me naked!”

“Don’t you dare call Harry a pervert!” Seamus said, “all five of us share a dormitory *and* a bathroom. Of course we’d see each other naked at some point.”

“I don’t see why you’re freaking out about it now. Harry’s not the only one who likes guys in our dormitory,” Dean said.

Ron’s eyes widened even further.

“You as well?” He turned to Seamus. “The three of you?”

“You’ve been rooming with three poofs for the last three years and guess what? Nothing’s happened,” Seamus said.

“You’re making a big deal out of absolutely nothing. I’m exactly the same person I was yesterday and you didn’t have a problem with me, and Seamus and Dean, then. Can you please let go of my arm?” Harry said.

Ron shoved Harry away, as though the contact had burned him.

“You’re all disgusting freaks.”

Despite himself, Harry flinched at the word. This was the first time he'd been called a freak at Hogwarts, and it was from the mouth of somebody who claimed to be his best friend. It shouldn't hit him so hard. He knew Ron wasn't who he claimed to be, so why did it hurt so much to hear it now?

Ron stormed off, shoving past Harry and out of the common room. Seamus looked ready to chase after him, cheeks flushed red with anger, but Harry's hand on his arm stopped him. Harry didn't want his friend to leave.

"That was unpleasant," Fred said, looking at the now shut portrait hole with disappointment, "sorry guys. We had no idea he was like that. Rest assured the rest of us don't think that way."

"It's alright," Harry said, "I know you don't."

"He never should have said that stuff about you," George said.

"He has a point though."

All eyes turned to Hermione. Harry hadn't realised she was nearby, but considering the common room was otherwise silent, there was no way she hadn't heard what Ron said.

"Hermione, do not even try to justify what he said," Harry said.

"He was tactless, but Ron's always been like that. All I'm saying is that he's got a point. There's no logical reason for you to be gay," Hermione said in that insufferable matter-of-fact tone, "the whole point of sexual intercourse is to have children, and that requires a man and a woman. There's no way for two men to have a child so what's the point in even considering it?"

"That's not the case in the magical world," Seamus said, glowering at Hermione.

"That's not to mention how unsanitary it is," Hermione continued, ignoring Seamus, "sex between men is incredibly unclean and makes you vulnerable to all sorts of horrible diseases. Oh Harry, I really think you should reconsider this."

"I am not going to listen to you insult me and my friends and try to tell me who I can and can't like," Harry said, feeling his temper rise.

"I'm only thinking about what's best--"

"No Hermione. I don't want to hear it!" Harry snapped.

"But Harry--"

"Hermione, you need to stop talking right now," Dean said.

The dark skinned boy, normally so calm and level headed, was furious. Hermione looked around the common room, obviously trying to find support from someone, but everybody was looking at her with disapproval. With a huff, she turned her nose up at everyone.

“Well don’t come crying to me if you catch something nasty!”

With that, she stormed off after Ron. Harry watched her go, and his anger at the situation left with her. He stared up at the ceiling, willing his eyes to stop burning and for his raging emotions to calm down.

“Your friends are mental,” Angelina said.

“They are not my friends any more,” was all Harry said.

This was what he’d been wanting to happen for the last year and a half. There was no way Ron and Hermione could apologise for this and pretend like nothing happened. Not only had they revealed their own prejudicial attitudes on full display in front of the entirety of Gryffindor house, they’d also directly insulted Harry with those very attitudes. Harry would be well justified in turning away from them. It was what he wanted, so why did it hurt so much?

Though the party resumed, Harry felt no desire to celebrate. He went up to the dormitory and sat against his headboard, face pressed against his knees. He was likely making his real friends worried, but he wanted to be alone right now to process things. Or so he thought, because he felt the bed dip each side of him.

“Harry?”

It was Seamus and Dean. He buried his face in his knees again.

“You don’t think differently about me, do you?”

“Of course we don’t,” Seamus said, “you’re still Harry to us, no matter what those dicks say.”

“Do you want to be alone, or do you want one of us to stay?” Dean asked.

Even though he wasn’t looking, he grabbed hold of both of them.

“Stay, please.”

They settled in more comfortably on either side of him. After a few minutes, an arm wrapped around him, then another, until Harry was being held between them. It made his heart race, but it was a feeling he would never give up. Ron’s harsh words and Hermione’s insufferable ignorance had hurt him, but perhaps it was worth it if he could have this?

Chapter End Notes

And there it is. The break in the friendship we've all been waiting for.

On a side note, as cool as the visuals under the lake and in the maze were in the books, I'm not the only one to find it odd that there was no way for the spectators to see what

was happening.

A step forward

The first thing Harry did when he woke up the next morning was let Sirius know what happened. Their conversation was brief as it was fairly early, but Sirius was proud that he was able to stand up for himself. The hangings around Ron's bed were shut tight. Harry hadn't seen him return to the dormitory last night, and he had no desire to run into him. Harry left the dormitory, walked through the empty castle and strolled along the shore of the lake. Just yesterday, Harry had dived to the bottom to retrieve Ron as part of the Triwizard Tournament. Now here he was, free of his former best friends.

The walk helped to clear his head such that when he went back inside he felt more like himself. Dean and Seamus were coming down the marble staircase, and they smiled when they saw him. Harry smiled back, and he found the action came to him easily. The three of them went into the Great Hall for breakfast. The seats around Harry were all filled with the people he cared about; Seamus and Dean either side of him, and Neville, Parvati and Lavender across from him. They spoke freely, clearly catching Harry up on all the things he'd missed when he was monopolised with Ron and Hermione.

Speaking of, Hermione showed up to breakfast half an hour later, followed by a disgruntled Ron. They received a rather chilly welcome from the rest of Gryffindor, and there were no seats available anywhere near Harry. Up at the staff table, Harry caught the way Dumbledore frowned when he saw the distance.

"Um, Harry? Yesterday in the second task, was that Gillyweed you used?" Neville asked.

"It was. I talked about the task with Sirius and he sent me some," Harry said.

"Really? Gillyweed is in the book you got me for Christmas. It's got so many incredible magical properties!" Neville said. The others all looked fond of the boy's enthusiasm.

"Professor Sprout says she'd love to be able to grow some in the lake but seeds are hard to get."

"I've got some. Not sure why but Sirius sent me some as well," Harry thought for a moment.

"Though now that you mention it, he did say something about Professor Sprout liking them."

Judging by the way Neville lit up, Sirius wasn't wrong. They chatted away about Herbology for the rest of breakfast, and it was clear the passion that Neville had for the subject.

Considering how poorly the boy often did in his other classes, it was great to see an area where he was able to shine.

Professor Sprout did, in fact, like the seeds. After breakfast, Harry brought them down to the greenhouses, and somehow found himself roped into a special project to start growing them in the lake. Sprout assured them that it wouldn't take away from their studies, or Triwizard preparations, and that she only offered to let them do it as the seeds were Harry's and Neville was the most interested. Harry didn't mind, and happily agreed.

He spent the rest of the morning with Neville discussing how they were going to grow the Gillyweed. Neville's skill in Herbology shone through as he talked about finding the right part of the lake to start the cultivation. Harry knew that everyone had different skill sets, but it made him wonder what Neville would look like if he could show this level of ability in all of his classes. He obviously worked better with his hands instead of a wand.

A wand?

A thought suddenly occurred to Harry, one that he didn't particularly like, but once it came to him he couldn't get it out of his head. With the exception of Potions, where Neville couldn't hold his nerve beneath Snape's malicious aura, Neville struggled in all subjects which required him to use a wand. Transfiguration, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, any time he needed to cast a spell, Neville only managed it after lots of intense practise. Then Harry remembered a story Neville told the other Gryffindors about how he found out he had magic. His Uncle Algie had been trying to make magic express itself for years. They thought he was a Squib right until Neville fell out of a window and bounced down the road.

Very little accidental magic, and difficulties with casting magic using a wand. The only subject he excelled at was a practical subject which required very little active magic use. All of these painted a particular picture in Harry's mind.

Harry raced upstairs before lunch and called Sirius via the mirror. His godfather appeared a moment later, looking worried.

"Harry? What's happened? Did Ron do something to you?"

"No, Sirius, I'm fine. I just thought about something that could potentially be quite serious," Harry said, "I think I'm not the only one that had spells cast on them. I think Neville has them as well."

Sirius frowned.

"What makes you say that?"

"He really struggles whenever he needs to use a wand, but he's brilliant at Herbology which doesn't need one. He barely showed any accidental magic as a kid but he's clearly magical," Harry said, "somebody put a spell on me that restricted my magical core. Magic is so much easier for me now that it's gone. I think somebody has done the same thing to Neville."

"It's certainly possible," Sirius said, "it'd be a good idea to reach out to Augusta anyway. There's few people quite as well connected as Augusta Longbottom. Frank and Alice were good friends with James and Lily, so I can send her a letter. I can pass along your worries as if they were something Moony noticed when he was teaching last year. At the very least, she can have Neville checked."

"Thank you," Harry said, "I'd hate for him to be held back from being who he was meant to be."

“Your care for your friends is one of your best traits, even more so now that your friends are actually who they say they are,” Sirius said, “how are Seamus and Dean doing? Ron’s words might have been aimed at you, but it applied to them as well.”

“I think they’re alright. Seamus was pretty angry about it, but he seems to have calmed down, and Dean was more upset about me being upset,” Harry said, “I’ve not seen much of Ron and Hermione so far today, and I don’t intend to.”

“That’s good to hear. I’m glad they’re doing ok. You now just need to be careful. It’s possible that somebody will try and dose you again. Possibly Ron or Hermione, but just as likely it could be Ginny or Dumbledore.”

“I know. I will.”

The rest of that day was fantastic. Free from having to pretend, Harry was able to fully enjoy his time with his friends. Harry mentioned wanting to fly, so Fred and George supervised them as the group of fourth-years borrowed the school brooms to fly around the Quidditch pitch. Viggo joined them, and to everyone’s surprise, so did Parvati and Lavender.

“I wanted to know what all the fuss is about,” Parvati said.

“Yeah. We’re probably not going to be international Quidditch stars, but knowing how to handle a broom is a useful skill in this day and age,” Lavender said.

“Quite right. At Durmstrang, everyone learns to fly properly, and there are mandatory sessions everyone must attend every month to keep up proficiency,” Viggo said, “not everyone plays Quidditch or enjoys racing, but it’s important that people have options for travel,” Viggo said.

Of the group, Seamus and Dean were perhaps the most comfortable on the brooms. Neville looked very nervous, and Parvati and Lavender were completely clueless. Harry and Viggo remained close to the ground with the latter three while Fred and George accompanied Seamus and Dean. With some gentle coaching, Harry and Viggo coached Neville, Parvati and Lavender into flying a basic course five feet above the ground.

“You have good friends here,” Viggo commented, “much better than those other two.”

“You heard about that,” Harry winced.

Viggo gestured to Parvati and Lavender.

“Gossip and rumour works in every school. Of course I heard it.” Viggo grinned, then sniffed loudly. “I suspect that the Weasley boy would have hated Durmstrang. Too many things would have been too close to the disgusting things he said to you and your friends.”

“Really? How so?”

There was still a lot that Harry didn’t know about the other magical schools. It was another thing which confused him about this tournament. It was supposed to promote positive international relationships, but the visiting students were kept almost entirely separate and

they were told nothing about what the sister schools were like. It almost would have been better had the tournament been held elsewhere. That way Harry would have been able to learn through exposure.

“At Durmstrang, we have a system of Eldre Søsken, or Elder Siblings. When we join the school at eleven, the boys are assigned an Eldre Bror and the girls an Eldre Søster to act as a mentor and guide for their school years. The responsibility is taken very seriously, the older students considering it their duty to prepare their Yngre Søsken both for their time at Durmstrang, but also for the world once they leave,” Viggo explained.

“Is that why I always see the older Durmstrang students going over school work with the younger ones at meals?” Harry said.

“Mhm. The Eldre Søsken make sure their Yngre Søsken do not fall behind, especially since they aren’t receiving typical Durmstrang schooling here. It’s a shame there is nowhere properly set up for duelling, but we have made do,” Viggo said.

“That sounds really nice. You’re right, it’s very different from what we have at Hogwarts.”

“But there’s more. Here you share rooms based on year group, but at Durmstrang, the only year that does that is the seventh-years. I have shared a room with my Eldre Bror for the last three years, and when I return to Durmstrang, I will share with my Yngre Bror.”

“Your Eldre Bror is Viktor?” Harry asked.

“Indeed he is, and a very capable mentor he has been. He has performed his duty flawlessly,” Viggo smirked, “and I must say, he is also very warm to sleep next to.”

“You’ve slept with him!” Harry somehow managed to keep his voice to hiss.

Viggo laughed.

“Not like that. Durmstrang is even further north than Hogwarts. In the winter, the nights get very cold, so sharing beds for warmth is fairly common.”

Harry could now fully see why Viggo said Ron would hate it there. If even the thought that somebody might think he was gay was repulsive to him, then having to share a bed with another boy or else freeze in the night would be unbearable.

His gaze drifted upwards to where Fred and George were showing some Quidditch manoeuvres to Seamus and Dean. It sometimes got quite cold in the dormitory, especially if Harry was trying to use the Ritual of Remembrance. What would things have been like if Hogwarts was more like Durmstrang?

Harry shook his head, trying to dispel the thought. Viggo chuckled to himself.

“Go on,” he said.

“What?”

“Go fly with your friends. You and Viktor are both creatures of the air. Leave your earthbound friends with me.”

Harry thanked him and turned his Firebolt upwards. By the time he touched the ground again, he was breathless and windswept, but best of all, he was laughing right alongside Seamus and Dean. When Seamus put his arm around Harry’s shoulder, or Dean brushed against him, it felt right, and Harry had no idea what to make of that.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, time continued to pass. March finally arrived, and with it came more of the Champion Quidditch games. Things were neck and neck, and Harry couldn’t be happier. What to do about Seamus and Dean was still confusing. Nothing much had changed between them. Harry still went swimming in the morning, and Dean joined him in the showers afterwards. He always enjoyed their conversations, but he felt guilty every time he had to avert his eyes from wandering.

Why was this such an issue now? He had accepted that he liked boys a long time ago, and being around these two had never been a big deal before. What had changed? Harry wanted to say nothing, but that wasn’t exactly true. It was all out in the open now after Ron’s diatribe. Harry liked boys, and apparently Seamus and Dean did too. The small bud of hope that had formed in his chest grew every day, but he was still tormented by worry.

Because he didn’t just like one, or the other. He liked both at the same time. When he looked back through a book on magical genealogy, he couldn’t find any mention of three person relationships. It just didn’t seem to happen.

He hoped that speaking to the others in the Ring Realm would help him, but every time he hoped to go there, he never did. Frustrated, Harry shut his hangings, stripped out of his pyjamas and placed his Focus Stone nearby. At least the familiar routine of meditation would help calm his mind, and if he was able to see a magical memory, then it would be even better. Occasionally such meditation even helped him access the Ring Realm.

When he opened his eyes, it wasn’t to the endless ocean of the Ring Realm. His body felt ethereal and floaty, meaning he’d tapped into the Ritual of Remembrance. It wasn’t exactly what he wanted, but Harry was still intrigued by whatever memory he was being shown. Following the tug inside him, Harry disconnected from gravity and like a ghost, floated out of the window.

It was day time, the sun high in the sky. The Hogwarts grounds were peaceful and calm. Was this before the Muggle army was camped on the opposite shore, or after? There was no way to tell. Harry floated down to the stone steps leading to the front doors. He continued to follow the tug down the sloping lawns towards where Hagrid’s hut should be. It was bizarre to see that patch of land empty. Instead, he found a familiar paddock at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

A small group of children stood huddled near the fence. There was a mix of ages, but Harry would guess most were about thirteen or so. None of them were wearing school robes. They each wore what looked like normal clothing from the past, but all had a neckerchief around

their neck coloured with Gryffindor scarlet bordered by gold or Slytherin green bordered by silver.

“Here we are children. Remember to stay calm. We wouldn’t want to spook her.”

Godric emerged from the woods leading a beautiful unicorn. The man looked a bit older than the last time he’d seen him in these memories; his beard a bit longer, a few more lines on his face, but that beaming smile was ever the same. He didn’t bring the unicorn right to the fence as he began telling the children all about it.

This was a lesson. Harry was actually getting to see Godric teach! This was a privilege many would trade their wands for. Harry settled in next to the students, listening to Godric. Whenever they talked in the Ring Realm, Godric’s passion for teaching and caring for children was obvious, but here it shone like the sun. The breadth of his knowledge of unicorns was vast, and the children all hung on his every word. Even Harry found himself swept up in it, learning loads about the creature.

As the lesson came to an end, Godric’s head shot up and he grinned widely.

“Alright then children. It is time for lunch. Let’s head back up to the castle now.”

Godric led the group up the lawn to the front doors, shortening his own strides to easily match the pace of the children. He answered their questions without ever losing his bright smile. There was a sense of safety about him. A long trilling note was heard and everyone looked up to see a majestic red bird swoop overhead. It landed lightly on Godric’s shoulder.

“Fawkes my friend. I see you’ve come to greet our guest as well,” Godric said.

Fawkes? Harry stared at the phoenix, completely taken aback by it. He thought Fawkes was Dumbledore’s bird?

“Lord Gryffindor, that’s such a pretty bird,” one of the girls said.

“Fawkes is a phoenix dear Lillith. Perhaps we shall have a lesson on them at some point. There is much to be discussed. After all, many of your wands have phoenix feather cores,” Godric said.

“Um, Lord Gryffindor, who is that?”

One of the boys was staring right at Harry. Harry jolted. How was this boy seeing him? This should only be a memory. Oh god he was naked! He floated up into the air, covering his privates, but the boy kept looking in the same direction. Harry followed his gaze. Walking up the path from the gates was an old man. He wore pale blue robes and had a long grey beard that reached his waist. He leaned heavily on a wooden staff. The hat on his head was navy blue and covered in stars, and Harry realised that it was the Sorting Hat.

“Is that-”

“I think it is-”

Several of the children were looking at the old man in awe. When he was close enough, Godric moved to the front of the group and knelt down on one knee before the old man, bowing his head.

“Master Merlin.”

Harry gaped. This was Merlin! Gasps and muttered whispers came from the children, and they all hurried to follow Godric’s example of kneeling before him. Merlin chuckled.

“Please children, stand up. I’m not worthy of such an honour from you.” He lightly prodded Godric’s head with his staff. “This one absolutely, since he was my student.”

Godric rubbed his head, still smiling, and rose.

“It is so very good to see you again Master. I trust you have been well?”

“As well as I can.”

“And King Arthur? How are things in Camelot? I have been meaning to visit for a while but my duties here have kept me very busy.”

Merlin jabbed Godric with his staff again to stop him rambling.

“Remember to breathe. Whether in magic or might, calm breathing is important.”

“Of course Master.”

“Do not worry. Arthur and his court are fine. Holding together a kingdom is a difficult task but he has risen to the challenge admirably,” Merlin said, “I couldn’t be prouder of the man he has become.”

Merlin glanced behind Godric at the children still staring at him in awe.

“I had other things I wished to discuss with you. Why don’t we let the children go and eat while we talk?”

It took a little while for Godric to convince the children to return to the castle. All of them wanted to speak to the legendary Merlin. Harry wondered what stories they’d heard about the man back then. It was Godric's bombastic promise to regale them all with tales of his time learning from Merlin that got them to move. The children ran off to lunch, chattering excitedly with one another regardless of the colour of their scarves.

Godric led Merlin down to the shore of the lake, Fawkes still perched on his shoulder. For a while they didn't speak, and it was Godric who broke the silence.

"This isn't a social call, is it?" he said, his voice serious.

"I'm afraid not." Merlin sighed heavily. "Things are getting worse out there. The Muggles are growing more suspicious of magic. More and more wizards and witches are having to keep their magic a secret for fear of retribution, or enslavement. Have they tried their luck here?"

"A local Baron demanded we surrender to him. He tried sending a force of mercenaries across the lake." Godric's expression was furious. "They did not make it to this shore."

The Giant Squid drifted lazily across the surface, and they watched it when it dipped and jetted downwards, causing a large splash.

"We have woven more protections into the wards to deter Muggles from finding us."

"That's what most of us are doing. Arthur is trying to keep Camelot as a safe refuge but it is an uphill struggle. As more of your students enter the world as trained witches and wizards, there are more people who need to keep themselves safe."

"We try our best to teach them exactly that."

"I know, but it's also true that most magical people don't have the kind of protections that Hogwarts or the old noble families have, and with Muggle suspicions rising, it makes it harder for them to seek help," Merlin said, "there's been talk of establishing a formal Ministry to help oversee the affairs of magical Britain."

"I'm not surprised. Other countries have one."

"This would be more than just a council of the noble families. If wizards have to operate in secret from Muggles, there will be lots of work to be done to ensure we all stay safe. Arthur supports it, and has offered the use of Camelot until a more secure and permanent place can be found. Lord Black might not like dealing with Muggles but he accepted the offer."

Merlin turned to gaze up at Hogwarts castle.

"I am truly proud of what you and the others have been able to accomplish here my boy. You've provided a safe haven for all magical children in these Isles. Now even those born to Muggle parents may take their place in our world without having to swear their service to a Lord in exchange for education, but that is exactly why you'll need to be careful," Merlin's tone was grave, "even more so now that you have begun accepting children from the old families as well."

"An excellent suggestion on Salazar's part," Godric said.

"I don't deny it, but doing so takes the power away from the hands of the Lords of the old families. The power of Hogwarts may become too much for them to accept."

"Then I will protect it, even from other wizards if I have to!" Godric said fiercely.

"I'm sure you will, but nobody lives forever." Merlin's smile was tired, and he suddenly seemed so very old. "I'm sure you don't wish to bind your descendants to this school to maintain the wards. What will happen when you and the others are gone?"

Godric looked lost.

"I will find a way. *We* will find a way."

Merlin put his hand on Godric's arm, and his smile was warm and kind.

"I do not doubt that in the slightest. Now then, I believe there are excited children who are eager to learn."

As Godric and Merlin walked back up to the castle, Harry drifted upwards. The memory faded away and he woke in his bed, his mind racing over what he'd just seen.

Merlin was a legendary figure, even more so than the four founders. Some said he was the most brilliant student to come out of Hogwarts, but Harry had just learned it was the opposite. Merlin had taught Godric. Merlin wore the Sorting Hat, and had probably donated it to the school so that students could be sorted when Godric and the others weren't available. It made Harry want to grill Godric about everything he knew about the wise old man the next time he saw him.

It was another part of the story of the founder's era. The establishment of Hogwarts had caused ripples in the magical society of Britain. No longer was magical education strictly limited to the old wizarding families and those who served them. Godric, Salazar, Helga and Rowena accepted everybody, from Muggle-borns to purebloods, offering them all the same level of education and care. Harry could clearly see why that would upset some people. The power of Hogwarts could simply be the power over the teaching of children, but Harry felt it was more than that.

As Celio and the other Potter elves had explained, the wards of a noble family's home were connected to the Lord. The family magic was cultivated over generations, powering the wards to keep them strong and secure. Hogwarts was built much the same, and in the founders' day, they had been the ones to supply it with power. Their families hadn't continued to do so, yet Hogwarts remained just as strong as ever. No other magical dwelling was like this. Was this the power of Hogwarts that the other lords would fear?

Harry dwelled on the magical memory he'd seen for the next few days, but he couldn't figure out anything more. There just wasn't enough concrete information about the founding of Hogwarts to understand the effect it had caused. Harry was almost tempted to scour through the history section of the library, but he didn't want his friends to become worried. It wasn't as though he'd been particularly interested in history before.

At least everything seemed to be going well. Ron and Hermione weren't speaking to him, and Harry was glad for it. He never wanted to speak to them again, and there was no way he would ever pretend to be friends. Ginny looked a mixture of furious and distraught whenever she saw him in those days, but Harry didn't care. Neither she nor Dumbledore tried anything, but that might have been because Harry found himself surrounded by genuine friends.

The rest of the Gryffindor fourth-years had rallied around him now that they didn't have to put up with Ron and Hermione. Parvati and Lavender hung out with them more often, sharing stories they'd heard from around the school. Neville, Seamus and Dean were stalwart presences by his side. The Gryffindor Quidditch team weren't usually that far away either,

and Viggo dropped in and out as he pleased. For the first time in a long time, Harry felt safe and secure.

He didn't want it to change, which was why the thoughts he was having about Seamus and Dean were so distressing. They were really good friends. Harry enjoyed every moment he got to spend with them. Lying side by side with Seamus on either of their beds as they went through Ancient Rune translations and designs, or figuring out Arithmantic calculations to decode spells with Dean were some of the highlights of his days. He knew they liked boys as well, but there was no way they liked *him* that way. And even if they did, what was Harry supposed to do when he liked *both* of them?

It almost made him want to ask Sirius about it, but every time he pulled out the mirror, he chickened out. It was perhaps selfish of him, but he didn't want to talk to Sirius only to be told he had to choose. He didn't want to choose. He didn't want to lose either of them as a friend, which was why he decided he wasn't going to do anything about it.

It was with those thoughts that Harry went down to the lake to swim. The morning air in early March had a crisp quality to it. The sky was bright and blue, only faint wispy clouds decorating it. Harry changed into his swimming trunks, felt the warming charm wash over his skin, and struck out into the lake. The familiar motions helped to calm him. He dived down when he felt a large form moving beneath him. The Giant Squid was drifting lazily. It prodded his chest as it usually did, then it held out an arm to him. Harry held onto it. The presence he felt from the Giant Squid felt familiar to him. It was almost like how Hogwarts felt.

Eventually the Squid swam off, and Harry floated back up to the surface. When he had swum for long enough, he headed back to the shore. He had just finished putting his clothes back on when he heard a branch snapping. Standing at the edge of the little cove were Seamus and Dean. Both looked shocked and nervous to see Harry. Harry was just as surprised to see them.

"Um, hi?" Seamus said.

"Hi? What are you guys doing here? How come you're not still asleep?"

"We uh, we heard you going out for your morning swim," Dean said, "ok, I heard you go out and I woke Seamus."

"Why?"

"Could we talk to you Harry?" Seamus asked.

This felt like a sitting down kind of conversation but there was nowhere to sit in the cove. Harry was nervous, as did the others.

"It's been a bit mad these last couple of weeks, and we realised that we never thanked you for standing up to Ron and Hermione like that. I know you mainly did it because they were insulting you as well, but we still really appreciated it," Dean said.

“That’s not why I did it. I mean, they were insulting me, but I would have been just as upset with them if they were only insulting you.”

“We know, and that’s what makes you such a great guy. It’s honestly impressive how much you can care about people,” Seamus said, “I didn’t really think that much about it, but I’m really glad that we became friends last year. It just makes me wish we could have had it sooner.”

“Me too,” Harry said, trying not to sound bitter.

When he looked up, he saw Dean and Seamus exchanging nervous glances.

“Are you two alright?” Harry asked, now getting quite worried.

“It’s just hard to put it properly into words,” Dean said.

“I guess it’ll be easier if I just come out and say it. I really like you Harry,” Seamus blurted out, looking embarrassed but refusing to look away, “I’m not sure when it began, but I started really looking forward to the times we could be together not really doing anything exciting. Reading in the dormitory, working out rune stuff together, even just talking about whatever we wanted. I could joke and mess around with you, and then be serious and studious, and you’d be right there, so yeah, I like you a lot.”

The burgeoning hope in his chest was practically singing, but surely this was too good to be true. Harry turned to Dean, who smiled weakly at him.

“I feel the same way, for a lot of the same reasons. I thought that I would be alone when I came to Hogwarts, raised entirely by Muggles in a world of magic. I was happy with the friends I made, but I still felt like I was missing out on stuff. You were in the same position, and last year I finally had somebody I could talk to about some of the weird things that wizards don’t have but Muggles do,” Dean said, “I’m not sure when me liking you turned from liking you as a friend to liking you more, but it did, and I do.”

“You- you both like me *like that* ?”

“We do,” Seamus said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we didn’t know if you would like either of us back. I only told Seamus when he accidentally let something slip to me after the World Cup. Both of us decided that we wouldn’t say anything to you at first so we could figure things out,” Dean said.

“But then you told Ron that you liked guys and we didn’t know what to do. All of us really like the friendship we have, but we didn’t want to keep this a secret any longer,” Seamus said, “so we decided to tell you together, because you have a right to know.”

“And whatever you decide, we’ll accept it without issue. One of us or neither of us, just let us know so we can still be friends,” Dean said, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Harry caught the slight fear in what he said. The pair of them were just as scared of messing things up as he was, but they showed the courage Gryffindor house was known for by telling him, whereas Harry was prepared to stay silent. His heart clenched seeing them looking scared, so Harry decided to listen to his heart for once.

Harry stepped closer and through his arms around both of them. They shuffled and didn't hug back, making noises of confusion.

"Harry?"

"But which one-"

"I didn't want to have to choose, so I didn't say anything." Harry kept his head hidden in their shoulders so they couldn't see how red he was. "Please don't make me choose between you."

"But- wait, so you like both of us?" Seamus asked.

Harry nodded.

"I know it's really selfish of me, and it's probably not what either of you want, but I hated having to think about liking one of you more than the other, even *like that*," he said, "I'm sorry if I've messed this up."

But then their arms came up and hugged him back. It felt right and Harry sank into the combined embrace. Sirius was the only one who hugged him like this, like they *cared*. When it ended, Harry didn't let go. The three of them stood there on the shore of the lake in a little triangle, arms still around each other. It was more than Harry ever expected to happen, but then even more added to it when Seamus leaned in and pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek, making him blush fiercely. The sandy-haired boy was grinning happily, his cheeks also red. Dean did the same thing, and Harry nearly melted.

"What does this mean?" Harry asked, "I haven't the faintest idea how relationships work."

"Neither do I," Dean said, "but I'm happy with this."

"Me neither, but I don't care. If you don't want to be without either of us, then the three of us will be together," Seamus said with conviction, "let bastards like Ron and Hermione think what they want about us. It doesn't change anything."

"But what about you two? You said you liked me, but I don't want to force you two to be together if you don't want that," Harry said.

Seamus and Dean looked at one another, as though considering something. It was like they were working out their options, but before Harry could say anything, they leaned in and kissed. Harry's mouth hung open as he watched them. It wasn't like the pecks they'd given him. It started out chaste, but then it kept going. Something stirred within Harry, but it wasn't jealousy or anger. His grip on the two boys unconsciously tightened, causing them to part.

"I think we can be very happy together with you Harry," Dean said.

Seamus smirked.

“Was that nice to watch?”

Harry nodded before he could think.

“Well let’s make sure you’re not left out then.”

More kisses were exchanged between all three of them, and even when they decided they really needed to head back to the castle for breakfast, they didn’t entirely move away from one another. Seamus kept his arm around Harry’s shoulders and Dean held his hand. Harry’s heart was soaring. The worries of this year seemed to melt away, and for one glorious moment, Harry could just be a normal happy kid who had taken a step forward with his two best friends.

Encounter in the dark

Even without the Hogwarts gossip mill, it was hard to keep secrets in the castle. Harry had hoped he'd be able to keep this new development private for at least a little while. After nipping up to the dormitory for a quick shower, Harry joined his fellow fourth-years at the Gryffindor table, sliding into the free space between Dean and Seamus. Viggo had joined them today. His unclouded eye moved between the three of them, and he turned in his seat and held out a hand to Lavender, one eyebrow raised.

"I'm not paying up until we hear the details," she said.

"Yeah, we don't know if you've won yet," Parvati piped up.

"What's going on?" Dean asked.

It was slightly terrifying the way the three across from them all simultaneously turned their attention.

"Only the love triangle of the century," Lavender said, "so? Who confessed to whom? What's the shape looking like now?"

"Excuse me!" Harry said, "have you been betting on us?"

"Of course we have. The three of you have been circling around each other ever since I got here," Viggo said, "even more so after the Yule Ball."

"Come on, put us out of our misery," Parvati said.

None of them said anything, but the three matching blushes were more than enough evidence. Viggo nodded decisively.

"Pay up girls."

Parvati and Lavender handed across a few silver coins each.

"I swear to Merlin if anyone else finds out about this, I will find a way to make your lives a living hell," Seamus said, his voice low and stern.

"But we want to know-" Parvati said.

"Please, stop. This only just happened. At least give us some time to find our feet and work things out," Harry said.

"At least until after the summer, then we can answer some *respectful* questions," Dean said.

The girls seemed alright with that, but Viggo was very disappointed, at least until he made Parvati and Lavender agree to keep him informed. After that they were able to enjoy a fairly ordinary breakfast. Harry felt a thigh occasionally brush against his own, and he smiled.

Harry hadn't been kidding when he said he had no idea how relationships worked, which was why he was slightly confused when nothing really changed. He had been friends with both boys well before feelings had developed, so they fell back into their old routine, just with a bit more. There was more contact between the three of them, though only when nobody else was around, which was usually only in the boys dormitory. Neville was told and while he was very happy for them and didn't mind any PDA around him, he did ask that they keep it respectful. Harry completely agreed, even if it was hard not to melt every time he received a hug.

Of course, neither Ron nor Hermione were told. Not that they tried to hide it, but Harry really didn't want to have to deal with his former friends' hateful and ignorant attitudes. They weren't speaking to him, which Harry was more than happy with, especially since it was their actions which caused the rift.

Harry opened his eyes to see the endless ocean of the Ring Realm. He was quickly swept up into a hug by James and Godric, while receiving a polite nod from Salazar.

"Dear nephew, it has been a while! Please tell us everything!" Godric said.

Harry quickly told them everything that had happened since they last spoke. All three of them were furious when they heard about the second task.

"At least Braich was able to keep you safe," Salazar said, "Helga would have had kittens otherwise."

"Braich?" Harry asked.

"The Giant Squid," Godric said.

"Wait, the Giant Squid in the lake is the same one from your time!" Harry said.

Godric and Salazar exchanged a knowing smile.

"We have told you before that Hogwarts will always keep her children safe. Godric, Helga, Rowena and I placed many protections on the castle," Salazar said, "Braich comes from an ancient species of magical squid that lives only in the deepest oceans. Even amongst magical people, many do not believe they actually exist as only three sightings have ever been reported. Helga met Braich when she was a young girl and they formed a close bond. When Braich learned of Helga's intentions to construct Hogwarts, she agreed to reside in the lake."

"We wove her into the magic of the castle and she became one of the Guardian Spirits," Godric said.

"I heard stories of first-years who fell into the lake while crossing being helped back into their boats by the Giant Squid," James said.

"Of course. Braich would never allow a child to come to harm in the lake, as you saw during the second task when the Grindylows attacked," Salazar said, "her presence was the only

reason I felt comfortable allowing Godric and Rowena to teach the students to swim in the lake.”

“The night that I witnessed in the Ritual of Remembrance,” Harry said, “there was an army on the other side of the lake between the mountains. Godric was trying to stay guard but Salazar told him to go to bed. Camran and Jon tried staying up as well. Salazar said that Suil and the other Guardian Spirits were ready to defend the castle.”

Godric looked melancholy.

“I remember that night. Young Camran and Jon were terrific boys, always doing their best to look after the younger students. I’m so very proud of both of them,” Godric said, “twice in my life did an army attempt to attack Hogwarts by crossing the lake. The first was the army you saw, three nights later. With Braich in the water, neither army reached the other shore.”

“But what of the other Guardian Spirits? I don’t remember hearing about anything like that when I was in school,” James said, “who’s Suil?”

Harry caught Salazar’s eye.

“Suil was the basilisk,” he said, coming to a realisation.

Salazar nodded.

“How on earth is a basilisk supposed to be a guardian!” James demanded.

“I would have thought it was obvious. Had an army managed to breach our defences close enough to reach the castle, while all the students were safe and secure in the dormitories, Suil would unleash her very *displeased* gaze on the intruders. It matters not the might of a magical or Muggle army when meeting the eye of a basilisk,” Salazar said haughtily, “Suil was proud of the position she held. I constructed my chamber so that she may be comfortable until she was needed, and as a refuge for the children to retreat to once she had been unleashed.”

“That’s not how she’s remembered,” Harry said, “Voldemort used her to attack the school twice. He opened the Chamber of Secrets when he was at school and used the basilisk to kill a Muggle born girl. Two years ago, he did the same thing. Thankfully nobody died but quite a few were petrified.”

Harry winced.

“I’m sorry, but I killed her.”

Salazar cursed.

“You do not need to apologise to me. You are not to blame. That despicable moron who claims to be my Heir is responsible,” Salazar sighed.

“But she was your snake and I killed her.”

"No, you freed her," Salazar said, "Suil loved the castle and though she only rarely got to interact with them, she loved the students. Her duty meant everything to her. To be forced by the Familiar bond between her and the Slytherin line to go completely against that duty would have been heart-breaking for her. To attack any student would have caused immense distress, and I would not be surprised if she was driven mad when she killed that poor girl. For fifty years, she lived in that torment, so for freeing her, I thank you."

Harry didn't feel like he deserved the gratitude, but he felt better knowing that Salazar wasn't angry with him.

"So the Slytherin Guardian Spirit was the basilisk; the Hufflepuff Guardian Spirit is the Giant Squid; what's the Guardian Spirits for Gryffindor and Ravenclaw?" James asked.

Godric grinned.

"Now that would be telling. I think I'll leave it to my dearest nephew to see if he can figure it out."

James pouted. Harry wanted to laugh, but the discussion of the magical memory reminded him of what he'd seen most recently.

"I saw another magical memory. It was later than the first one, where Merlin came to visit the castle," Harry said, "he seemed really worried."

"Because he was," Godric said, "my teacher rarely visited Hogwarts, as doing so always caused a stir amongst the students. He came when he felt there was something we needed to know, news that may not have reached us. He always did his best to counsel us as well as was possible."

"They were darker times back then, and darker times are approaching," Salazar said, "not only the conspiracy surrounding you. You will need allies to aid you."

"Sirius and Remus have been a big help, as have Andromeda and Arthur," Harry said, "and Sirius is reaching out to Lady Longbottom."

"It is a good start, particularly for Arthur as he will be able to monitor his wife's behaviour," Salazar said, "it is also good that you have been smoothing out the tensions between the houses, particularly between Slytherin and Gryffindor."

"The younger years have mostly been following my lead, while the older years are a bit more aloof but still willing to be civil," Harry said, "Ron's the only one who's been making a fuss about it."

"And have the Slytherin's been behaving as well?"

"Mostly? It's hard to tell really, since their upbringing usually has them acting more formal anyway."

"Even so, it's good progress, especially now that you are no longer in the clutches of your former friends. I most heartily approve of the people you've surrounded yourself with,"

Salazar said.

"I'm just sorry you had to hear such vile things said about you," James said.

"It's alright. It was the perfect excuse to end the friendship between both of them, and there's no way they can backtrack like they've done in the past, because it was direct insults rather than just arguing," Harry said, then willing himself not to blush, "it was worth it."

"They sound like really nice boys," James said, reading between the lines.

"They really are."

"Have you considered telling them about all this? We know that Mr Thomas knows about you being from a noble family, but they don't know the full extent of it," Salazar said.

"I don't want to lie to them, but I also don't want to burden them. Everything going on with Dumbledore and Voldemort, they'd be dragged into it," Harry said.

"If I may, by associating with you they are already 'dragged' into it. I suspect that they would want to be by your side even if you were not in a union," Godric said.

"I know, but they've never had to deal with all the mess that seems to happen around me. They got to have a mostly normal Hogwarts experience. Being with me, that'll be very unlikely to happen."

James pulled him into a side hug.

"I never told Lily I was Heir Potter until we were nearly graduating from Hogwarts. She knew that I was from a wealthy family, but as it seems like most Hogwarts students outside Slytherin, she was unaware that magical society had nobility. In seventh year we started dating, and I was so over the moon that I could finally be with her that I was scared that me telling her would drive her off," James said, "when it looked like we weren't just a school romance, I told her and do you know what she did?"

"What?"

"Hexed several uncomfortable places and then demanded I teach her everything she would need to know about her new place in life. She was more angry that I'd kept it from her than she was about suddenly finding herself the partner of a future lord, because she wanted to make her family proud."

"So I should tell them?"

"When you're ready to, I think you should," James said, "they do deserve to know, because there will be expectations placed on them, but for now, enjoy yourself with them."

The conversation with James, Godric and Salazar was on his mind at breakfast the next morning. Harry was bracketed between Dean and Angelina enjoying a bowl of porridge when

Viktor came storming up to him holding a copy of the Daily Prophet.

“Who is this woman? Is she the one who was at the Wand Weighing?”

He thrust the paper at Harry. On the front page was a rather scandalous sounding headline.

Viktor's secret heartache.

International Quidditch player taken in by obsessed fan

Dean leaned against his shoulder as they both quickly skimmed through the article describing Viktor's relationship with Katie. It was written to make Katie seem like a gold digger, only interested in him for the fame and money. Across from Angelina, Katie was also reading her own copy of the Daily Prophet, and tears were slowly gathering in her eyes.

“How does she know that I invited Katie to visit me in Bulgaria? I told her that on the shore of the lake after the second task when nobody else was around,” Viktor said.

“I have no idea. Rita Skeeter is known for writing unflattering articles about people. Nobody really knows where she gets her facts from. Cedric might know more,” Harry said, “but I don't think any of this is true.”

“I know it isn't,” Viktor said, “I shall be speaking with my lawyer about this. That woman needs to face consequences.”

Viktor rounded the table and sat next to Katie. Harry and Dean turned away to give them a bit of privacy as they talked quietly to one another. When Viktor left, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head, and Alicia scooted in closer to offer her another hug. She looked very upset.

Harry opened the Daily Prophet and continued reading. Now that he wasn't speaking to Hermione, he didn't keep up with the news nearly as much. He just finished reading about the latest Quidditch rankings when a story caught his eye.

Ministry employee still missing. Minister for Magic personally involved.

"Anything interesting?" Dean asked.

"A ministry employee went missing last summer and she still hasn't been found," Harry said. He read aloud, "Bertha Jorkins of the Department of Magical Games and Sports was last seen exiting the Albanian Ministry of Magic after registering her arrival in the country. The trail went cold not long after. Many within the Ministry were concerned for her whereabouts, but Ludo Bagman, Department head, did not take action until Ms Jorkins had been missing for some time."

“That seems really irresponsible,” Dean said, “though judging by the way Mr Bagman seems to act all the time, it's really not that surprising.”

Harry wasn't sure what about the story caught his attention so much. Nothing about it seemed suspicious, but Harry couldn't help thinking back to the Death Eaters at the World Cup. There hadn't been any other stories that he remembered in the Daily Prophet about similar

attacks. If Voldemort was planning something, it was related to Harry's participation in the tournament. That's what all the evidence pointed to.

"I'm sure she'll be found soon," Dean said.

"Hopefully," Harry replied.

"It's nearly time for Ancient Runes," Seamus said, leaning over Harry and Dean.

Harry collected his bag and followed Seamus out of the Great Hall. Not having to spend time with Hermione on the walk to class was great, and when they were alone in the corridors, Seamus reached out and linked their fingers together. It made Harry feel incredibly giddy.

The Champion Quidditch games continued. Cedric's final match was against Viktor, this time held in the afternoon before dinner, and it was incredibly hard fought. The Hufflepuff proved that he was a formidable Seeker in his own right, making Viktor work for it. The Snitch led the pair of them on a merry chase through the rest of the players. After half an hour, it zoomed towards the Hufflepuff goals, and Viktor managed to catch it, flying through one of the hoops in the process.

Harry cheered along with the rest of the crowd. As had become typical after these games, he went down to the Quidditch pitch to congratulate them. Cedric didn't seem upset by his loss, and Viktor praised his skill.

"I can't believe these games are nearly over," Cedric said.

"Is it bad that I'm looking forward to competing in this tournament more than I am about the actual tournament?" Harry said.

"Not at all, at least this tournament you actually volunteered for," Fleur said, "and this tournament doesn't come with ridiculous twists. Quidditch is still Quidditch."

"That is true, and I think everyone would riot if the judges tried to change things," Viktor said.

Just as they were about to leave, McGonagall strode across the pitch towards them.

"That was an exceptional bit of flying Mr Diggory," she said.

"Thanks Professor," Cedric said, "is everything alright?"

McGonagall pursed her lips, looking almost pained.

"Unfortunately I've got a bit of bad news. The third and final task of the Triwizard tournament will be held on May 24th, the final day of exams. It will take about a month to set up and Professor Dumbledore volunteered the Quidditch pitch as the location for it," she said, "I'm afraid that after next week, you won't be able to use the pitch for your games."

"What!" all four of them exclaimed.

“Believe me, I tried to fight them on this as much as I could but I was overruled. All I could do was make sure I was the one to tell you about it,” McGonagall said.

“But why couldn’t they set it up elsewhere? What’s so special about the Quidditch pitch?” Harry said.

“The four of you will be briefed on the third task two weeks beforehand,” McGonagall said, “but it’s not all bad. Unless I’m mistaken, there are only three games left: Potter vs Ms Delacour, Potter vs Mr Krum, and the Championship game?”

“That’s right.”

“After the task, there is a month before our guests are due to leave. This should give you plenty of time to complete the remaining games.” McGonagall looked very contrite. “We’ll be making an announcement about this at breakfast tomorrow, though you’re free to inform your teams now. Just be sure not to tell them anything I’ve told you about the task.”

It wasn’t what any of them wanted to hear, and kind of put a damper on the festivities, but they had to begrudgingly accept it.

“Angelina will be very angry. She was looking forward to playing against you both,” Harry said.

“And I her. I was very impressed with how your Chasers played against Cedric,” Viktor said.

“Indeed. I can’t wait to see what they’re like in an actual game.” Fleur sighed. “I think I will go and inform my team now. They’ll be disappointed, but it’ll be better hearing it from me.”

She split off from the group to head back to the Beauxbaton carriages.

“Harry, may I speak with you for a moment?” Viktor asked.

They said goodbye to Cedric, turning away from the front doors to the castle. They walked past the Beauxbaton carriages and towards the Forbidden Forest. The sun was setting, and the darkness was closing in. They stopped just before the tree line. Viktor looked uneasy.

“Everything alright?” Harry asked.

“I think so, but I am unsure,” Viktor said, mulling over his thoughts for a moment before continuing, “has Katie said anything about what she plans to do after Hogwarts?”

“Um, I don’t think so. Why?”

“It is likely nothing, but when I asked her, she didn’t answer me and I was worried that I made her uncomfortable.”

Was this actually happening? Was Viktor Krum, international Quidditch star, coming to Harry for relationship advice? Harry, who had only just entered his first relationship two weeks ago?”

“She probably didn’t answer because she doesn’t know herself. She’s taking her OWLs this year, so she probably doesn’t know what she wants to do after Hogwarts yet,” Harry said, “I don’t think you made her uncomfortable.”

Viktor’s shoulders relaxed.

“That’s good to hear. I like her very much, and she makes me very happy. I was just worried I was being too forward.”

“You don’t have to be so worried. I think you make her happy too. She probably just needs a bit of time to figure out what she wants to do in the future, but I’m sure she’ll tell you once she has.”

A branch snapped in the forest and Harry’s head immediately turned to face it. He drew his wand, keeping it in his hand ready to act. Harry had a lot of experience with this forest to be cautious about what might be moving about in there in the dark. Viktor copied him. Both of them lit their wands, casting the light about trying to see what it was. There was the sound of something moving, and Harry hoped it was nothing.

A very dishevelled man emerged from behind a bush. He was walking funny, as though fighting against invisible ropes that were pulling him backwards. The light fell on him and Harry gasped when he saw it was Mr Crouch. His normally perfectly put together clothes were torn and muddy. His hair was a mess, and his moustache more grown than Harry had ever seen it. Crouch was muttering up a storm, stumbling towards them and talking to somebody like he was at the office.

“Is that one of the Triwizard judges, the man from your Ministry?” Viktor asked.

“It is,” Harry said, then he called out, “Mr Crouch?”

Closer now, Harry could make out the faded, almost glossed over quality to his eyes.

“Mr Crouch, are you alright?”

He obviously wasn’t, but what else was Harry supposed to ask? Crouch suddenly lunged. Viktor raised his wand, but Crouch tripped over his feet. Harry caught him before he could hit the ground. Up close, Crouch’s eyes faded.

“Need ... Dumbledore ... must tell ... so stupid ... all my fault.”

“Mr Crouch, it’s going to be fine. You’re at Hogwarts. I can go and get Dumbledore,” Harry said clearly.

“Need to tell him ... Dumbledore ... Bertha ... my fault.”

Crouch was very heavy, and while Harry didn’t want to have to interact with Dumbledore, whatever was happening was very serious.

“Come on then. Let’s get you to the castle.”

Harry tried lifting Crouch up to get him to work. As soon as he did that, Crouch stood and stumbled away, back to talking to somebody that wasn't there.

"Can you keep an eye on him while I go and get help?" Harry asked Viktor.

"Be quick," Viktor said cautiously, keeping his wand trained on Crouch.

Harry ran off towards the castle. It was when he reached the Beauxbaton carriages that he suddenly had an idea. Turning off towards them, he pounded on the carriage door. A moment later, a disgruntled looking Beauxbaton seventh-year answered the door.

"What?" the boy demanded.

"I need Madam Maxime to come with me. Tell her Mr Crouch has shown up and looks like he's been attacked! Please, it's urgent!"

There must have been something in Harry's tone which conveyed his truthfulness, because the Beauxbaton boy hurried inside. Harry was left waiting there for close to a minute before Madam Maxime emerged. She did not look happy to see him.

"This is most irregular Mr Potter. What business do you have disturbing our evening?"

"I'm really sorry for disturbing you, but Mr Crouch just showed up out of the forest looking like he's been attacked. Viktor's with him but he needs help. Can you please go and make sure he's alright while I go and get Dumbledore?" Harry asked, "please!"

Madam Maxime looked at him suspiciously. Harry grew impatient. He'd hoped that Maxime would be able to handle things until he came back with Dumbledore, but apparently it was a lost cause. He turned and ran towards the castle. It was late enough that most people were done with dinner now, so Harry ran straight towards Dumbledore's office. He nearly slammed into the gryphon statue.

"Sherbet lemon!"

The statue didn't move. Of course the password would have changed.

"What are you doing here Potter?" said a most unwelcome voice.

Snape came striding down the corridor.

"I need to see Professor Dumbledore. It's urgent!"

"The headmaster is a very busy man who does not just see students on a whim, Potter. Whatever you think is so important will have to wait."

"Please sir! It's Mr Crouch! He showed up out of the Forbidden Forest!"

The statue began spiralling upwards and Dumbledore appeared. Whether he heard voices or had found out somehow, Harry didn't care. Before Snape could interrupt him, Harry hurried to tell Dumbledore what had happened.

“Then please, lead the way Harry.”

With surprisingly fast steps, Dumbledore strode away from the office and towards the stairs. Harry had to hurry to keep up with him.

“Did he say anything to you before you left?” Dumbledore asked.

“Not really. He was really out of it, kept talking like he was somewhere else, then suddenly he’d be lucid and begged to speak to you,” Harry said, “he said it was important.”

“I am sure it is.”

Harry couldn’t see Dumbledore’s expression very well from the side, but he didn’t like the twinkle in his eyes. They left the castle and hurried down the front lawn to where Harry had left Crouch with Viktor. Something silvery white shot passed them, racing along the shore of the lake to the Durmstrang ship. When they arrived, Madam Maxime was helping a disoriented Viktor to sit up.

“What happened here?” Dumbledore asked.

“I could ask you the same question,” Maxime said.

“Viktor, are you alright?”

“I have no idea. I heard someone come up behind me not long after you left. I thought it was you, but there was a light and I was knocked out,” Viktor said, “I don’t know where Crouch is now.”

“What is the meaning of this?”

Karkaroff ran over, took in the sight of his Champion on the ground surrounded by Dumbledore and Maxime, and puffed up in rage.

“Treachery! Conspiracy! I see you two have been working together to sabotage my Champion!”

“I did no such thing!” Maxime said, standing to her full and considerable height, “I only came here because this boy told me there was an emergency involving your student.” She waved a dismissive hand at Harry, glaring at Karkaroff. “I am deeply insulted by your accusation.”

“Everyone, please, calm down,” Dumbledore said, “let us find out what has happened and then proceed from there. Harry, Mr Krum, if you could please explain.”

Between the two of them, they explained what led to them finding Crouch.

“We shall need to search the forest for Mr Crouch. Clearly he isn’t in the right frame of mind,” Dumbledore said.

“I can handle that.” Moody came trudging over from the castle. “I bumped into Snape in the corridors and he filled me in.”

“Very good. Mr Crouch can’t have gotten far. You must find him before something else does.”

Moody nodded then strode into the forest.

“This entire situation is simply outrageous!” Karkaroff raged. “Not only has Hogwarts cheated a child into the tournament, but now a member of your own Ministry of Magic has attacked my student! I shall be submitting a formal complaint to the International Confederation of Wizards!”

“Igor, we don’t know yet if that is what happened,” Dumbledore said calmly.

“And I do not care! I am done listening to your platitudes! All the months of planning, of pretty words about re-forging old ties, and yet all I have received from you is insults! Mark my words, this shall be the last time that Durmstrang competes in this tournament!” Karkaroff glared, then beckoned to Viktor. “Viktor, come!”

Viktor said his goodbye and followed after his headmaster. Maxime gave Dumbledore a last withering stare before she too left.

“Please return to your dormitory Harry. I shall call on you soon,” Dumbledore said.

More than happy to get away from the man, Harry did as he was told. It was only when he was safely back in the castle that he had time to think. He had been worrying that something big was happening, but Crouch suddenly appearing so dishevelled proved it. He needed to talk to Sirius immediately. Fred and George were giving a demonstration in the common room, giving Harry the chance to slip past unseen and get to the dormitory. The other boys weren’t there, so Harry shut his hangings, warded them for privacy, then called Sirius’s name into the mirror.

“Harry, I wasn’t expecting a call,” Sirius said.

“Something just happened.”

He quickly filled Sirius in on everything that happened. When he finished, Sirius looked troubled.

“And there was no sign of him?”

“None that I could see. Viktor made it sound like somebody else had attacked him, probably whoever took Crouch,” Harry said.

“And whoever it was had to have been close by for them to have attacked so soon after you left Viktor. It was incredibly risky for you to have been in that situation, but I won’t say any more on that,” Sirius said, “Crouch’s behaviour is disturbing, but it’s not the only thing I’ve noticed.”

“Has there been anything else? I checked the papers and the only thing I could find was Bertha Jorkins’ disappearance. The Death Eaters have been quiet, haven’t they?”

“In the magical world, yes, but there’s been some strange occurrences in the Muggle world,” Sirius said, “most Magicals wouldn’t have noticed it, but there’s been several unexplained disruptions to the Muggle transportation network. Train tracks have been damaged, roads have been flooded, but the most severe was a plane that had to abort take off when the engines suddenly stopped working.”

“The Death Eaters are behind it?”

“I have no idea. As much as people may have thought otherwise, I was never a Death Eater. I don’t know their plans, but attacks on Muggles were fairly common back during the last war. It wouldn’t surprise me if they were picking up old habits again,” Sirius said.

“So why attack Mr Crouch?”

“Barty Crouch was a controversial figure in the last war. He certainly made himself a sizable list of enemies within Voldemort’s forces for his incredibly strict and heavy handed approach to dealing with Death Eaters, or suspected Death Eaters. It all came back to bite him though when his own son was accused. Crouch sent the boy to Azkaban without a second thought, and there went all of his popularity and good will. His son and his wife both died about a year after that,” Sirius said grimly, “what I’m more concerned about now though is the meeting Dumbledore hinted that he wanted with you.”

“I’ll play along that nothing has changed with me, except for Ron and Hermione, but I have no idea what he’s planning. I’ve not interacted with Dumbledore since I found out the truth,” Harry said.

“Which is why I don’t want you to give him any opportunities to get his claws into you. Remember to keep your head like in your meditation practices and do not look him in the eye,” Sirius said, “when you come home in the summer, I’ll teach you proper mental defences.”

Harry heard the dormitory door open.

“Someone’s here. I’ve got to go.”

“I’ll speak to you soon. Stay safe.”

The mirror went dark. Through the warded hangings, there were the shadowy forms of two figures. One of them knocked on the wooden bedpost.

“Harry?”

It was Dean. Harry took down the wards on the hangings and opened them, seeing Seamus and Dean standing there.

“There you are. We wondered when you missed dinner,” Dean said.

“Sorry. I was talking to Viktor after the Quidditch match and, well, a lot happened.”

The other boys took in his expression. Seamus squeezed onto the bed next to him and Dean sat in front of him.

“Is everything alright?” Seamus asked, “I know he’s your friend but he didn’t insult you, did he?”

“Nothing like that,” Harry said.

“Then what?” Seamus said, “you can tell us.”

That was very true. Even if he hadn’t decided on whether to share the rest of it, Harry could at least tell them this. He told them about what happened with Crouch and the headmasters. When he finished, Seamus wrapped an arm around him.

“You just can’t catch a break, can you?”

“Apparently not,” Harry said, “I’ll probably need to talk to Professor Dumbledore about it, but beyond that there’s nothing I can do.”

“It’s a bit odd that he would show up like that. He hasn’t been at Hogwarts since the first task. I thought it was weird since he must have put so much effort into organising the tournament, but if somebody was hurting him, then it would make sense,” Dean said.

“At least you told somebody before whoever attacked Crouch could attack you.”

Seamus’s hand was scratching lightly at the back of Harry’s neck, and it felt ridiculously good. Harry melted into the contact.

“Enjoying yourself?” Dean asked.

“Keep doing that and you’ll send me right to sleep,” Harry said.

“Maybe that was my plan,” Seamus grinned.

The moment was interrupted by Harry’s stomach making a loud growling sound.

“Have you not had dinner?”

“With everything that happened, I’ve not had a chance.”

“Then before we do anything else, you need to eat,” Dean said.

“But I don’t want to get up,” Harry said.

He was really relaxed right now. If this had been first-year, Harry would have ignored his hunger in favour of the comfort he was receiving, but nearly two years of proper meals made that hard to do now. He didn’t want Seamus to stop what he was doing though. Then a thought occurred to him.

“Dobby,” he said.

With a crack, Dobby the House Elf appeared. Seamus and Dean both startled when they saw him.

“Master Harry Potter calls Dobby!” Dobby said excitedly.

“How’ve you been, Dobby?” Harry asked.

“Dobby has been doing well sir! Dobby enjoys working at Hogwarts. The other Elves are kind and the teachers here even more so!”

“That’s great to hear.”

“How may Dobby help Master Harry Potter?”

“I didn’t manage to make it to dinner tonight, Dobby. Is there any food left over that I could have?”

“Of course sir! Dobby will go and get some!”

Dobby disappeared just as quickly as he appeared.

“You have a House Elf?” Seamus asked.

“He’s not mine. I helped him out a couple of years ago when he was in a bad situation, and he said he’d help whenever I needed it.” Harry pulled his coin pouch from his pocket. “I don’t like giving him extra work to do, but I don’t really feel like moving right now.”

“Oh? And why’s that?” Seamus’s grin was back.

Harry gave him a nudge, pushing his head back against the fingers that had stopped moving. Seamus chuckled and continued his scratching.

Dobby reappeared with a plate of food and a flagon of juice with three cups.

“Food for Master Harry Potter and drinks for Master Harry Potter and his friends. Is there anything else you need from Dobby?”

“That’s everything. Thanks a bunch Dobby,” Harry said, handing the elf a few silver coins.

Dobby’s eyes went wide.

“Master Harry Potter does not need to do that!”

“I asked you to go out of your way for me, so it’s only right that I reward you for it. Take it. Add it to your fund for your new jumper,” Harry said.

Dobby beamed, thanking Harry profusely.

“I think he is the oddest House Elf I’ve ever seen,” Seamus said.

“That’s honestly a fair description.”

As Harry ate his dinner, the three of them chatted together about everything and nothing. It was the kind of friendly interaction Harry always craved, made even better because Seamus’s hand didn’t stop its action. Being with these boys gave Harry peace. Telling them the truth about his life could damage that, but Harry didn’t want to hide anything from them. The words never came out though, because Harry was a coward who didn’t want this moment to end.

When the food and drink was finished, the three of them took their showers to get ready for bed. Harry couldn’t help sneaking peeks at them when they were drying off, and with the way he kept catching their eyes, they were doing the exact same thing. They exchanged kisses with each other, another thing that was so intoxicating, before heading back into the dormitory. Neville was changing into pyjamas as well, and the four Gryffindor boys said goodnight to one another.

Ron’s hangings were shut and silent, but Harry didn’t care. He had friendship now, more than friendship. He didn’t need the redhead any more.

Manipulated memories

The next morning at breakfast, the announcement was made about the postponement of the Champion Quidditch tournament. The news went down like a lead balloon as people from all houses and schools made their disappointment known. Despite Harry warning her in advance, Angelina still looked like she wanted to leap from her chair and murder Dumbledore for once again taking Quidditch from her. During the furore, Harry received a note written in a familiar curling script instructing him to come to Dumbledore's office after classes that day. Sirius's warnings were clear in his head as he bid his friends goodbye and made his way to the stone gryphon. This would be the first time since his inheritance that Harry would be in Dumbledore's presence, and part of him was very nervous. Dumbledore was an extremely skilled wizard. Harry could think of no-one else who could have placed those spells on him, and if he wasn't careful then he would do it again.

Harry drew upon all the cunning Salazar's house was known for as he gave the gryphon the password. The statue spiralled upwards, and Harry rode the staircase upwards as well until he reached a perfectly polished wooden door. Voices were talking inside and Harry heard them fairly clearly.

"We need to be careful about this, Dumbledore. Crouch may have made a few mistakes in his time, but he also has a lot of influence in the Ministry. If it gets reported that he was attacked and went missing, especially in the presence of foreign wizards, we could have a huge scandal on our hands," said the voice of Cornelius Fudge.

"Surely Cornelius, you're not suggesting that Madam Maxime or Professor Karkaroff had anything to do with this?" Dumbledore said lightly.

"Of course not! But you must admit that it looks suspicious. After all, Maxime was found on the scene before you arrived."

"And you have been given a full account of what led to her being there. Had she not been, there is every possibility that something worse could have happened to Mr Krum."

"Excuse me," Moody said, "I think we should continue this conversation another time. Mr Potter is here to see you."

The office door opened before Harry could knock. Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk as Fudge stopped mid-pace. Moody stood against the wall.

"I'm sorry sir. I can come back later," Harry said.

"Not at all Harry," Dumbledore said, cutting across Fudge, "the Minister and I were just finishing up here."

Fudge looked affronted at being cut off, but he regained his jovial smile when he looked at Harry.

“It’s good to see you, my lad. I’m sorry that I haven’t been able to come and see you in the tournament, but it’s been so busy at the Ministry lately, what with the fiasco at the World Cup and ... other things,” Fudge said.

“Like Bertha Jorkins? I read about her in the paper,” Harry said.

“Yes, Bertha. Not to worry Harry. We’ll find her,” Fudge said, then to Dumbledore he said, “I think it would be best if we inspect the sight of the disappearance.”

“Of course. Harry, please stay here until I return,” Dumbledore said, rising from his chair.

“I can come back later sir.”

“Nonsense, this won’t take long,” Dumbledore said, “Minister, after you.”

The three adults left the room. Harry listened as Moody’s clunking footsteps faded into the distance.

He had only been in Dumbledore’s office once before, when he had been accused of being the Heir of Slytherin. Harry snorted at the irony that while he hadn’t been the Heir at the time of the accusation, the events of that year led to him becoming the Lord of Slytherin.

The portraits of the former headmasters and headmistresses dozed lazily in their picture frames. The few that were awake watched him curiously but didn’t say anything. The odd assortment of strange silver instruments chugged and whirred on their spindly tables. There was a musical cry and a large yet light weight landed on Harry’s shoulder. Fawkes the phoenix peered down at him from his new perch. Harry reached up to gently pet his feathers, feeling the phoenix's warmth fill him up.

On a high shelf looking down on everything was the Sorting Hat. The navy blue hat was once Merlin's, and it was a crazy thought that Harry and everyone else who had passed through the walls of Hogwarts as a student had each worn it. Seeing it also reminded Harry of something else he saw in the Ritual of Remembrance. He glanced up at Fawkes, the very same phoenix that had once perched on Godric’s shoulder. The warmth in the bird was very familiar, but it wasn’t just the calming presence that phoenixes normally exuded. It was a lot like the magic Harry felt at Gryffindor Castle.

Fawkes was the Guardian Spirit that Godric Gryffindor had left to the school. Harry thought Fawkes was Dumbledore’s pet, but apparently he was wrong. Why did everyone think otherwise? Had Fawkes not shown himself at the castle before?

Something shimmering caught Harry’s attention, bringing him back to the present from his wonder. A cabinet door was ajar, the inside glowing with a silver light. Everything else in the office was pristinely neat, so Harry guessed that he was supposed to notice this. Opening the door, Harry saw a Pensieve, not unlike the one Sirius had shown him at Grimmauld Place. The insides shone with ribbons of silver, indicating that a memory had already been placed inside. If Harry were still a Gryffindor dosed to not think things through, he would poke the stuff with his wand. Knowing that the portraits were watching him, he did exactly that.

The silvery ribbons swirled faster and faster. More colours appeared until everything slotted into place. It was like looking through a window down into a high ceilinged room below. Harry bit back a sigh. Dumbledore set this up so he could see this memory, so he dipped his head forward until it broke the surface of the Pensieve. There was a sudden swooping sensation as Harry tipped forward, fully falling into the memory.

He was in a large, high-ceilinged room. Rows of benches lined three of the four walls, which were filled with witches and wizards wearing the same black robes like a barrister. The people along the middle wall wore robes of deep red. A single chair sat in the middle of the room. Harry looked to his right and saw a younger version of Dumbledore. Crouch sat in the middle of the row on a raised plinth. It looked very much like a courtroom.

A door on the front wall opened. Dementors appeared, leading a dishevelled and gaunt Karkaroff wearing Azkaban prisoners' robes into the room. He was placed in the chair. Golden chains appeared, binding him tightly. The Dementors left to lurk at the furthest corners of the room.

Crouch questioned Karkaroff, who apparently wanted to share information on the Death Eaters with the Ministry. Listening to the normally unctuous man stammer and fumble his words like this as he gave name after name was a bizarre experience, but Harry wasn't sure what he was supposed to get from this. That was when he noticed something strange. Karkaroff opened his mouth to speak, then everyone else in the room froze. Karkaroff mouthed something inaudible and then closed his mouth again, looking terrified. The other people resumed moving, though they rushed into new positions before carrying on like normal.

The memory dissolved into smoke and reformed into the same courtroom again. There weren't as many people dressed in robes this time, only those in red were present. The rest of the seats weren't as filled, and the people there were dressed normally. Crouch looked angry as two burly looking Aurors guided a young Ludo Bagman into the room. Crouch then accused him of supplying information to the Death Eaters. Harry was gobsmacked. Bagman was a bit of an idiot, but there was no way he was a Death Eater. Why was Dumbledore showing him this?

The next memory that was shown made Harry's blood boil. It was in a large chamber not unlike the courtroom, but there was no chair in the middle and the benches were more curved around so everyone could see. Unlike before, Dumbledore was sitting at the high podium. The seats were filled with the same witches and wizards as before, and Harry realised that this must be the Wizengamot. All of them looked exhausted and weary. Crouch stood and began speaking. He listed off various Death Eaters that had been captured and sent to Azkaban.

"And we have successfully captured the traitor Sirius Black, unfortunately not before he murdered 12 Muggles and one wizard. Black is already on his way to Azkaban as we speak."

Then everything froze again. Dumbledore rose from his seat and gave an impassioned defence of Sirius, arguing that he should not be sent to Azkaban and that his actions fighting Voldemort at least warranted a trial to determine what happened. He finished his speech and sat down, then everything resumed as if he hadn't spoken at all.

These memories have been tampered with, Harry thought. Nobody had spoken up in Sirius's defence until Harry. Everyone had believed him guilty without trial because the evidence had seemed so damning. Was Dumbledore trying to trick Harry into thinking that he did what he could but was overruled? Was this an attempt to make him seem benevolent so that Harry would trust him?

The scene shifted again. He was back in the courtroom. Crouch was at the high podium, peering down with barely concealed contempt as a group of four people were escorted in by Dementors. Once all four chained to chairs, Crouch listed off the charges.

"Rabastan Lestrangle, Rodolphus Lestrangle, Bellatrix Lestrangle," Crouch sneered, "Bartemius Crouch Junior. The four of you have been found guilty of the attack and subsequent torture of Auror Frank Longbottom and his wife Alice. You will now receive your sentence."

One of the prisoners, a young boy with straw coloured hair, begged for Crouch to show mercy, that it wasn't him who did it, but Crouch didn't seem to hear him. Harry watched as Crouch sentenced the four of them to life in Azkaban. The woman, Bellatrix, didn't seem to care as she proclaimed that the Dark Lord would reward them for their loyalty when he returned.

"I think that will do, Harry."

Harry jolted. Sitting next to him was the present day Dumbledore. He gripped Harry's arm and the pair of them rose up through the air. They left the Pensieve. Dumbledore didn't look angry that Harry had been rummaging in one of his cupboards, proving that this had indeed been intentional.

"Curiosity is not a sin but it must be exercised cautiously," Dumbledore said.

He had a kind looking smile, eyes twinkling warmly as he gestured for Harry to sit across from him at his desk. Harry avoided looking at his eyes by glancing back at the Pensieve.

"It's a Pensieve," Dumbledore said, interpreting Harry's expression to be curiosity and confusion, "it's a remarkable device that allows me to extract and peruse through thoughts and memories at my leisure. I'm sure you've had moments where your head feels just a bit too full. A Pensieve is very good at allowing me to see what might otherwise have been missed."

"So those were your memories?" Harry asked.

"They were. I had been viewing them before Cornelius arrived and I mustn't have closed the cupboard properly. I won't fault you for being curious," Dumbledore said.

"So those were all trials?"

"They were. There were many similar trials during the war, and especially in the few years after it ended, but I won't bore you with such details," Dumbledore said, "I asked you here to see how you're holding up. It must have been quite a shock to stumble into Barty like that."

“It was, but I think I’m doing alright. My friends have been a big help,” Harry said, “have you found him, sir?”

“I’m afraid not. It’s difficult to judge where he might have gone,” Dumbledore said, “thankfully I have managed to calm things down with Madam Maxime. Professor Karkaroff is still angry but he is at least prepared to go through the proper channels. I have advised Cornelius to get ahead of him in the investigations that will no doubt arise from this.”

Dumbledore peered over his half moon spectacles at Harry, who was still avoiding his gaze. Fawkes fluttered over from his perch, landing lightly on Harry’s shoulder.

“I’m very impressed with how you’ve handled yourself so far in the tournament, Harry. I know you protested your involvement quite strongly at the beginning. I apologise that I wasn’t able to do anything to help you, but even I am not able to do everything,” Dumbledore said.

“I’m still not happy about it, but I’ve been trying to make the most of it. Getting to meet and become friends with Cedric, Viktor and Fleur has been great.”

“And I am glad to see that. The bonds of friendship are more important than most people think. To meet people who have lived very different lives to ourselves helps to broaden our minds, or at least that’s what I believe,” Dumbledore said, “though I am concerned that you seem to have neglected your old friends for our international guests.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, “I still hang out with my friends.”

“I meant Mr Weasley and Ms Granger. It always warmed my heart to see three such strong friends running around the castle. Remember that Beauxbaton and Durmstrang are only with us for a year. You don’t want to allow your existing bonds to weaken, don’t you?”

“It’s not that. Ron and Hermione, we’ve grown apart,” Harry said, “I guess we’re just at that age, you know?”

“Indeed I do, but that does not mean that the friendship is lost forever. I’m sure the three of you will be able to work things out,” Dumbledore said.

“Maybe,” Harry said, “is that all sir?”

He very much didn’t want to be there any longer. Dumbledore smiled genially and dismissed him. Fawkes didn’t leave his shoulder until Harry was basically through the door.

That whole meeting had been a way for Dumbledore to try and convince him to make up and be friends with Ron and Hermione. It was completely ridiculous, not to mention how weird the interest a headmaster was taking in the personal life of one of his students was. Dumbledore was trying to get him back under his control. Harry did not believe for one instant that Dumbledore just happened to be viewing those memories. The first showed Karkaroff was a Death Eater, likely to make him distrustful of Viktor, but something Karkaroff said was edited out. There was also Bagman, though what Dumbledore hoped to achieve with that. Harry already didn’t trust the man.

Then there was Sirius. Was Dumbledore hoping that Harry would accept him more if he thought Dumbledore had been on his side all along? That Harry would open up to him and accept him back into his life? No way was that happening. Harry knew that there had been no investigation, nor a trial, into what Sirius was accused of. As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and as one of the most famous and trusted wizards in Britain, Dumbledore could have called for a trial at any time, but he didn't.

The final memory was more confusing. Why did Harry need to know about Crouch and his son? The only thing that Harry took away from that was a feeling of deep sympathy for Neville. In the nearly four years he'd known him, Harry hadn't asked why Neville lived with his grandmother. Having himself grown up with his aunt and uncle, the thought that somebody didn't live with his parents didn't immediately strike him as weird. What had been done to Mr and Mrs Longbottom sounded awful. No wonder Neville had reacted so strongly to seeing the Cruciatus curse?

Harry knew that Sirius needed to be told about this. Dumbledore was up to something, as they always knew he was, but this just confirmed that he was on the move. With both Dumbledore and Voldemort making plans, Harry would need to be careful to make it through safely.

Time continued to pass, and despite everything going on in the world, Harry found himself enjoying it. He got to spend time with his friends every day. Ron still glared at him whenever he saw him, but Harry had gotten quite good at completely ignoring him. Hermione kept looking like she wanted to say something to him, but Harry likewise ignored her. As far as he could tell, neither of them knew about his new relationship with Seamus and Dean, and that was exactly how he wanted it.

Speaking of, Harry was never so happy as when he was with his boyfriends, and hadn't that been a rush to finally say. They weren't affectionate in public, saving that for when it was just the three of them. Harry quickly learned to love all the kind touches and even kinder words he got from his boys, and made sure to always return them just as fiercely. Seamus was the more affectionate of the two, always ready with a hug or a pat or a kiss. Dean wasn't as physically affectionate, but he made up for it with kind gestures. What made Harry even happier was that it wasn't just directed at him. He felt a rush of warmth whenever he saw them embrace one another, or share little kisses before bed. It was like the friendship the three of them had evolved, bringing them all with it.

After the Easter holidays, McGonagall approached Harry, asking him to follow her. She led him and the other Champions out of the castle and down the lawns to the Quidditch pitch. It looked like they were finally finding out what it was being used for. When they stepped out onto the pitch, Harry's heart broke.

"What have they done to it?" Cedric said, equally as aghast.

"A Quidditch player after my own heart," Bagman said jovially, "not to worry. After the third task is over, everything will be exactly as it used to be."

Harry found that hard to believe. The floor of the pitch was covered in lines of waist high hedges.

“They’ve still got a bit of growing to do. One more month and they’ll be twenty feet high,” Bagman said, “anyone have any ideas what the task is?”

He wiggled his eyebrows at them.

“A maze,” Viktor said.

“Exactly right! The third task will involve each of you navigating through a maze of hedges. You’ll enter the maze in order of points. Of course, it won’t be that easy. Within the maze will be a series of obstacles for you to overcome,” Bagman said.

“What sort of obstacles?” Fleur asked suspiciously.

“A few spells, a few enchantments, Hagrid’s sourced us some magical creatures, but I’m afraid I can’t say much more than that. Your task will be to make it to the centre of the maze and retrieve the Triwizard cup,” Bagman said, “you will have the next month to prepare. The task will take place at the end of May on the final day of exams. That’ll give you plenty of time to recover afterwards and, for Mr Diggory, Mr Krum and Ms Delacour, prepare for your NEWT examinations.”

The reminder that they still needed to take those exams to become fully qualified wizards made them grimace.

“Alright then, if there’s no other questions, you’re dismissed. All we ask is that you keep this to yourselves. Harry, may I have a word?” Bagman asked, but Harry was already walking away with the other Champions.

He had a whole month to prepare, and for the first time since entering this tournament, Harry felt like he could actually do well. As soon as he got back to the common room, he told the others what he needed to do, and they all agreed to help him. The next day, Harry and the other Gryffindor boys went to the library after class to find books on various charms and jinxes that might be useful for him to learn. Harry noted down everything he thought looked good. Sirius and Remus also had plenty of suggestions.

With all that in mind, Harry practised. During his free period when the others had Care of Magical Creatures, Harry went to McGonagall’s classroom to work on the spells. True to her word, McGonagall never *taught* him how to use them, but if he asked for advice then she was happy to give it.

“When I said I’d help you learn spells, I didn’t think it’d hurt this much,” Seamus said, getting up from where Harry had stunned him for the fourth time in a row.

“You need to aim for the cushions more,” Dean said, rearranging the cushion pile they’d set up for stunning practice.

“Funnily enough, that’s hard to do when you’re stunned. Maybe you should give it a try,” Seamus said.

“I think that Harry’s got the Stunning spell down well enough,” Dean said hurriedly.

“But Seamus and you haven’t,” Harry pointed out with a grin, “come on, the pair of you need to practise as well.”

After the Stunning spell was the Shield charm. Harry ended up getting stunned a lot as he figured out how to make the shield work, but once he managed it, he was able to block all the stunners Seamus and Dean sent at him, even when they both fired at the same time.

Whenever he learned something new, he always made sure they did too. It was fun getting to teach them, especially since he didn’t have to hold back or pretend to be less intelligent.

Neville occasionally joined them as well, but most of the time it was just them three. Even then, as May slowly passed by, Seamus and Dean could join him less and less. Unlike Harry, they still had exams they needed to study for. Harry studied with them so he didn’t fall behind, but mostly to keep them company.

A week after being told about the third task, Harry made his way downstairs in the early morning for his usual morning swim. Just as he was crossing the common room, he heard a name call out to him. Parvati was standing at the bottom of the right hand spiral staircase. Her cheeks were streaked with tears, her eyes bloodshot and red, and she had a dressing gown wrapped tightly around herself as though to ward off some unseasonable chill.

“Parvati? What’s wrong?”

“I really need to speak to you,” Parvati said, “please, it’s important.”

Harry nodded. He gestured her over to a secluded corner of the common room. As an afterthought, he cast the privacy charms Sirius had taught him. It wasn’t quite as effective without a physical barrier to anchor them to, but it should be enough.

“Is everything alright?” Harry asked.

“You really need to be careful in the third task,” Parvati said, “I’m really worried that something bad is going to happen.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“I’ve been having dreams again. It’s the same woman, cowering in front of a high backed chair but I can’t see who’s sitting in it. She was begging him to let her go since it’ll be over soon. The thing in the chair just laughed at her, saying that he would have what he needed thanks to his faithful servant. Somebody else in the room that I couldn’t see said ‘my lord’, and then the thing laughed and tortured the woman,” Parvati said, “I know you don’t believe in Divination all that much, but Harry, I’m really worried that this is happening somewhere in the world. When I woke up, I had this overwhelming urge that I needed to tell you about what I saw. Please, you have to do whatever you can to prepare for the final task. You’re my friend. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

Harry wasn't sure what he could say to her. She was right. He didn't think Divination was a serious thing, especially the accounts of how Professor Trelawney was ... not quite believable as a Seer, but he trusted Parvati. If she felt these dreams were premonitions of what was to come, then he believed her.

"Thank you for warning me. I'll be sure to prepare as well as I can," Harry said to her.

Parvati heaved a great sigh of relief.

"Thank you. That's a weight off my shoulders," Parvati frowned, "actually almost literally. I feel a lot better now that I've told you."

"Is there anything in Divination about that?"

"I'm not sure. I did read an account from a Seer in the 18th century who said that the visions of the future each Seer is granted were meant to be shared with the world. It wasn't the duty of a Seer to keep that knowledge to themselves," Parvati said, "maybe genuine visions need to be told otherwise the Seer is weighed too heavily by it? I'm not sure. I'll ask Professor Trelawney about it."

She then looked up at Harry.

"I know you're practising a bunch of spells with Seamus and Dean, so I'm not sure what else you can do, but please, be sure to stay safe."

"I'll do my best."

Greatly relieved, Parvati went back up to the girls dormitory. Harry went down to the lake, but he didn't swim. He went out far enough that he could float on his back, staring up at the cloudy sky.

Parvati's vision sounded like it could be a glimpse of what Voldemort was planning. He had taken a woman hostage, and was forcing her to do something. There was also a third person there, but Parvati didn't know who. Voldemort said he would have what he needed soon, but what was that? Whatever it was, Voldemort's faithful servant was getting it. Was it some magical artefact? A book or a potion? Or was it Harry? Harry didn't know how it could be him. The wards of Hogwarts were strong, and as much as Harry loathed to give the man credit, Dumbledore was the one man Voldemort was said to fear.

So long as Harry remained at Hogwarts, he was fairly certain he would be safe. When the school year finished, he would be going home with Sirius back to Grimmauld Place. Between the Black properties and the Potter properties, Harry would be safe behind powerful wards. Once he let Sirius know about this new development, he would be even safer.

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower with his head full of thoughts. The hot water of the shower helped to clear his mind a little. As per usual, Dean joined him a moment later.

"You seem very deep in thought," Dean commented.

"I've got a lot on my mind."

“I can imagine, but hey. Not long now and then the tournament will be over,” Dean said.

“It can’t come soon enough. With any luck, next year will be completely normal,” Harry said.

“Here’s to normal,” Dean said, holding his fist over the dividing wall.

Harry tapped his fist to Dean’s, but then Dean held onto his hand and pressed a kiss to it. Harry blushed fiercely. Not one to be outdone, he pulled the other boy closer and pecked his cheek. Both of them were red, and Harry ignored the stirring in his loins. Now wasn’t the place for that, though it was very difficult to keep his eyes from wandering when they finished in the showers and dried off.

Seamus entered the bathroom as they were finishing, bleary eyed and sleepy as he normally was in the morning. As Harry passed, he leaned in to press a kiss to his cheek. Dean also kissed his forehead. When the door closed, Harry saw Seamus standing there completely frozen, and he could imagine the dumb grin on his face.

Yeah, hopefully next year will be completely normal. No more threats to his life, no more backstabbing so called friends, and Harry would get to enjoy his time with his boyfriends in peace.

Each day Harry practised new spells, and now he was quite happy with the repertoire he’d developed. Along with the Stunning spell and the Shield charm, he also learned the Impediment jinx, the Body Bind curse and a very useful spell called the Four Point spell, which basically turned his wand into a compass. He also worked on his Transfiguration so he could make things he needed at a moment’s notice. It wasn’t very refined, but for making hasty barricades, it worked perfectly.

As May passed by, the other fourth-years were able to help him less and less. They still had tests to complete. All Harry could do was study alongside them and test them when they asked for it. All his spell practise paid off as he was able to help correct their wand movements for Charms and Transfiguration. It caused a noticeable decrease in explosions from Seamus. Harry could have felt lonely at this time when everyone else was so distracted, but he didn’t. Not when he had another project he was working on.

Harry took Parvati’s warnings seriously. When Sirius heard what she told him, he agreed with her. Whoever put his name in the Goblet of Fire only had one more chance to get to him. Harry would need to do everything he could to stay safe. After consulting with Sirius and Remus via the mirrors, and James, Godric and Salazar in the Ring Realm, he had come up with a plan.

After taking Ancient Runes and Arithmancy for nearly two years, it was finally time to put that new knowledge into action.

Over the summer, Harry had read many books on warding. It was the basis for the protections on all the family properties he owned. Other such runic magic had been covered in class. Harry would put it all into practice. While the others revised for their coming exams, Harry

poured over notebooks as he scribbled down Arithmantic calculations and rune diagrams, books strewn about him as he referenced them as needed. It was a slow process as Harry wanted to be sure he was doing this right. A week later, Harry felt confident enough to try it. He showed his work to Professor Babbling, who gave him an approving nod.

Harry was nervous when it came time to begin the engraving. Four smooth stones lay on the table in front of him. Professor Babbling supervised. Seamus had wanted to watch but Harry and Dean reminded him that they had exams coming up. He was grumpy about it, but Harry promised he could see the final product. Harry picked up one of the stones and held his wand like it was a pen.

“Insculpio Exponentia.”

A thin, shallow channel was carved into stone. After writing and rewriting the runes over and over again, Harry moved with a steady and practised hand, engraving the runes into the stone. As each one was completed, the magic in the air shifted. It settled within the stone, moving along the pattern according to the runes. It was fascinating to witness. Given that he didn’t want to rush this, it took Harry just over an hour to finish engraving the stone. When the last line was placed, he pushed in a little of his magic. All the runes lit up, and when it faded all the channels were burnt white.

“May I?” Professor Babbling held out a hand.

Harry passed over the stone. With an expert eye, Babbling assessed his work, turning it over this way and that. She waved her wand over it and muttered strings of words beneath her breath that Harry couldn’t make out. The examination took half an hour, but when it was done, Babbling shone with happiness.

“Congratulations Mr Potter.”

“I did it?”

“You did.” Babbling handed the stone back to him. “I must say, most students of Ancient Runes usually fail at their first attempt at a runic construct. Normally they try to go too far too fast and they either don’t know the right runes, or they don’t think to select them. I believe this should work as intended.”

“I hope so,” Harry said.

“Trust yourself Mr Potter. You have been an excellent student, very diligent in your work, and I am confident that what you have made will work. If you don’t believe me, why not show it to Mr Finnegan? The pair of you are like a well oiled machine when you work together in my class.”

Harry attached the stone to a silver chain and then wore it around his neck. It was easily hidden beneath his clothes.

Everyone was in full exam revision mode when he got back to the common room. Hermione had commandeered a table in a corner, and by the looks of it she had dragged Ron into it as

well. Ginny was also drowning in work, which made it easier to slip past them all. He didn't see any of his friends, so he guessed they were in the library. Heading up to the dormitory to drop off his things, he found Dean pacing about the room, muttering to himself. By the sounds of it, he was trying to remember facts about Goblin rebellions in the 15th century. Harry was planning on leaving him to it, but then Dean groaned, stomping over to his History of Magic notes.

"Everything alright?" Harry asked carefully.

Dean sighed heavily.

"I promised myself I'd do better at History of Magic this year, but Binns just makes the whole subject so boring! Every time I try to study it, all I can think of is his droning voice and it makes me want to do literally anything else, but I can't do anything else because then I feel guilty that I'm not studying History of Magic!"

"Hey, hey, it's alright, it's alright." Harry stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Dean. "It'll be alright."

Dean slumped against him.

"How long have you been up here trying to study?" Harry asked.

"About an hour. The others went to the library to brush up on Potions with the Hufflepuffs," Dean said.

"Then I think it's time you took a break."

"I can't-"

"Yes, you can," Harry said calmly, "it won't help to try and force yourself to study while you're worked up like this. Come on."

"What are we doing?" Dean asked.

"We are going to cuddle, and you are going to relax."

Harry led them over to Dean's bed, brushing his notes onto the floor. Dean looked a bit confused when Harry lay down on the bed, but Harry didn't explain any further as he pulled the other boy down so he was lying on top of him, head resting on Harry's chest. He remained tense for a bit, but then Harry rubbed his back gently. Dean sighed again, shuffling until he found a more comfortable position.

"I really should be studying," Dean mumbled into Harry's chest.

"And you will. For now though, we'll enjoy a bit of peace and quiet and when you're ready, we can study History of Magic together."

"But you don't have an exam? You need to prepare for the third task?"

“And I need a break from that as well,” Harry said, “unless of course, you don’t want to cuddle?”

Dean buried in closer, which was all the answer that Harry needed. Harry continued to rub his back, occasionally moving upwards to scratch at the base of his neck. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was doing, but it must have been working because Dean was definitely relaxing. Eventually his breathing evened out as Dean fell into a light doze. That was how Seamus found them half an hour later. He took one look at them and smiled. He dumped his bag and then sat on the edge of Dean’s bed, putting a hand on Dean’s back alongside Harry’s.

“Was he stressing about History of Magic again?”

“Again?” Harry asked.

“He mentioned it a few days ago when we were all studying it together. I get why he wants to get his grades up but it’s probably a lost cause with Binns as a teacher. I’m thinking of signing up for a correspondence course for History of Magic next year,” Seamus said.

“I might join you.”

Even with his clear head, Professor Binns’ voice was like a sedative and trying to stay awake was a struggle.

“He insisted on keeping at it, even when we all went to work on Potions, so I’m surprised you got him to stop.”

“I didn’t give him much of a choice, and by the time we were cuddling he didn’t want to leave.”

“It’s cute, and being the little spoon feels great,” Seamus said, “budge up.”

Seamus nudged him until Harry moved forward, being careful not to jostle the dozing boy lying on him. He didn’t know what Seamus was after, but then he shuffled into the space behind him and wrapped his arms around him. Harry was sandwiched between them, tucked against Seamus’s chest with Dean lying on him. It felt really nice.

“Comfy?” Harry asked.

Seamus rested his head on Harry’s shoulder.

“Absolutely. Being the little spoon is great, but so is being the big spoon. Never thought I’d get to say that but it’s the truth.”

They chatted softly to one another until Dean roused himself. He blinked open his eyes, looking around blearily. With Harry’s hands still on him, he didn’t move about that much, but he eventually saw Seamus was there as well.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Not too long. You must have needed that nap,” Harry said.

“Next time you get so stressed, tell one of us,” Seamus said, ruffling Dean’s short hair, “otherwise Harry and I will have to kidnap you for cuddles again.”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” Dean said.

He lay his head back down, then looked up with a frown.

“What is that?”

Harry pulled the rune stone out from under his robes.

“Is that what you’ve been working on? The thing you went to Professor Babbling to help make?” Seamus asked.

He handed it to the sandy-haired boy, who turned it over to look at all sides of it.

“What does it do?” Dean asked.

“If it works, it should help block incoming malicious spells,” Harry said, “obviously it won’t stop anything like the Unforgiveables, but I thought any little help I could get in the maze would be better than nothing.”

“Did you base it on wards?” Seamus asked.

“Kind of? It won’t be anywhere near as strong as that, but it should connect to my magic to power it.”

“This is incredible.” Seamus gave the stone back and pressed a kiss to Harry’s cheek. “You’re amazing.”

Harry averted his eyes as his cheeks warmed up.

“I- I was thinking of making more and giving them to the other Champions,” Harry said, “I know they’re all much better at magic than me, and obviously they wouldn’t have to use them, but I can’t help feeling that something really bad is going to happen.”

“Parvati’s dream,” Dean said, “it makes sense. I was getting that feeling too.”

“So you don’t think I’m mad? Like I’m giving away my advantage or something?”

Seamus snorted.

“At no point in this tournament have you really been trying to properly win. Cedric, Fleur and Viktor are your friends more than they’re your competition, so by all means, if you want to keep your friends safe, then do what you think is best,” he said.

Harry settled in more comfortably, surrounded by his boyfriends.

“Thanks guys.” He glanced at the clock on the wall. “Do you reckon we’ve got time for a nap?”

“We absolutely do,” Seamus said, “might want to set an alarm just in case though. I’m quite comfortable at the moment.”

“We should probably also close the hangings in case we get unexpected company,” Dean said, “they might get the wrong impression.”

“As if I care what Weasley thinks,” Seamus said.

“I was thinking more about Neville. The poor boy might have a heart attack seeing the three of us in the same bed.”

Harry chuckled, waving his wand to close the hangings. It was only an innocent, fifteen minute nap, but they’d still spare their friend some dignity. Either way it was time he got to spend with his boyfriends, and it made Harry look forward to many similar times in the future.

The third task

Chapter Notes

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

Harry finished the other rune stones and handed them out to the other Champions. They seemed confused by them at first, but Fleur quickly realised what they were capable of. Like Seamus and Professor Babbling, she too was impressed by his rune work.

“I never wanted to be in this tournament so I don’t really care about winning. I just want us all to get through this safely,” Harry said.

“Hear, hear,” Cedric said, “I can’t wait for all of this to be over. There’s Quidditch that needs playing.”

“You say that like you’re going to win,” Viktor said.

“Of course I’m going to win!”

“Gentlemen, I think the victor will be me,” Fleur said, then to Harry, “thank you very much for this Harry. I am sure it will come in handy.”

The 24th of May grew closer and closer, and as it approached, Harry’s nerves began to grow. All he could do was practise his new repertoire of spells and look up any new ones which might help. That was what he did every day when exams started. He felt a little bad about sitting in class reading a book while the rest of the fourth-years struggled through all their tests, but the teachers hadn’t excused him so there was little else he could do. For a moment, Harry thought that Snape might have still made him sit the end of year exam, but the Potions Master seemed distracted of late.

With the pressure of exams, Harry didn’t get to spend much time with his friends. All of them were busy studying, and Harry didn’t want to disturb them. The only thing he could do was make sure they remembered to eat and go to bed at a reasonable time, as well as get them up in the morning so they weren’t late. For Seamus, this occasionally meant almost literally.

“Why did they have an exam the day after Astronomy?” Seamus whined as he leaned heavily against Harry, who was dragging him into the bathroom.

The other fourth-years were just as tired, but Seamus was only beaten by Ron in how dysfunctional he was in the morning.

“I know, but at least it’s in the afternoon. I’m sure Hagrid’s giving you something nice to do,” Harry said.

Harry made sure he was standing in front of the shower. Seamus swayed on the spot, not moving towards it.

“Are you going to get undressed or do I need to do that for you?”

Seamus choked on his own breath, whipping around to face Harry. Harry refused to acknowledge his flushed cheeks. He was being at least half serious about it.

“You’d do that?”

“Would you rather I shove you into the shower dressed?”

“No, I’ll get changed, it’s just-” Seamus struggled to find the words, “would you really do that?”

“Maybe when exams and the tournament are over, we can talk about that,” Harry said.

He left the bathroom when Seamus actually started undressing. Now that the thought had been put into his mind, Harry wished he had exams to distract himself.

The days passed by in a blur of exam revision and spell practice. Time seemed to speed up in that annoying way it did when people wanted to put off a big event, and before Harry knew it, it was May 24th. The third task was to be held that evening. There was a general buzz in the air, excitement for the end of exams and for the spectacle the task was sure to be. Harry pushed porridge around in his bowl. While it was prepared to perfection by the house elves, he really wished he’d gone for something that wasn’t so wet and sloppy. His stomach was filled less with fluttering butterflies and more a swarm of angry bees.

“Here.” Dean removed the bowl of porridge and replaced it with a few slices of buttered toast. “At least try to eat that.”

Harry tried smiling, but it probably came out more like a grimace. He managed to eat one of the slices when Professor McGonagall approached from the staff table.

“Mr Potter, could you come with me please?”

“What? Why? The task isn’t until tonight!” Harry said.

“I know. This isn’t about the task,” McGonagall said, “the Champions families have been invited to watch the final task. They’re waiting for you in the antechamber.”

For a moment, Harry was confused as to who would come for him, but then he realised. His face lit up. He wolfed down the remaining pieces of toast and followed McGonagall. The other Champions were already there with their families when Harry arrived, but he ignored them in favour making a beeline for the two men standing to one side.

“Sirius!”

He threw his arms around his godfather, who returned the hug just as fiercely. He pulled back just enough to see Remus smiling at him fondly.

“What are you doing here? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“Because we wanted it to be a surprise,” Sirius grinned. He pulled Harry in for another hug, then whispered in a low voice, “apparently Dumbledore tried inviting the Weasley’s in your

place, which would mean Molly. There was no way we were letting that happen.”

Harry completely agreed. Today was going to be awful enough, and it would be even more so if he was at the mercy of Molly Weasley. Getting to spend it with his godfather was much better.

“Why don’t you introduce us to your friends? We’ve heard a lot about the other Champions. It’d be good to put faces to names,” Remus suggested.

Harry led Sirius and Remus to Cedric and his family. Sirius and Amos exchanged polite nods, which were repeated when Viktor brought his parents over, and then Sirius bowed politely to Monsieur and Madame Delacour. Fleur was chatting away in French to a little girl who had to be her sister.

The four Champions exchanged stories with one another, filling their families in on everything they’d been doing. Mr Diggory was particularly excited about the Champions Quidditch games, though he scowled when he heard Harry beat Cedric. They parted ways to go and explore the castle. It had been many years since Sirius had officially been to the castle, so Harry acted as an unofficial tour guide for him. He showed them all of the places he’d found in his wanderings, even though Harry was sure they had already found these places.

After lunch, they went out onto the grounds. Remus was very interested in the Abraxan horses that pulled the Beauxbaton carriages. The smell of single malt whisky was strong in the air when they approached the paddock, where Hagrid was patiently tending to the horses.

“Hello Harry! Professor Lupin, it’s good to see!” Hagrid gawked at Sirius. “Isn’t this a sight for sore eyes!”

“It’s good to see you as well, Hagrid,” Sirius said.

“Blimey. I was thrilled to hear you were cleared. It was a nasty piece of work. I never thought Pettigrew had it in him,” Hagrid said, “I think I’ve still got your motorbike around somewhere.”

“You do?”

“Of course. I hope you don’t mind, but I occasionally use it to get around the place. Most fires aren’t big enough for me to use the Floo network and brooms can’t hold my weight,” Hagrid said.

“Don’t worry about it, Hagrid. I thought it had been lost somewhere when it wasn’t returned with my other confiscated possessions,” Sirius said, “but we can talk about that later. I think Moony’s got a million questions about these beauties.”

That made the horses nearest to them preen.

“It’s not everyday you see Abraxan horses. I’m allowed to be curious,” Remus said, “that’s quite the herd you’ve got here.”

“I can’t take credit for them unfortunately. They’re from Beauxbaton. Professor Dumbledore asked if I could look after them while they’re here,” Hagrid said, “as far as creatures go, they’re pretty calm all things considered. Olympe says that they’re used to being around kids from the school.”

“Olympe? Do you mean Madam Maxime?” Harry said.

“Oh? First name basis already,” Sirius grinned mischievously.

“I mentioned that the school carriages are pulled by threstrals but since most people can’t see them they don’t get to interact with people that often,” Hagrid said, either oblivious or ignoring Sirius’s implication, “it’s such a shame because the herd we have here is really sweet.”

They talked to Hagrid for a little while but eventually the smell of whisky grew too much for them and they bid him farewell. The rest of the grounds were peaceful and calm with all the students still in the castle. There were small splashes and jets of water as the Giant Squid swam at the surface. Harry told them all about his interactions with it.

“To think the squid isn’t just a squid but something left here by Helga Hufflepuff herself,” Remus said, “hearing that, I’m suddenly not as concerned about eleven year olds crossing the lake in small boats if the Giant Squid is watching over them.”

“More like under them, but it does make a lot of sense. Back in our day, there were quite a few kids who’d go swimming in the lake and they’d encounter the Giant Squid often. They never said anything about it being aggressive,” Sirius said.

The three of them sat down on the shore.

“How are you feeling about tonight?” Sirius asked.

“As ready as I can be, I think. I just can’t wait for this to be over,” Harry said.

“You and me both,” Sirius said, “once the tournament is over and you’re home for the summer, we can start working on getting to the bottom of things.”

“Like how to prove Dumbledore was my magical guardian?”

“Exactly. Doing that will make everything else a lot easier. At the very least, it’ll let you recall the money that those leeches stole from you,” Sirius said, “but we can talk more about that later. For now, you just worry about making it through the third task in one piece.”

They re-joined the rest of the school for dinner. Sirius mentioned how nostalgic it was to sit at the Gryffindor table once again. Quite a few students came up to Remus to say hello. It seemed they still remembered their first competent Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. The Gryffindor fourth-years came in in a big group. Seamus and Dean sat across from Harry, with Neville, Parvati and Lavender sitting around them. Between them and the twins, Harry was surrounded by a bubble of his favourite people. Ron and Hermione were further down the table, casting pointed glances up at Harry and Sirius.

“I am so glad that’s over,” Seamus said dramatically.

“It was the History of Magic exam, right? How’d it go?” Harry asked.

“As well as History of Magic ever goes. I’m pretty sure I mixed up loads of dates and names, but it should be alright.”

“What about you Dean?” Harry asked.

“I still wish we had a better teacher than Binns, but I think I did well,” Dean said.

“Binns was always the worst teacher in this place,” Sirius said, “if you want, I can recommend some of the books we used to self-study.”

“Really? That would be great!”

Seeing the looks on his friend’s faces, Harry introduced them all to Sirius as his godfather. Parvati and Lavender’s faces lit up with curiosity, and for a moment Harry worried that they’d step over a line, but their questions were respectful. Neither of them asked about Sirius’s time in Azkaban. They were more interested in what he’d been doing after he’d gotten out.

“A lot of healing and cleaning. My old family home was empty for a decade, and while I got it to the point that we could live in it comfortably last summer, I wanted to be sure it was 100% habitable.”

“It seemed alright when I was there,” Dean said.

“You barely saw any of the house,” Sirius said.

“Wait, you’ve been to Harry’s house,” Seamus said.

“Sirius lives in London and Dean was visiting London with his mother so I asked if he’d like to visit,” Harry said, “I’ll invite you both to visit this summer.”

“Is it a big house? Mam said that the Blacks always had big houses,” Seamus said.

“It’s fairly big,” Sirius said, “I’ll give you guys the tour when you come.”

“We’ll be allowed?” Dean asked.

“Of course. You’re Harry’s friends. I’m not going to deny him access to his friends for two months,” Sirius said, “yes, even if you’re more than friends.”

That caused all three of them to duck their heads in embarrassment, but they were spared further teasing by a reprimand from Remus.

Surrounded as he was by his favourite people, Harry found dinner to be a rather enjoyable affair all things considered. Sirius was a natural at conversation, entertaining everyone with his stories about his days at Hogwarts. Their section was full of laughter as Sirius told them

all about the mischief he and James got up to, and when they heard that Remus had also been a part of it, the fourth-years all gaped at him.

“It rather ruins my reputation as a teacher to hear about my own school days,” Remus commented lightly.

“So that’s how we could never catch you in any of our pranks!” Fred exclaimed.

“You’re very good at what you do boys, but unfortunately for you, I have plenty of experience in avoiding pranks,” Remus said, “it was a necessary skill to have with James and Sirius around. Everyone in Gryffindor knew that when they were being quiet and had their heads together, it was time to run for cover.”

“Cowards. It’s not like we were that bad,” Sirius said.

“You once put a jinx on Alex Stevens that caused a random article of clothing to vanish every half an hour for an entire morning,” Remus said.

“In our defence, Alex jinxed us when we were first years by making our pants suddenly double in size so they’d fall down,” Sirius said, “and it’s not like we got out of devising that revenge unscathed. At least Alex’s version had a time limit. We couldn’t get that spell to stop until all our clothes were gone when we were testing it out.”

“Is that why you wouldn’t let anyone into the bathroom that one time in third year?” Remus asked.

“Yes, and we were brewing a potion that would give Timothy McKenzie hair like Dumbledore for three hours,” Sirius said.

“Why’d you do that?” Harry asked.

“We felt he needed to lighten up a bit.”

The funny stories about the Marauders adventures at Hogwarts almost made Harry forget that he was to compete in the final task that very evening. Unfortunately, his body remembered, and as dinner wore on, his appetite slowly began to fade until he was poking at the food on his plate. The others noticed his declining mood but he was grateful that they didn’t offer more than mild encouragement. If they all tried piling on encouragements and suggestions, Harry felt like he might have exploded.

Professor McGonagall made her way down the Gryffindor table, a slight air of apprehension about her as she approached Harry.

“The Champions need to make their way down now,” she said.

Harry rose to his feet. McGonagall put a firm hand on his shoulder and gave him a small nod. She then backed off as Sirius and Remus also stood, pulling him into hugs in turn.

“You’ve got this. One last push and it’ll all be over,” Sirius said, “I’m thinking we both deserve a break from it all this summer. How does a holiday sound?”

“That sounds great,” Harry said.

“I’ll start looking where we can go,” Sirius said, squeezing Harry once again, “whatever happens out there, I am so proud of you.”

With those kind words, Harry stepped away from his godfather. The others at the Gryffindor table all offered words of support, but there was no time for anything else. The other Champions were already making their way to the doors, so Harry hurried to follow after them.

The four of them walked down the sloping lawns towards the Quidditch pitch. While they were undoubtedly nervous, Harry had never seen them looking quite so confident before. The weeks they had to prepare for the task had definitely come in handy. Like before, a small tent was set aside for them to get changed. Harry groaned when he saw his robes were, once again, red.

“This is getting ridiculous,” Fleur said, not needing any prompting to direct Harry and Cedric, dressed in yellow, to stand together, “you’d have thought they’d have paid attention to this by now.”

“Somebody worked very hard to make sure that I was in this tournament, and they’ve been working very hard since to make sure I was the perfect Gryffindor Champion. I’d like to think I’ve disappointed them,” Harry said, “look, I know you three really want to win this. You volunteered to take part, but please, just be careful. I’ve got a really bad feeling about this task, and winning is not worth your life, no matter what anyone else might say.”

“I’ve been having similar thoughts. Ever since that business with Mr Crouch, Headmaster Karkaroff has been acting odd,” Viktor said, “he’s not the most courageous man, but lately he has been more jumpy, more prone to snapping at everyone. It’s like he’s expecting something to happen.”

“Whatever it is, we can’t let it,” Harry said, “I don’t want any of my friends to get hurt because of some stupid tournament.”

“It is sweet how you worry. Do not fear, even if we are competing in this final stretch, I am sure we all have our priorities in order,” Fleur said, “I too would quite like to see us all walk away from this. After all, we have a much more important tournament to win when we’re done here.”

“Quidditch, bringing people together since the middle ages,” Cedric said.

The sounds outside grew louder as the rest of the school made their way down from the castle. Slowly the seats were filled, and the tent flaps opened.

“Everyone ready?” Ludo Bagman said with a beaming grin, “excellent! If you’ll come with me.”

Bagman led them over to the entrance to the pitch. The hedges had grown to 20 feet in height, towering over them all, casting long, dark shadows into the maze. Professors

McGonagall, Flitwick, Sinistra, Vector and Moody stood to one side, each with a bright yellow star pinned to the front of their robes.

“I’ll quickly go over the rules of what you’ll need to do before we make a start,” Bagman said, “the Triwizard cup has been placed in the centre of the maze. You will enter in the order of your points, and after that it will be a race to reach it first. Doing so will bring you victoriously out of the maze in triumph. Various obstacles have been placed within the maze to slow you down. If at any point you wish to withdraw, simply send up red sparks with your wands and somebody-” he gestured to the nearby teachers “- will come and retrieve you, however doing so will count as a forfeit. Is that clear?”

They nodded. Bagman grinned, and that was when the other officials arrived. Dumbledore barely suppressed his scowl when he saw Harry and Cedric dressed in Hogwarts colours. Maxime was disgruntled to see Fleur getting on so well with the others, but Harry was drawn to Karkaroff. The man’s mannerisms were mostly correct, but there was a rigidity to the way he held himself, a nervous flicker to his eyes as he glanced this way and that trying to take everything in. He looked ready to bolt at a moment’s notice.

He wasn’t the only one Harry picked up odd cues from. Dumbledore was definitely much calmer and more composed than Karkaroff, but the glimmer in his eyes was different than its usual twinkle. It was almost ... expectant. Combined with Parvati’s warning, the feeling in Harry’s gut grew worse.

The final official was Cornelius Fudge, clearly taking the place of Mr Crouch. Fudge smiled when Harry caught his eye, but he didn’t linger. The Minister looked slightly stressed and strained. No doubt everything that happened with Crouch was still causing him issues, and the way he kept glancing at Maxime in apprehension made it abundantly clear his opinions on the matter.

The four champions were guided to stand in front of four openings into the maze. Bagman’s voice, magically amplified, began introducing the third and final task of the Triwizard tournament. As the points stood, Cedric would enter first, then Harry, followed by Fleur and finally Viktor. A cannon went off, and Cedric walked into the maze, and the hedges closed up behind him. After five minutes, it went off again. Harry took a deep breath, and entered the maze.

There must have been some kind of magic woven into the hedges, because the darkness that loomed all around him seemed very unnatural. The air was colder and thicker, cloying at his senses. Lighting the end of his wand helped, and Harry strode forward. While he wasn’t interested in winning, he still wanted to give this a good effort. More importantly, he wanted to survive.

As he made his way through several twists and turns, having to double back twice when he reached a dead end, he heard the cannon go off. Fleur was now in the maze as well. Harry muttered “Point Me”, holding his wand flat on the palm of his hand. It turned to point north. He needed to keep heading south, and take a right at the next opportunity. Thankfully, a right

turn appeared and Harry went down it. The cannon went off for the fourth time. Now all the Champions were in the maze.

The path led to a crossroads. Going either left or straight ahead would lead in the right direction. Before he could make a decision, Cedric came sprinting out from the left path. The sleeve of his robe was slightly singed.

“One of Hagrid’s Blast Ended Skrewts is back that way! The thing’s bloody enormous!”

Without another word, he took off down the right path. Not wanting to deal with those creatures, Harry took the path straight ahead. The air in the maze was thick and heavy. Harry startled at every sound that pierced the suffocating haze. There were definitely enchantments to unnerve him, so Harry did his best to fortify his mind. He hadn’t gotten to the point of fully shielding his mind like Occlumency was supposed to do, but his nightly meditation helped to keep him calm and focused.

Then he rounded a corner and the shadows grew darker until the only light came from Harry’s wand. He stopped, ears straining to hear something approaching. The darkness faded somewhat a short distance ahead of him. Ginny was standing there in the maze, dressed in robes of the finest silk.

“Come my dear husband. I think it’s time we had children, yes? I know you’re supposed to be gay but that’s nothing a little potion can’t fix.”

She held up a perfectly manicured hand which held a glass vial of clear liquid. A ring with an enormous glittering diamond sat on her finger. From the corner of his eye, Harry caught the thin strands of puppet strings attached to his wrists and ankles. This was a Boggart, just a Boggart. Think of something funny!

“Riddikulus!” he cried.

Ginny stepped forward, as though trying to entice him into her embrace, only to trip on her robes and fall flat on her face. Though the ground was dry, when she picked herself up she was covered in mud from head to toe. Harry snorted, which turned into full blown laughter when she tried picking herself up and her heels sank into the dirt and she tipped backwards. He had one last glimpse of Ginny looking absolutely mortified before the Boggart retreated and Harry was left once more in the gloom of the maze.

Taking a moment to calm his racing heart, Harry strode forward. Occasionally he would stop to use the Four Point spell again but he seemed to be going in the right direction. Just as he reached another crossroads, Harry felt the Hogwarts wards flaring, reacting to the casting of a dark spell before it was immediately stamped down. It was just like that first lesson with Professor Moody. Harry gripped his wand a little tighter.

A scream pierced the air and the wards flared again. Harry took off towards it. Thankfully it came from not too far away, but it was on the other side of a row of hedges. Harry raced along, trying to find a path that would get him there. He heard spells being exchanged when he finally whipped around a corner.

Viktor had his back to him, brandishing his wand and trading spells with Cedric, who was further down the path. Somebody lay on the ground between them.

“Viktor! What the hell is wrong with you!” Cedric yelled, ducking beneath a curse and responding with a jinx of his own.

Viktor batted the spell aside, but Harry noted his movements were sluggish. There was a jet of red light and Cedric’s wand leapt from his hand. Viktor raised his own, and Harry acted.

“Expelliarmus!”

Viktor turned as his wand was ripped from his grip, soaring through the air into Harry’s outstretched hand. His eyes were foggy and unclear. Before any of them could do anything, there was a flash of light and Viktor dropped to the ground, stunned. Fleur had her wand aimed at him, panting as she leaned up from her position on the ground. Cedric retrieved his wand and went to help her, while Harry made sure Viktor was alright.

“I don’t know what happened. He just started attacking me but I don’t think that he was really there,” Fleur said, “I have seen Viktor duel. He would never have moved so slowly, nor let someone creep up behind him.” She hesitated for a brief second. “He cast the Cruciatus curse on me, but it didn’t last after the initial burst of pain.”

“His eyes were cloudy. I think someone bewitched him into attacking you,” Harry said.

“Bloody hell. Why would anyone do that? This maze is already crazy enough,” Cedric said, “are you going to be alright?”

Fleur was still trembling. Even if Viktor in his bewitched state hadn’t been able to properly use the Cruciatus curse, it still hurt a lot.

“I will be. I shall make sure Viktor is recovered by the teachers.”

She raised her wand and shot off two bursts of red sparks.

“Are you sure? You don’t have to pull out,” Harry said.

“Yes I do. This is as far as I go, but you two,” Fleur turned her gaze imperiously on them both, “find that cup. Bring this awful tournament to an end so we can all be free of it.”

Harry nodded resolutely, and Cedric did the same. Though they were loath to leave them, the sooner they found the cup, the sooner this would be over. They returned to the crossroads that Harry had found.

“Shall we split up?” Cedric asked.

“Not a chance. I don’t care about winning this thing. I just want to make sure we all make it through. We’ll be better able to defend ourselves if we work together.”

“International magical cooperation. I like it.”

They set off together, eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary. As they walked, Harry's mind raced. For the wards to have been set off, the Unforgivable Curses had to have been used. Viktor had been forced to use the Cruciatus Curse, and Harry suspected he had been placed under the Imperius Curse to do so. Both times it had been stamped down by Dumbledore, the only other person besides Harry who had a connection to the wards. Was he really so determined for Harry to succeed in this tournament that he would use illegal spells on the competition, or did he just not care enough about them to protect them?

If the Unforgivables were in play, Harry's ward stones would be useless. They'd immediately break under that kind of spell. Harry and Cedric would just have to keep their wits about them to make sure they didn't get hit themselves.

They made liberal use of the Four Point spell to guide them towards the centre of the maze. They were nearly there when Harry heard an awful scuttling sound, but he could see nothing around them in the dark. Judging by the look on Cedric's face, he heard it too. They rounded a corner, hopefully one of the last, only to find their path was blocked by a shining golden mist. It was thick enough that they couldn't see through it. Harry tried blasting it with the Reductor Curse, but the spell passed straight through it.

"Any ideas what this is?" Harry asked.

"I think so. Give me a minute."

They didn't have a minute because just as Cedric stepped closer to examine the mist, the scuttling noise reappeared, much louder and faster than before. Branches bent and snapped as a spider the size of a tiger barrelled across the hedge towards them. Harry sent stunning spells at it, but they bounced off its flanks without effect.

"Cedric!"

Harry stumbled backwards as Cedric whipped around. The spider advanced on them and they both retreated, spells just on the tips of their lips, only for them to cross the threshold of the golden mist.

All at once, everything flipped. The sky and the ground traded places, and Harry felt as though his feet were stuck with cement to prevent him falling upwards (downwards?) into the air. Neither of them could move, too disoriented by the inversion, and that was when the spider crashed into them. It went rigid as it too felt the effects of the gold mist. Harry was knocked to the ground, which seemed to right the world and let him move again. The spider also seemed to be recovering, but Cedric was still standing there.

Before he could react, the spider pounced on Cedric. The contact freed him, but now he was pinned beneath the giant spider, pincers trying to get a good hold on him. Cedric fought, but his wand was lying just out of reach.

"Stupefy!"

Harry put in a touch more power than usually would, and it was enough to make the spider rear up, clicking furiously. Cedric took the chance to grab his wand and the pair of them

aimed at the softer underbelly. One more volley of stunning spells and the spider slumped to one side, its legs twitching grotesquely. Cedric scrambled to his feet, backing away from it as much as he could.

“They’re crazy. They’re insane. What sort of lunatics would let loose an Acromantula in a school tournament!” Cedric rambled.

“There’s a colony living in the Forbidden Forest. They probably thought they could save time and money by just using one of them,” Harry said.

“That’s no excuse. All it would take is one bite and that would be it. Acromantula venom can take a lifetime to recover from,” Cedric said, “are you alright? It didn’t get you, did it?”

Harry didn’t think so, but when he tried to stand, his ankle gave a painful twinge. He must have fallen awkwardly when the spider barrelled over him. Cedric knelt beside him, waving his wand over the injured ankle.

“I think it’s just a sprain. I don’t know many healing spells but this should hopefully keep it stable so it’s easier to walk on.”

Bandages wound around his ankle. When Harry put some weight on it, it still hurt but it was manageable for a short period. Cedric slung his left arm over his shoulder, leaving Harry’s wand arm free.

“Come on. Let’s get going,” he said.

With Cedric’s support, Harry hobbled down the path in the maze. The gloom ahead of them seemed to clear and there, standing on a plinth, was the Triwizard Cup. It shone with an eerie blue light which was almost like a beacon in the dark. All it would take is one of them to reach out and grab it and this whole tournament would finally be over. Harry made no move to do so, and beside him, neither did Cedric.

“Go on then. Take it,” Harry said.

“What? No, you take it.”

“Don’t be daft. I wouldn’t have been able to keep walking if it weren’t for you and I’d have had to send up red sparks. You deserve it.”

“Well I wouldn’t have beaten the Acromantula if you weren’t there. I think saving my life is a bit more significant than a bit of support for walking,” Cedric said, “*and* you disarmed Viktor before he could do anything more to me and Fleur.”

“But I wasn’t even supposed to be in this stupid tournament in the first place. This should be your victory!”

“Maybe, but even so, you’ve competed just as hard as the rest of us. You’ve *earned* this just as much as we have, so I’m telling you to take it,” Cedric said, “don’t fight me on this. Hufflepuff house can be just as stubborn as Gryffindor when we get our minds on something, especially if we think it’s the right thing to do.”

Harry grimaced. Cedric was willing to hand over the sort of glory that Hufflepuff hadn't seen in a long time. Why did he have to be so bloody noble?

"Fine. We'll take it together."

"What?"

"That way we both win. Either way it'll be a Hogwarts victory."

Cedric grinned.

"I think I can handle that."

They stepped up to the plinth. Harry held his hand out to one of the cups handles, only to pull back a bit.

"Can you feel that?" he asked.

"Feels like magic. What do you reckon? Bagman did say the first person to reach the cup would be taken victoriously out of the maze."

Parvati's warnings rang in his head, and Harry suddenly felt really bad about all of this. He was almost tempted to tell Cedric that no, he would take the cup alone. That way, whatever mess was about to happen, it would only affect him, but when he opened his mouth to say something, he caught Cedric's expectant gaze. Harry was the one to suggest they both take it. He couldn't go back on that now.

"Be on your guard just in case," was all he said.

Cedric nodded in understanding. They each reached for a handle and Cedric counted them down. On three, they grabbed them, and Harry felt a jerk around his navel. His feet left the ground and his surroundings all blurred together. Light and dark flew past his head. Harry no longer felt the magic of Hogwarts surrounding him. In all the chaos, Harry screwed his eyes shut to block it out, hoping against hope that the awful feeling in his gut was wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Don't mind the brewing storm looming on the horizon.

The graveyard

After what felt like ages of flying through a swirling vortex of colours, Harry and Cedric landed roughly on soft dirt and grass. It did absolutely nothing for Harry's twisted ankle, and it was only Cedric's quick reflexes that kept him from falling. The Cup fell from their hands, rolling away from them slightly.

This was most definitely not the maze. It was also not Hogwarts. Harry couldn't see any landmarks he associated with the grounds, nor could he see the mountains that surrounded it. There was no comforting presence of the Hogwarts magic from the wards of the school. Instead, there were rows and rows of headstones, dotted here and there by a larger memorial or mausoleum.

They were in a graveyard.

"Bagman didn't say anything about this, right?" Cedric said, "do you reckon this is part of the task?"

"No idea, but let's be careful anyway. Stick together."

Neither of them lowered their wands as they looked around. Magic still pulsed from the Cup, having been riled up by the journey but slowly settling. If Harry were to guess, he would say that once it was fully settled, the portkey would be able to take them back to Hogwarts. They only needed to wait a few minutes.

Cedric read the inscription on the nearest headstones while Harry tried to place the funny sense of foreboding. There was something about this place which felt familiar, but he couldn't figure out what it was. The largest grave near to them had a large statue of an angel. In front of it was a wide and deep stone cauldron. Harry cautiously approached it. Inside was a clear liquid giving off a faint but foul odour. The inside of the cauldron was covered in runes, glowing slightly in the darkness.

"Cedric, I think we should get out of here," Harry said, "I think we should get out of here right now."

"The portkey is almost recharged and then we'll leave," Cedric said, "I don't like the look of that ritual set up."

Harry blanched, because he'd just seen the name on the largest grave.

Tom Riddle

"We need to go now!"

A twig snapping had them both whipping around with their wands. A figure was stumbling towards them. In the darkness Harry couldn't make out any details, but they were moving as though pulled along by ropes, and they were carrying something small in their arms.

“Don’t come any closer,” Cedric said firmly, wand raised.

The person tripped, and her hood fell. In the light of Cedric and Harry’s wands, Harry recognised her as Bertha Jorkins. She looked positively awful; red rimmed and puffy eyes with enormous bags beneath them, and tear tracks permanently staining her cheeks. What may have at one time been beautifully sleek hair was matted and unkempt. Her whole body was trembling, and her sobs renewed when she saw Harry.

“Please! Please run! Save yourselves!”

There was a crack, and a new figure appeared from the darkness. Harry barely had time to take in the black robes and the skull like mask before a high, cruel voice pierced the night.

“Kill the spare!”

It all seemed to happen so slowly. The Death Eater raised his wand and a jet of green light shot from the end of it, aimed at Cedric. At the same time, Harry reacted. He knew there was no spell which could block the Killing Curse, but that didn’t matter. With a flick of his wand, a huge chunk of earth was ripped upwards, directly into the path of the spell. The Curse hit it and the whole thing exploded, throwing all of them backwards.

That seemed to snap Cedric out of his shock. Immediately he was on his feet, firing stunning spells through the cloud of dust. One of them hit Bertha, who crumpled to the floor. The little bundle she was carrying wriggled and squirmed. The force of the blast had knocked off the Death Eaters hood.

All Harry could see was white or grey hair flying as the Death Eater turned his wand to Cedric. The spell exchange was brutal, and several headstones exploded as both combatants dodged. Harry shot his own spells when he could, which seemed to enrage the Death Eater further. Harry shielded himself from a hex fired his way, but before either of them could counter, the Death Eater struck. The spell was pale brown, almost beige in colour. Harry was at the wrong angle to throw up a shield charm, and it caught Cedric in the chest just as he picked himself up from dodging a previous curse. It clung to him like slime for a moment before fading away. Cedric fell to the ground and didn’t move.

“No!”

Harry turned his wand on the Death Eater.

“Stupefy!”

In that moment, the full might of Harry’s magic came rushing forward. The stunning spell, usually a smallish bolt of red light, was a giant ball of blazing red. The Death Eater tried to put up a shield, but the overpowered stunner smashed right through it, hitting him squarely and throwing him backwards. Harry stumbled and crawled over to Cedric. His robes were burned where the spell touched them, but miraculously, Harry could feel his chest rise and fall. Something was hot to the touch beneath Harry’s hand. They needed to get back to Hogwarts.

Magic flared behind him, and over his shoulder he saw the Death Eater standing up somewhat sluggishly. Harry looked forward. The Triwizard Cup was out of reach, so he jabbed his wand at it and cried "Accio!" He grabbed a fistful of Cedric's robes as the Cup came soaring towards him. Just as his hand met the cold metal of the Cup's handle, a spell hit them both. The sickly yellow light felt like fire and Harry screamed as the sensation of a hook around his navel once again whisked him away.

He landed with a thud, collapsing basically on top of Cedric. The Cup went flying out of his grip, but he didn't much care. His eyes were screwed shut and his back felt like it was on fire, a horrible creeping burning sensation that lit up his nerves and refused to soothe and settle. There was silence for a moment, but then there was a loud cheer. Harry tensed, wand almost raising to instinctively try and find the noise, but then he felt familiar magic wash over him.

They were back in Hogwarts, safe beneath the wards. This more than anything allowed Harry to relax and open his eyes.

A small group of people rushed towards him, but Harry ignored them. His hand crept up to Cedric's neck, not stopping until he could feel the small pulse there. Cedric was still alive.

"Harry, you need to move away from him," a voice said.

Harry looked up. Dumbledore was leaning over him, the head of the group also containing Fudge, McGonagall and Moody.

"He needs to see a Healer. He got hurt really badly."

"We have a team of Healers already here and ready to go. Come on Harry, let's move away so they can work."

With surprising strength, Dumbledore lifted Harry up and back. A team of Healers in the bright green robes of St Mungo's immediately descended. Their wands waved over Cedric many times and they spoke in hushed voices. McGonagall took Harry from Dumbledore.

"Come on Potter. Let's get you somewhere you can sit down."

She led him over to a nearby bench. Getting to take the weight off his twisted ankle felt really good.

"What is it that you need, Potter?" McGonagall asked, kneeling down in front of him.

"I want Sirius," Harry said.

"I'll go get him. We're trying to keep everyone in their seats but I can do it."

She left him there, rushing off towards the stands, giving Harry a chance to look around. Dumbledore was speaking in a low and hurried voice to Fudge a short way away from where Cedric was being seen to by the Healers. Fleur was on her feet, being held back from approaching by Madam Maxime. Viktor watched on with an aggrieved expression, and

Bagman kept glancing between all of the Champions and the discarded Triwizard Cup, his wand twitching towards his throat as though he wasn't sure whether he was supposed to be making announcements. Karkaroff was nowhere to be seen.

"Come with me boy," said a gruff voice.

A rough hand grabbed Harry by the armpit and dragged him to his feet. Harry wobbled, wincing as his ankle flared with pain, though it was dull compared to the fire raging across his back. Moody was there, leaning heavily against his staff as he tried dragging Harry away from the stadium.

"I don't want to go."

"It's for the best. Let's get you to the Hospital Wing," Moody said.

"I told you, I'm not going."

"Don't be such a brat," Moody growled.

In his injured state, Harry could do little to resist. It was only when they reached the shadowy passage leading out of the Quidditch Pitch that he found his strength and twisted out of Moody's grip.

"I'm not going anywhere. I need to know that Cedric will be alright!"

"There's nothing more you can do for that boy, though I'll admit I'm surprised he's even still alive," Moody said, "whoever was there on the other side must have royally messed up."

Harry froze. Moody knew the Cup had taken them somewhere. He knew there was somebody else at the other end. But how?

"I never said that there was anything there," Harry said.

"Of course there was something there. I was hardly going to set a Portkey without knowing where it would take you. I'll admit, for a second I thought you weren't going to be the first one there. Even if I removed as many of the obstacles from your path as possible, those other three Champions were hardly slouches. Luckily, cursing Krum to attack Delacour was the stroke of genius I needed, especially when you oh so nobly told Diggory you needed to stick together."

Harry inched backwards, trying to come up with a plan while reconciling what he was hearing. Moody set this up, but why? Wasn't he supposed to be one of the best Aurors the Ministry had? Wasn't he supposed to be loyal to Dumbledore? Surely even going mad wouldn't cause him to act like this, but then Harry thought about it more.

He knew that the teachers patrolled the corridors at night. It was why he used the Marauders Map to get around. Over the course of a year, he would see just about every teacher walking around at night at various points, but as he racked his brain, he could never remember seeing Moody on patrol. Whenever Harry checked, he was always in his office. Somebody as

famously paranoid as Moody would never be satisfied with their safety unless they checked themselves.

“I don’t understand,” Harry said as he crept backwards. The evening light hit him as he left the tunnel, Moody inching after him, “why would you make the Cup a Portkey?”

“Because I obviously wanted to get you to that graveyard. I wanted you to bear witness to the resurrection of my master, and I succeeded!”

“You put my name in the Goblet of Fire. You’re not Moody,” Harry stated.

“Oh Potter, your teachers were right when they said you were sharp, and stubborn as stains on a cauldron. Getting you to do what I needed was basically impossible, but you still did what I wanted in the end.”

As Moody spoke, his wand arm slowly raised and at the same time, his skin bubbled. His features were manic and they contorted grotesquely, and Harry recognised it as Polyjuice Potion.

“But now my master has been restored to life once more. The Dark Lord will rise and I shall be rewarded greater than any Death Eater! And when I deliver him Harry Potter, I shall be held above everyone else. I will serve at his side with unquestioned devotion, and all those who abandoned their master and rolled over like dogs to the Ministry will fall at my wand!”

Harry’s ankle gave a painful twinge, causing him to stumble and fall backwards. The sudden change in position seemed to throw Moody off, but Harry had no time to react. Landing on his back caused an explosion of pain. By the time he was cognizant again, Moody’s wand was aimed at him. A bolt of red light hit Moody in the chest from somewhere behind him, and he fell to the ground stunned.

“Harry!”

Sirius suddenly appeared at his side, Remus joining him a moment later. They helped him back to his feet and led him away from Moody. Dumbledore and Fudge were there. They all watched as the Polyjuice finished wearing off. Moody’s scraggly hair became fuller and blonde. The scars faded away, the skin turned pale and slightly gaunt. Moody’s wooden leg was pushed aside as a flesh and blood leg grew in its place, and the magical eye popped out of its socket.

Harry recognised the man from the memory Dumbledore ‘accidentally’ showed him. The years had not been kind to Barty Crouch Jr, but it was undeniably him. Fudge was gaping like a fish, but Harry caught the look on Dumbledore’s face. It was almost like triumph and smug satisfaction, like he had guessed that this was the case and was revelling in being correct.

“We need to get him away from here. There are too many people, and he’s already caused enough of a scene with rambling,” Fudge said.

“I quite agree, Minister. I would quite like to know how a supposedly dead man was able to hide amongst my staff so I would suggest calling in the Aurors,” Dumbledore said.

He turned to Harry, but Sirius and Remus had already led him back to the bench.

“We’re sorry we didn’t get here sooner. McGonagall did what they could, but they’ve got people directing everyone in the stands back to the castle and they wouldn’t let us leave,” Sirius said.

“Cedric, what’s going to happen to him?” Harry said.

“Don’t worry about him right now. The Healers are doing what they can,” Remus said, “what about you? Are you hurt at all? I can see you’re bleeding.”

Harry hadn’t noticed that, but there was blood dripping from a cut on his shoulder. Probably from when the Acromantula crashed into him. Harry’s first instinct was to deny everything and insist he was fine, but he was in a lot of pain right now and he wasn’t thinking clearly.

“My back, it really hurts,” Harry said, “a Death Eater shot some kind of spell at me. It was like fire.”

“I’ll go get you a Healer,” Remus said.

“But Cedric-”

“Has an entire team tending to him. A single Healer can be spared to examine you,” Remus said, brooking no further argument as he strode off to the people in green robes.

“A Death Eater?” Sirius asked.

“The Cup was a Portkey. It took us to a graveyard where there was this cauldron. I don’t know what they were trying to do. Bertha Jorkins was there but she was being forced, and then a Death Eater showed up. I recognised the mask from the World Cup. He did something to Cedric, and he shot some kind of spell at us when we tried to leave,” Harry explained as best he could through the pain.

“Harry, I think it best if you came up to my office,” Dumbledore said, “it is very important that you tell us everything that happened to you tonight before things get out of hand.”

“Absolutely not Dumbledore,” Sirius snarled, “Harry is in considerable pain and in no fit state for an interrogation. The only place he will be going is St Mungo’s to receive treatment.”

“Of course. I will be happy to speak to him once he has recovered,” Dumbledore said.

The Headmaster moved away when Remus returned with one of the people in green robes. Harry almost cried in relief when he saw that it was Andromeda Tonks.

“Tell me what hurts Mr Potter, and please do not leave anything out,” she said, acting as though they had never met.

Harry played along, telling her about the fiery pain in his back even as Andromeda healed the wound on his shoulder and his twisted ankle.

“He said that somebody cast a spell on him,” Sirius said.

“Do you know what spell it was?” Andromeda asked.

“I have no idea. It was yellow, really sickly looking, and it feels like burning.”

Harry winced at another painful twinge, rubbing his chest when he felt something hot pressing against it. There was something round and hard there. From beneath his robes, Harry pulled out the rune stone he’d carved. The runes were all lit up, pulsing with magic, but Harry could feel how fragile it was. It was so close to breaking.

“What is that?” Andromeda asked.

“It’s a rune stone I made. It’s supposed to protect me from low level spells and stuff. Cedric has one too, but it obviously didn’t do its job properly or he wouldn’t have been hurt.”

“May I?”

He handed Andromeda the stone. She tapped it gently with her wand.

“It has a magical signature. If we can analyse it, we can figure out the spells that were used. You said that Mr Diggory has one as well?” Harry nodded. “Can you tell me anything else about the spells he was hit with?”

He described how the yellow spell hit them both, but Cedric had already been hit by a spell that was almost like beige, sticky slime. Andromeda nodded, then darted off to the team of Healers around Cedric. Sirius pulled him into a careful hug.

“I’m so proud of you.”

“But I-”

“None of that now. You made it through the last task and came out of it alive. That was all I asked of you, and by the sounds of it, your rune stone may help the Healers figure out how to treat Diggory. You’ve done so much for me to be proud of,” Sirius said.

The Healers around Cedric had arranged him onto a stretcher. A Healer stood at the top and bottom of the stretcher, reaching out to take hold of a slip of paper. In an instant, the Healers and Cedric were gone.

“We’ve taken him to St Mungo’s for treatment. I’d also like to take Mr Potter there as well,” Andromeda said, returning with one of her colleagues, “that way we can heal the curse that was cast on his back to cause such pain. I’m afraid your guardians will have to make their own way to the hospital.”

Harry instinctively grasped hold of Sirius.

“Hey, it’ll be alright Harry. You’ll be safe with Andy, and Remus and I will be there as soon as we can,” Sirius said, “you’ve been so brave tonight. Please, just be brave for a little longer.”

It took an embarrassingly long time for Harry to let go. Andromeda helped guide him to lie down on a stretcher. His back flared in pain again, causing him to wince.

“Can you let them know?” Harry asked.

“Don’t worry. We’ll make sure all your friends know, especially those two,” Sirius said, then to Andromeda he said, “we’ll be at St Mungo’s as soon as we can. We’ll bring the Diggory’s with us.”

Mr and Mrs Diggory were with Professor Sprout. Mr Diggory had a lost look on his face while Mrs Diggory had a pained but resolute expression. A Healer from St Mungo’s was talking to them, probably giving them the same kind of instructions as Andromeda.

Harry rested his head back against the stretcher. The adrenaline was leaving him, his whole body was throbbing, and it was getting harder and harder to keep his eyes open. The last thing he remembered before finally passing out was Andromeda and the other Healer holding onto the slip of paper above his head. By the time the Portkey took them away, he was out.

When Harry woke, it was to the clean smell he always associated with the Hospital Wing. That was an area of Hogwarts he was very familiar with, but opening his eyes quickly proved that he wasn’t there. The room was similar, with rows of beds along the walls, but the beige walls were not made of prominent stone like Hogwarts. The windows were tall and narrow, letting in thin beams of light. This was St Mungo’s.

He wasn’t wearing his glasses so everything was blurry. Harry tried sitting up, and was surprised when his back didn’t hurt. The skin felt tight, and there were some aches, but it wasn’t the nearly overwhelming pain. Whatever the Healers did must have worked. His glasses were on the bedside table next to him, so he grabbed them and put them on.

Sirius was slumped in a seat next to him. He jerked awake when Harry moved.

“Harry? Are you alright? Does anything hurt?”

“A bit achy but I’m fine.”

“That’s a relief,” Sirius said.

At that moment, the door to the ward opened and Remus and Andromeda came in. Both looked very glad to see him awake. Remus took the empty seat by Sirius while Andromeda stood on Harry’s free side, waving her wand over him while muttering incantations.

“It’s currently just after lunch the day after you arrived, so you’ve not been out that long. You responded well to treatment, so you won’t need to stay much longer. I’ll get you something to eat and after a bit more observation, you should be free to go back to Hogwarts by dinner,” Andromeda said, “I’m sure you have questions.”

“How is Cedric? Is he- is he alright?” Harry asked.

Andromeda shared a look with Sirius and Remus.

“I’m not going to lie to you Harry. He’s in a bad way. The two spells he was hit with combined in an unexpected way and have done a lot of damage. He’s still receiving treatment and likely will be in a magical coma while he recovers,” Andromeda said, “but this is a lot better than it otherwise could have been. Your actions may have saved his life.”

“What? But I didn’t do anything?”

“Did you not give him a rune stone to protect him?”

“I did, but it was only supposed to protect against minor stuff,” Harry said, “the Death Eater wasn’t playing around. There’s no way it would have helped against the curses he used.”

“I think you underestimate yourself. The rune stone you made worked by absorbing the magical energy of harmful spells. As you said, for minor spells it would absorb it completely, giving the user protection against them, but that does not mean that it was useless for something more intense,” Andromeda said, “the rune stone both of you wore absorbed at least some of the magical energy of the curses, so even if it couldn’t stop them entirely, it would be like being hit by a weaker version of them.”

“To still cause enough damage for a magical coma must have meant they were pretty bad spells to begin with,” Sirius said.

“They were, and their interaction hasn’t helped, but the other reason your rune stone has helped Harry is that because it absorbed the magic of the curses, we were able to get a magical signature from it. Knowing what spells were used is one of the most helpful pieces of information Healers can get when trying to reverse their effects.”

“And what spells were used?” Remus asked.

“The first, the one that looked like beige slime, is a particularly nasty curse that attacks the target almost like a corrosive acid. It would eat through everything until there is nothing left of the person, but thanks to the rune stone, it didn’t have enough energy to get through the skin,” Andromeda explained, “the second which hit you both was a curse that amplifies the pain of an injury to unimaginable levels. It can cause burns if not applied directly to an already present injury, which is what happened to you Harry. Luckily, the rune stone absorbed most of it, otherwise you’d likely have been delirious from the pain.”

“But Cedric got hit with both of them. You said they interacted weirdly,” Harry said.

“They did, but Harry, he will be alright. From the magical signatures we got from the rune stone, we were able to figure out what spells were used within an hour of him arriving here. From what I saw before I came here, he was responding well to treatment,” Andromeda said, “I’m not going to lie. He’ll have a long recovery ahead. Once the Healers are finished, it’ll be up to him and his magic to decide how long he’ll be in the magical coma, but he is alive and he will come back to you and your friends. Believe that. There’s a lot of power in faith.”

Harry rested his head back on the pillows propping him up. It didn't feel real. This shouldn't have happened. Even as Andromeda explained things, Harry couldn't help a creeping sense of guilt from taking over him. He should have done more. If only he had figured out that Moody was a fake earlier. If only he had done something about the Unforgivable Curses being used. If only he hadn't let Cedric come with him to the graveyard. Maybe they should have dropped out of the maze along with Fleur and Cedric. It's not like any of them actually wanted to win the tournament anyway.

Andromeda left and Sirius took hold of one of his hands, giving it a very firm squeeze, which made Harry look over at him. If his godfather knew the raging thoughts in his head, he didn't say, but Harry felt like he did from the knowing looks he received. Nothing was said until Harry had eaten the lunch St Mungo's provided.

"There is some good news to you being brought to St Mungo's," Sirius said, "since you were being treated for a dark curse, they used various cleansing spells and potions on you. You've been doing a good job of using more of your actual talent and ability, but this is the perfect excuse to finally throw the blocks off for good."

"But Dumbledore will just try and put them on again. He already wants to meet with me to talk about what happened," Harry said.

"And we can work around that," Remus said, "he's asked Sirius and I to meet with him as well. It sounded grave so it likely has to do with Voldemort. We can give him your account of what happened in the maze when we do. That way he has no excuse to meet you personally."

"Needless to say, you should not be alone with him. You've come too far to let him get you back into his clutches now," Sirius said, "you deserve to be a happy, normal boy who gets to spend time with his boyfriends in peace."

The thought of Seamus and Dean brought a small smile to his face, a small spark of happiness that was rapidly smothered by dawning dread. There was no way he could keep the mess of his life from them any more. It was clear that Voldemort was on the move, and like it or not, Harry was going to be thrust into the midst of it all. Harry would never want to drag anyone he cared about into it with him, and he cared about them *so* much.

When he got back to Hogwarts, when he found a quiet moment for just the three of them, he would swear them to secrecy and then he would tell them everything. Then they could make their choice. At least if they wanted nothing to do with him, they would still have each other, and Harry ... Well, Harry would just have to live with it. It wouldn't be the first time he'd lost people after all.

Sharing the secret

Just as Andromeda said, Harry was cleared to leave before dinner. His ankle and shoulder were fully healed, not even a scar, but his back would still be tender and sore for at least a week. Andromeda gave him a balm to rub into the skin which would help the healing process along, soothing out the aches and tightness. He thanked her for everything she'd done, and asked her to keep him updated on Cedric's condition.

Sirius and Remus held his arms tightly as they apparated to Hogsmeade. The squeezing sensation was unpleasant, but after everything that happened, Harry could easily manage it. The evening sun was setting, casting Hogwarts Castle with vibrant orange hues. It looked very beautiful, completely at odds with what had just happened.

Dinner was likely in progress, or so Harry thought, because when he walked through the front doors, there were still a lot of people milling about in the Entrance Hall. Gasps rang out when Harry was spotted. Sirius and Remus glared the crowds away, putting on their best 'I spent 12 years in Azkaban, don't test me' and 'I am a very disappointed Professor' faces. The only ones to ignore them were Harry's friends.

Fleur and Viktor rushed forward, both pulling him into a tight hug. They looked slightly worse for wear but otherwise fine. Then Fred and George, along with the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team appeared, and Harry was nearly crushed within the big group hug he received. When they backed off, he saw the Gryffindor fourth-years watching him, looking unsure if they should approach. Harry left them with no doubt as he walked over. Seamus and Dean were at the front, and he grabbed hold of both of them. When they hugged back, something settled within him, and he almost completely relaxed.

"I'm so glad you're ok," Dean said, "you are ok, right?"

"Yes, I'm ... I'm as good as I can be," Harry said.

That made Seamus hug harder, and Harry bit back the wince as his back twinged slightly. Hearing that made Parvati, Lavender and Neville sigh in relief. Someone pushed their way through the watching crowd of students, and just as his boys stepped back, Harry found himself with an armful of Cho Chang.

"Thank you," she sobbed, "thank you so much!"

"Cho, I'm- I'm sorry I-"

"No, don't you dare apologise!" Cho said. Tears were streaming down her cheeks when she pulled back, but her eyes were full of steely determination. "Mr Diggory told me what you did for Cedric. It's because of you that he's still alive right now and has a chance to get better."

"Come along everyone. I think we should head inside now so we can have something to eat," Remus said, ever the sensible one.

The group all sat together at the end of the Hufflepuff table, but they weren't the only ones doing so. While most people sat with their Houses, Harry could see small groups of mixed colours dotted about the place. There were even some Slytherins amongst the various gatherings, a testament to the effort Harry had put forward to encourage more unity between the houses. Harry sat between his boys, with Sirius and Remus bracketing them. Fleur and Viktor were across from him, along with Cho, Fred and George. Angelina, Alicia and Katie, as well as many of Cedric's friends, filled in the gaps.

"It was a bit mad last night. There weren't any screens like for the second task so we had no idea what was happening in the maze," Fred said, "we saw the red sparks for Fleur and Viktor, but then there was nothing. The next thing we knew there was some kind of commotion at the entrance to the maze, but all the teachers would say was that there had been a bit of a complication with the end of the tournament and we needed to return to the castle."

"Was Madam Maxime not able to get screens for the third task like she did for the lake?" Harry asked Fleur.

"No, and she was just as angry about it. Apparently the other organisers overruled her, saying that the suspense was part of the fun, but that we'd all be safe with the monitoring spells they put in place," Fleur scoffed, "we all know how well those spells worked out. How on earth was somebody able to cast the Unforgivable Curses and not set off any kind of alarm!"

"I am so ashamed that I was not able to throw off the Imperius Curse. When Fleur told me about what I did while under its sway, I am only glad that you and Cedric were able to stop me before I did something I could never take back," Viktor said.

"Don't blame yourself. The fake Moody must have put all of his magical power into keeping you under, and you were fighting him the entire time. It's why your eyes were foggy, and why your movements were so sluggish. If we had been duelling you at your best, we might not have been able to beat you," Harry said.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, but it does not make me feel that much better," Viktor said, one arm around Katie.

"We only knew a bit more about what happened because Mr Diggory and Mr Lupin sent a message to me about Cedric," Cho said.

"How were things in the Gryffindor common room?" Harry asked.

"Hard to say really. I think everyone was a bit shocked how everything went down," George said, "a few people tried pestering your friends but we set them right."

"Really?" Harry asked his boys.

"They wanted to know what happened as though we had any more answers than they did. It was mental," Seamus said.

"I'd be careful around Ron and Hermione. They seemed a bit ... off, maybe annoyed that nobody wanted their opinions," Dean said, "I wouldn't be surprised if they tried getting back

into your good books again like they did last year.”

“There’s no chance of that. I don’t want their hatred in my life,” Harry said, and then in a quieter voice so only they could hear him, “not when I’ve got you.”

Seamus took his free hand beneath the table and squeezed it, while Dean put a hand on his thigh. Harry glanced behind him at the Gryffindor table. Ron and Hermione were sitting slightly apart from the others, both looking grumpy. He looked away before he could catch their eyes. The conversation quietened, making Harry look up from his plate of food. Sirius tensed in the corner of his eye.

“Harry, might I have a word with you?”

Harry turned in his seat to see Dumbledore, smiling benignly as his eyes twinkled. The grandfatherly act had Harry’s hackles rise, and he was met with a desire to never speak to the man again.

“Harry’s only just got back from the hospital. Surely whatever it is can wait,” Sirius said.

“Of course, I only wished to speak with him about his recent experiences to see how he is holding up,” Dumbledore said, surveying the assembled students, “I am very glad to see friends banding together. Ms Chang, I am so very sorry that this has happened.”

“Thank you Professor. I heard from his father that Cedric should recover. I just hope it’s soon,” Cho said.

“As do we all, my dear. Mr Diggory is lucky to have someone like you in his life,” Dumbledore turned back to Harry, “why don’t you come to my office tomorrow morning so we can discuss things?”

“Why don’t Remus and I come with you now? You said you needed to speak with us anyway,” Sirius said.

Dumbledore’s brow barely twitched.

“Certainly. If you’ll come with me.”

Sirius and Remus rose from their seats as Dumbledore swept away.

“I’ll speak to you once we’re done,” Sirius whispered to Harry, giving him one last hug before he and Remus followed Dumbledore out of the Great Hall.

“I do not trust that man,” Fleur said, her eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean?” Dean asked.

“Of all the Headmasters, he does not seem at all concerned with what is happening. I have seen many arrogant men, but even they never acted quite so above it all. Madam Maxime is furious with how he has handled this tournament. She would have taken us all back to Beauxbaton immediately but I insisted that we stay for a bit longer,” Fleur said, “do not be

alone with him Harry. I do not trust that he actually has your best interests at heart, especially not after what happened this year.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t,” Harry said, then when Seamus and Dean both looked confused, he whispered, “later.”

A hand reached across the table to push his plate towards him. Harry looked up at Cho’s slightly teary face.

“Eat. Cedric really cared about his friends and he wouldn’t want us wasting away,” Cho said.

“I will if you will,” Harry said, gesturing to her mostly full plate.

Cho chuckled wetly and they both slowly ate their food. Dean lifted the arm from his thigh to rest across his shoulders, grounding Harry in the moment. When he had enough, he could feel the call of his bed, and he knew that it was time. Dean and Seamus followed him from the Great Hall and up to Gryffindor Tower. Nobody tried to stop them from leaving. When they were safely up in the dormitory, Harry climbed onto his bed, gesturing for the others to join him. With a wave of his wand, the hangings were sealed and warded for privacy.

“Something’s wrong Harry,” Dean said, “I don’t know what it is but it’s obviously upsetting you. You don’t have to tell us what it is, but we’d both like to help you.”

“You’ve been through some heavy stuff this year, and you don’t have to hold onto it alone,” Seamus said, “we’re here. You can tell us as much as you want.”

“I- I do want to tell you. I do, I just- I don’t know where to start, and I don’t want to mess anything up,” Harry said.

“Mess what up?”

“This. Us. These last few months have been great. I don’t want to mess things up because my life is stupid,” Harry said.

“That’s not going to happen Harry,” Seamus said, “we might not have been there for the crazy stuff you got up to in your first two years here, but we’re your friends now. You’re our boyfriend, so you’re stuck with us.”

“Why don’t you start from the beginning?” Dean said, “you can take it slowly, but I agree with Seamus. You’re not going to get rid of us that easily.”

“I really hope so, but before I say any more, I need you to swear that you won’t tell anyone else,” Harry said, “it’s not that I don’t trust you. I just really cannot let anyone else know before I’m ready.”

He saw the way Seamus tensed slightly. The pair of them exchanged a look, and for a moment, Harry thought that they were going to disagree, and then that would be it. To his surprise, Seamus met his eyes without hesitation.

“I, Seamus Finnegan, do give my word that whatever is to be revealed to me by Harry Potter, I shall not repeat to others who do not already have this knowledge. I shall keep this vow until Harry Potter releases me from it. May magic make it so.”

There was a rush in the air as the vow was sealed into place. Dean made the same vow.

“Now if we try to tell anyone, we’ll lose our ability to speak forever. I trust you Harry. Clearly whatever is so important you want a vow is something big,” Seamus said, “we’re here for you whatever it is. That’s how being a boyfriend works.”

Harry sincerely hoped that was true, and it was that hope that let him hold up his right hand so they could both see it.

“Well, Dean knows some of it already but-”

The ring on Harry’s finger, usually kept hidden from being seen, became visible. Seamus gasped when he saw it, then his jaw hung open when the ring changed between Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin.

“That’s a lordship ring, but there’s three of them at once,” Seamus said.

“I’m the Lord of three Noble and Most Ancient Houses, and Heir to a fourth,” Harry said.

“You never said that when we met in the summer,” Dean said.

“Blimey. Mam told me the Potters were supposed to be nobility, but I didn’t think it was as big as this, and you’re a Lord three times over!” Seamus said, “hold on, is that why you thought things would change between us? Because of your social standing?”

“Not entirely. This is just the start.”

In stops and starts, Harry told them about his inheritance in third year and all the revelations that came with it. It wasn’t the first time he’d told people about it, and one would think it would get easier each time, but Harry was telling them everything. It wasn’t just the cold hard facts of what happened, but also how he felt when he learned everything.

He told them about how overwhelmed he was when he found out he was Lord Potter and Lord Gryffindor and Slytherin. How betrayed he felt when he learned of the spells and potions he’d been placed under, and how freeing it was to finally be rid of them. How he’d finally gotten to speak to his father in the Ring Realm, and how between that and the Inheritance Test, he’d learned that Sirius Black was innocent. When they heard how Harry had managed to deduce who Pettigrew was and how he found him in the dormitory, Seamus and Dean both tensed, even though they had figured some of it out themselves.

Harry continued talking about the frustration of having to pretend to be friends with Ron and Hermione, even as they still tried to dose him with potions throughout the year. How Ginny had tried after they won the Quidditch Cup. All of the feelings he’d bottled up about his situation came spilling out of him quite unbidden, which wasn’t such a bad thing, because it led to him rambling about them.

How he had been so happy to find them on the train in Third Year because they talked to him like he was normal. How he hadn't gone completely mad because he got to spend time with them, that their friendship had been leagues above anything he'd shared with Ron and Hermione. Harry told them how much he'd come to cherish the moments they had together even before their feelings developed, and now that they had grown closer, he was terrified of losing them because of all the craziness that made up his life.

"And now something's going on. Voldemort's doing who knows what, and Dumbledore's plotting something, and there's still so many unanswered questions about everything, and I know I should have told you all of this sooner but I was scared I'd push you away. I know it's not fair that I basically strung you along, but you two were something I could choose for myself, and you've only ever wanted me to be me and not some caricature or celebrity, and I was selfish and I didn't want to lose that. Now that you know you probably don't want any part in all of this drama, and I completely understand if you-"

Harry was vaguely aware that he was becoming slightly hysterical, but the emotions were flowing, crashing against the walls he'd built to contain them and bringing them down. There was no stopping it now and the words came pouring out of him without control. His breathing picked up, and he couldn't even see Seamus and Dean even though they were right in front of him.

He was snapped out of his hysteria by a pair of lips crashing into his own. His vision suddenly sharpened, focusing on Seamus kissing him deeply. He pulled back and they were both slightly breathless. Then Seamus pulled him into a firm hug, a hug that was joined not even a second later by Dean. The raging tidal wave of emotions was calmed as Harry was enveloped in their arms.

"I'd call you an idiot but I don't think I can," Dean said, "I'm so sorry all of this has happened to you."

"Those people have done unforgivable things to you," Seamus grumbled, "and you've been suffering through it basically on your own."

Seamus pulled back and held Harry's face in his hands, staring into his eyes intensely.

"Do not think for a second I'm going anywhere. Call me selfish but I don't want to lose you either," Seamus said.

"Yeah, you're stuck with us. The three of us are a team," Dean said.

"But- but I've got so much baggage. I'm a Lord and people will expect so much from me, and if you stay with me they'll expect it from you as well," Harry said, "and there's all the stuff with Voldemort and Dumbledore and-"

"And that doesn't matter. We've said it before but you've only ever been Harry to us. Lord Potter, Lord Gryffindor, Lord Slytherin, maybe, but still just Harry," Dean said calmly.

"Besides, at the risk of being incredibly blunt, we already knew we'd get attention because of the whole 'Boy Who Lived' thing. If that wasn't enough to scare us off, then this won't,"

Seamus added.

Dean scowled, giving Seamus a light smack.

“We can handle the rest of it as it comes. A couple of extra pairs of hands will help lighten your load,” Dean continued, “that is, if you still want us to.”

Harry ducked his head, but even as selfless as he was, he couldn’t bring himself to say no to them. He wanted them, and he made sure they knew that by holding onto them tightly.

With everything out in the open, Harry felt a lot lighter. His emotions were still racing around in his chest, but now he felt like he could think. Dean pushed him so he was lying down, and his boys slotted themselves either side of him, the three of them cuddled together. He needed to show them how much he cared, and how happy he was that they were still willing to be with him.

When Dean looked over, Harry leaned up to kiss him. It was slow and steady, not rushed but still full of care. He did the same thing to Seamus. The three of them traded lazy, unhurried kisses, content to just be together after all the stress of the Triwizard Tournament.

The sun set and through the hangings they heard somebody else come into the dormitory. Judging by the sounds, it was Neville. That was the cue for them to get ready for bed. Harry hated being apart from his boys, but he also wanted to change out of his robes and into something more comfortable. Once all three of them were in pyjamas and they’d brushed their teeth, Harry snagged them before they left the bathroom.

“Please, don’t go.”

They understood his question. Ron wasn’t in the dormitory when they crossed, and Neville didn’t comment when all three of them climbed into Harry’s bed. In the months that they’d been dating, this was the first time they slept in the same bed together. It should have been a big occasion, but Harry just wanted his boys close at hand. The lingering emotions from their earlier talk crept up on him once again, spurred on by the sense of safety he felt being sandwiched between Seamus and Dean.

A sob escaped him. He fought down another, but in the dark Harry felt Dean move so they were basically nose to nose.

“It’s alright Harry. You can let it out.”

And so he did. With Seamus’s broad frame at his back, he pushed his face into Dean’s shoulder. Enveloped in their arms, he let the tears fall. No longer fighting it, he didn’t sob, nor did he make more sound than he had to. All he did was let the chaos and pain inside him leak out and drift away, safe and secure in the comforting embrace of his boyfriends.

Harry was the first one awake the next morning, which was typical. While the beds in the dormitory were larger than a typical single, they really weren’t big enough for three teenage

boys to sleep together comfortably. It was only because they were so tangled together that neither Dean nor Seamus had fallen out.

Both of his boys were sleeping peacefully. Harry felt Seamus's steady breathing on the back of his neck, and he found himself captivated by the relaxed expression on Dean's face. It made him want to inch forward and touch it, but knowing how lightly Dean slept, he settled for stroking his hand back and forth in its place on the small of his back. About half an hour later, Dean's eyelids began to flutter, until eventually warm brown met vivid green.

"Morning," he mumbled.

Since he was awake, Harry leaned up to give him a kiss. Dean tried to stretch, only to realise that Seamus was clinging to both of them like an octopus.

"We need a bigger bed," he said.

Harry's heart fluttered at the thought they would do this again.

"To be honest, we should probably all get up and have a shower since we didn't before we went to bed. I could certainly do with one."

"That's fine. Shall we wake Seamus up as well, or do we let him sleep?"

"He'll need a shower to wake up anyway, and he'll be grumpy if we leave him out," Harry said.

Dean shook his head fondly. He leaned over to press a kiss to Seamus's cheek, before standing up from the bed. Now alone with only Seamus, Harry had more room to roll over and begin the process of waking the sandy blonde up. It took a bit of shaking for Seamus's eyes to flutter open, and before he could do more than groan, Harry captured his lips in a kiss. That certainly got his attention as the kiss was returned.

"Wha- what time is it?" Seamus asked.

"Time to get up," Harry said, "come on, we're going to take a shower."

Harry led Seamus to the bathroom by the hand as the other boy was still bleary eyed from sleep. Dean was waiting for them, getting their things ready. Then Harry was reminded of a brief conversation Harry had with Seamus. It felt like ages ago, even if it was only less than a week.

"Is it alright if I-" Harry asked, lightly tugging at the hem of Seamus's sleep shirt, "since you're still so sleepy."

Even as he said it, he could see all traces of sleep gone from Seamus's face.

"Um, sure, if you want."

In the months since they had become boyfriends, they hadn't done more than kiss. Passionately kiss, some would call it making out, and there had been wandering hands

occasionally creeping beneath shirts, but they'd never gone beyond that. While Harry didn't plan on doing that today, there was still something heart pounding about being given permission to undress his boyfriend.

The sleep shirt came off easily, Seamus raising his arms as needed. Harry could have easily stopped right there. The little workouts that Seamus managed to sneak in between homework and hanging out had given him the beginnings of muscles across his abs, chest and arms. A quick glance at Dean showed he was just as captivated as Harry was, but Harry wasn't going to stop there. He knelt down, fingers curling into the waistband of Seamus's sweatpants and tugging them down.

It was a bit ridiculous, because he had seen both of his boys naked before, but this was an entirely different context. As it was, he was left breathless when Seamus stepped out of his sweatpants, his nude form on display. He was stunning, and not just the length close to his face. It was a bit shorter than Harry's own, but the way it was twitching at the attention told Harry that it would likely grow further.

Harry stood, completely red in the face, only to see that Seamus was just as red. He had no idea what to say, all the words he could think of sounded completely lame in his head, so all he could do was smile and hoped it conveyed everything he wanted. From the smile he received in return, his message was understood.

Before Harry could do anything else, he felt a pair of hands on his shoulders. Dean was there, a questioning look in his eye.

"Can I?"

He pulled at Harry's pyjama top, and Harry understood. For some reason, he hadn't thought beyond undressing Seamus, but he nodded anyway. Dean showed the same gentle care that Harry had, pulling off his top smoothly. Harry felt both of their eyes on him, and while the context made him a little embarrassed, having his boy's attention on his body didn't make him feel uncomfortable. It was actually really quite nice. He stifled a yelp when Dean copied his action, kneeling so he could pull down his pants.

And just like that, he was naked like Seamus, with Dean so close to his half-hard dick. Oh god, why had he started this? He wasn't ready to take that step but there was so much temptation.

Dean stood and stepped back to survey his handiwork, but he didn't get far before Seamus appeared at his side. With a grin and a whispered comment, Seamus began undressing Dean. Dean was thin, like Harry, but he didn't have the lithe muscle that Harry had gained from swimming and Quidditch. It didn't stop Harry from becoming captivated by the sight. Both his boyfriends were incredibly attractive, and there was something completely intoxicating to Harry to see them in this position, with both of them naked and Seamus on his knees in front of Dean.

Seamus stood and leaned upwards to give Dean a kiss. The pair of them then held out an arm, beckoning Harry closer. He joined them in the hug. Getting to feel them both, the press of so

much skin against skin, was an electric feeling. He hoped they felt the same way, though judging by the hardnesses he could feel pressed against his hips, he was pretty sure they did.

“God, how did I get so lucky to get two very hot boyfriends,” Seamus said, “can we do this again? Please say we can do this again.”

“I’d- I’d like that quite a lot,” Harry said.

“Me too,” Dean said, “though we should probably have a conversation about how far we’re willing to go. This is new for all of us.”

“That’s true,” Seamus said, “perhaps when we’re not all raring to go.”

“Shall we take our showers then?” Harry suggested.

Despite the temptation, they separated into the three individual shower stalls. Any possible awkwardness was washed away as they fell into the swing of the familiar routine. It took a little while for the conversation to get going, but the silence still felt peaceful. Harry didn’t have much to say, he’d already said so much yesterday, so Seamus and Dean talked about their exams. It felt like a different time, when the third task hadn’t happened yet, and Harry’s life hadn’t been messed up once again.

Now that they’d crossed the line of undressing each other, there was no hesitation to shamelessly stare at one another over the low walls separating the bathroom stalls. Harry caught both of his boys' eyes as he washed his body, but that was fine because he did the exact same thing to them. By the time they finished and dried, towels tied around their waists with a few more kisses exchanged, it was late enough in the morning for others to stir, and Neville came into the bathroom. He saw the way they were looking at each other immediately.

“I’m very happy for you, but I don’t want to know,” was all he said, and Harry and the others left it at that.

It was only when Harry left the safe cocoon of his dormitory that the events of the previous two days caught up with him. The air in the castle was heavy and subdued as the news of what had happened to Cedric spread. There was a lot of uncertainty, and Harry had no doubt he’d be fielding questions about it for a long time. He sat with the other Gryffindor fourth-years at breakfast, and he told them what happened in the maze. Judging by the determined expressions on Parvati and Lavender’s faces, they would make sure that other people knew so Harry wouldn’t get inundated with demands to tell the story. He trusted them to be able to manage the gossip.

Just as Harry was finishing his breakfast, Sirius entered the Great Hall. He spotted Harry and immediately strode over to him.

“There’s been some developments. Are you free to talk?” he whispered into his ear.

“Is everything alright?” Harry asked.

“Not exactly, but it’s not for everyone’s ears,” Sirius said.

“Can- can Dean and Seamus come too? They know everything I do,” Harry said with uncertainty.

Sirius looked a little surprised and proud.

“If you trust them, then that should be fine,” he said, “come with me.”

Sirius led the three of them up to the seventh floor. They passed a tapestry of a wizard trying to teach trolls how to dance and arrived at a blank stretch of wall.

“What-” Harry started but Sirius held up a hand.

The man paced back and forth three times in front of the blank wall, only it suddenly wasn’t so blank. A door materialised out of nowhere. Sirius threw it open, revealing a spacious but comfortable lounge. A fire was crackling in the hearth, though no heat was given off.

“What is this place?” Dean asked.

“This is a remarkable place we found in our sixth year,” Sirius said, “it’s called the Room of Requirement. It only appears when somebody has great need of it, and always comes equipped for the seekers needs. At first we thought that this was just the best hiding place in the castle when Filch wanted to tan our hides for one prank or another, but then one day James was bemoaning the lack of private Potions labs we could use while walking along that corridor, and then bam, one suddenly appears.”

“How come it isn’t on the Marauders Map?” Harry asked.

“We tried putting it in, but it never stuck. Remus thought it was because of the transient nature of the room. It’s not always here, so why would it register? Other than that, we have no idea.” Sirius shook himself a little. “Feel free to make use of the Room in the future, though be sure that nobody else figures it out, but we should get to business.”

There were two long sofas and a couple of armchairs. Sirius directed the three boys to one of the sofas, while he sat across from them. He leaned back in his chair, surveying Seamus and Dean, and Harry felt the cold trickle of dread running down his back.

“So, Harry told you everything,” Sirius said, “absolutely everything?”

“Yes sir. He told us basically everything that’s happened to him since before third year and after,” Dean said.

“Then I hope I don’t need to impress upon you the importance of the trust you’ve been given, and the consequences should that trust be broken,” Sirius said severely.

“Sirius-”

“Harry is very important to me, and he has already had too many people come into his life for the wrong reasons only to take advantage of him. If I find that either of you have done the same, I will not hesitate to settle things myself. I may not have been a murderer when I was sent to Azkaban, so don’t make me become one.”

“We’d never do that to Harry!” Seamus piped up, face flushed angrily as he wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders, “I care about him and want him to be happy!”

“Me too! When we swore to keep his secrets, we understood the trust we were being given. I can assure you of that Lord Black,” Dean said.

Harry was mortified that Sirius was doing this, but he was also a tiny bit gleeful. He’d never had somebody so explicitly defend him like this before. Sirius was promising harm to his boyfriends if they did anything to hurt him, and his boys were standing their ground and affirming that they wouldn’t. Even as his heart swelled a little, he shot Sirius a baleful look. Sirius ignored him, continuing to scrutinise the other two boys.

Then it was like someone had flicked a switch. The stern expression vanished and a relaxed, at ease grin spread across Sirius’s face.

“Excellent. Then it’s a pleasure to meet you both, even if I’ve already met Dean.” He held out his hand. “Sirius Black, Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. Harry’s told me all about you of course.”

Seamus and Dean shook his hand, a little put off by the sudden whiplash of emotions.

“Did we just get given the shovel talk?” Dean asked in a cautious whisper.

“Oh god, my Mam’s gonna be insufferable about it, and Dad’ll probably bring an actual shovel,” Seamus groaned into his hands.

“While I’m glad you’re comfortable enough to speak to your parents about your relationship, I’ll remind you that there’s plenty you can’t say to them,” Sirius said, “which includes what I wanted to talk to Harry about today.”

That got all three of their attention.

“Is it about what you talked to Dumbledore about yesterday?” Harry asked.

“It is,” Sirius said, “I gave him your account of what happened during the third task. He didn’t seem happy to be getting it second hand, but hopefully that’ll stop him from seeking you out about it. I just want to be clear, when you were in the graveyard, did you actually see Voldemort? Was he there? Did he emerge as the result of a ritual?”

“No. There was a cauldron full of runes, and Bertha Jorkins was there along with a Death Eater. Bertha Jorkins was holding a bundle like a baby that might have been whatever form Voldemort is currently taking, but I didn’t actually see him, and we left before they could do any kind of ritual.”

Sirius nodded, as though expecting this yet still looking unhappy about it.

“What’s wrong?” Harry pressed, but then a thought occurred to him. It was the only thing that made sense. “He’s back, isn’t he? That Death Eater found a way to revive Voldemort.”

Seamus flinched quite severely next to him, and Dean went completely rigid. All three of them looked to Sirius, and the tension ratcheted up when he nodded.

“Dumbledore had a way to confirm it.” Sirius sighed heavily. “Anyone high enough in the Death Eaters had the Dark Mark branded on their left forearm. It’s how he called them to him. I don’t know if you know this already, but Snape used to be a Death Eater before he supposedly became a spy for Dumbledore. After Voldemort fell the first time, the Marks faded, but late last night, it burned and darkened.”

“Snape’s a Death Eater,” Harry snarled.

“Believe me, I’m not happy with it either. If it was just Snape’s word, I’m not sure I’d trust it, no matter what Dumbledore says, but Dumbledore sent Remus out to investigate where he thinks the Portkey took you and Cedric. It was in a graveyard in a village called Little Hangleton. While he didn’t find the cauldron, Remus said there was definitely evidence of dark magic used and,” Sirius hesitated, “he found Bertha Jorkins’ body. I’m so sorry Harry.”

Harry closed his eyes. All he could see was Bertha, pulled along like a puppet on a string, terrified but still begging for Harry and Cedric to run and save themselves. Beside him, Seamus was trembling.

“But how could he even come back? He was dead, wasn’t he? Harry beat him when he was a baby,” Seamus said.

“Harry told you about the horcruxes?” Sirius waited for the two boys to nod. “So long as even one still exists, Voldemort’s soul is bound to the Earth. According to Snape, and on this I’m inclined to trust him, there are rituals that could be used to restore the wraith-like portion of Voldemort’s soul that had once inhabited his body back to flesh and blood. For the ritual Snape believed he may have used, he would need the bone of his father, the flesh of his servant, and the blood of an enemy. Given the location and who we’re talking about, all three were easily obtained. After all, Voldemort had no shortage of enemies.”

“So he’s really back,” Harry said dully.

“There’s a way we can be absolutely certain. Something only you can do,” Sirius said, “you are Lord Slytherin, and like it or not, Voldemort is a descendent of the Slytherin family. You should be able to feel him through the Family Magic.”

This was something Sirius had taught Harry over the summer. The Lord of a family could feel the presence of the other members of his family connected to the Family Magic. In the past, some Lords used it to exert control over their families with an iron fist, but mostly it was used to alert the Lord to any distress or damage to a family member. Harry had practised with each of his own Lordships. Cycling through the Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin magic, to Harry it was like existing in a large void. Far in the distance were stars representing people long dead. Other than that, it had been empty.

Harry let the lords ring on his finger change to the Slytherin ring. Closing his eyes, he sank into the part of himself that was connected to the Slytherin Family Magic. He was met once more by the void. Stars twinkled off in the distance, but Harry could already feel there was a difference. He was no longer alone in the void. An orb of light floated nearby, a thin white tendril reaching out and connecting the two of them. When he focused, the orb turned into mist, which grew and expanded and took the shape of a man.

It took the form of Lord Voldemort, unmistakably alive. Harry's eyes shot open with a gasp.

"He was there. He's back as part of the family, which means he's fully alive again," Harry said.

"It's not ideal, but it's not the worst news either. At least it's something we can work with," Sirius said, "we can talk more about it when you're home for summer."

Sirius looked between the three of them.

"Look after each other. I know the world seems a bit mad right now, but things will be alright in the end. We're a lot more prepared than we were the first time, and this time when we defeat Voldemort, the bastard will stay dead."

Farewells and partings

Harry's fourth year at Hogwarts ended with a completely different feeling than his third. A year ago, Harry heralded the approach of summer with a feeling of triumph. His third-year had gone surprisingly well, all things considered, and he had been looking forward to spending the summer with his godfather as he always should have been. Now, everything was different.

The week after the third task was a blur. The Diggory's visited the school and met with Harry, McGonagall and Sprout. They thanked him for saving their son, which made Harry squirm and the guilt rose within him again. McGonagall withdrew a small pouch from her desk, saying that the Minister had been by earlier and dropped it off.

"Usually there would have been a ceremony, but in light of what happened, well, the Ministry has seen fit to keep things quieter," McGonagall said.

The Diggory's had tried giving it all to Harry, but he had stubbornly refused, practically shoving half of it into Mr Diggory's hands.

"Cedric reached the end at the same time as me. He deserves this more than I do."

In the end, they didn't fight him, and they left without another word.

Stories flew in every direction, the gossip about what happened during the third task refusing to die down. Parvati and Lavender had spread Harry's story, but he was reminded just how terrifying the Hogwarts rumour mill could be. It seemed everywhere he turned there was some new fanciful version of the tale. More than one person had tried asking Harry to recount his version again, so he had taken to spending time away from large crowds. The June weather was glorious, so with his friends, Harry lounged by the shore of the lake.

"It feels weird to have finished so early," Neville said.

He and the other fourth years had done all of their end of year exams before the third task, but the fifth and seventh years still had to complete their OWLS and NEWTS. Katie was often found with her nose inches away from a book as she crammed whatever knowledge she could into her head.

"I think the teachers wanted the rest of us done so they could put all of their energy into supervising the last task and all the celebrations that they thought would come after it," Lavender said, "for all the good it did them."

"At least you guys still have your project with Professor Sprout," Fred said, "how's the Gillyweed coming along?"

Harry listened as Neville launched into an explanation. He was the mastermind behind this project, Harry was just an extra pair of hands. It was interesting helping Neville cultivate the Gillyweed seeds Sirius gave him in the lake.

Angelina and Alicia appeared not long after, dragging a stressed out Katie with them.

“I know you’ve got to study, but not without burning yourself out,” Angelina said sternly, “don’t make me sic your boyfriend on you.”

Katie gave a huff, but didn’t resist as they joined the group in the shade beneath the large beech tree. They made sure not to talk about school stuff, trying to find any topic they could, when their eyes landed on the Quidditch pitch.

“It’s a shame we couldn’t finish the tournament,” Angelina said, “I think everyone was really looking forward to it.”

“It wouldn’t feel right,” Harry said, “we all agreed that we all need to be there to see it through to the end. Fleur and Viktor said they’d come back to finish the games off when Cedric’s recovered.”

The reminder that Cedric was not with them brought the mood down again, until Fred and George whipped out their latest joke products and gave a demonstration. The ideas they came up with were brilliant, and the laughter was absolutely needed after everything that happened.

When they headed back to the castle for dinner, Harry hung back to walk with Fred and George.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?”

The three of them made a detour down a secret passageway behind a tapestry. When he was met by two curious faces, Harry pulled out the bag containing the Triwizard winnings.

“I want you to have this,” he said.

The twins gaped at him.

“What? Are you joking?”

“That has to be-”

“500 galleons, and I want you to have,” Harry said, “put it towards opening your joke shop.”

“We can’t accept this Harry. It’s way too much money,” Fred said.

“Then it’s a good thing I’m not asking.” He shoved the bag into George’s hands and pulled out his wand. “You are taking this money. I don’t need it but you do. Think of it as an investment.”

“But-” George stammered.

“You won’t change my mind on this. There are dark times ahead, so we’ll need all the good laughs we can get. You two are brilliant about the things you’re passionate about, so I know you’ll be great at running a joke shop. You’ll put Zonko’s out of business, for sure,” Harry

said, “please. Everyone deserves the chance to follow their dreams. You’ve both done a lot for me over these last two years. Let me do this for you.”

Fred and George stared at him in disbelief for a moment, then Harry found himself squeezed between the two. It was like they were trying to squeeze the life out of him with the force of their gratitude, but Harry understood. Belief was a powerful thing, especially when it was other people's belief in you. Growing up, Harry had no-one to give him the kind of opportunity he was giving to the twins, and by their reaction, they hadn't either. Mrs Weasley didn't approve of their career aspirations, but Harry wholeheartedly did. There was nothing wrong with bringing laughter into the world.

“Fred and George seemed very happy,” Dean commented.

The three of them were alone in the dormitory, and they were lying on Harry's bed. Dean carded his fingers through Harry's hair while Seamus helped rub the balm into Harry's back. The redness had reduced significantly, and it no longer twinged when he twisted but still felt a bit tight.

“I just gave them a helping hand,” Harry said.

“And the fact you're not walking around with your Triwizard winnings in your pocket means nothing?”

“I'm sure it's completely unrelated, as is my immunity to all future Weasley products.”

Seamus snorted.

“Good for them. They've pulled off some crazy stuff with barely any resources. I dread to think what they can come up with now they've got the cash,” Seamus said, “you may have doomed us all.”

“At least Ron can stop looking like he's sucking on a lemon whenever you walk past,” Dean said.

That had been an unintentional side effect of keeping his winnings with him. Ron and Hermione had tried approaching him in the common room, but as Harry turned to tell them to go away, the coin bag had shifted and the unmistakable sound of money clinking could clearly be heard. Ron had gone a furious shade of scarlet, and Hermione had dragged him away before he could start ranting about Harry ‘shoving his riches in his face’.

“I don't want to think about Ron,” Harry said.

Seamus's hands rubbing his back was very soothing. Harry could quite happily fall asleep right then and there.

“Don't worry. If you don't want to speak to them, then you won't have to. We'll make sure of that,” Dean said.

“And if he says any more horrible stuff about you, I'll punch him in the face,” Seamus said.

“You’re a wizard,” Harry mumbled.

“But who expects to get socked in the face these days? It’ll definitely leave an impact.”

“But you’ll get in trouble. Be sneakier,” Harry said.

With those thoughts of petty revenges against Ron and Seamus’s massaging touches long after the balm was applied, Harry fell asleep.

Two days before the end of term, a notice was put in every common room about a school wide assembly that was to take place later that day. Harry went down with the others, taking his seat at the Gryffindor table. There was no mixing of houses today. There were four long blocks of red, yellow, blue and green, with two pockets of navy blue and brown. Harry saw Viggo sitting next to Krum amongst the Durmstrang students, and Fleur, Melonie and Martin with the rest of Beauxbaton.

Up at the staff table, the only guest was Madam Maxime. She was glaring icily at Dumbledore, who stood at the podium in front of the table. Karkaroff had vanished. His seat, along with the seats for the two ministry representatives were gone. When everyone was seated, all eyes turned to Dumbledore.

“Another year at Hogwarts draws to a close, and what a year it has been. Today is a day for farewells and well wishes, though I feel that, though the parting will no doubt be sad, it is all the worse for the very prominent gap in this very hall. I am of course referring to Cedric Diggory,” Dumbledore spoke, “Cedric Diggory embodied many of the aspects that Hufflepuff House prides in its members. Kindness, honesty, a strong belief in the value of hard work and fair play in all things, and a loyalty to his friends that is seldom seen. The time he spent in these hallowed halls has touched us all in some way, and there are many in this hall who are feeling his absence most acutely.”

Harry was taken aback by this speech. Dumbledore was talking like Cedric was dead. How dare he! Judging by the looks he could see on several people’s faces, he wasn’t the only one to pick up on this language. Whispers broke out as people wondered whether Cedric had taken a turn for the worse, while all of Cedric’s friends were glaring up at the Headmaster. Cho in particular, though she was crying, looked absolutely thunderous. Viktor and Fleur both looked ready to storm up to the podium and set the record straight. As though sensing the mood of his audience, Dumbledore hastened to continue.

“As we remember him fondly, he is fighting for his life in St Mungo’s, a victim of a terrible tragedy that never should have happened. For Cedric Diggory was attacked by none other than Lord Voldemort.” Gasps of shock rippled through the Great Hall. “The Ministry of Magic does not wish me to tell you this, and no doubt many of your parents will agree, but I think to pretend otherwise is an insult to a very bright and talented young man, as though we are supposed to believe that his suffering is due to some error on his part. It was only the very brave actions of Harry Potter that saved this young man’s life, and ensured that both were able to return home before they were lost to us.”

“The aim of the Triwizard Tournament is to bring together young people from different walks of life to foster bonds of friendship and fellowship, though our countries and our cultures may differ. It has become one of my fondest memories to see so many of you reaching out a hand and offering friendship between schools, and I am sure these bonds will last a lifetime. Such bonds are needed now more than ever. Dark times lie ahead, and it is important that each of us finds the light within ourselves so that we may stand against it.”

“We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. To our guests, know that you will always have a place here at Hogwarts should you wish to have it. We now come to the moment where we must choose between what is right, and what is easy. Only together may we stand against the darkness of Lord Voldemort.”

Dumbledore’s speech was gloomy, and Harry hated it. Though he was only mentioned once, the whispers and the gossip started up in earnest as Dumbledore implied that Harry had faced Voldemort. Never mind that Harry had been telling a different story ever since he came out of the maze. Dumbledore was trying to take control of the narrative in a very big way. He would need to talk to Sirius about how they were going to handle this.

Almost as soon as Dumbledore finished, there was a flurry of activity as the Beauxbaton and Durmstrang students prepared to leave. The subdued atmosphere shifted to something bittersweet as everyone said their goodbyes to their foreign visitors. Harry was glad to see so many Hogwarts students interacting with their guests. He may hate Dumbledore, but he agreed that the bonds of friendship that were formed this year could easily last a lifetime.

Harry, of course, had his own goodbyes to make. He stood with Viktor and Fleur a little away from everyone else, his friends giving him some privacy to say goodbye to his fellow Champions.

“All things considered, it has been an honour to meet you both,” Fleur said, “please keep in touch. Let us know what is happening with Cedric.”

“I will. Stay safe,” Harry said.

“Only if you promise to do the same,” Viktor said, “I did not like the way your Headmaster spoke. The way you have spoken all year, I get the feeling that there is something bigger at play here.”

“You are a very talented young wizard. I am sure you will have the strength to overcome whatever challenges come your way,” Fleur said, “but that does not mean you have to do them alone.”

She held up her hand into the space between them. Viktor reached out and laid his hand on top of hers. Harry’s eyes widened as he recognised the significance of what they were doing. He didn’t hesitate to copy their actions.

“If ever you need our assistance, call for us. We will come,” Fleur said.

“Comrades-in-arms,” they all said together, and just like that, the magic was set. The three Champions had now bonded as allies, bound by honour and by magic to come to the aid of

their comrades-in-arms in all their battles to come. Harry felt a surge of gratitude as he wrapped his arms as best he could around both of them.

“Thank you,” he mumbled.

When they parted, Viggo appeared.

“The ship is almost ready to depart. We will begin boarding soon,” he said to Viktor.

“Thank you Yngre Bror. Let us say our farewells and then we can leave.”

They re-joined the group of friends that had formed. Viktor pulled Katie away to have a private conversation, while Viggo joined Harry with the rest of the fourth years. Viggo insisted that Parvati and Lavender had to keep him up to date on all the gossip in return for all the juicy details of the goings on at Durmstrang.

Nearby, Martin embraced a teary Colin as they said goodbye to one another. From the corner of his eye, Harry was sure he saw Draco Malfoy leave a sheltered corner of the courtyard, followed soon after by one of the Beauxbaton third-years. So much had happened at Hogwarts this year, and while there was always something crazy happening, it would almost feel quiet with their visitors gone.

The group that saw off the foreign students was not as big as the one that had welcomed them all those months ago. Tears were shed and hands were waved as Beauxbaton stepped into their powder blue carriages. The large winged horses had all been harnessed and with the crack of a whip, they set off. The carriages soared into the sky, circled around the castle once as everyone waved and then they vanished into the clouds.

While this was happening, the Durmstrang students loaded into their ship. None of them seemed concerned that Karkaroff wasn't with them. In fact, they all seemed to be looking to Viktor as their leader, and Viktor didn't hesitate to take command. There was a shot from a cannon to announce their departure, and the Durmstrang ship smoothly pulled away from where it had been moored, slowly sinking down beneath the surface of the lake.

The lake was calm, only gently pushing Harry around as he held onto a convenient rock. The Bubble-Head Charm held, and while his view was slightly distorted, being able to stay submerged and breathing was well worth it. He carefully picked away the larger stones that had drifted over, keeping the earth clear around the thin green stem that had sprouted.

Neville had found the perfect spot to grow the Gillyweed seeds, and he and Harry came down a couple of times a week to tend to them and monitor their progress. Neville was next to Harry, similarly working on the other seed they'd manage to get to sprout. Unlike Harry, who was wearing his usual swim briefs and nothing else, Neville wore a full wetsuit. He said it was a gift from his Uncle Algie when they visited Shetland last summer. They weren't too far from the shore, but they were still deep enough for several metres of water to be above their heads. Neville glanced over from his own seedling, nodded in approval, then gestured for them both to return to the surface.

This would be the last time they would visit the Gillyweed, because in a few hours they'd be boarding the train to take them home.

The two days since their guests had left had definitely felt quieter. Everyone had gotten used to the extra people on the grounds that it felt strange for them to no longer be there. He could tell Parvati and Lavender were missing their gossip buddy, and Harry felt the absence of his fellow Champions keenly. At least he had the promise of a full summer with Sirius to look forward to.

They broke the surface, Bubble-Head Charms breaking, and they swam back to shore where Dean and Seamus were waiting for them with towels. Harry and Neville took them and their change of clothes into the little lean-to that Professor Sprout had made for their project, quickly drying off and changing.

"Everything coming along nicely?" Dean asked when they were done.

"It's looking good. Professor Sprout said she can keep an eye on them over the summer, but now that they've sprouted they should hopefully be fine. I don't think there's anything in this part of the lake that'll eat Gillyweed so we shouldn't have to worry about that," Neville said.

They headed back up to the dormitory so Harry and Neville could have a quick shower. After that, the four of them hung out in the dormitory, waiting for the time to head down to the carriages. Dumbledore's speech had renewed the whispers that followed Harry wherever he went, and he didn't want to have to deal with them more than he had to. It made him think about Cedric, lying in a coma in St Mungo's, and it hurt. Luckily, his friends were good at keeping him from falling into those thoughts for too long.

They rode down to the train in a carriage together. The scarlet steam train gleamed as brightly as ever, a welcoming sight especially now that Harry could look forward to his summers. Down the platform, Harry saw Ron and Hermione get on the train, and he made sure to enter a carriage far away from them. The others followed behind him, not questioning when he shut himself into the first empty compartment he found.

"Ron and Hermione?" Neville asked.

"I don't want them to try and sit with me and pretend like everything's back to the way it used to be," Harry said, "if it was just the way they've treated me these last two years, I might have been able to forgive them, but I can't accept how they talked about my boyfriends."

"You're a better person than me," Seamus said, "I was ready to deck Ron when he spouted that rubbish after the second task."

"There's nothing wrong with not forgiving them, not after everything they've done," Dean said.

The three of them shared a significant glance. It wasn't just their actions at Hogwarts that Harry couldn't forgive, but they couldn't speak openly about it with Neville. Thankfully, Neville easily accepted what he said.

"I almost wish you had taken the end of year exams. With the way your scores were improving, I think you'd give Hermione a run for her money," Neville said.

"She'd be even more insufferable than she already is," Seamus muttered.

"Is this prime gossip I hear?"

Parvati and Lavender burst into their compartment. When they were seated, Harry slid the lock on the door shut and put a privacy ward over the windows. Both girls raised an eyebrow but didn't question it.

"Who's insufferable?" Lavender asked.

"The usual," Harry said.

"Ah, Hermione. Yeah, she didn't put in a good showing this year," Lavender said, "I mean, she aced all her tests, but she was definitely quicker to snap than even last year. I don't think she took you breaking up with her well."

"I didn't break up with her!" Harry said, "we weren't dating, and it was her fault our friendship ended."

"That's what I mean. You friend-broke up with her and Ron. I absolutely agree it was because of the nasty things they said to you and how they treated you, but she was still incredibly grumpy about it," Lavender said.

"Not that she would talk to us about it. I swear, all she ever does in our dormitory is shut her hangings and read," Parvati said, "at least she's figured out privacy wards so we can chat in peace even when she's in one of her moods."

"Honestly Harry, you made the right call, not that I think your boys would have let you make any other one."

"But how were things in the boys dormitory? Ron made his opinions on people like you fairly clear," Parvati asked.

"We didn't really see him all that much. He never came up to the dormitory when we were there, and his hangings were always shut tight in the mornings," Dean said.

"With how lazy he is, it's a miracle he got to his classes on time," Seamus said.

"I'd say you risk doing the same, but you at least know how to set an alarm," Dean said.

"That's something else for Hermione to stress about. I'm actually surprised she didn't drop him as dead weight ages ago after your breakup," Lavender said, "especially after the disaster at the Yule Ball."

Harry caught the mischievous glint in Seamus's eyes as the boy turned to him.

"Five sickles Ron and Hermione stop being friends by Christmas," he said.

“Alright, but five sickles it happens after Christmas, and ten if it’s in the run up to exams,” Harry said.

“You drive a hard bargain, Potter. I accept, so long as you give me ten sickles if they’re still friends by the end of the year,” Seamus grinned. “I need to recoup my loss from this year.” “Deal.”

They shook hands. Dean chuckled fondly, having heard all about their silly little bets.

The Hogwarts Express wound its way through the countryside. Unfortunately, the peaceful atmosphere couldn’t last, as the elephant in the room reared its head.

“Professor Dumbledore said that You-Know-Who is back and that you fought him, but that’s not what you told us,” Neville said.

Harry couldn’t help the heavy sigh.

“I’ve already told you everything that happened. I didn’t see Voldemort but-” Harry considered for a moment how best to put this. He trusted the people in this compartment to at least hear him out, “-but I asked Sirius if it’s possible that Voldemort managed to find a way to come back anyway. He did.”

“Are you serious?” Lavender said, her voice trembling slightly.

“Deadly serious. Believe me, I wish I wasn’t,” Harry said, “I wish that we could just live our lives normally, but apparently that isn’t on the cards, at least for me.”

“I believe you, Harry.”

All eyes turned to Parvati.

“I had another dream the night before the third task. I didn’t want to believe it, and you already had enough to worry about so I didn’t tell you. I saw a man in black robes standing over a bubbling cauldron. There was a dead woman beside it, the same woman I’ve been seeing for months now. The man cut off his hand and put it into the cauldron, and then dripped some blood from a vial. The potion in the cauldron burned bright white and when the light faded, a thin, skeletal looking man rose from it. I don’t think there is any mistaking those red eyes for anyone else,” Parvati said, her voice shaking with fear, “I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. Maybe if I had, things would have gone differently, but Professor Trelawney said I needed to be very careful who I told my visions to.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Parvati. You already gave me enough warning to be as prepared as I could have been,” Harry said, “there’s already plenty of blame to go around. You don’t need to take on any yourself.”

“My dad says that Divination is one of the most dangerous branches of magic, even if most people don’t think so,” Parvati said gravely, “the danger doesn’t necessarily come directly from the knowledge of the future, but rather the lengths people will go to to either avoid what’s coming, or ensure it comes to pass. Maybe telling you could have prevented what

happened to Cedric, or it could have influenced your actions into a worse outcome. It's so hard to tell when you can't see everything."

"So he's really back," Lavender whispered, "what are we going to do?"

"We are going to do what we can to stay safe this summer," Harry said decisively, "I'm not asking you all to be paranoid, but keep your wits about you. There's other people working to stop Voldemort. I'd rather they do the heavy lifting than expect a bunch of Hogwarts students to do it for them."

"There was more," Parvati said, "I had the same dream I had at the end of last year again. Two glass orbs filled with smoke and vapour. The light was fading from one while the other came to life. I have no idea what that could mean and Professor Trelawney wasn't sure either. She said the veil of the future was thicker than she had ever seen it, and peering through it is getting harder and harder."

Harry didn't take Divination, but he could only guess that that meant the events to come were up in the air and ever changing. Hopefully that meant the path to victory was still open to them.

He was pulled from his thoughts by Seamus wrapping an arm around his shoulders and pulling him into a side hug. Harry leaned into it without resistance. Whatever was coming in the future, at least he wouldn't have to face it alone. He would do whatever he had to to keep the people he cared about safe. Everyone in this compartment were included in that, but especially the two boys he'd given a little piece of his heart to.

Each of them took a moment to calm down after the heavy conversation. The silence was heavy but not as awkward as it potentially could have been. It ended when Lavender, rallying from her melancholy, asked everyone what their plans for the summer were. The attempt at normalcy was greatly appreciated as they answered her.

"I don't have anything big planned. I know Gran wants to take me to Gringotts to help teach me how to manage the Longbottom accounts, but other than that I think I'll tend to the greenhouses," Neville said, "I know it's nothing exciting but-"

"Nothing wrong with doing what you love," Harry said.

"What about you Harry? Will you be flying a lot this summer, or will you be swimming instead?" Seamus asked.

"There's not really anywhere for me to fly when I'm with Sirius, and if I want to go swimming I have to go to a nearby Muggle gym," Harry said, then he perked up, "oh, I'll have to invite you guys around sometime. I'm sure Sirius wouldn't mind. The house should hopefully be fully back up and running now so we can see all of it."

"That sounds great! I'll ask Mam if you can come to mine as well."

"We don't really have a lot of space in our flat, but I'm sure Mum wouldn't mind some guests," Dean said.

“I’ve never really been able to invite people around to my house before so I don’t have much experience as a host, but I’m sure we’ll still have a good time,” Harry said, “maybe-”

He cut himself off before he could say anything more. Honestly, he wanted to ask if maybe, just maybe, his friends would like to help celebrate his birthday with him. Harry had never had a birthday party before. At the Dursley’s, he was always forced to sit in the corner while Dudley rampaged around with all of his friends completely high on sugar, while his own birthday passed by unremarked upon. Last year it was just him and Sirius, but that was special because it was the first time for them both, and they got to visit Gryffindor Castle.

Now Harry had more friends that he wanted to spend time with, and he wanted to share these parts of his life with them. It didn’t have to be something big and grand, nothing fancy or extravagant. Even if all it was was a sit down meal with everyone together, that would be enough.

He didn’t ask though, because it seemed so far into the future, even if it was only a month away, and apparently the future was very uncertain at the moment. Seeing his dip into melancholy, Seamus leaned against him a little heavier and Dean, sitting across from him, pressed his foot against Harry’s. The silent show of support was very much appreciated.

The others didn’t comment, easily moving on to discuss other things.

The lunch trolley came and went, the afternoon wore on, and the green countryside gave way to more and more buildings as they made their final approach to London. They changed out of their robes and back into their normal clothes, and soon after, the Hogwarts Express pulled into Platform Nine and Three Quarters. The platform was full of parents eagerly waiting to welcome their children home for the summer.

Neville, Parvati and Lavender pulled their trunks down from the luggage racks and left the compartment, but Harry stopped his boys before they could do the same. When they turned to question him, he gave each of them a meaningful kiss.

“I have no idea what’s going to happen this summer so I wanted to say goodbye properly, and I didn’t think that out on the platform would be a very appropriate place,” Harry said.

“I am never going to complain about either of you kissing me,” Seamus said, face flushed, “but yeah, everyone else shouldn’t get to enjoy it as well.”

“Exactly,” Dean said, and the dark skinned boy gave each of them a kiss as well, “now I don’t think we should keep our parents waiting, shall we?”

“No fair! Don’t dip out before I can return the favour!”

Seamus pounced on Dean, giving him a big, exaggerated kiss, and then Harry a much sweeter one. It made Harry laugh.

“Keep in touch?” Harry said.

“Absolutely. I think our owls are going to get a lot of exercise this summer,” Seamus said.

“I might ask Mum if I can get an owl as well to give yours a bit of a break,” Dean said.

The three of them took down their trunks and joined the steady stream of students stepping onto the platform. Harry spotted Sirius fairly easily and made a beeline towards him. Mrs Finnegan was nearby, and she came over when she saw them approaching.

“Good to see you, pup,” Sirius said as he pulled Harry in for a firm hug, “got everything?”

Seamus was greeted by his mother while Dean hung around. His mum was waiting for them on the Muggle side of the platform. Harry spotted Neville talking to his grandmother, before they both walked away. They were going to Gringotts at some point, and Harry hoped he was wrong about Neville also having blocks placed on him.

“We should head off now. There’s things we need to do when we get home,” Sirius said, “shall we?”

Sirius led Harry, the Finnegan’s and Dean back through the barrier to King’s Cross, where they were met by Dean’s mum. Harry had never met her before, but the resemblance to her son made it obvious who she was. She greeted Dean with a bright smile and a tight hug. Only then did she turn to the others.

“You must be Harry and Seamus. Dean’s told me all about you both.” She held out her hand. “Jill Thomas. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

After the introductions were done, Ms Thomas somehow managed to take Dean’s trunk from him, despite the boy's protests.

“We’ve got to get a move on unfortunately, but I’m sure you’ll be able to keep in touch by owl,” Ms Thomas said, “I have to say, as odd as it was at first, I did start to miss the owls coming and going so often when you all went back to school.”

“Of course. We’ll keep in touch. You’ve got our number just in case,” Mrs Finnegan said, “come on then Seamus, let’s go see what mess Dad’s made of the shed while I’ve been gone.”

“I thought you said he was only repainting it,” Seamus said.

“And we both know that’s not all he’ll have managed to do,” Mrs Finnegan said.

“We need to go as well,” Sirius said, giving Harry a slightly serious look.

“I’ll be in touch, Lord Black,” Mrs Finnegan said.

Sirius nodded. While Harry would question that later, he was too busy giving each of his boyfriends one last hug. It was slightly bittersweet parting as he and Sirius headed for the apparition point. The slight tension in Sirius’s frame didn’t ease at all, so Harry braced himself for a serious conversation. Whatever it was didn’t bode well.

No doubt, this summer would turn out to be a lot busier than last year.

Plans for the summer

Following the crack and uncomfortable squeezing of Apparition, Sirius and Harry arrived back at Grimmauld Place. The square outside was just as dreary as it had been when Harry came here last summer, but Number 12 stood out as a bastion of might and splendour. The outside certainly looked a lot cleaner than the surrounding buildings. Sirius and Kreacher must have been hard at work this year.

The inside was just as nice. The greens and browns were the colours of the forest, and it helped to settle Harry as he stepped through the front door. This was his home, and him being here was proof that he didn't need to go back to the Dursley's ever again. Sirius was his guardian now full time, and there was nothing that Dumbledore or anyone else could do or say otherwise.

The Black family magic washed over him, welcoming its Heir back, but even as Harry was soothed by it, he could also pick up an undercurrent of unease. Magical houses often picked up traits of the people who ran them. The house must be reflecting Sirius's nervous anticipation. The man had come back here after learning that Voldemort had returned, and the house had picked up on it. It wasn't much, and Harry likely only felt it because of his connection to the magic, but it was enough for him to grow worried.

"I know it's sudden, but we don't have a lot of time," Sirius said, "Dumbledore has requested a meeting with me, suspiciously timed for after I'd be back from picking you up from the train."

He handed Harry a note with Dumbledore's looping handwriting. Glancing at the clock on the wall, he saw they only had ten minutes left.

"He's coming here," Harry said.

"Yes. Ideally I wouldn't want him anywhere near you, but as far as we know, he isn't aware of how much you know. Is the plan still to act like we're on his side?" Sirius said.

"I've been careful to avoid being dosed again, but when I met Dumbledore after the Crouch incident, he didn't try anything," Harry said, "all he asked about was my friendship with Ron and Hermione, but I played that off as us just growing apart. With Voldemort back, I don't think it would be wise to show our hand too forcefully now."

"That was my thought as well. Keep our friends close and our enemies closer," Sirius said, "alright, we'll play it like that, but I won't let him walk all over us."

"Do you know what the meeting will be about?"

"Not sure, but I've got ideas. As for the timing, I think he was hoping to 'accidentally' bump into you while he's here," Sirius said, "I know you've only just got back, but I need you to go up to your room and stay there until I come and get you. Keep your mirror on you as well."

Kreacher appeared to bring Harry's stuff up to his room, and Harry followed behind the elf. Kreacher still mumbled under his breath occasionally, but it wasn't the muttering Harry had grown accustomed to hearing. Instead, it was surprisingly domestic.

"... Master Harry's clothes will need washing. Yes, that will need doing immediately. Lord Black will also need his cloak so Kreacher can do that as well. Both masters are silly and need feeding or they'll starve. Does Kreacher have everything he needs? Master Harry likes treacle tart. Kreacher may need to quickly buy ingredients ..."

"You don't need to do anything special for me Kreacher," Harry interjected, "I like treacle tart but I'll like whatever you make just as much."

Kreacher turned to give him an affronted look.

"Master Harry has had a long journey and deserves to eat a good meal, so Master Harry will get what he is given!"

He left Harry standing there, honestly wondering whether he had just been scolded or reassured. It sounded a bit like both, like Kreacher was threatening to make Harry's favourite food and that he would eat it and enjoy it. It was odd, but Kreacher was an odd elf.

His room was just as he left it, perfectly clean and tidy. Kreacher left his trunk at the foot of the bed and bowed out, leaving Harry alone. Sirius would be meeting Dumbledore any minute now, so he dug around in his trunk until he found the mirror, leaving it on his bed. He might as well start unpacking his things if he was stuck in his room for the next while.

"Harry Potter."

It came from the mirror just as Harry was putting his laundry in a hamper for Kreacher to take away. Harry rushed over, responding with Sirius's name. The mirror shifted and Sirius appeared in it. It looked like he was in the dining room.

"Dumbledore will be here very soon. I'm going to put the mirror in my pocket. You won't be able to see anything, but you should be able to hear what we both say. Just try not to make any noise. I don't want Dumbledore to know you're listening in."

Harry nodded, and the mirror went mostly dark as Sirius put it away. There wasn't much rustling off fabric as Sirius moved. The main sound he could hear was the scratching of a quill as Sirius wrote something. There was a chime and the dining room fireplace flared.

"Sirius," Dumbledore greeted genially, "how are you, my boy? Everything alright at the station?"

"It was as chaotic as expected, but everything was fine."

"And Harry?"

"Unpacking his stuff. He said he might have a little nap as well."

"Good. I'd hate for him to accidentally walk in on us while we're discussing things."

There was the sound of chairs moving.

“What’s this about Albus? Is this about Voldemort?”

“Indeed it is. It’s a matter of utmost importance actually,” Dumbledore said, “I am reforming the Order of the Phoenix.”

Sirius let out a breath.

“You think that’s necessary? What about the Ministry?”

“I have tried appealing to Cornelius, but he won’t listen to me. He keeps insisting that Voldemort is not back and that Harry must be lying about seeing him.”

Harry bit his lip to keep in his growl. He didn’t see Voldemort. Even if Voldemort actually was back, Dumbledore was the one lying about it.

"But surely he can't deny the evidence. I mean, what about Barty Crouch? Did they interrogate him?"

"Bartemius Crouch Junior was summarily shipped back to Azkaban as soon as it was discovered how he had escaped. Cornelius declared him to be a raving lunatic, which Crouch's ever so slightly unhinged ramblings before he was caught seemingly supported," Dumbledore said, "I fear that even if Crouch testified that he did what he did on Voldemort's orders, it would be dismissed as delusion."

"That's ridiculous. So Fudge is burying his head in the sand?"

"He is, which is most unfortunate for us. We both know the magnitude of the danger Voldemort presents, so I have made the decision that we need to act now before he can get a good foothold like he did before, even if we have to go behind the Ministry’s back.”

“That’s why you sent Remus out to get in contact with the old crowd,” Sirius mused, “is this you asking if I’ll join again?”

“That isn’t my only reason for speaking with you, but I’d be delighted if you would. We need all the experienced wands we can get.”

There was a pause as Sirius thought over his answer.

“I’ll do what I can Albus, but you have to understand, I have Harry’s wellbeing to think about. Dealing with Voldemort is important but Harry is my priority. Thankfully, those two goals are aligned with one another.”

“I quite agree, and I am very glad to hear it, which is why, if I may, I have a request.”

“Oh?”

“The Order will need a secure place to meet that Voldemort and his supporters won’t be able to access. This war will be initially fought in the shadows, and if Voldemort gets wind of

what we're doing, which he no doubt will, he will try and oppose us. Our meeting place must therefore be secure and well defended."

"That makes sense."

"I have considered many possible locations but all of them are unsuitable for one reason or another, which is why I am asking whether this house could be made available to use as Headquarters for the Order."

Harry gaped at the mirror, clapping a hand over his mouth to stop himself making noise. Judging by the silence on the other end, Sirius must have also been shocked, though clearly not as much as Harry as he started speaking a moment later.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, my boy."

"Albus, I—" Sirius paused, "I'm not immediately saying no, but surely there must be somewhere better than here."

"Alas, there is not. Grimmauld Place has incredibly secure wards. Small scale attacks can be easily repelled, and though with prolonged concerted effort they can be breached, it would not be quick or easy to do, which would give us plenty of warning," Dumbledore explained, his voice warm and kind, but Harry could hear hints of something like condescension in it.

"But it is also known as my primary residence," Sirius said, "if Voldemort figures out that I'm part of the Order, this will be one of the first places he'll look. A new location would be protected by anonymity."

"Rest assured that I had considered that," Dumbledore said, sounding frustratingly all knowing, "anywhere that is anonymous would not have nearly the same level of fortification that Grimmauld Place does. I believe that extra protection would more than make up for its more ... public place."

Sirius paused once again.

"Again, I'm not saying no, I just want to understand a bit more."

"That's quite alright, my boy."

"What would be required if we were to make this house Headquarters?"

"Not a whole lot, and certainly nothing strenuous. I realise that this is your home and I don't wish to intrude more than necessary. Its primary use would be to house Order meetings. Perhaps a bedroom or two could be made available as a temporary resting place. You wouldn't need to worry about that though. If you agree, I have asked Molly Weasley if she would consent to act as- I suppose you could describe her as a den mother. Any issues with the Order members staying here would be dealt with by her."

"How would she manage that?"

“Well, it would mean that Molly and her family would need to temporarily relocate here, which I’m sure will not be an issue. As known associates of Harry, they will be targeted, and the Burrow cannot be made fully secure. It would also mean that Harry would get to spend the summer with his friends.”

Once again, Harry had to bite down a scoff. He was so close to barging into that room and telling Dumbledore to stuff it. There was no way he was going to spend the summer with Ron and Ginny. Hermione would probably be brought in as well. Even as he had these thoughts, he knew there was little Sirius could do to argue against it without giving them away. They would just have to come up with a plan to get around it.

“Alright. I’ll have to speak to Harry about it since this is his home as well, but in principle I agree.”

“Excellent! I’m so glad to hear that.”

“There is still the matter of Grimmauld Place being known as my residence.”

“Don’t worry, my boy, I have a plan which will solve this issue, one which you are already familiar with,” Dumbledore said, “while the wards are certainly very impressive, I would like to add an additional layer of protection to it. The Fidelius Charm should solve all of our problems and plug up any gaps in the defences.”

“Concealing the house so only those who are explicitly told the address can find it,” Sirius mused.

“Precisely. I have a few more arrangements to make but I should be ready to cast the Charm in the next few days. As head of the Order of the Phoenix, it makes sense for me to be the Secret Keeper, as it is very unlikely that anyone will be able to force the secret from me.”

“No.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“I’m sorry Albus, but if you are going to cast the Fidelius Charm on my house, then I insist that *I* be made the Secret Keeper.”

“Sirius, my boy-”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you Albus,” Sirius cut him off, “nor do I think you would give the secret away to Death Eaters, but this is my house. I am tied to the existing house wards so it would be no great strain to also layer in the Fidelius Charm as well. What’s more, if we’re acting in secret, we need to make it seem like everything else is normal. While I don’t have a packed social calendar, I meet enough people that it will be strange if I’m suddenly not able to invite people to my own home.”

“If Grimmauld Place is to become Headquarters, you won’t be able to just bring anyone in,” Dumbledore warned.

“I’m aware. There are plenty of places I can bring them so guests won’t see anything, but again, it will be thought of as strange if I’m unable to allow them into my house. It would be suspicious, and we wouldn’t want word of it to get into the wrong ears.”

It was clear from the heavy silence that Dumbledore wasn’t happy with this. Harry almost wished he could see the expression on his face.

“Very well. I find I have to agree with your logic, though I will ask that you do not give out the secret haphazardly, and that you should be willing to give the secret to whomever I ask you to.”

“Of course,” Sirius said, “when should I be expecting everybody?”

“I will call an Order meeting next week. We will decide the arrangements then.”

“Will Molly be moving in immediately?”

“Heavens no.” Dumbledore chuckled. “She will need time to put her affairs in order at the Burrow before moving over with Arthur and the children still living at home. I also wouldn’t want to impose on you so soon. Let’s say in a few weeks time, which we can confirm at the meeting next week.”

That gave them at least two weeks of freedom before Harry was forced to spend time with Ron and Ginny. The conversation between Sirius and Dumbledore wound down, and Dumbledore then left through the dining room fireplace. Harry was still going over the conversation when there was a knock on his bedroom door. Sirius entered when he gave permission.

“I’m so sorry. I figured he wanted to use Grimmauld Place as Headquarters but I didn’t know he planned to move the Weasley’s in as well. I wanted to say no, but that would have given us away,” Sirius said.

“It’s alright Sirius.”

“No, it’s not. This is your home, and you deserve to feel safe and secure here, not looking over your shoulders for a knife about to stab you in the back.”

“It won’t be ideal, but having everyone so close might be a good thing. They might let their guard down and let something slip. Anything we can use to hold against them that they can’t get away from,” Harry said, “but I am not sharing a room with Ron, not after what he’s done.”

“Absolutely not. Even if he hadn’t betrayed your trust, I wouldn’t want him anywhere near you after saying such horrible things about you,” Sirius said, “don’t worry. I’ve already got an idea about how we can make this work. You’ll still be able to have a somewhat normal summer. You could even invite your friends over if you want.”

Harry perked up at that. Hearing about Grimmauld Place being used as Headquarters, and the additional protections Dumbledore wanted to place on it, Harry had thought he would be

locked up here with no escape from his former friends. Getting to spend time with his boyfriends was definitely welcome news.

A few days after that meeting, just as they discussed, Dumbledore returned to Grimmauld Place to cast the Fidelius Charm. Harry stayed up in his room throughout, not willing to be in the same room as his headmaster. This time, Sirius didn't let him listen in via the mirrors, but that was fine. He had letters to write.

True to their word, the letters between him, Seamus and Dean were frequent. Harry apologised to Hedwig about it, but she seemed quite pleased to be so active. It hadn't been that long since they'd seen each other, but it felt so much longer after getting used to being with them every day. Harry hinted in his letters that they could come and visit, but also carefully implied it would need to wait until some details had been worked out. Both of them understood this, but seemed excited regardless.

Harry was just reading about the latest woodworking project Mr Finnegan had started when he felt the Fidelius Charm become active. It was an incredibly bizarre feeling. He was in Grimmauld Place, but for the life of him he couldn't think about where exactly he was. His mind felt at odds with itself, not quite able to reconcile what he was seeing with his eyes with the knowledge being kept from him. The feeling passed when Sirius came up and gave him the secret.

"That should be it until the weekend when we have the first Order meeting," Sirius said, "needless to say I don't want you near it."

"That's fine. You'll tell me anything I need to know, right?"

"Of course. I just don't want you to get pulled into anything," Sirius said, "as it happens, Dumbledore asked me not to tell you anything. He feels that the less you know, the better."

"That is complete rubbish. When has keeping secrets from me ever led to a better outcome?"

He thought back to the mess with the Philosopher's Stone in first year and the Chamber of Secrets in second year. If the teachers had been a bit more forthcoming when Harry came to them about it, maybe things would have been different. Though of course, back then he was dosed to be reckless and not think things through.

"Needless to say I won't be listening to that particular instruction," Sirius said, then he saw the letters on Harry's desk, "I see you've been giving Hedwig a workout."

"We promised we'd stay in contact," Harry said, willing his cheeks not to burn.

"I never said I have a problem with it. I trust you'll be careful what you say in writing. If you want, I can teach you a charm which can conceal writing on a letter until a password is given. It's not fool proof but it's highly unlikely a Death Eater or Dumbledore would think to check for it in a nearly fifteen year olds mail."

Sirius clapped his hands.

“Anyway, now that the security is sorted. I need to show you around the fully up and running Grimmauld Place.”

Harry grinned and followed his godfather.

In the months that Harry had been away, Sirius had finished cleaning up the house. It was now fully habitable, with no rooms sealed away because they contained all manner of rot and decay. To Harry’s surprise, there had also been a bit of restructuring.

“You know that magical dwellings, especially those in an expanded space like this house, can rearrange their internal configurations as needed. If Dumbledore wants to use this place as Headquarters, that’s fine, but I’m not going to let them get a free ride into luxury,” Sirius said.

The ground floor only contained what was usually the receiving room for the floo network, now converted into a simple living room, a small reading room, and the formal dining room. Downstairs was the kitchen. Up the stairs to the first floor were four bedrooms.

“These’ll be for the Weasley’s when they come to stay. Obviously Arthur and Molly will have one, and the twins will have another. I suspect Dumbledore will probably invite Hermione to stay as well, so she and Ginny can share,” Sirius said, “as for Ron, since you will not be sharing with him, I figured he could stay here.”

The last bedroom, tucked away behind the stairs leading up to the second landing, was a small box room. There was only enough space for a bed, a wardrobe and a small desk, and unlike all of the other bedrooms on this floor, it didn’t have a window.

Harry knew for a fact that there were more guest rooms than this, but Sirius seemed supremely unconcerned with bringing more of them out.

“He gets a room to himself. It’s not my fault this is the only one available,” Sirius said.

Up another flight of stairs to the second floor, this landing had four doors. Harry recognised three of them as his room, Sirius’s room and Sirius’s study. The fourth he didn’t know.

“This floor is warded so only family can come up here, or at least that’s what I’ll be telling people. In reality, anyone keyed into the wards can come up,” Sirius said, “that way there’s no risk of unwanted guests trying to sneak into your room.”

Sirius grinned.

“But this is what I really wanted to show you.”

He led Harry through the fourth door on the landing. Knowing that Grimmauld Place was bigger on the inside did nothing to prepare Harry for the rich corridor it opened into. All the places Harry had seen last year, like the library and the drawing room, were here, set up like a natural extension of the rest of the house, but there was more.

Sirius wasn't kidding when he said Grimmauld Place was almost as large as Potter Manor. The tour led him through the remaining guest bedrooms, more drawing rooms and living rooms, a spacious ballroom, a potions lab, and a separate space set aside for duelling practice. There was another, more informal dining room, and also a second, much larger kitchen. Harry followed as Sirius led him into a small walled garden, which was behind the house.

"This is the backdoor to the house," Sirius explained, "the Order and everyone Dumbledore invites to Headquarters will come in through the front door. This is where we'll bring in any guests we don't want them knowing about. The door here leads to the street behind Grimmauld Place. I'll show you it later."

Harry almost thought the tour was over, but then Sirius showed him something that the man was clearly excited about. They went up a winding staircase. The first door they came across opened up into a vast planetarium. A recreation of the Solar System hung suspended in the air, each planet orbiting around the Sun, all in the correct position. The walls were painted to show the stars beyond. Harry was already impressed but then Sirius led him further up the spiralling staircase and into a large glass dome.

It was like they had stepped into night. The sky through the glass was completely clear of clouds, and dark even though it was the middle of the day. The stars glittered and twinkled, the Milky Way a prominent streak cutting through it all. Several telescopes were already set up.

"The Black's have always taken Astronomy seriously, so naturally we had an observatory built so we could stargaze any time we liked," Sirius said, "I remember your friend Dean liked Astronomy, so I'm sure he'd love to come see this."

"This is incredible," was all Harry could say.

The only time he'd seen so many stars was at Hogwarts. It was utterly bizarre but completely brilliant that he could have this view right in the middle of London.

"Hermione is going to lose her mind if she finds out about all these rooms," Harry said when they set themselves up in one of the hidden living rooms.

"Which is why we're not going to tell her. She'll just have to do her summer homework with her own resources," Sirius said, "speaking of, did you get much this year?"

Obviously he did, so that afternoon Harry made a start on his homework, even though he'd like to explore some more. It was nice sitting with Sirius as they both worked. Sirius wasn't overbearing about making him study, only occasionally leaning over to see what he was doing and offering helpful suggestions if Harry asked for them. He managed to make a pretty good outline for his Charms and Herbology essays when he decided it was time to finish for the day.

"As a reward for being so diligent, come with me. There's one last room I didn't show you which I think you're going to like."

Curious, Harry followed his godfather. The room was directly across from the library. It was a small locker room, but Harry's jaw dropped when he pushed the sliding door on the far side open. Beyond was a large swimming pool, easily the size of an Olympic pool. The room was designed to make it look like a natural formation while still being man-made. All along one wall were floor to ceiling windows, giving a view over the rooftops of London.

"I know how much you like to swim, especially in the lake at Hogwarts and Potter Manor. You made do last year by going to the nearby gym, but I know that Dumbledore and the Order will have kittens if you left the house early in the morning alone. Am I right in thinking you wouldn't want anyone to accompany you as a chaperone?" Harry shook his head. That sounded like a horrible idea. "So I had this built for you to use. There are monitoring charms built in to detect distress, but other than that, this is yours. You can set a password for the door so nobody can come in and disturb you, except for me."

Harry didn't know what to say, so he didn't bother saying anything. He threw himself at Sirius, trying to express his gratitude through the force of his hug. Sirius got the message, patting him comfortingly on the back.

"Alright then pup, have at it. Go burn off some of that restless energy before dinner."

As soon as Sirius left, Harry did just that. Not even bothering to go get his trunks, he just stripped off his clothes and dove right in. The burn of his muscles as he swam lengths felt great, and much needed after a few days of inactivity. To be able to partake in one of his hobbies in the privacy of his own home was a great feeling, and even if this summer was going to be challenging, what with dancing around the Weasley's, at least Harry would have this to keep him occupied.

The next day, Harry and Sirius were eating breakfast in the dining room. The Order hadn't moved in yet, so they were making the most of using the space before things became more chaotic. Harry froze when he heard the front door open. Sirius looked up, a little wary but then he relaxed. A moment later, the dining room door opened and there was Remus.

"It's good to see you Harry," he said.

He took a seat beside Sirius. Kreacher appeared, shoving a plate of food down onto the table in front of him before disappearing again in a crack.

"I see Kreacher is still as eccentric as ever," Remus said, "though that seemed a little more forceful than usual."

"He's still a bit grumpy because I told him about Molly," Sirius said, "from all the stories I've heard, she'll descend on this house and establish herself as the one and only cook. I made sure she can only access the servants kitchen and not the main kitchen, but Kreacher's still not happy about it."

The kitchen was seen as the House Elves domain. Even the Lord of the house needed to tread carefully there.

“He’ll still cook for us if ever we need it, if Molly or the other Order members push us too far. He’s definitely making his opinion of this situation perfectly clear,” Sirius said.

“I’ve got an idea. I’m not sure it’ll help, but it’s worth a try,” Harry said.

“Go for it. You’re better at handling him when he’s in a mood than I am.”

Harry called for Kreacher, who appeared with a crack. He gave Sirius a scathing look before turning his attention back to Harry.

“Master Harry needs something from Kreacher? Will he tell Kreacher he can cook for his Lord's family again?”

“I’m afraid not, but I have a very important job for you to do to make up for it,” Harry said.

Kreacher eyed him shrewdly.

“The people that are coming to stay here in a few weeks, a few of them have tried to dose me with potions in the past. I’ve avoided it so far because my ring warns me, but I don’t want to have to constantly be watching out for it in my own home.”

“This is why Kreacher must cook for his masters. Kreacher would not allow poisons and potions to enter his food, so why has Lord Black ordered Kreacher to put him at risk? Kreacher doesn’t know,” the elf descended into inaudible mumbles.

“The reason is because we want to remain in these peoples good graces enough that they don’t try and escalate the behaviour to something more serious,” Sirius said, “if the only food is coming from them, then they can more easily slip something in and force Harry to take it. If Harry avoids it for too long, they’ll try something else.”

“And we don’t want that to happen. We want to know what they’re up to without tipping them off that we’re onto them. Does that make sense?” Harry asked.

“Think of it like the Ball my mother hosted, the one where she invited Lady Flint even though the two couldn’t stand each other. She opened up her home to someone she hated because she wanted to show her strength over her and also gather more information. What we’re doing is the same, only it’s not just gossip we’re trying to find,” Sirius said.

Kreacher hummed.

“Kreacher understands, but Kreacher wonders why Lord Black did not just say this when he gave Kreacher his instructions,” then to Harry he asked, “what task does Master Harry have for Kreacher?”

“I need you to go through their things and nullify any non-medicinal potions they bring with them,” Harry said, “make it inert and not do anything in such a way that they won’t know. You’ll need to keep on top of this in case they try to brew more. They absolutely must not find out about it. Do you think you can do this?”

“Kreacher can do it. Kreacher can keep Master Harry safe, and Lord Black he supposes.”

That made Sirius snort. With that sorted, Kreacher left to his other duties, and they all tucked into their breakfast.

“I didn’t think the Order would start coming here until the meeting,” Harry commented.

“While I am in the Order, Sirius gave me the secret so I could come around any time,” Remus said.

“There’s a room ready and waiting for you if you’d just stop being a stubborn little git,” Sirius said.

“Pot meet kettle,” Remus shot back, then turned to Harry, “I’ve still got a flat near Diagon Alley, and that’s where I live most of the time, but over the last year I’ve been helping Sirius with cleaning out Grimmauld Place.”

“It’s a good thing you did as well. There were a lot of artefacts that needed inspecting to see what was too dark or dangerous to be kept in the house,” Sirius said, “I showed you the heirloom room yesterday, which is where most of them went. I worked with the Black account manager to store the really dangerous stuff in one of my vaults.”

“So the stuff in the cabinets is fine?” Harry asked.

“No, but it’s not so immediately dangerous that it needs more than a lock. It should go without saying that if a cabinet is locked, ask me before trying to open it.”

That made sense. Harry could admit to being curious about some of the things he’d seen in the cabinets in the drawing rooms, even the ones in the public part of the house, but he had also been taught a lot about the reputation of the Black family. It wasn’t exactly pleasant, so any warnings Sirius gave him about the objects in this house were well worth heeding.

“Just be sure to let our guests know when they arrive,” Harry said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be reading them the riot act,” Sirius said.

“But we won’t have to worry about that for at least a few more days,” Remus said, “more than enough time to get started.”

“Started? I thought the house was fully up and running?”

“It is. He means your lessons for this summer,” Sirius said, “you’ve done very well in your etiquette lessons, so we’ll put those on the back burner for now. When we’re finished eating, we’ll explain what we have planned.”

This, of course, made Harry hurry to finish. Infuriatingly, neither of the two adults seemed in any great hurry, forcing Harry to wait there impatiently. Eventually though, Remus finished the last of his eggs and Kreacher came to collect the dirty dishes. They all stood. Sirius led them up into the private part of the house and to the duelling room.

“Dumbledore might have it in his head that you need to be kept in the dark, and while I can sympathise with wanting to protect the innocence of children, given the present

circumstances, I don't think we can count on that for much longer, not with the people we know are coming for you," Sirius explained, "the Black's have always been of the opinion that it is better to be safe than sorry. If a threat is out there, it is better to be prepared to face it and never need to than to be caught unawares and scrambling. By all accounts, you're good at defending yourself, but you've never been in a proper fight between wizards."

"Which is why this summer, Sirius and I will be teaching you how to duel. What sort of spells to use for both offence and defence, what sort of tactics to use, and also just as importantly, how to escape if you're overwhelmed," Remus said.

"It was James and Lily's wish that you could live a long and happy life, and it is my duty as your godfather to make sure that wish is fulfilled. This war with Voldemort, this chess game of Dumbledores, it will not be your end," Sirius said, "are you ready?"

Harry nodded resolutely. There didn't even need to be any thought. The more he could defend himself, the more he could defend the people he cared about. His parent's wish was Harry's wish. The bright future he tried not to imagine for himself was the goal he wanted to reach. Nothing too flashy or fancy. Harry would be happy in a quaint little cottage, not having to worry about the world around him. Recently that dream had changed to now include Seamus and Dean, and sometimes he thought there might be a couple of kids running around as well.

That was what he wanted. A normal life with a happy family. Voldemort and Dumbledore could screw themselves if they thought they could keep that from him.

Important letters

Harry lay on his back in the duelling room, chest heaving as he tried to flood his body with precious oxygen. While all the various forms of exercise he did had given him stamina, duelling with Sirius and Remus was completely different. Sirius was keen on not having Harry fall into the trap a lot of wizards found themselves in. When spells started flying, they often forgot to move, preferring to block or deflect with magic instead. When they were faced with an enemy of comparable or greater skill, when their shields failed and they were forced to move or risk being hit, their movements were panicked and inefficient.

Therefore, Harry spent the first few days of duelling practise constantly on edge. Sirius would yell out dodge, and Harry was forced to twist or roll out of the way instead of shielding. After the first couple of tries, it got easier, and even more so when Sirius taught him how to roll properly. Sirius also aimed at his feet so he had to constantly be on his toes. Learning the proper footwork was challenging, but ultimately rewarding when Remus tested him. It was obvious both adults weren't using their full skill level on him, but the approving look he received from them when he lasted for five minutes was more than worth it.

"I can see why Remus spoke so highly of your performance in his class," Sirius said, coming over and handing Harry a bottle of water, which he downed in one go.

"You definitely have a talent for Defence Against the Dark Arts, something which is particularly impressive considering the ... questionable nature of some of your teachers," Remus said.

"I'll have you know that Professor Lupin was an excellent teacher," Harry said, managing to grin.

Remus rolled his eyes.

"You've picked up the proper footwork to be nimble in a battle quickly. Now you just need practice so it becomes second nature, as well as improving your spell repertoire, but we can keep working on that this summer," Sirius said.

They dismissed him and Harry retreated to his room. Learning to fight properly was definitely a useful skill to have, especially if he put his full magical ability into it. He was reminded of the night in the graveyard when he shot that stunner at the Death Eater. It had smashed straight through the Shield Charm. Harry could already see that coming in handy.

As he was in the Heirs room, there was an en-suite bathroom attached. It was a very luxurious bathroom, much better than the one downstairs which the other house guests would have to share. It was neatly divided into two sections. The first had a sink in front of a large mirror, along with a toilet. The second was like a wet room. In one corner was a mostly open shower cubicle with two shower heads, one which would have the water falling like rain from above while the other was normal. Taking up at least half of the room was a marble bathtub large enough for at least four people to fit in comfortably.

Harry wasn't sure what the Blacks expected of their Heirs, or whether this was just the sort of luxury they demanded, but he certainly wasn't complaining as he sunk into bubbly water, the temperature perfect to make him relax after a gruelling duelling session. His thoughts went back to the Prefects bathroom and the giant bathtub there. None of them had had a bath like it at home, with Dean not even having a bath at all. He was definitely showing this to them when they came to visit.

When he finished soaking, Harry stepped back into his bedroom with a towel around his waist as he finished drying his hair. Perched on his window sill was a beautiful barn owl, a recent purchase from Dean, bearing a letter from his boyfriend. Hedwig was snoozing on her perch having just come back from delivering a letter to Seamus. Harry fed the barn owl a few treats before taking the letter.

Dear Harry,

Thanks again for the warded mail pouch. I was worried when you said in your last letter that we needed to be careful what we could put in writing, and I didn't think I could have lasted the whole summer without speaking to you. It's a shame I can't use magic outside of school, so I guess I'll just have to get you to use magic for me!

Mum adjusted to Noether faster than she thought she would. It helps that she completely dotes on her. I swear my owl likes my mum more than me, but at least she'll have a more reliable way of keeping in contact with me when we go back to Hogwarts.

Seamus wrote to me the other day asking if I could come to Ireland to visit him. I think he's asked you the same as well. It'd be great to go. I spent a few days with him before and after the World Cup and I'd love to go again. Not sure if his house is big enough for all three of us, so we may need to do separate trips. Either way I'm sure Seamus will be happy. It feels weird not getting to see you both everyday.

How have things been with you? You said your godfather has been teaching you to duel? How's that going? Dare I ask, have the 'guests' moved in yet?

Hope to hear from you soon.

Love, Dean.

Harry's heart warmed when he read his boyfriend's words. He turned to the letter Hedwig brought back from Seamus.

Dear Harry,

That password spell for our mail is great. I hope you don't mind but I showed it to Mam and that sent her down a rabbit hole of research. I was slightly expecting her to make a big deal out of it but she actually left it alone, so I think we're in the clear. Maybe because she made me tell her the password. I guess we'll need to keep our letters above board.

Learning to duel sounds great. Wish Mam would let me do stuff like that. She's decided that I'm going to pass my Charms OWL with the highest grade in the year so she's been driving

me a bit mad. At least Dad knows how to make her back off a bit. He's had years to get used to her personality, even if it's gross the way they look at each other.

If you'd like to come and save me from them, just let me know. Mam's said you're free to visit. I think she would just like to meet you since I talk about you and Dean a lot. I know you've got to be careful with security, what with where you're living and the certain someone out and about, but if you can manage it, that would be great. It doesn't have to be for very long. I just want to see you. I miss you both, even if it's not been that long.

Keep your head up and don't listen to what the Prophet says. They don't know what they're talking about. My family supports you, and I know Dean and his mum do too. Let me know if any of those unwelcome house guests give you any trouble and I'll be there to give them a piece of my mind.

Have you been keeping up with the Quidditch League? The Tutshill Tornados have been having a fantastic season, but I reckon the Kestrels are still in with a chance of winning the League. What do you think?

Love, Seamus.

Reading anything his boyfriends wrote to him always made him feel giddy. It may have just been a sign off but Harry always found himself drawn to the little *love* written at the bottom. Considering how confused he'd been about his own feelings, Harry knew that he was completely gone for these boys. He cared about them so much, and it wouldn't be long before he could speak the L-word aloud.

Was it too fast? Harry had no idea. His parents dated in seventh year, got married six months after graduating Hogwarts, and then had Harry when they were twenty. That could be considered fast, but they were different times back then. Magical Britain had been in open warfare against Voldemort. War was coming once again, and Harry didn't want to have any regrets about waiting too long.

Harry frowned, lying back on his bed as he thought over the other thing that Seamus had said. The Daily Prophet had put out a story telling Magical Britain that all was well, denying that Voldemort had returned and denouncing Dumbledore for trying to incite panic. Mixed in with the latter was a subtle yet not subtle insinuation that Harry had been lying and making things up for attention. It hadn't been pleasant to see, and Sirius had gone stony faced when he'd read it.

Dumbledore was playing games and bringing Harry in along with him. Harry wanted nothing to do with it. While he wanted Voldemort gone, he also wanted the truth. He hadn't seen Voldemort in the graveyard, so why was Dumbledore insisting that he had? Of course, he knew the reason. It was to control the narrative, make people believe events as Dumbledore described them so that he can be seen in a positive light.

It was the sort of political game that Harry hated, but knew he would need to get used to it if he was going to take his place in Magical society. Sirius had said he would keep an eye on the Daily Prophet and intervene if they went too far, so Harry just had to do what he could to help out.

With a plan in mind, Harry got up from bed and went over to his desk. His normal summer correspondence was quite small. Before third year, his letters had been intercepted by Dobby, and then he went to stay with the Weasley's so he had no need to send letters. Third year was when he discovered the betrayal. The summer before fourth year he'd sent letters back and forth with his boyfriends, and occasionally also with Neville. Now he had more friends, and he was determined to keep these bonds active, so he pulled out rolls of parchment and began drafting letters.

He sent a letter each to Neville, Parvati and Lavender, asking how their summers were going. Nothing too detailed or probing, just a friendly inquiry. He also wrote letters to Fleur and Viktor, though he would have Celio take these to a post office to be delivered. He hoped Fred and George wouldn't be too upset to not hear from him, but Harry didn't want to have to deal with the reaction of Ron and Ginny if they saw them getting mail from him.

The last letters he wrote were to Seamus and Dean. He spent longer on these two since there was more to say. Harry couldn't finish them, because he needed to ask Sirius about how visiting would work. Hedwig woke up to the sound of his quill, and Harry could practically feel her excitement for another delivery run. A knock at the door drew his attention.

"Dinner's nearly ready," Sirius said, giving him an amused smirk, "so you should probably get dressed."

Harry suddenly realised that he hadn't actually gotten dressed after getting out of the shower, still only with a towel around his waist.

"There must have been something pretty distracting in those letters you got," Sirius smirked.

"Seamus asked if I'd like to come and visit him in Ireland, but I don't know how security is supposed to work," Harry said.

"That's a very good question," Sirius said, coming into Harry's room and sitting down on the end of his bed, "it'd probably be easier if you stayed here, but I'm not going to make you a prisoner in your own home. I know you want to visit Potter Manor, and probably Gryffindor Castle, at some point."

He hummed, deep in thought.

"The Order will ask questions if they don't see me when I'm here," Harry said.

"True, but there won't really be any of them here except for when we have meetings, so all we'd have to do is say that you're up in your room doing homework," Sirius said, "why don't we hang on until we find out when Molly will be moving in. Once we know that, we can plan around it."

"So you don't mind me going to visit? Even if it's far away?"

"Obviously I want you to be safe, but I don't want you to feel like you're cooped up here. I know very well that this house, for all its size, can very quickly feel like a cage. So no, I don't have an issue with you visiting one of your boyfriends," Sirius said.

That eased something in Harry's mind. Sirius left, Harry quickly got dressed, and went downstairs to dinner. He finished his letters off when he was done and sent them off with an eager Hedwig.

The day came for the first meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. Sirius was slightly on edge, which put Harry on edge too. This would be the first time in a long time that Grimmauld Place would have so many visitors, and while Harry knew they wouldn't be able to get him up in his room, he was slightly worried about the presence of Dumbledore and Mrs Weasley. It was a necessary evil to find out what Dumbledore's plans were, but Sirius reiterated his promise that he wouldn't let either of them walk all over them.

Harry ate his dinner in the informal dining room, tucked away in the private area of the house. Sirius ate with him, but the clock ticked closer to 6:30pm, when the meeting was supposed to start, and his nerves grew.

"Who's coming to the meeting?" Harry asked, trying to diffuse some of the tension.

"Besides the obvious, McGonagall will be there I think, as will quite a few of the old crowd from last time. Moody will be there too, the real one, so I don't think I can get away with using the mirror to let you listen in. I'll still tell you everything after we're done," Sirius said, "apart from that, I'm not sure. Dumbledore and Remus were more in charge of reaching out to people."

At quarter past six, Sirius stood.

"I want you to stay in the private parts of the house until everyone's gone. If you need anything, send Kreacher to come and get me."

With that, he left Harry alone. No longer hungry, Harry went upstairs to his room. He had planned to sit in bed and read, but lying in the middle of his bed was a book that Harry was sure he didn't own. It had a sheet of parchment stuck to the front of it, obscuring the cover.

I expect you to read this so you can stay safe. Don't make me set homework. - S

Expecting something about defensive spells or counter curses, Harry peeled off the parchment, only to immediately squawk in sheer embarrassment as he read the title.

A Wizard's Guide to Wizards: A How-To for Male Homosexual Relationships

Harry wanted to curl up into a ball and die. He didn't want to do this. He did not! No, no, absolutely not. He had heard whispers from the older years so he knew that this was Sirius's roundabout way of giving him The Talk, which, just, no. He did not want to have this conversation with his godfather!

At least he's giving you a book to read and not awkwardly sitting you down, Harry thought, though it was only a small comfort. It's not that these thoughts hadn't crossed his mind when making out with his boyfriends grew a touch more heated, when hands wandered a bit further

than before. Harry distinctly remembered that day after the third task when the three of them had undressed one another before taking a shower. Harry was self-aware enough to know that he had no idea what he was meant to do if they had wanted to do more than what they'd already done, so it was with a great deal of courage that Harry settled in and opened it.

There was no way he was letting Sirius give him homework on this stuff.

What followed was just as enlightening as it was absolutely mortifying. This book seemed to cover *everything* : the general view of homosexuality in the magical world, and how that varied in comparison to the Muggle world; marriage and family customs; useful spells for intercourse. Harry's eyes went wide when he saw that chapter heading, and he nearly slammed the book shut right then and there. It even talked about how two men had sex, and all the ways they could find pleasure, which turned Harry into a blushing and squirming mess. The illustrations certainly didn't help.

In the end, he managed to at least skim through the entire book. Some parts were probably rushed through and he'd need to go back to understand it properly, but he at least got the gist of everything. Despite his mortification, Harry surprisingly felt better when he finished it. He felt a bit more confident that he wasn't just fumbling in the dark in his relationship, and having more of a concrete image about what *more* looked like was certainly nice to picture. It didn't stop him from sending a stinging hex at Sirius when he poked his head through the door later that evening.

"I see you got my present," he grinned.

"Why?" Harry groaned.

"Would you rather I sat you down and told you all about the birds and the bees? Or I guess in your case it would be the bees, the bees and the bees," Sirius said, earning another groan from Harry, "in all seriousness though, it's important for you to know this stuff. Staying safe isn't just learning to defend yourself. It's also about being safe in here."

He tapped his heart.

"Like with all things, it's better to have the knowledge and not need it, then need it and not have it," Sirius continued, "I'm not stupid enough to think you're not going to explore your relationship. You're at that age. All I ask is that you do so safely and with the consent of all involved."

"I wouldn't force them into anything," Harry said.

"I know you wouldn't. So, do you think the book was helpful?"

"I think so? It was very ... in depth."

That got a laugh from Sirius.

"It certainly is. Feel free to share it with your boyfriends if you'd like."

Harry could just imagine showing it to them. Seamus would go bright red, only to devour it eagerly. Dean would be calmer, more cautious, but still read through it patiently.

“Come on. Let’s go down and have some hot chocolate before bed. I can fill you in on the Order meeting.”

In his embarrassment at the book, Harry had completely forgotten about the Order meeting. Remus was already nursing a cup of tea when they joined him in one of the private drawing rooms, and Kreacher appeared a moment later bearing a mug of hot chocolate for Harry. He left with a snarl, complaining about guests making a mess in the dining room. For how long the meeting ended up being, Harry was surprised at how little seemed to get done. Dumbledore presided over everything, introducing everyone. Very few of the names meant anything to Harry, though one in particular stood out.

“Snape!”

“I know. Apparently Snape will be resuming his role as a spy amongst the Death Eaters,” Sirius said, though it was clear from his tone how little he believed that.

“Did he say anything to you?” Harry asked.

“Severus barely spoke, which is probably for the best, and Sirius was on his best behaviour,” Remus said, “if only that could be said for everyone.”

Mrs Weasley had been there, and Dumbledore had told everyone how she would be acting as den-mother for Headquarters. It was something she was inordinately smug about, especially towards the end of the meeting when all that was left to discuss were the arrangements to move her family in. From the sounds of it, she was going to be insufferable, but at least it gave them a timeline. The plan was to move Mrs Weasley’s family in a week before Harry’s birthday, meaning they had two weeks left of relative peace.

The rest of the meeting leading up to that was mostly uneventful. They were mainly concerned with spreading the word of Voldemort’s return to as many people as they could, all while recruiting more members. Moody had a couple of contacts in the Auror department he felt would be sympathetic and willing to listen. There was no mention of the Daily Prophet article, other than to say it was clearly meant as a Ministry statement.

Beyond that, the conversation had turned to Voldemort and his plans. All eyes had turned to Dumbledore, who told them he had thoughts about what Voldemort wanted to do now that he regained his body. Sirius and Remus agreed that he likely would operate in the shadows for a while. The Ministry’s statement gave him the perfect cover. Dumbledore did seem to have some ideas, but he told them he needed a few more days to verify some things, but that they likely would have to guard something.

“So he really doesn’t know much,” Harry said.

“It’s been a month since Voldemort returned and he was always very good at acting secretly. While we’re further ahead than we were last time, the Ministry standing in our way is slowing us down,” Sirius said, “I told the Order that I would be monitoring the Daily Prophet

and would act if they ever lied about you. As your godfather, I have the perfect excuse to do so, though they all understood that there was nothing I could do about their statements towards Dumbledore.”

“You don’t sound so concerned about that.”

“It’s a shame, it really is,” Sirius said, completely unapologetically, “though we do need to be careful. For all his faults, Dumbledore was the only wizard Voldemort ever feared. If the Ministry is somehow able to get him locked up, there’s nothing stopping him from taking over easily. Fudge is acting like a player in this game when really he’s just a pawn, making moves according to designs he can’t even see. Unfortunately, he’s a pawn with an awful lot of power to back him up.”

The thought of Fudge unknowingly playing along with Voldemort’s game, ironically out of fear of Voldemort being back, was not a good thing to end the day on, but Harry could easily see it. Fudge never seemed to have much of a backbone the few times they’d met. He clearly enjoyed the office he held, but that sort of man would break at the first sign of trouble. If only trouble wasn’t looming quite so close.

A bright flash of green in a graveyard. Cedric couldn’t get out of the way in time, but Harry wasn’t fast enough. He couldn’t move at all, frozen in place as the curse struck the other boy. Cedric fell lifeless to the ground; glassy, unseeing eyes staring up at Harry, almost accusing him of not doing enough.

That wasn’t how it happened.

A bright flash of green in a graveyard. Harry saved Cedric, but then the Death Eater bound them both in ropes. He did something that Harry couldn’t see but knew was unspeakably painful. The cauldron burned bright white, and a skeletal figure emerged, filling the air with high cold laughter.

That was not what happened!

High, cold laughter. Green light. The graveyard. Cedric living. Cedric dying. Images overlapping and shifting too fast for him to see, until suddenly it all went still. Harry stood in the graveyard, but there was a body lying in front of each grave. Sirius, Remus, Neville, Parvati, Lavender, Fred and George, Arthur. On and on, everyone he cared about. Where the cauldron once stood was Lord Voldemort. Dead at his feet were Seamus and Dean. Harry’s heart broke.

“If love is so powerful, why are they all dead? Why are they all dead Harry Potter?”

Harry shot up out of bed, breaths coming hard and fast. The room around him was dark and blurry, until he shoved his glasses on his face.

He wasn’t in the graveyard. He was in his bedroom at Grimmauld Place. Nobody could get in here without a very long and drawn out fight. Cedric and the others were still alive. He would

know if they weren't. Right?

It wasn't the first time that Harry had had a nightmare, but this one took a long time to calm down from. His heart was racing as he convinced himself that it was just a dream. He got up, heading into his bathroom and splashing water on his face. It helped a bit, but he could still feel himself shaking. The image of his boys dead at Voldemort's feet was seared into his brain. Nothing he did would get rid of it.

Harry went back into his room. With a wave of his wand, soft light filled the room, and he settled into bed with Seamus and Dean's latest letters. He got these today, meaning that his boyfriends were fine till at least that point. They were fine, Harry told himself as he traced his fingers over their words. If only they had mirrors like the one Sirius gave him. While he hated to wake them up in the middle of the night, at least then he'd get to see their faces and confirm that it had all just been a bad dream.

When the sun finally rose, Harry had been unable to get back to sleep. His disturbed night was clear as he went downstairs to breakfast. No-one else from the Order was currently staying at Grimmauld Place, so Harry went to the private dining room to eat. Kreacher took one look at him and disappeared, returning with a plate of French toast. Sirius frowned over the copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Rough night?"

"Bad dream."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No thanks. I'm feeling a bit better now."

And that wasn't even a lie. Seeing Sirius alive brought him relief. Even if he couldn't check on the others, at least he had some proof.

The French toast was excellent, and Harry also tucked into some sausages as well. An unfamiliar owl flew in through the open window. It circled and landed in front of Harry, holding out its leg. Across the table, Sirius frowned at it, but then his eyes widened in recognition, giving Harry a nod. Harry took the letter, giving the owl a piece of one of his sausages. The owl ruffled its feathers and took off again, leaving Harry to read the letter.

Dear Harry,

I'm really not sure how I'm meant to put all of this into words. Saying thank you doesn't seem to cover it enough. I know Gran said that it was Lord Black's idea, something about Professor Lupin noticing when he taught us in third year, but I'm sure it really came from you. Gran's tried to train me to be a Lord, but I was never very good at those lessons, so all I can really do is say thank you.

Gran took me to Gringotts almost as soon as we got off the train. She said it was to help teach me to manage the family accounts. I'm sure you can understand why I was confused since surely it could have waited, but when we got there, she immediately started talking

about bringing in a trusted Healer. I had no idea what she was talking about. Looking back on it now, my head was completely full of mothballs.

We went back home and a Healer came and scanned me. I didn't get a chance to see what was there before I had to drink a bunch of potions and kneel in a ritual circle. It was quite painful but when I came to I felt so much lighter than I've ever done. It felt like I could do anything, but then I was overwhelmed by the Family Magic. I was out cold for two days, and it's only in the last day that I've been able to get up and walk about. Apparently my inheritance was a big one, but because of everything I barely felt it at the time.

I don't know much about what happened, but Gran let me see the result of the diagnostic scan. I suppose it'd be easier to just show you, so I've enclosed a copy. It's ... a lot.

Harry tore through the envelope and found a second sheet of parchment.

RITUAL OF PURIFIED CLEANSING

Patient: Neville Frank Longbottom; Lord of REDACTED

Healer in charge: REDACTED

Assistant healers, if any: n/a

Potions

Unfocusing potion. The target will find it difficult to focus on tasks for long periods of time. Date of first dose detected: September 1st 1991.

Nervous potion. The target will experience heightened nerves. Date of first dose detected: September 1st 1991.

Equilibrium potion . The target will find it difficult to maintain equilibrium, resulting in heightened clumsiness and more easily losing balance. Date of first dose detected: September 1st 1991.

Spells

Magical core restriction: 95%. Note: partially removed prior to cleansing. Approximate restriction at time of cleansing: 60%.

Mental fog curse. The target will find it harder to think clearly. Note: partially removed prior to cleansing.

Mental processing curse. The target's mental processing is slowed, thus requiring longer to understand new information. Note: partially removed prior to cleansing.

Curse of heightened fear. The target is more likely to feel increased fear towards the targeted person/object/situation. Target key: Dark magic, Severus Snape, Slytherin House, Augusta Longbottom. Note: partially removed prior to cleansing.

Submission charm. *The target is more likely to submit to others, following their lead. Note: partially removed prior to cleansing.*

Loyalty charm. *The target's feeling of loyalty to the targeted person is increased. Target key: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Harry James Potter. Note: partially removed prior to cleansing.*

It was just like what had been done to Harry, even down to some of the spells and potions being identical. Harry felt sick when he saw he had been a target key for the loyalty charm, and he already had the letter drafted in his head to apologise profusely and swear that he didn't know. He turned back to Neville's letter.

As you can see, there was quite a number done on me to stifle my mind and my magic. The Healer says that such a tight restriction to my magical core may be why my family thought I might be a Squib. If these had been kept in place, I would have been left completely useless at magic, nothing more than an idiotic little follower. Because I know you're probably freaking out about it, I trust you Harry. I know that you had nothing to do with these spells, even if you were one of the target keys.

We think that my inheritance managed to weaken a lot of these spells but couldn't break through them entirely. I'm not sure when it happened, but I've had a chance to look over my memories of our time at Hogwarts together, and I still consider you my friend. Spells or not, you've done plenty to earn my loyalty.

Therefore I, Neville Frank, Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom, offer you the most sincerest gratitude on behalf of my family. We owe you a life debt, one which I will freely fulfil with the full support of Lady Regent Augusta Longbottom. The Longbottom family shall come at your call to aid you in your endeavours.

Yours most sincerely,

Heir Neville Longbottom.

Harry was stunned when he finished reading. Without a word, Harry passed across the letter and the test results to Sirius as he tried to process what he'd just learned. Neville had spells put on him to restrict his magic. He was just like Harry. Given the similarities between the two, he could be confident that the same person applied them, and there was only one person they currently suspected.

"And here I thought that man could sink no lower. To strangle the ability of two Heirs to noble houses, turning them into nothing more than puppets for him to string along," Sirius growled, "what possible justification could Albus have to do such a thing?"

"I have no idea. Trying to claim more power for himself?"

"Possibly, but he has to know that there's no point to that. Everyone dies eventually. Death can only be avoided for so long, and even back then Dumbledore was already old for a wizard. What use would he have for power in the moment when it would all be over when he dies?" Sirius said.

“Unless that’s the point,” Harry wondered aloud, “we don’t learn much about magical culture at Hogwarts unless you come from magical families, but only the purebloods really hold to the traditions. A lot of the pureblood families have been dying out or were wiped out in the last war. Maybe Dumbledore wants to bring an end to the magical traditions by making sure there’s nobody left to pass them along?”

“He is seen as the champion of Muggleborns, and the pureblood families that side with him tend to be less conservative of magical traditions. It would make sense.”

“What should we do now?”

“Neville’s your friend, and Augusta Longbottom would be a powerful ally to have. I was already considering reaching out to her anyway. Whether we tell her about all of this, about you, I don’t know.”

“I think we should tell them. If need be, I can swear them to secrecy with the life debt,” Harry said, “Dumbledore obviously put such a strict block on Neville because he has the potential to be an exceptionally powerful wizard, and Lady Longbottom has a lot of influence both in the Wizengamot and on the Hogwarts board of governors. Neville’s my friend. I told Seamus and Dean, so I think Neville deserves to know as well.”

Sirius sat back for a moment, thinking things over.

“Very well. I’ll get in touch with Augusta and arrange a meeting, but I don’t think it would be best to meet here.”

“If only we had access to other meeting places that only we could get to.”

“Very funny mister sarcasm. Finish your breakfast while I write the letter.”

Harry shoved some more French toast into his mouth. If Neville learned the full truth, then the four Gryffindor boys would be a united front. Together with Parvati and Lavender, Ron and Hermione’s influence in their house would be restricted, preventing Dumbledore from getting his hooks back into Harry. It would also mean one more person to carry these burdens. Harry hated it, but there was no stopping it. Neville became a part of this as soon as Dumbledore decided to play the chess master to mess with everyone’s lives.

Powerful allies

Living in the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix was not as exciting as it sounded. The Order met every few days, though they were shorter than that first meeting. Most of the members arrived in time for the meeting and didn't stick around for long afterward. The exception was Mrs Weasley.

As den-mother, she clearly felt it was her duty to make the meeting as comfortable and homey as possible, arriving at least an hour before the meeting started to make a spread of food for everyone to enjoy, and then staying for longer than was necessary to clear away afterwards. According to Sirius, she had made a few pointed comments about wanting to see Harry, but Sirius shut her down every time, claiming that Harry wasn't a member of the Order and so was instructed to stay out of everyone's way during the meetings.

It meant that Harry did a lot of hiding in the private part of the house, but this was perfectly fine with him. The only people who could get to him were Sirius and Remus, and there was so much to explore. Harry vibrated in excitement about getting to invite his boys to visit.

But first, he had an important meeting to attend.

Harry woke up from a surprisingly pleasant dream and got dressed. Sirius was waiting for him by the fireplace in the private receiving room.

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

He tossed a pinch of floo powder into the flames, which roared bright green, and called out "Potter Manor". The floo network would never be Harry's preferred way to travel, and it was pure luck that Harry managed to not tumble out of the grate on the other side. He stepped into a luxurious drawing room. Celio was at his side immediately, clearing away the soot from Harry's clothes. Sirius appeared behind him a moment later.

"We shall have refreshments prepared for Lord Potter and his guests, and Lord Potter's robes have been freshly laundered and await him in his room," Celio said.

"Thanks Celio."

"You go and get changed," Sirius said, making sure the fastening on his robe hadn't come undone from the floo, "I'll go collect our guests."

With that, Sirius strode from the room, intending to apparate to Longbottom Manor. Harry was left alone, a few butterflies fluttering in his stomach at the thought of what was to come. It would be fine. Neville was his friend, and he'd already taken a great risk sharing his diagnostic scan results with Harry. Harry could return the favour, though if need be, he could call on the life debt to bind them to secrecy. Harry sincerely hoped that it wouldn't come to that.

The robes Celio had set aside for him were a burnished bronze colour with a golden trim. There was also a brooch in the shape of a stag's head, a small ruby enclosed within the antlers. It was all much higher quality than the clothes Harry normally wore, and leagues above anything he had growing up. This wasn't just a meeting with Harry's friend from school though. This was a potential alliance between two noble houses. Harry needed to look, and act, the part.

Changing into the robes, Harry felt Sirius's lordship training kick in. He held himself more confidently, back straight and head held high. Sirius spoke often about having a public, professional face with which to do business, while keeping the more private self for only close friends and family. Harry struggled with it at first, but the two years of having to pretend around Ron and Hermione had paid off, and Harry fell into the role of a Lord easily.

He went back to the drawing room to wait for his guests, standing at the window with his hands behind his back. From here he had a nice view of much of the grounds, including the empty stables. There were stables like it at Gryffindor Castle as well. Harry had never ridden a horse before, but it could be something fun to try and learn.

The wards chimed, alerting him as the fire in the hearth turned emerald green. Harry turned, strolling over as three people emerged. Sirius smiled and joined him. Like him, Neville was also wearing more expensive robes, and he wore them well even if Harry felt that his friend looked a little lost without some evidence of his beloved plants on his person. The woman standing next to Neville was old, though she moved with the confidence and the surety of someone much younger. She wore a lime green dress and clutched a bright red handbag.

"May I present Lady Regent Augusta and Heir Neville of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom," Sirius said, then to the guests, "allow me to introduce my Heir, Harry James."

Harry inclined his head to both Lady Longbottom and Neville. It felt strange to only do this much, almost like he was being rude. Lady Longbottom seemed to think so as she narrowed her eyes at him, but Harry held firm. He hadn't been introduced in full, but with his lordships, he held a higher position than either of his guests.

"It is a pleasure to formally meet you both. I am Harry James, Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient Houses of Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin, Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black."

Lady Longbottom's eyes widened slightly. She dipped into a curtsy, nudging Neville sharply for him to bow.

"Well met, Lord Potter, the pleasure is all mine. I must say, I am surprised to hear such titles. When we stumbled across each other that day in Flourish and Blotts, I had not considered you'd come into quite such a large inheritance," she said.

"It was very new to me as well, Lady Longbottom," Harry said, "which is something we will be discussing today. Shall we take a seat?"

They each sat down, Neville and Lady Longbottom across from Harry and Sirius, and Celio appeared bearing a tray of drinks. Once they were all situated, Lady Longbottom leaned forward.

“May I be frank, Lord Potter?” Harry nodded. “I was very hesitant to allow Neville to send you his letter. It contained such sensitive information, and while I felt much the same gratitude towards you and Lord Black for bringing this to our attention, I did not feel comfortable broadcasting exactly what had been done. However, Neville insisted on it. He said that we could trust you, Lord Potter. Were we wrong to do so?”

“You were not,” Harry said firmly, “even if circumstances hadn’t been what they are, I wouldn’t have held what happened to Neville against him.”

“Circumstances?” Lady Longbottom asked.

“Is this about Dumbledore being weird with you at the end of last year?” Neville asked.

“Let’s just say, the Headmaster is not who he pretends to be,” Harry said.

That made Lady Longbottom scoff.

“That is such an obvious statement to make in light of what has been discovered. Neville says that Albus was acting strangely towards you following the third task, trying to have meetings with you about what happened. Why would he do this?”

Harry exchanged a look with Sirius, who nodded. He handed Lady Longbottom the parchment containing a copy of his own diagnostic scan results. She let out a small gasp, then handed them across to Neville.

“Well this certainly explains why you reached out to us,” she said.

Neville looked up from the piece of parchment, eyes wide and glassy.

“You- you too?”

“It’ll be easier to explain if I start from the beginning,” Harry said.

And so Harry explained it all. After having done so many times at this point, he fell into a sort of familiar rhythm, beginning with how he woke up with way more magic than he went to sleep with, all the way to the present day. Neither Neville nor Lady Longbottom interrupted him, though it was clear a few times that they wanted to, but they were too transfixed by what Harry was telling them.

“It was when I realised that Neville was a lot better in classes which didn’t require active magic use that I recognised it as similar to how I felt after I had the spells blocking my magic removed. Obviously I didn’t know for sure, but if there was a possibility of it being true, I needed to do something, so I asked if Sirius could reach out to you to check,” Harry finished.

“Harry-” Neville said, but the words failed him.

“There is a lot to discuss, Lord Potter. I think the most pressing right now is the fact that your inheritance was kept from you, and thus you inherited your Family Magic completely out of the blue,” Lady Longbottom said, “it’s clear that somebody worked very hard to keep the two of you contained. There is a simple magic block placed on newborns to help prevent any wild bouts of accidental magic during infant distress, but this block is by its very nature intended to be weak. At most it would seal about 10% of a person’s magical core, and it slowly fades away as the child develops, completely breaking when the child turns four, the age when accidental magic typically first starts to appear.”

She tapped Harry’s test results.

“This block is something different. It is very difficult to seal a person’s magic, otherwise Azkaban wouldn’t require such strict security measures. The ritual that can do it takes at least a day of dedicated spellcasting to seal a magical core to this extent. Very few people know how to do it, and the only one I can think of is Albus Dumbledore,” Lady Longbottom said.

“That’s who we thought as well,” Harry said, “but you seem certain.”

“You’ve heard about what happened to Neville’s parents?” Harry nodded, sending an apologetic glance to Neville. “After Frank and Alice were attacked, the Longbottom family was in shambles. It was chaos. I was so busy making arrangements for my son and daughter-in-law’s care at St Mungo’s and following up on the trial of the Death Eaters responsible, that I ran myself a little ragged. When Albus came calling, asking to see Neville, I didn’t think anything of it. He claimed he wanted to check for any residual effects of any curses used on him. I was completely run off my feet and still had so much to do, so to my great shame, I allowed it to happen and left Neville alone with him.”

She sighed heavily, and for the first time since the conversation began, Harry saw the old woman that she was.

“The next thing I knew, I was waking up in bed a day later. Albus had left a note saying he didn’t find anything and that Neville was fine, that I returned from my work so tired that I immediately went to bed. I didn’t even check in on Neville when I knew I should have done. None of the House Elves would tell me what Albus had done with my grandson, but at the time, this didn’t occur to me as strange so I let it go. Looking back on it now, it is most peculiar and I suspect that Albus did something to keep me away for the time required for the ritual without me getting suspicious.”

“So Dumbledore had all the time he needed to bind Neville’s magical core,” Harry said.

“And the same with you Harry,” Sirius said, “Dumbledore was the one to deliver you to the Dursley’s. Who knows how long it was between Hagrid getting you out of Godric’s Hollow and him taking you there.”

“We cannot allow this to continue,” Lady Longbottom said decisively, “Dumbledore has no right to do what he has done. His actions amount to grievous assault at the very least. What have the pair of you been doing about this?”

“Right now we’ve been gathering as much information as we can. Until we can get something concrete, trying to go up against Dumbledore is pointless. He’s too well liked for anything to stick,” Harry said, “both of us have been acting like nothing has changed so he won’t try too hard to bring me back under his control. Ron, Hermione and Ginny have tried dosing me at various points, but my lord ring warned me every time. The twins have also been watching out for me, and now that I’m no longer friends with either of them, they’ve not had the chance.”

“I did wonder why you changed towards Ron and Hermione in the last two years. It’s not just the way they’ve been treating you, it started even before that,” Neville said.

“I’ve been trying to pull away from them without making it suspicious. Thankfully, they dug their own graves publicly enough for everyone to accept that I don’t want to be friends with them. Not that it stopped Dumbledore from trying to get me back with them.”

“The main issue is that, while we have spells with Dumbledore as a target key and we have a lot of suspicion, we don’t actually have a lot that conclusively ties Dumbledore as being responsible for any of this,” Sirius said, “the best shot we have is figuring out who Harry’s magical guardian was before I took over. Gringotts have been unable to find the information, but by law and by magic, it must exist somewhere otherwise the authority of the title is null and void. We’re pretty sure it’s Dumbledore, and as soon as we can prove that, we’ll have a lot more to work with.”

“I quite agree. Even if we don’t have much concrete evidence, we can still work to undermine his power base. I’ve had my reservations about how he has been running Hogwarts for some time. Now is the perfect opportunity for some more scrutiny. After all, it’s my precious grandson’s OWL year,” Lady Longbottom said.

“I can help with that as well. We also need to make sure Harry and Neville remain safe. Dumbledore is one thing, but there’s more than one enemy out there. The Ministry isn’t doing a very good job of anything besides sticking its head in the sand, which is especially bad given a certain dark lord’s resurrection at the end of May.”

“Neville told me about that. As much as I don’t want to believe it, I trust his judgement.” She turned her steely gaze to Harry. “Though I hate that you’ll be involved, that psychopath has had a bizarre obsession with you ever since you were born. Do you know how to fight?”

“Sirius and Remus have been teaching me.”

“Uncle Algie’s been teaching me as well. I’m not going to let you face him alone,” Neville said.

“I can’t ask you to do that Neville.”

“I’m not asking you. I’m telling you that I’m doing this. I won’t hold you back,” Neville suddenly looked very nervous, “we weren’t entirely ... honest in our introductions earlier. It’s not a big lie, and it’s really just leaving some things out, so I don’t think it’s that bad.”

His rambling was cut short when Lady Longbottom put a gentle hand on his arm.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about dear. Be proud of your lineage.”

Neville sat up straighter, head held high.

“I am Neville Frank, Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Hufflepuff, Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom,” he said.

Harry was astounded. Neville was Heir, now Lord, of the House of Hufflepuff.

“That’s-”

“Really unexpected?” Neville said, “I was shocked too. I think we all stared at the Inheritance Test that the Goblins had me do for ages before it sunk in.”

“As far as I’m aware, the last descendants of Helga Hufflepuff are the Smith family, though they haven’t been claimed by the Hufflepuff Magic in at least 200 years. The Longbottoms are like the Potters in that they’ve been in Gryffindor for generations,” Sirius said.

“While we may be predominately Gryffindor, we’ve had a fair few Hufflepuffs in our line as well,” Lady Longbottom said, looking with pride at her grandson.

“I needed something to do while I was on bedrest, so I looked into the family tree to try and figure it out. About 400 years ago was when the Hufflepuff name went extinct in the male line, with the dominant line of descent being the Smith family. Over a hundred years later in 1666, the head of the Smith family had two sons and a daughter. Their family wasn’t doing well financially at the time due to the Great Plague in the Muggle world. He had to marry his youngest son and daughter off to noble families for the dowry to get by. Elenor Smith married Peter Longbottom, who went on to become Heir Longbottom following his elder brother’s death three years later,” Neville recounted, “so that’s the connection to Hufflepuff. I’m sure you’ve got a similar story for Gryffindor and Slytherin in your family lines.”

“I’ll have to look into it to see where Gryffindor crossed into the Potter line,” Harry said.

“What about Slytherin?”

“Apparently I became the Heir of Slytherin by right of conquest, but I’m not sure how that works. According to the test, I got it in June 1993, which is when I rescued Ginny from the Basilisk,” Harry said.

“Not in 1981?” Lady Longbottom said, frowning, “if you were to win You-Know-Who’s title from him, I would have thought it would be when you defeated him the first time.”

“Because back then, it wasn’t a competition of Heirs,” Sirius said, “Remus and I have been thinking about this for a while, but it’s what makes the most sense. In 1981, Voldemort went to kill you as himself, but do you remember what he said to you in the Chamber?”

“Let’s match the might of Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin, against the famous Harry Potter,” Harry said.

“Exactly. The adult Voldemort would never have done that, but the piece of Voldemort in the diary was his sixteen year old self, and even genius prodigy teenagers can be incredibly stupid at times. He not only explicitly challenged you, he challenged you as the *Heir of Slytherin*. That put the Heirship of Slytherin up as forfeit should he lose, which he did when you killed the Basilisk and the soul fragment in the diary.”

“Would this soul fragment have anything to do with why the Goblins were particularly cagey around the condition of Hufflepuffs cup?” Lady Longbottom asked.

“When I turned out to be Heir Hufflepuff, our account manager brought out her cup under a stasis charm. He said that a really dark piece of magic had been used on it, requiring a deep cleanse, but they were worried it may have inadvertently damaged the magic of the cup despite their best efforts,” Neville said, “when I touched it and pushed a bit of magic into it, it sorted it out.”

Harry explained the horcruxes, watching as both Longbottom’s paled.

“Of all the depraved, idiotic, purely insane things that that man attempted, to split his soul just to avoid death? Utterly despicable,” Lady Longbottom said.

“You weren’t kidding all those times you said you don’t live a normal life,” Neville said.

“It’s alright though. The Goblins have managed to track down most of them. The diary has been destroyed; the Gaunt family ring and Hufflepuff’s cup have been cleansed; and the piece inside me has been removed,” Harry said, “that just leaves two more, but they’re behind powerful wards so the Goblins can’t find their location.”

“Anything you need from us to help, we’ll provide it,” Neville said.

“Indeed. We are allies in this, both against the Dark Lord and against Dumbledore,” Lady Longbottom said, “who else knows?”

“Aside from those present, Remus Lupin and Andromeda Tonks do,” Sirius said.

“She was the one who performed my cleansing,” Neville said, getting a proud nod from Sirius.

“Arthur Weasley and the twins know as well, and I told Seamus and Dean after the third task,” Harry said, “I- I couldn’t keep it from them.”

“Nor would I expect you to. This is a big burden,” Lady Longbottom said.

“I’m glad you’re happy with them. I just hope I get to find two people who are nice like that,” Neville said.

“Two people?”

“Yeah. There's something weird about the Family Magic of very powerful lines. They don’t always like coming together. As I’ll become the Lord of House Longbottom and House Hufflepuff, they’ll need to be separated as soon as possible so that one or both don’t get lost,”

Neville said, "I'll need to find someone who will be bear the next Heir Longbottom, and someone else who will bear the next Heir Hufflepuff."

That made Harry blanch. He knew that he would need to have children one day, and in the fantasies he kept to himself he had imagined having kids with Seamus and Dean, but he didn't know that it was *required* by his magic. He thought- well he didn't really know what he thought, just that it wasn't this. Sirius caught his slight panic, putting a comforting arm on his shoulder.

"We can talk about it when we get home."

Lady Longbottom, seeing Harry's expression, began asking questions about Harry's studies and what he hoped to achieve in his OWLs. While the distraction was obvious, it worked, giving Harry a bit of time to calm down from this bombshell. It was also a reminder that Lady Longbottom was one of the school governors. She had a lot to say about education, asking him several very detailed questions about how he was finding classes, what he wanted to be when he grew up, whether or not he felt the current crop of teachers was up to standard. It was slightly like an interrogation, and he caught Neville giving him commiserating glances.

Lunch was served, with no further talk on such serious matters. Harry asked Neville about his greenhouses, which naturally led to a long conversation about plants and Herbology. Sirius and Lady Longbottom were engaged with talk about Hogwarts and future plans they were making together, but none of it sounded relevant to him so Harry ignored them. After lunch it was time for Neville and his grandmother to go.

"I'll stay in touch," Neville said.

They both bowed to Harry one last time. Once his guests had disappeared with a swirl of bright green fire, Harry slumped down in a chair. That whole conversation was a lot to take in, but at least he would have a powerful ally. With Lady Longbottom in the Wizengamot and the board of governors, and Neville as another Heir to Hogwarts, Harry felt a lot more confident. Facing Dumbledore and Voldemort would be a challenge, but it was a fight they had a good chance of winning.

The next few days passed in a blur of reading and duelling. Sirius pushed him hard, always forcing Harry to think outside of the box to come up with strategies to try and beat him. Harry never did. Despite his years in Azkaban, Sirius still had many more years of experience on Harry, both as a wizard and as someone who had actually seen combat. Harry did his best, and he felt he was improving, but it still grated on him that he could never come close to winning.

"Your trouble isn't power, it's knowledge. Knowledge and experience, both of which can only be gained from practice," Sirius said, "you're doing much better than you were when we started."

"I just hope it'll be enough."

“It will be. Remus and I will make sure of that,” Sirius said firmly.

After cleaning up, Harry collected his books and went downstairs into the public part of the house to do his homework. There was a reading room next to the dining room where the Order held its meetings, and he found this was the perfect place to hang out that would allow the Order to see him without coming across as suspicious. While it wasn't anywhere near as good as the Black library, the books on the shelves were still helpful for completing his homework.

He had just finished his Transfiguration essay, and opened his books to make a start on Arithmancy, when he heard people walking past the door. Glancing at the clock, Harry was surprised to find it was nearly 6:30pm. The Order members must have been arriving for their meeting. Time had completely gotten away from him.

Gathering his things together, he opened the door to the reading room, only to immediately wish he hadn't. Standing at the foot of the stairs, welcoming somebody Harry didn't recognise, was Mrs Weasley.

“It's so good that you could make it.”

“I almost didn't. Fudge is starting to get a bit twitchy about people's loyalties,” said the woman with shoulder length, peach coloured hair that Mrs Weasley was speaking to.

“Be sure to let Albus know. It'll be a blow to us if we can't keep spreading the word.”

At that, both women turned, and Mrs Weasley spotted Harry. Her eyes widened in shock and then her expression changed, a beaming smile spreading across her face. She held her arms out, rushing towards him and pulling him into a suffocating hug. In years past Harry had accepted the smothering because he was so unused to receiving physical affection. Now though, he had Sirius and his boys who readily gave him hugs whenever he wanted them. This just felt stifling.

“Harry!” she screeched, “how good it is to see you!”

“It's good to see you too, Mrs Weasley,” Harry managed to say.

“I'd hoped I'd get to see you at some point. Ron's been asking about you. He's sorry he hasn't been able to send you any letters, but we've all been given strict instructions on what's safe to put in letters and what isn't. I'm sure you'll understand,” Mrs Weasley patted his arm, still smiling warmly, “if I'd known I'd bump into you, I'd have made you something for dinner. Growing boys need their food and we're currently commandeering your dining room.”

As she said that, Harry caught the flash of resentment in her eyes, the subtle glance towards the fancy panelling and finishes around her.

“There's no need for that,” Sirius said, coming out of the dining room, “I make sure Harry's eaten before the meetings start, and if he gets hungry he's more than capable of coming down to get something else.”

“And just where have you been hiding him? All the times I’ve been by to prepare for meetings and I’ve never seen him! His friends have been getting worried sick!”

Sure they have, Harry bit back the retort.

“Harry is not a member of the Order, and as Dumbledore has deemed everything we do as need-to-know, I’ve asked Harry to stay upstairs while the meetings take place,” Sirius said, “speaking of, we’re about to start.”

He gestured for Harry to head upstairs, which he was more than keen to do. Mrs Weasley pursed her lips but let him go without a fuss. The peach haired woman held out her hand to him.

“It’s nice to meet you, Harry. I’m Tonks, Andromeda’s daughter. Hopefully we get a chance to talk more later,” she said.

Harry shook her hand politely, taking his chance to slip away. He had not been prepared to see Mrs Weasley at all, which was stupid. Sirius complained enough that she descended on his house before the meetings, swaggering around like she owned the place, handing out instructions left and right. He was not looking forward to when the rest of the Weasley’s turned up.

He curled up in a seat in one of the drawing rooms, the wizarding wireless playing the Quidditch commentary in the background, but Harry wasn’t really listening to it. All things considered, he was having a good summer, but a small amount of loneliness crept in. It was the downside to having gained such good friends this last year. Their absence was felt that much harder.

He managed to get through that evening, cheering himself up enough to catch the final half hour of the game. When he went to bed that night, Harry felt much better. Even so, he wasn’t expecting the surprise he received the next day.

Harry finished reading through the Daily Prophet, ignoring the stories which alluded to him for no reason. Sirius had already read them, and though his expression grew stony, he didn’t make any comment before leaving. The Quidditch section was very interesting. Now that he’d passed his NEWTS, Viktor had been taken on full time by the Bulgarian national team. He’d just played a friendly against Argentina, with the Bulgarians winning 360-220. Harry was also pleased to see Puddlemere United were steadily rising in the British League. It probably wasn’t, but Harry liked to think it was because of Oliver Wood.

“Harry, guess who I’ve brought?”

He looked up to see Sirius grinning in the doorway to the private dining room. He stepped aside, revealing a tall, dark skinned boy who was beaming back at him.

“Dean!”

Harry was off his chair in an instant, rounding the table and pulling Dean into a tight hug, one which was eagerly returned.

“What the- but- how? You never said you were coming!”

“I didn’t think I was,” Dean said.

“That’d be my doing,” Sirius said, “I’ve been in contact with Ms Thomas for a few weeks now.” Seeing the unimpressed look on Harry’s face, Sirius hurried to continue. “Nothing too serious! It’s part of the conversations I’ve been having with Lady Longbottom about education standards. I’ve been meeting with many muggleborn families to get their feedback, so when it came time for the Thomas family, I asked if he’d like to spend the day with you while we talk about boring grown up stuff. I assume that’s alright with the pair of you?”

“Yes!” Harry said immediately, causing Sirius to chuckle.

“Alright then. I’ll be back before dinner. Kreacher’s around if you need anything, and I’ve got my mirror on me just in case.”

Now alone, Harry leaned up to kiss his boyfriend. Dean returned the kiss, and they stood there for a moment in each other’s arms.

“I’ve missed you.”

“Me too,” Dean said, “it was a bit mad. Sirius showed up at our flat this morning and Mum acted like everything was completely normal. The next thing I knew, he was asking if I wanted to come here and I said yes before even thinking about it.”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

Harry led them to one of the private drawing rooms, the one with many comfy sofas in it. Dean looked around with interest as they walked.

“The house seems bigger than the last time I was here.”

“Sirius and Remus finished cleaning it out, so it’s fully up and running. I can show you around later,” Harry said, “it’s definitely a lot bigger on the inside.”

“Just like a Tardis, but you get to live in it. It’s so cool.”

They didn’t do much for a little while, chatting as they filled each other in on how their summers had been. Dean gaped when Harry told him about Neville.

“Blimey. Another Heir of a founder, and another lord in the making. I’ll be honest, of everyone in our year, I wouldn’t have expected it to be Neville. He’s great, but he never really acted, well, posh.”

“I don’t really act posh either.”

“I suppose, though you definitely acted a bit differently at the Yule Ball,” Dean said, “you looked really good in your dress robes.”

“So did you,” Harry said, “when I asked Fleur to help set me up with someone, she asked if I wanted to go with a girl or a boy. I was tempted to say boy, but I couldn’t get the image of going with you or Seamus out of my head, so I went with Melonie.”

“I wish I could have gone with you,” Dean said, “both of you, though I have absolutely no idea how that would work.”

“Neither do I.” Harry snorted. “Can you imagine the looks on everyone’s faces if I’d come with two partners? There’d be outrage.”

“They’d have to scramble to rearrange the seats at the top table, and nobody would be able to take their eyes off you in the opening dance.”

“Let them stare. They’d just be jealous that they didn’t have two handsome boys on their arms,” Harry said.

“You think we’re handsome?” Dean asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Of course,” Harry said, his cheeks flushing slightly, “how could I not?”

They were sitting sideways on the sofa, facing one another with their legs tangled between them.

“That’s good to hear, because I think you’re very handsome too, and I know Seamus has made his opinion of us very clear,” Dean said, “have you heard much from him?”

“I think his mum’s driving him a bit mad with OWL preparation, but other than that he’s fine. I’d like to go and visit him soon.”

“And the other stuff?” Dean asked hesitantly.

Harry sighed. He filled Dean in on what had been happening with the Order, but there wasn’t much. Sensing Harry’s shift in mood, Dean reached out and took his hand, running his thumb over his knuckles gently.

“So if you’ve been stuck at home for nearly two weeks, what have you been up to? I’m guessing there’s plenty to keep you occupied around here?”

Dean had already seen some of the house when he visited last year, but even Harry had been blown away by all the changes. The tour was much more impressive. Harry showed him all his favourite spots while telling him about what he, Sirius and Remus had been doing. Dean was impressed by the duelling room, and he was interested in the Potions lab.

“Maybe we could practise without Snape breathing down our necks all the time,” he said.

“He wasn’t as bad last year,” Harry said.

“Only because you weren’t hanging out with Ron and Hermione any more. Without those two, your Potions grade went up, and you helped keep Neville calm so he could make a

decent attempt at each assignment. There just wasn't as much ammunition to use against you," Dean said.

"Well, that's better than nothing I suppose."

The best was saved for last, something which Harry knew Dean would love. After they ate lunch, Harry led Dean to the observatory. As soon as they stepped into the dome of clear glass, the bright blue afternoon sky replaced by the dark of night, clear of clouds with all the stars glittering above them, Dean's jaw dropped. He didn't pick it up again until he'd done a slow sweep of everything he could see.

"This is-"

"The Blacks were always very good at Astronomy, so just about every Black property has an observatory like this. I know how much you love Astronomy, so I thought you'd-"

He was cut off by Dean lunging at him, wrapping his lithe arms around him and squeezing tightly.

"I take it you like it then?"

His answer came in the form of a kiss.

"Of course I do. Can-" Dean glanced at the nearby telescopes, "- can we?"

They spent much of the afternoon stargazing. Harry wasn't as enamoured by Astronomy as Dean was, but it was still fun to do, though that may have been from the sheer delight in his boyfriend's face as they set up their telescopes. The stars above them were clear and vibrant. It was a miracle to see it in the middle of a city like London, but here they were, looking at the moons of Jupiter in the afternoon in mid-July. It was almost surreal, but magic was often like that.

Harry had Kreacher bring them up a blanket so that when they were done using the telescopes, the pair of them lay down in the observatory to watch the stars, almost like they'd found some quiet patch of grass at Hogwarts. Dean's hand found Harry's, and their fingers laced together.

"Thanks for this. Sorry if it wasn't that exciting for you," Dean said.

"I had fun, and I enjoyed watching you have fun."

"I've always loved the stars. Mum and I used to make a game of finding as many as we could when we went camping together," Dean said, "we've not done that in years, but I never thought I'd be dating someone with access to an observatory like this."

"Glad I could be of assistance," Harry teased.

Dean rolled his eyes.

“I am not a gold digger, but right now I am definitely digging your gold,” he said. Then he froze, groaning loudly and hiding his face, “oh god that sounded like such a bad euphemism.”

“Just a little,” Harry said, laughing at how embarrassed his boyfriend became.

He turned to lie on his side, and once Dean calmed down, he did the same. He stared into Dean’s eyes for a while, one hand resting on the other boy’s hip. Ever so slowly, they came together, lips meeting. Harry felt a tongue gently probing at his mouth, and he allowed it access, their kiss deepening. Their hands wandered slightly, and Harry felt bold enough to slip his under Dean’s t-shirt, feeling the smooth expanse of skin beneath.

There was a small tug, a button on Harry’s shirt coming loose. The next thing he knew, his shirt was entirely unbuttoned. Dean ran his hand over the emerging muscle on Harry’s chest. The sensation of being touched like this made Harry shiver, and he wanted to return the favour. He tugged at Dean’s t-shirt, a gentle encouragement for him to remove it. In the next moment, both of them were without shirts. The skin of their upper bodies pressed together as they continued exploring their kiss.

It broke off, and Harry trailed feather light kisses down the side of Dean’s neck. It made Dean gasp, and then Harry gasped as well when Dean responded in kind. They were so close together that their hardnesses pressed against one another through the fabric of their pants. That feeling simultaneously made Harry raring to go, and brought him back down to earth at the same time. Dean must have felt the same way, because the kiss wound down, becoming more chaste as they lay face to face, slightly out of breath.

“That felt really nice,” Harry said.

“It did.”

“But Sirius will be home soon, so we should probably move if we don’t want him to find us like this. I don’t think I’m ready for that kind of teasing.”

Neither of them moved.

“I don’t think I’m quite ready yet either,” Dean admitted, “I want to, but I don’t know, I feel like when we take that step, we should- I think-”

“It should be all three of us together,” Harry finished, taking pity on his struggling boyfriend.

Dean nodded, some of the tension draining away from him. It was certainly a nice image, the three of them together as they took that step in their relationship. Until that time, Harry was happy he got to make out with his boys, hopefully with less and less clothes.

They lay together for a bit longer before finally heaving themselves to their feet. Once they were dressed, they went down to the library. Sirius found them reading together, Harry leaning against Dean’s side. Nothing was said about what they got up to in the observatory, and if Sirius suspected anything he didn’t say. All he did was announce his presence, letting Dean know he was free to stay for dinner, and that Sirius would take him back home afterwards. Saying goodbye was hard, but it wasn’t quite as bad as Harry thought it was

going to be. Some of the loneliness had settled after seeing Dean, and he went to bed much happier than he had the night before.

An unromantic consideration

There were only six days until the Weasleys moved into Grimmauld Place, and Harry was determined to make the most of the peace and quiet. Sirius had filled him in on Tonks, who he had bumped into at the last meeting. She was indeed Andromeda's daughter who hated being called by her first name Nymphadora. She was also a junior Auror, having completed her training in March. Moody, the real one, was something of a mentor to her, which apparently had started before he was supposed to teach at Hogwarts.

Letters still came and went frequently as Harry conversed with his friends. There was a bit more giddiness as he wrote back to Dean, and he was more determined than ever to see Seamus, which was why Harry was disappointed when Sirius told him to get ready to travel.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked.

"It's a surprise," Sirius grinned, "one which will be immediately spoiled since we're travelling by floo. You won't need to be in anything fancy, but maybe something smarter than casual. Two out of the three people we're meeting will need impressing."

Harry frowned, but dressed in a simple button up shirt and jeans. Nothing too opulent, but still smart looking. Unless of course they were meeting very traditional wizards, but then Sirius would have told him to wear robes. They met back up at the private receiving room. Sirius took a pinch of floo powder and tossed it into the flames.

"Finnegan residence," he said clearly.

Harry's eyes widened. Sirius smirked, stepping into the fire. Harry followed him a moment later. The uncomfortable spinning of floo travel was even worse when he knew what lay on the other side. He emerged into a tastefully quaint kitchen. Even to Harry's eyes, it was clearly a blend between magical and Muggle, given by the radio plugged into the wall and the electric lights in the ceiling even as dishes were scrubbing themselves in the sink. A familiar, sandy haired woman stood at the kitchen counter as a kettle whistled on the stove. Mrs Finnegan looked over when they arrived.

"Right on time, Lord Black. Would you care for some tea?" she asked.

"I'd love some, and please, call me Sirius."

"I'll do that when business talk is over," Mrs Finnegan said, then she turned her sights to Harry, "well met, Heir Potter."

Harry inclined his head to her, the appropriate polite greeting.

"Good morning Mrs Finnegan."

"Let me guess, you didn't know you were coming here?"

“Not until Sirius said the destination into the fire.”

“We know how much you’ve both been chafing a bit under the distance, so we thought it’d be a fun little surprise,” Mrs Finnegan said, “let’s go get him.”

Harry and Sirius followed Mrs Finnegan into a dining room. There were several papers on the table, and she instructed Sirius to take a seat as she led Harry on to an entrance hall. In front of the front door was a set of stairs leading up to the first floor.

“Seamus! Get down here!”

A voice called back.

“I’m busy!”

“You’ve got a guest!”

There was a thud, then the sound of footsteps. Seamus appeared at the top of the stairs in a loose tank top and a pair of shorts. The scowl on his face turned into a look of elation when he saw Harry, who gave him a small wave.

“Harry!”

Seamus practically flew downstairs, throwing himself into a hug. When he stepped back, his mouth opened and closed, as though the words wouldn’t come, but Seamus didn’t seem to care as he beamed.

“You two have fun, but I want that door left open, do you hear?” Mrs Finnegan said.

“Mam!” Seamus groaned, even as he took Harry’s hand and led him upstairs.

On the landing at the top of the stairs, there was a door to the left, and two to the right. One of the right hand doors was open, which was Seamus’s room.

“Sorry about the mess. Here, let me just-”

Seamus snatched up his wand from the desk and made as though to wave it.

“It’s fine Seamus. You don’t need to go out of your way for me.”

Truthfully, it wasn’t that messy. The bedding was roughly made, and there were some items of clothing strewn next to the laundry hamper rather than it, as though Seamus had tried throwing them in and missed. Everything else was the kind of clutter that spoke of a well lived-in room. It was nowhere near as bad as Ron’s room had been when Harry first visited the Burrow, before Mrs Weasley forced him to tidy it up for Harry to stay there.

Seamus gave him another firm hug, and pressed a deep kiss to his lips when they parted.

“It’s really good to see you. You didn’t have any issues with security or the *other* people?”

“They’re not arriving for another few days. I’m sure they’ll be appropriately awful,” Harry said, “at least the twins will be there, and Arthur can help make sure they don’t go too far.”

“Still, I hate that you’ll have to share your house with them after everything they’ve done to you,” Seamus said, “if there wasn’t the other thing, I’d offer to let you stay here. It’d be a bit of a squeeze but I’m sure we’d manage.”

True, Seamus’s room wasn’t that big, and Harry could easily imagine the pair of them squeezing together on the single bed.

“It’ll be fine. I’ll have ways to get away from them if they’re being too much.”

Harry filled Seamus in on the parts of the house that Sirius had locked away from everyone else. Hearing that made Seamus laugh.

“So they’ll essentially be living in a manor house, but they won’t even get to see most of it. That’s brilliant! I almost want you to tell Hermione about the library she doesn’t get to use.”

“I’d rather not deal with that drama. She’ll just have to make do with the books in the reading room we set aside for them.”

“It sounds like a really cool place to live,” Seamus said, “I asked Mam about the Potter family. She said they’ve got a big Manor house where they normally lived. Is that true?”

“It is. I was blown away when I saw it for the first time. I couldn’t believe that it was actually mine and that I should have grown up there.”

That made Seamus’s grin falter.

“It’s in the past Shay, nothing I can do about it now. All I can do is make sure the future is better.”

“Shay?”

“Do you not like it? Sorry, I didn’t know if a nickname would be alright.”

“It’s absolutely fine. I just wish that I could come up with something cool for Harry,” Seamus mused, “Harrikins?”

“You got that one from the twins,” Harry accused.

“Absolutely, but it sounds way too childish for how I see you.”

From where they were sitting on Seamus’s messy bed, Seamus pulled them down so they were lying side by side. Strong arms wrapped around him so they were cuddling.

“The door is still open,” Harry reminded him.

“I know. Mam’s already read me the riot act,” Seamus said with a groan, “basically as soon as I got back, I may as well have been strapped to a chair and given The Talk. I do not need

to hear my mother telling me about two men having sex *ever again!*”

“Just your Mam? What about your Dad?”

“He was there too. Probably felt it was his fatherly duty to teach his son about safety and all that, but I think he was a bit overwhelmed and out of his depth having to talk about gay sex when he’s not gay, so he stood to one side, arms folded looking serious.” Seamus buried his head in Harry’s shoulder. “It was the most mortifying moment of my entire life.”

Harry laughed, rubbing Seamus’s back.

“Mine wasn’t much better. Sirius gave me a very *detailed* book on the topic and threatened me with homework on it if I didn’t read it through and take it seriously,” Harry said, “how’d your Dad take it? About us?”

Mr Finnegan was a Muggle, and part of the book Sirius gave him talked about the difference between the Magical and Muggle worlds views on homosexuality. While the Muggle perspective was shifting, it wasn’t exactly great across the board.

“He’s known that I like men since after third year. He’s never been against it, mostly just a little confused. Apparently when they first got married, he asked Mam questions which honestly weren’t unlike the things Hermione said, only in a much nicer way. I don’t think he really got it until Uncle Rory took a Bearer Potion and got pregnant. It’s kind of hard to think otherwise when your wife’s brother’s got a stomach the size of a small whale,” Seamus said, “he had twins.”

“I’m glad your family is supportive,” Harry said.

“They’re all nosy little shits who drive me up the wall, but I wouldn’t trade them for the world,” Seamus said, “and I’m glad you’re now with people who support you too. Lord Black didn’t give you grief when you came out, did he?”

“He didn’t. I think he knew before I did when the Veela at the World Cup didn’t affect me.”

“That’d do it. Sounds like all three of us are in good places at least,” Seamus said.

Of the three of them, Dean lived the most in the Muggle world, as he was a Muggleborn. Harry had been slightly worried how Dean’s mum would react, but Dean had assured them both by letters, and in person when they met, that while his Mum had questions, she ultimately just wanted him to be happy.

Much like when he met up with Dean, Harry and Seamus spent some time catching up on their summers. Even with all their letters, there was something much better about being able to talk in person. Seamus’s home life was very different than what Harry had heard about, since the village he lived in had a mixed magical and Muggle community. From the stories Harry heard about the cottage in Godric’s Hollow where he’d lived with his Mum and Dad, he may have experienced something similar had Voldemort not made his move.

“Do you want to go see it?” Seamus asked, “we could explore the village for a bit, if that’s alright.”

“We’d need to ask Sirius first, but I’d love to.”

Seamus beamed.

The Finnegan’s lived in a cottage, with lots of wood panelling and exposed beams in the walls and ceilings.. The ground floor was arranged almost like a ring, with the living room and dining room either side of the entrance hall, with those two rooms connected to one another by the kitchen, which was behind the stairs. Sirius was still talking to Mrs Finnegan in the dining room.

“Mam, can I show Harry around the village?” Seamus asked, sticking his head in the doorway.

Mrs Finnegan looked to Sirius.

“That should be fine, but don’t go too far,” Sirius said.

“I agree. I’d stick to the magical side of town for today,” Mrs Finnegan said.

They thanked her, heading through the dining room and kitchen and out the back door. The garden had raised flower beds filled with wildflowers, and butterflies fluttered around them. There was a sizable garden shed, from which Harry could hear the dull sound of a saw.

“Dad’s latest project. The only thing he’d let Mam do to his space was put a charm to keep the noise levels down,” Seamus said.

“That seems reasonable.”

“It is. He likes to keep himself busy, but he sometimes worries about being useless since Mam and I can use magic. Mam always says he’s a complete idiot since both of us are hopeless in the kitchen even with magic,” Seamus said, “honestly, she’s got some nerve telling me to keep my door open when she and Dad are way more disgusting with each other in public.”

“Do you mean they kiss and hold hands and generally show affection to one another?”

“Yes! No kid wants to see their parents do that!”

Harry laughed.

There was a gate at the back of the garden leading to a lane with a high hedge along one side. Harry felt the faint wash of magic as he stepped through, realising that they were now in the magical side of the village. He was eager to see how wizards lived when they were together, and was slightly disappointed when there was nothing overtly magical. Seamus shook his head, taking his hand and led him down the lane.

After about five minutes, the hedges gave way to a large field. There was a playground and what looked like a small Quidditch pitch. Several children were racing around on toy broomsticks between the hoops, watched by attentive parents. People in robes sipped cups of coffee outside a café, and the air was filled with a pungent smell as they passed an apothecary.

“It’s not nearly as big as Diagon Alley, but Mam gets the magical essentials from here,” Seamus explained.

A few people said hello to Seamus as he passed, but whether it was because they hadn’t recognised him, or there was some community sense of privacy, nobody commented on Harry being there. A few owls flew overhead as Seamus pointed out various places.

“Did you play much Quidditch when you were growing up?” Harry asked.

They’d stopped for a snack, munching on a delicious pastry from a bakery next to the Quidditch pitch.

“Not much. A few of the dads run kid-friendly Quidditch lessons, but I was never really into it growing up,” Seamus said, “I almost wish I did though. It always looks so fun watching you play.”

“Maybe you should try out for the team?” Harry suggested.

“Nah. The only open position right now is Keeper, and I suck at Keeping. Who do you reckon’ll get the spot?”

They traded suggestions back and forth. He hadn’t heard much from Angelina this summer, but she had sent him a letter asking him whether he’d still want to be on the team when the Quidditch Cup started back up again. Harry’s reply had been aghast, questioning how she could doubt him like that. Her response to that had been snarky, but Harry could tell she was also relieved. This was her last year to play for the House team, and she wanted to go out on a high. Harry had a sneaking suspicion a certain badge was on its way to her.

“I just hope it’s not Ron. I heard him talking about playing Quidditch with his brothers when he’s at home, and apparently he always plays Keeper. He’d be completely insufferable if he got on the team,” Seamus said.

“More insufferable than he already is. You know, Mrs Weasley said that he’s missing me but he hasn’t sent me a single letter this summer,” Harry said, “it’s like they only remember I exist when it’s convenient to them.”

Seamus scowled, taking Harry’s hand as soon as they were done with their pastries.

Aware that he was out in the open with a protective godfather waiting for him, they slowly made their way back to Seamus’s house. Seamus promised that the next time he came they could do this properly, but Harry assured him he’d had a good time regardless. They stepped through the gate into the Finnegan’s garden at the same time that Mr Finnegan left the shed.

He was a broad man, tall with deep brown hair. He was surprised to see Harry, but got over it quickly and introduced himself as Tom Finnegan.

Back inside the house, the pair went upstairs to Seamus's room. They didn't know how much time they had left together before Harry needed to leave so they made the most of it. Seamus asked if he'd been keeping up with the Quidditch League, which led to an animated discussion of the pros and cons of the Tornados. Seamus swung his arm, imitating a Beater, and Harry couldn't help but admire the flex of his muscles. The magical weights Harry got him for Christmas were in the corner of the room, and they'd clearly been well used. Seeing this, Seamus showed off a little, flexing both arms proudly. Not to be outdone, Harry unbuttoned his shirt to show off his own gains.

"Awesome," Seamus said quietly, eyes transfixed.

"Seamus, I-"

Seamus cupped both his cheeks, cutting him off.

"When it happens, it'll be all three of us together. We're a team, right?"

Harry was so glad to hear that, and he nodded. Seamus smiled, closing the distance for a kiss.

"You might want to close that up, or the adults downstairs might get the wrong idea."

Harry rolled his eyes but buttoned up all the same. Mr Finnegan found them sitting on Seamus's bed going through old programs from some of the Quidditch games Seamus had been to, all perfectly innocent.

"Sorry lads but it's time for Harry to go," he said.

Like with Dean, it was sad to say goodbye, but getting to spend time with him had helped ease the rest of Harry's heart. Both of them were fine, and they still cared about him. After one last hug, Harry joined Sirius at the fireplace, stepping into the emerald green flames to return to Grimmauld Place.

Harry had almost entirely finished his summer homework, a fact which he was inordinately grateful for. No doubt when Hermione arrived, she would demand they all work on it together. Having it already done would be the perfect excuse for him to skip out, even if she would then change tactics and demand to look over his work. Never mind that he hadn't let her do that in nearly two years, and that his improved grades reflected his lack of need for her help.

Having it all done gave him more time to spend doing other things. Dean's suggestion of practising Potions was a good one, and Harry and Sirius had spent an afternoon going over ingredient preparation techniques. Harry was already quite good at this, but there were some subtleties that he hadn't known about that Sirius taught him. Overall, it was actually quite

peaceful brewing Potions without a disgruntled man in flowing black robes constantly making snide comments in his ear.

The other thing which Harry worked on was Occlumency. Given that the Order was using Grimmauld Place as Headquarters, Sirius had insisted that it was vitally important for him to protect his mind from invasion or attack. So far, Harry had done everything he could to avoid eye contact with Dumbledore, but there was only so long he could get away with that before it became obvious. He needed strong Occlumency shields. Luckily for him, the meditation practice he'd done to prepare for the Ritual of Remembrance came in handy here, allowing him to calm his mind relatively quickly.

"Occlumency isn't just about keeping people out. It's also about making sure they can't find anything if they manage to get in," Remus explained calmly, "build a strong mental picture and use that to store thoughts and memories. It should make it harder for an intruder to know where to look."

"Like a mind palace?" Harry asked.

"In a way. The image doesn't necessarily have to be of something that is materially strong in the real world. So long as it is easy enough for you to create and maintain, and easy to conceal your thoughts and memories, anything will work."

The issue with Occlumency was that it took time and practice to build up skill in it. It wasn't something that Harry could get overnight. Sirius said there were items that could be enchanted to provide low level mental protections, which there should be some in either the Potter or Black vaults that they could get, but having protections without them was vital for him. Harry had already written to Seamus and Dean, telling them about Occlumency and suggesting they start learning too.

Harry emerged from the swimming pool, pulling himself from the water. His body ached pleasantly, a familiar feeling that spoke of a successful swim. It was great that Sirius had managed to have a pool built. He could probably have gotten away with going to the Muggle gym to swim when it was just him and Sirius living at Grimmauld Place full time, but there was no way he'd manage with Mrs Weasley on the prowl. After that first time she bumped into him, Sirius said she was desperate to catch him again. It led to loud complaining when she realised she couldn't go beyond the first floor of the house.

"I told her it was a quirk of the wards that only family members could go up there," Sirius had said, "she didn't look happy in the slightest, but she didn't know enough to be able to call me out on it."

Needless to say, Harry was giving her as few opportunities as possible to see him, which may come back to bite him when she came to live here, but he would cross that bridge when he needed to.

After showering, Harry headed to the private dining room for breakfast. Sirius was already there, a plate of bacon and toast uneaten as he frowned at a letter he'd received.

"Everything alright?" Harry asked.

Sirius jumped, startled out of his thoughts.

“Sorry. I was a bit distracted.”

“You looked like you were thinking hard about something.”

“I was.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

That made Sirius frown harder.

“Possibly. It’s something I hadn’t considered, but Lady Longbottom has just reminded me that it would be to your benefit. I only hope it won’t cause any issues.”

“Sirius, what’s wrong?” Harry asked, more sternly.

Sirius sighed.

“I have a few questions that it’s important that you answer. They’re going to sound very personal and prying, which I’m sorry about, but I swear they’re relevant. Is that alright?”

Harry nodded cautiously.

“How much do you care about Seamus and Dean?”

That caused Harry to splutter. It wasn’t at all what Harry thought he was going to ask.

“What?”

“I mean, are you serious about your relationship with them? Is it just a schoolyard fling, or do you feel that you could go long term with one or both of them?”

“I- well, um,” Harry stammered, “I care about them a lot, and um, I’d like it to be long term?”

That last bit came out more like a question but Sirius nodded anyway.

“Do you think they feel the same way?”

“I hope so?”

“Alright, last question. Could you see yourself getting married to them?” Sirius asked, “I’m not asking for a specific plan, just whether you think it’s possible.”

Harry’s face burned, and it took all he had not to fidget and squirm in his seat. This conversation was not what he expected at all when he woke up this morning, but as uncomfortable as it made him, it put images into his head. Very pleasant images.

“Yes.”

Sirius nodded.

“Then I think we need to have a meeting of all three families, because there are some things we need to discuss.”

“What?” Harry had a sudden thought which made him pale. “I don’t need to marry them right now or something because I’m a lord, right?”

“No, but we do need to formalise the relationship,” Sirius explained, “in the past, families often drew up explicit marriage contracts even if the relationship occurred organically. This was to provide safeguards to both sides. It was particularly important to the noble families, who had much more to lose both in terms of wealth and Family Magic.”

“But you said that we don’t need to get married?”

“And you won’t. Nowadays, some traditions have been relaxed even amongst the more hard-line noble families. What I’m proposing is to set up a betrothal contract between the three of you,” Sirius took in the way Harry’s face burned, “a betrothal contract would be a formal recognition of your relationship, and it can be set up to be as loose or as strict as the parties desire. I don’t want any of you to feel like you’re being forced into anything, so we’ll make it as loose as we can. The important thing is that a betrothal contract offers some legal protections from outside influence.”

“You think we’ll need that?” Harry asked.

“We know that you were dosed with potions to make you attracted to Ginny Weasley. It’s entirely possible that if that had continued, the potions would have only grown stronger, and with all the other spells and potions in your system, you wouldn’t even think twice about signing a more restrictive, binding marriage contract. There would have been no coming back from that, not without severe consequences to yourself,” Sirius said, “I don’t want to give them any opportunities to slip something in through the cracks. We still don’t know who your magical guardian is. Things like formal betrothals usually take place on or after the person’s fifteenth birthday which for you is not far off. This is your former magical guardian’s last chance to try and exert influence over you.”

“So if we have a contract in place between the three of us, they won’t be able to do that?”

“They won’t. Only by following the steps laid out in the current contract can it be ended and a new one entered into,” Sirius said, “if we word things right, it will also offer some protection to your boyfriends too.”

This was all slightly overwhelming, but Harry could see the logic in it. He could, unfortunately, quite clearly see Ginny waving a forged contract about, claiming to be betrothed to him, and he could also see himself being forced into honouring it. He was forced to compete in the Triwizard Tournament against his will, so this would be par for the course. By already having a legally recognised contract in place, all of that would be rendered moot.

It just felt a bit too formal, and Harry hated that it also felt like he was forcing Dean and Seamus into something that they didn’t sign up for. It was only the reassurances they gave

him after he told them everything that let him move past that insecurity.

“Alright. What do we need to do?”

“I’ll reach out to a lawyer I trust who can draw up the contract. We’ll then meet with the Finnegan’s and the Thomas’s to explain our reasoning and go over any changes they want to make. I want to get this done before Molly moves in this weekend. I’m sorry that doesn’t give you more time to mentally prepare.”

“It’s fine. These things happen.”

At the very least, Harry would be able to send them both a letter warning them about this. Sirius let him go and do that, and once Hedwig took off with both letters, Harry curled up on his bed, trying his best to process this new wrinkle in his already complicated life.

“Alright. Take a deep breath, and enter your mindscape.”

Harry did so. After all his Occlumency practice, Remus thought it was time to test out his defences. Harry had built up a mindscape that came easily to him. He opened his eyes at the shores of a lake. It was a cross between the lake at Hogwarts and the one at Potter Manor. The water was dark and murky, and behind him was a vast forest of lush green trees. There was nothing in the trees but boring, inconsequential memories, but they were his first line of defence. Hopefully anyone trying to penetrate his mind would think there was more deeper inside and get lost in there.

He dived into the water, which was beautifully clear blue beneath the surface. There were kelp forests swaying in the current, Grindylows swimming about in the fronds. Large clams dotted the coral reefs, and further in were the ruins of a Mer settlement. Harry drifted amongst it all.

He felt the intrusion when Remus tried breaching his defences. It was like a small ache in his temple, like an oncoming headache, which passed fairly quickly. Harry waited patiently. Everything settled again before he felt another intrusion, probably from Remus withdrawing and re-entering. This time, he saw a figure standing at the edge of the lake. After a few minutes of contemplation, the figure dived in. Remus was holding his breath, and was immediately set upon by a pack of Grindylows. He tried swimming away but the Grindylows grabbed him, dragging him into several tight caves Harry had built into the shore of the lake. Remus struggled and there was a bright flash as he once again withdrew, though it seemed like a struggle to do.

Leaving his mindscape, Harry saw Remus panting slightly, but there was a proud look on his face.

“I’ll admit I’ve not done that many times before, but that was one of the more effective mental defences I’ve come across,” Remus said, “setting up the forest as the more tempting option was a nice touch.”

“Did you get lost?”

“A bit, which was very good. Even though I knew that it wasn’t real, the sensation of being underwater was so realistic that I couldn’t help holding my breath. Most people elect to have their defences act more like castle walls, but you’ve set yours up like a boggy marsh, trapping people rather than repelling them, which is a lot more dangerous for the Legilimens if it’s done correctly.”

“It’s a shame you pulled out when you did. I wanted to set the Giant Squid on you.”

Remus laughed loudly.

“I’d say your Occlumency has progressed very nicely. It’d probably be better for a more experienced Legilimens to test it, but from what I can gather, it should hold up, and you’ll definitely be alerted if anyone tries to break it.”

That was good to hear. A piece of unambiguously good news amidst the chaos.

“I’m surprised you asked to do this,” Remus said.

“I needed a distraction. Forcing myself to calm my mind helped.”

“Molly and her lot will be moving-in in two days’ time. Things will get a lot more stressful after that.”

“That too. I was thinking more about the meeting tomorrow.”

“I see.”

As it turned out, Sirius’s trusted lawyer was Ted Tonks, Andromeda’s husband. He specialised in contract law, so was able to draw up a basic betrothal contract very quickly. Harry had seen it, and while he agreed in principle with everything that was written in it, it all just seemed so...

“It’s not very romantic, isn’t it?”

Harry’s head shot up. How the hell had Remus been able to put it into words so easily?

“James felt much the same thing when he started dating Lily. Sirius told you that James only told Lily about his lordship towards the end of their time at Hogwarts. After he told her, he procrastinated giving her a betrothal contract for ages because at heart he was a hopeless romantic. Having her sign something to say they were in a relationship was far too formal for his tastes,” Remus said, “when he finally plucked up the courage to give it to her, Lily took it and went up to her room. The next morning at breakfast, she called him an idiot in slightly more colourful language and gave it back to him, all signed.”

“And it didn’t change anything? It didn’t make things ... less, somehow?”

“James and Lily were madly in love with one another by the time they signed a contract, so no, it didn’t,” Remus said, “from all the stories I’ve heard about you and your boys, I don’t

think you'll have anything to worry about. This isn't a marriage contract between complete strangers. You know your boys, you care about them a lot. The only way that piece of paper will change anything is if you let it."

It was easier to hear than it was to believe. Harry had already struggled with his feelings regarding his boys to the point that, if he was being honest with himself, he might not have admitted anything had they not admitted their own feelings to him first. The relationship they'd built up over the remaining months of school was precious, and Harry didn't want anything to ruin it.

Yet they had still accepted him even when they learned about the betrayals he'd faced, all the complications he still had to deal with, and now a resurrected dark lord on top of it all. They had understood the security requirements Harry had to live under, and even though they all clearly missed each other, they waited patiently for him to be able to meet them. A betrothal contract could be something else they would happily accept, or it could be the straw that broke the camels back.

Whirlwind of emotions

The meeting was set, and Harry was suddenly very glad that both times he got to meet his boyfriends this summer had been sprung on him as a surprise. The anticipation was cruel torture, swallowed up and overshadowed by his nerves towards the conversation they were going to have. Sirius had suggested taking a Calming Draught, but Harry had refused. While smoothing out his rough emotions would be helpful, he didn't want the cushiony, blanketing feeling to make him miss any details.

So Harry meditated. He shored up his mental defences a bit, then remembered that Occlumency would be a useful skill for Seamus and Dean to have as well. That led him to finding the books Sirius and Remus had given him he first started learning, only to realise that he only had a single copy. That would not do. Luckily, he had full access to the Potter library, and it was easy to find a second. Then he found a couple of other books which he thought would be good to read.

"It's time," Sirius said, standing in the door to the library, "you might want to freshen up a bit. I'll be going to get the Thomas's. Everyone else should be arriving by floo."

Harry focused on the instructions he was given, allowing the feeling of purpose to settle his nerves a little. There wasn't much for him to do in that regard. By the time he went back down to the receiving room, the fire flared. Andromeda and a man who must be her husband Ted stepped through. They both looked around, Ted slightly in awe.

"Well met, Lord Potter," Andromeda curtsied, "it's been a long time since I've been to Potter Manor. I think the last time was when James was about 9, 10 maybe?"

"Did you come here often?" Harry asked.

"Not as often as I would have liked. My father wasn't the biggest fan of the Potters but it would be rude to turn down invitations," Andromeda said.

She then indicated her husband.

"Please allow me to introduce my husband, Ted Tonks," she said, "Sirius already told you but Ted's the one who drew up your betrothal contract."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Potter. I've heard a lot about you from Andy."

Ted held his hand out and Harry shook it. It was easy to fall into a conversation with the pair of them. Andromeda was curious how his studies were going, both at Hogwarts and beyond, while Ted was chagrined by the mess of the Triwizard Tournament.

"Apparently Madam Maxime kicked up a massive fuss with the French Ministry of Magic about how everything went down. From what I hear, Fudge has been pulling out all the stops trying to smooth things over. I think your name got dragged into it somehow, which is when the Daily Prophet started dropping those comments about you," Ted said.

“Sirius is keeping an eye on them to make sure they don’t go too far,” Harry said.

“Quite rightly.”

“I’ve heard a few grumbles among the noble families about how it’s indecorous for the Daily Prophet to speak that way about a citizen, but the ones who actually care to stop it don’t have the kind of pull to do so,” Andromeda said, “but enough of that, are you ready for this meeting?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. The contract is just a formality. It won’t get in the way of your lives,” Ted reassured him.

The fire flared green once again and three more people entered the receiving room. Mrs Finnegan stepped through first, bringing with her Mr Finnegan. Seamus was last. He shook himself to get his bearings after travelling so far by floo, but then lit up when he saw Harry. He immediately went over and wrapped Harry in a firm hug which immediately made him relax.

“Everything’ll be fine,” Seamus said.

Harry could only bring himself to nod.

“Welcome to Potter Manor everyone. If you could all follow me,” Harry said, doing his best to be a good host.

He led the small group from the receiving room to a small dining room. The Finnegan’s sat along one side of the long table, and Harry and the Tonk’s sat on the other. Celio appeared at Harry’s side.

“Will Lord Potter be needing refreshments?”

“Yes please. Thank you Celio.”

The Elf disappeared and reappeared with empty goblets and two large flagons of butterbeer. There were also a couple of platters of finger foods. Celio bowed and left them to it. At the same time, Harry felt people crossing the wards. He stood and went back to the entrance hall. The front doors opened, and Sirius arrived with Dean and his mother in tow. Harry welcomed them, accepting another much appreciated hug from Dean, and brought them to the dining room with the other guests.

“Thank you all for meeting with us on such short notice,” Sirius said, “we’ve got a lot to discuss so I think we should make a start.”

“That would be best,” Mrs Finnegan said.

Harry tried not to wither in his seat, but it was hard because he had no idea whether the look he got from the woman was approving or not. He felt Seamus’s foot brush up against his, the touch reassuring.

“While I appreciate getting to meet Dean’s friends from school, I’m afraid I’m a little confused about all of this,” Ms Thomas said, “in your letter you said something about betrothal, but I thought they were just dating. Surely they’re not already thinking about marriage?”

“Allow me to explain, Ms Thomas. In the magical world, magic can build up within family lines to become quite the powerful force. It is strongest in the noble families, making them targets for people who wish to acquire that power for their own. As a result, these families would arrange for explicit contracts to be made when members entered into relationships. That way there could be protection against outside interference and meddling,” Sirius said, “I’m not sure how much your sons have told you but Harry is the last of the Potter family and so bears the Potter Family magic. In fact, Harry has the Family Magic of several Noble and Most Ancient magical families within him. He has already faced attempts to subvert this magic for other gain, so when our children entered into a relationship with each other, we realised that protections were required.”

“You think Seamus is only in it for the power, the glory, the fame?” Mrs Finnegan said, a challenging gleam in her eye.

Beside her, Mr Finnegan squared his shoulders.

“Of course not. Dean and Seamus have been by Harry’s side through a very turbulent time. They’ve supported him without any expectation of reward or recompense, so if there’s anyone I can trust with a piece of my godsons heart, it’s them,” Sirius said, and Mrs Finnegan relented her staring, “but it is also true that there are others that I do not trust. People who have already proven that they want to be able to control Harry, or who wish to do him outright harm. They are still out there, and we don’t yet have enough evidence to force them to stop and bring them to justice.”

Ted reached into a file and pulled out three sheets of parchment. One each was given to the Finnegan’s and to Ms Thomas, while the third was put in front of Harry. They were copies of the betrothal contract. Harry watched as the others read through it.

“What you’ve been given is a betrothal contract that would formalise the relationship between Harry, Dean and Seamus. It will protect them from outside interference and allow them to progress together at the pace they feel is right,” Sirius said.

“So it’s not an engagement? I thought that’s what a betrothal was,” Ms Thomas said.

“In some cases, it is, but such contracts are also used when a noble scion wishes to date. It provides the same protections but with much looser obligations and exit requirements.”

“Obligations? You could force my son into doing stuff he doesn’t want to with this?” Mr Finnegan said.

“No,” Harry and Sirius said at the same time.

“As you can see, the contract merely formalises the relationship in the eyes of the law. There are no obligations stipulated for what any party is required to do to maintain the relationship.

Any party can withdraw from the contract if they are of sound mind and uninfluenced, and when all parties are seventeen, the contract will be revisited. At that point, it can be entirely dissolved, altered, or upgraded into a full marriage contract,” Ted explained.

“I’m sure you all must have a lot of questions. I swear that we will do what we can to answer them,” Sirius said.

What followed was an excruciating hour. Mr Finnegan and Ms Thomas both expressed uncertainty about the whole thing, with Ms Thomas not fully understanding why it was necessary. Ted likened it to a prenuptial agreement, but even that wasn’t entirely right. It took a little while but eventually Ms Thomas did come to understand, though it brought out a flurry of nerves on her part. Clearly she didn’t think Dean getting into a relationship with him would lead to such complications and worry.

Mrs Finnegan’s eyes were sharp as she scanned over the contract. Her questions drove right to the heart of what the contract would require from each of the boys. Would it require any kind of subservience or forced loyalty? Would signing it grant Harry authority over the other two? What hoops would they have to jump through if they wished to end the contract? Sirius and Ted were able to answer most of these questions, but Harry had to answer as well. Having to put such intimate details about his relationship into words was hard, especially because they hadn’t really talked about it themselves. Dean and Seamus sensed his struggle and pitched in to help as well.

Once the most serious questions had been dealt with, the conversation turned more relaxed as Andromeda and Sirius explained the role of the noble families in society, how Family Magic and descent worked, and what this meant going forward. Mr Finnegan and Ms Thomas were clearly interested in this topic. Coming from the Muggle world where there was always such a huge distance between nobility and everyone else, to be in such a grand home and to speak to people from that background wasn’t something they often got to do. Mr Finnegan tried grumbling about wealth and privilege, but his righteous indignation was stymied by Sirius’s loud laughter and easy agreement.

“I spent all of my formative years rebelling against the stuffy nature of aristocracy. I may wear the mantle now, but everything you’ve just said are things I said to my own family years ago.”

It finally came time for everyone to deliberate about whether or not they would sign the contract. Harry’s nerves rose. Would the Finnegan’s and Ms Thomas keep his boys from signing? If that happened, what would that mean for them? Mrs Finnegan’s expression was still very shrewd, eyeing Sirius and Ted. Her gaze landed on Harry, and he straightened automatically beneath it. Seamus’s foot pressed against his own kept him grounded under the scrutiny.

“I understand the necessity of this contract,” Mrs Finnegan said, “you hinted in your letter that there were many reasons you wished to have it signed. Given the present climate in the magical world, I can certainly see why. My only question is to the boys. What do you think about all of this? You’ll ultimately be the ones that this affects.”

She turned to face her son, who didn’t shrink back at all, then to Dean and finally Harry.

“I just want them to be safe,” Harry said, “my life’s always been a bit chaotic. It feels like I’ve been pulled from one thing to the next. I don’t want this to be taken away from me because someone else feels like it’s the right thing to do. It should be our choice, and I know that there are people who will disagree with that. I- I wish it could be different, but I don’t want to lose them.”

It felt embarrassing to say such a thing in front of his boyfriend's parents, but he saw the fondness in Seamus and Dean’s eyes.

“Harry’s right. It’s just a bit of paper, and if it means everyone else butts out of our business, then that’s a good thing. It doesn’t change how I feel,” Seamus said.

“If we want to do more, then we can do, and if we find in a few years that it’s not for us, then we can change things. This contract won’t force us into anything we don’t want, but as Seamus said, it’ll keep other people out,” Dean said, “I want that.”

Harry’s heart swelled.

“If this is what you want sweetie,” Ms Thomas said, sounding unsure, “I feel like this is something I won’t ever completely understand about the magical world, but I’ll always support you.”

“Thanks Mum.”

“Mam? Dad?” Seamus asked.

Mr Finnegan sighed.

“Magical relationships are so complicated,” he said, “so bureaucratic.”

“Ours wasn’t complicated,” Mrs Finnegan said.

“But it was bureaucratic when that Ministry lot got involved. Acting like I was stupid just because I don’t have a fancy stick,” Mr Finnegan grumbled.

“And I showed them where they could shove those fancy sticks if you’ll recall.”

“That I do, and I cherish that memory to this day Aisling,” Mr Finnegan said, “so our son is in a relationship with two boys. It’s already beyond anything I understood growing up. If it’s what he wants and it makes him happy, then by all means he can sign it. I’ve already got two unmarked graves ready to go if they do anything untoward.”

“Dad!”

“Relax Seamus, he’s only joking,” Mrs Finnegan said, “but I’m not. You boys look after each other, do you hear? These are uncertain times, and I don’t want you three rushing into anything you’re not ready for. This isn’t a proposal of marriage. You’ve all got long and happy lives to live yet. Don’t worry about being grownups when you’re still kids.”

Ted pulled out a quill and the official version of the contract. One by one, they each read it through to confirm that they agreed. Harry's name was signed next to Sirius's as his guardian. Seamus took the quill and signed below along with his mother. Finally was Dean and Ms Thomas. Seeing the ink still shining as it dried on the betrothal contract, Harry felt magic settled around him. It was only faint, but through their signatures he felt a thin strand reaching out to bind the three of them together. As soon as he felt it, it vanished, leaving him to wonder if it was ever there at all.

"Now then, I think lunch is in order," Sirius said, clapping his hands.

The contract was cleared away, and Celio and Letty appeared bearing food. Ted left to go file all of the documents. Seamus and Dean moved around the table so they could sit with Harry. They all tucked into a delicious roast. The conversation was pleasant as Sirius engaged Mr Finnegan about his work in the Muggle world, while Andromeda chatted to Mrs Finnegan and Ms Thomas. Harry was left to talk to his boyfriends, but none of them really said anything. Words would come later once what they had done had a chance to settle.

After lunch, Harry took Seamus and Dean for a tour of Potter Manor. Both of them were in awe of the place, and Harry tried not to let himself fall into melancholy as it once again hit him that this was where he should have grown up. All the memories he should have made over the years weren't present, never having the chance to form. He had some from the weeks he spent here last summer, but they were fleeting things.

The tour came to an end at the portraits of the previous Potter lords and ladies. Dean sensed his mood as they moved further and further towards the present day. The empty frame that should have held James and Lily, with Harry between them, stood out starkly. Would Harry have had more siblings that would have joined him in the portrait? An arm wrapped around his waist, pulling him into Dean's side. Seamus laced his fingers through Harry's.

"Do you have any pictures of them?" Dean asked.

"Hagrid gave me an album in first-year," Harry said.

"Do you think one of them could be made big enough to fit?" Dean said, "they deserve to be here with the others."

"I hope so."

"That sounds like a great idea," Seamus said.

Neither of them commented on how wet Harry's voice sounded. Now the empty frame didn't feel quite so much like an open wound. It was just waiting for the right thing to fill it, and Harry would find that thing. The line of Potters had not ended. Harry still lived to remember them, and one day there would be a new portrait added to this hall; a portrait with Harry and the two boys who held pieces of his heart, and the family they would make together.

If only the whirlwind of emotions would stop with the signing of the betrothal contract. Harry also had to deal with the Weasley's moving into Grimmauld Place the very next day. He woke up in the morning in a grumpy mood, mentally going over how he was going to handle this. Up till now, the Order had barely seen him as he always excused himself to his 'room' well before the meetings took place. That excuse would be harder to maintain with other people living there full time.

"Just remember, she isn't responsible for you. I am," Sirius said, "if she tries to boss you around, feel free to ignore her, and don't feel like you need to pretend to be their friends. With all the groundwork you've laid down these last two years, nobody will be able to argue with you not wanting to be friends with Ron and Hermione any more."

"So Hermione is coming as well?"

"I got word from Molly yesterday that she would be coming to stay, right after she loudly proclaimed how the rooms would be split. Needless to say, she won't get her way and make you share with Ron."

That wasn't a very happy thought. The public side of the house began to reflect some of Harry and Sirius's mood, not looking quite so luxurious. It would perfectly set the tone for the next month in Grimmauld Place.

Harry was in the public reading room after lunch, reading through a book on Ritual Magic, when he heard the front door bell ring. A moment later it opened and the house was filled with noise as several people came bustling inside. Mrs Weasley led the way, yelling to all her children and ordering them about. Already it was giving Harry a headache, and he asked himself why he thought being visible early was a good idea. Oh well, not much he could do about it now.

"Let's head upstairs to unpack, then we'll meet in the dining room to go over the house rules!" Mrs Weasley yelled, "Sirius, we'll need three rooms on the first floor. Ron of course will be sharing with Harry."

"He will not," Sirius said flatly, "I told you yesterday at the Order meeting. Harry has his own room that he will not be sharing with anyone."

"But Harry and Ron have always shared with one another. They love it!"

"I am not going to make my godson give up his space in his own home. There's enough rooms on the first floor for you all to manage."

The sound of bustling and banging trunks moved upstairs. Harry was only grateful that none of them thought to look around. The door opened and Sirius leaned inside, already looking dead inside.

"I reckon we've got about ten minutes before someone finds you. You can hide in your room if you'd like. I'll come and get you for dinner," Sirius said.

Harry snapped his book shut and took it with him. The first floor of the public side of Grimmauld Place was alive with activity, more so than it had ever been this summer. The bedroom doors were all open and noise came from each of them as their occupants talked amongst themselves. Harry managed to dart past Hermione and Ginny's room before they saw him, and the twins room and Mr and Mrs Weasley's door was closed enough that he didn't need to hide. The box room door behind the stairs was wide open, and Harry heard Ron's loud complaining about how small and dank his room was. The noise subsided a bit when he went upstairs and passed through the wards.

In the safety of his bedroom, Harry read about different rituals that had been used over the years. Many of them had medical uses, directing natural magic to enhance the body's natural healing ability. These rituals had since been adapted into spells that could be cast from a wand to make them less cumbersome, though the full ritual remained stronger.

The ones which Harry was really interested in were the warding rituals. These could imbue very powerful protections on people or places by harnessing natural magic from the surroundings. Harry was fairly certain that some derivation of these rituals were used by his mother that night to protect him from Voldemort. It was perhaps a strange thought, but he felt that by learning more about the magic Lily had invoked to protect her son, Harry would be just a little bit closer to her. He'd already gotten to speak to James in the Ring Realm, but Harry only had stories of Lily.

At the edge of his hearing, Harry picked up on the chaos that was slowly settling into Grimmauld Place. At 6pm, there was a knock at his door. It could only be Sirius or Remus, and sure enough, the former entered when he gave permission.

"It's-" Sirius said, only to be cut off by a loud screech of "Dinner!" from downstairs. "Ready to face the enemy?"

"As I'll ever be."

Kreacher would nullify any potions Mrs Weasley tried to use, and his Lord's ring would warn him if any managed to slip through the Elfs notice. Arthur and the twins would be there to support him.

Fred and George were waiting for him on the first floor landing, peering over the bannister to watch the rest of their family below. Big beaming grins spread across their faces when they saw Harry, and Harry was swept up into a big hug.

"Long time no see," Fred said.

"Sorry for intruding like this," George said.

"It's good to see you too," Harry said.

"We'll do what we can to keep the others in line, but there's only so much we can do," George said.

“Don’t worry about me. There are already plans in place. I’m not going to let them walk all over me,” Harry said firmly.

With that, Harry followed Sirius downstairs. No sooner had he set foot on the ground floor than he was noticed.

“Harry!” Mrs Weasley screeched.

“Mate!” Ron yelled.

Harry was pulled into a smothering hug by Mrs Weasley as Ron slapped his back.

“Oh it’s good to see you Harry dear. Sirius has been keeping you so out of the way I’ve not been able to see you! Come on, let’s get you fed. We’ll be eating down in the kitchen.”

“Bet things have been interesting around here mate. I mean, you’ve been living right in the heart of the Order!” Ron said, grinning as though nothing had changed between them.

“But Harry hasn’t been allowed to any of the Order meetings so I doubt he knows any more than we do,” Hermione said.

Harry stepped away from both of them with little more than a polite nod, heading towards where Remus was waiting. The man looked a little haggard, but his smile was kind and gentle.

“Shall we head downstairs?” Remus asked.

“That sounds like a fantastic idea,” Harry replied.

Ginny tried to slip in behind Harry but Sirius had his back. The downstairs kitchen was supposed to be the servant’s kitchen. A dining table which Harry recognised from the Burrow had been tucked inside it, with plenty of chairs around it for everyone to sit. Mrs Weasley bustled over to the counter while Sirius sat at the head of the table. Harry took the seat to his left, and Remus sat on his free side. Arthur claimed the seat across from him, forcing Ron, Hermione and Ginny to sit further down the table.

“Have you been having a good summer Harry? Sorry things have been a bit quiet,” Arthur said, “it’s been a bit mad at the Ministry lately. Order business aside, there’s been plenty of work for me to do.”

“It’s been alright, but definitely nicer than going back to the Dursley’s for any length of time.”

Harry caught the way Ron and Hermione were hanging on his every word.

“Oh Harry, did you not want to sit with your friends?” Mrs Weasley said, having turned around from the counter to see the seating arrangement.

He shrugged in response. Mrs Weasley pursed her lips but said nothing. She waved her wand and several dishes laden with food floated down to the table. When Harry reached out to load

food onto his plate, his ring remained cool. He still spotted a small gleam in Mrs Weasley's eye when he took a bite. Kreacher had done his job well, nullifying any potions she had tried to give him. Fred gave him a questioning look, and Harry gave him a minute shake of his head.

"So Harry, how come we didn't see you when we arrived? It's like you just disappeared before dinner," Mrs Weasley said.

"I wanted to stay out of your way while you unpacked."

"That's very polite of you dear, but we wouldn't have minded. I know Ron's been really missing your company this summer," Mrs Weasley said.

"We are really sorry we haven't been able to write to you," Hermione cut in, "only Dumbledore made us promise to be very selective about what we could put in a letter."

"That's fine," Harry said.

"It sucks that we don't get to share a room, but I'm not sure where you'd even be able to fit. My room's tiny!" Ron moaned, "come to think of it, where are you sleeping?"

"I've got a room upstairs."

"It's probably loads better than the one I'm in. Is there room for someone else? I wouldn't mind being on the camp bed this time around."

"Unfortunately, Harry's room is upstairs in a part of the house that is warded so only family members can get in," Sirius said.

"That's so unfair!" Ron said.

"It's a quirk of the house wards. Nothing I can do about it," Sirius said, completely unapologetically.

Harry turned back to Arthur, asking him about the latest cases he'd had at the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office. Arthur was happy to chat to him, and they had a nice conversation about when charming Muggle objects for wizarding convenience entered the realm of illegal versus accidental. The others down at the end of the table kept trying to interject and pull Harry into a conversation with them, but Harry always ended those quickly, engaging with someone else he actually cared to talk to. Mrs Weasley kept frowning at him, like she was expecting different behaviour.

"Now that we're all present, I think we should go over the house rules," Mrs Weasley said, standing from her place at the table, "this house is the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, and you will all respect it as such. None of you are part of the Order, so I won't hear anything about you getting to attend meetings. When Order business is being discussed, I want you out of the way and not trying to listen in. Is that clear?"

"Mum, that's completely unfair!" Ginny said.

“Yeah, you can’t expect us to live in the home of the Anti-You-Know-Who organisation and to stay away from it all!” Ron said.

“I can and I will!” Mrs Weasley yelled, “the Order is trying to fight a war against You-Know-Who while the Ministry buries its head in the sand and ignore it! It is not a place for children to be sticking their noses in, and that is final!”

“But what about Harry? You-Know-Who’s after him so surely he has a right to know!” Ron argued.

All eyes turned to Harry, who kept eating as though this conversation wasn’t happening.

“I trust that if there’s anything I really need to know, then Sirius will tell me,” Harry said.

“But what about all the stuff they’re saying about you in the Daily Prophet? You don’t want to know what’s being done about that?” Hermione asked.

“Not really. Sirius has it handled, and I trust that he can manage it better than I could,” Harry said.

Both Ron and Hermione seemed shocked by Harry’s lack of interest in the Order. They opened their mouths to argue but Mrs Weasley cut them off.

“If Harry is fine with it, then that’s the end of that,” she said, “now, security is incredibly important. You’ve all been limited in what you can put in letters, but we can’t risk anyone following you back to Headquarters. Nobody will be allowed to leave unless pre-approved and accompanied by an adult.”

There was another round of complaining from Ron and Ginny that Harry kept silent through.

“The security of Headquarters is too important, and need I remind you that You-Know-Who is after Harry and anyone connected to him. This is as much for his safety as it is for your own,” Mrs Weasley said.

“We’re not going to treat you like prisoners here though,” Arthur said, “if there’s anyone or anywhere you’d like to visit, let us know and we’ll work something out.”

“Arthur!” Mrs Weasley snapped.

“No Molly, they’re all teenagers, and teenagers don’t do well with being cooped up all summer.”

“It’ll also look really suspicious if Harry’s associates suddenly disappear off the face of the earth,” Sirius commented.

Harry finished his dinner and took his plate back up to the counter.

“I’m going to my room,” he announced.

“I haven’t finished explaining the rules!” Mrs Weasley said.

“This is my home Mrs Weasley, I already know the rules,” Harry said, keeping his voice polite.

Ron hurried to his feet.

“I’ll head up with you. We could catch up.”

“I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your unpacking.”

Before anyone could say anything else, Harry slipped out of the kitchen. He heard his name being called but he ignored it, crossing the threshold where nobody would be able to follow him. He felt bad that the twins would still have to deal with their family, but Fred and George were seventeen now, of age, and so the power their mother had over them was minimal.

It was only a single meal, but Harry was already dreading the next month.

Kreacher was waiting for him in his room, a piece of parchment clutched in his hand.

“Kreacher did as Master Harry asked. Here is what the nasty blood traitor tried to put in his food.”

It was more loyalty potions along with a few attraction potions.

“Thank you Kreacher. Keep nullifying the potions and making a note of what they are.”

Mrs Weasley was almost willingly giving him evidence of misdeeds at this point. This would be the last summer he had to put up with them. They would hang from a rope of their own making, and Harry would be free to live his life in peace.

A slightly awkward birthday

Chapter Notes

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

The next few days at Grimmauld Place were an exercise in patience that Harry didn't think he had. The house felt packed even if the Weasley's and Hermione were confined to the public part, and Harry had to truly resist hiding away in the private rooms all the time. If he only appeared at dinner, they would get suspicious, and Mrs Weasley already made pointed comments when she didn't see him.

Hermione discovered the small reading room on the ground floor the day after they moved in, which naturally led to her rallying everyone to get their summer homework completed. Ron grumbled about it the entire time, but Hermione wore him down with near constant nagging until he dragged his school bag downstairs. It was quite funny watching Ron try and pretend he was working while doing absolutely nothing, all the while Hermione was browsing the bookshelves with a critical eye and an ever deepening frown. Harry watched it all from the armchair he had claimed for himself, continuing to read the book on Ritual Magic.

"There's not a lot here which is relevant to our studies, but that should be fine. I've got all my school books with me," Hermione said, sitting at a small writing desk with a huff, "come on Harry. It's important that we get these essays done otherwise we'll be scrambling come September."

"I've already done them," Harry said.

"You have?"

"Wicked! Can I see what you've done?" Ron said.

"No."

"What? Why not?"

"Would you like me to have a look through them? A second pair of eyes would be better to find the mistakes," Hermione said.

"You can't see them because you need to do your own work for once," Harry said to Ron, and to Hermione he said, "and you don't need to do that. I'm confident that I've done well."

"Harry," Hermione said, her tone slipping close to condescension, "we're going into our OWL year this year. It's very important that we take our education seriously. You've never been a very diligent student before. I'm just trying to look out for you."

"I'm perfectly capable of managing my own education, thank you very much. I'd appreciate it if you didn't cast aspersions on my intelligence," Harry said.

He didn't give them a chance to respond, snapping his book shut and leaving the room. Ginny was hanging around the living room, leaning against the door frame. When she saw him, a demure look appeared on her face, and she twirled the end of a strand of hair around her finger.

"Don't mind them. You know how Hermione gets about homework. Want to play Gobstones with me?"

Harry ignored her too, heading up to the private part of the house. He shut himself in the library, determined to finish the book on Ritual Magic. It was interesting to learn, and some of them Harry was keen to try out. The Ritual of Spirit Walking stood out as an interesting one, allowing him to project his soul out of his body to move around freely. It probably wouldn't be useful at all, but given his experiences in the Ritual of Remembrance, it would be fun to be able to try it out in the present, rather than a magical memory.

"Figured I'd find you here," Sirius said, poking his head into the library.

"What gave me away?"

"The fact that Ron is currently grumbling about homework while Hermione is fuming over something," Sirius said, "let me guess, she wanted to read your essays."

"And I told her I didn't need her to and she should stop insulting my intelligence," Harry said.

"I quite agree," Sirius glanced down at the book Harry was reading, "please don't try any of those without telling me first."

"Don't worry. I won't," Harry said, "Grimmauld Place doesn't have a proper ritual circle anyway."

"It was something my mother got rid of when she found out she had to live here. The Black's didn't do much with rituals anyway so it wasn't missed. Potter Manor might have one. If not, then Gryffindor Castle should, and Dun Slytherin definitely will. Have you heard from the Elves what the condition of Dun Slytherin is?"

"Tippy said it was in worse condition than Gryffindor Castle. Apparently Salazar never had House Elves. She's been cleaning things up as carefully as she can, so it's slow going. I'm hoping to be able to visit before I go back to Hogwarts."

"That'd be nice. I'm sure you're also dying to visit Potter Manor and Gryffindor Castle again," Sirius said.

"If I can get 'permission' to leave the house," Harry said.

"If only you had a very nice godfather who knows you don't want to stay here with these people," Sirius grinned.

Somehow, Harry managed to make it through those few days with minimal conflicts. Mrs Weasley very quickly reached her wits end trying to wrangle five teenagers into one house

without letting them leave. The Burrow wasn't a big house, but it at least had large grounds that the kids could use during the day. With the security measures in place, Mrs Weasley wouldn't let any of them out, and even if they weren't stuck inside, she was clearly hesitant to unleash her children on Muggle London. Arthur didn't care much. He happily left for work each morning, and confided to Harry that he rather enjoyed getting to stroll through the streets before Apparating to the Ministry.

The first Order meeting since they all moved in came with a lot of shouting and arguing. Ron once again tried demanding to attend the meeting, or at least be told what was going on. Mrs Weasley adamantly refused, even being backed up by Arthur. Whenever he tried getting Harry on his side, Harry remained frustratingly unbothered.

After they were all herded upstairs by a very irate Mrs Weasley, Harry leaned over the bannister half an hour later to a very peculiar sight. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were all halfway down the stairs, holding what appeared to be flesh coloured strings. From the first floor landing, George caught his eye, gesturing for Harry to come down into their room.

"How've you been handling everything?" George said as soon as Harry joined them and the door was closed.

"About as well as I can. I'm just glad I've got somewhere to escape to. Sorry you have to put up with them more."

"Have no fear Harry dear," Fred said, "our family has learned that it's safer to stay out of our room when we're present."

The guest room they'd been given had been transformed. The two twin beds had been pushed together so there was only a thin gap between them. Big curtains had been put up, cordoning off one section of the room from the rest. Harry occasionally heard bangs and soft explosions coming from their room during the day.

"You've been hard at work?" Harry said, gesturing to the curtain.

"Very. Putting your investment to good use," Fred said.

"We've got a handful of products all ready to go, and about a dozen more that are in the final testing stage," George said, "we'll be ready to start owl-orders by mid August I reckon."

"That's awesome. What've you got?" Harry asked.

George handed him a catalogue. Harry was intrigued by the Skiving Snackboxes, a range of sweets that could make you ill enough to get out of classes. There were also fireworks that would put Doctor Filibuster to shame, along with several varieties of trick wands.

"You probably saw another one of our products getting some field testing from that lot," Fred said, pulling a flesh coloured string from his pocket, "Extendable Ears, meant to help you eavesdrop without being caught. Ron knew we were developing them so he asked if he could have some to spy on the Order meeting."

“We agreed so long as he gave them back when he was done, along with any issues he found while using them,” George said, “don’t worry though. Any decent protection charm will keep them out so we don’t need to worry about them listening in on us.”

“You think they’ll try?” Harry said.

“Of course they will. You should have seen them when you walked away from them that first day. Ron was moaning about it for ages,” Fred said.

“They’re acting like everything that happened last year didn’t happen, like Ron didn’t call me a freak because I like men, and Hermione didn’t say it was pointless and I’d be riddled with horrible diseases.”

“We know that. They weren’t much better when we were at home,” George said, “you probably saw the *assets* Ginny developed.” He tapped his chest. “Yes, the puberty gods have given our little sister a womanly figure, one she’ll no doubt try and use to seduce you.”

“Speaking of, I thought you were avoiding any potions they were giving you. There’s no way Mum hasn’t snuck some into all of your meals,” Fred said.

“Kreacher’s been intercepting every attempt, nullifying the potions before she can use them and making a record every time she tries. Nothing I’ve eaten has set off my ring.”

“That’s brilliant!” Fred said, “good on Kreacher. That’s your House Elf, right?”

“Sirius’s Elf. He’s not very happy with your mum so he stays out of the way,” Harry said, “and it’s a good thing he does. Hermione would go on one of her rants again, and Kreacher would probably take her head off with a frying pan if she tried to free him. He’s a proud Elf.”

“I’m just glad you won’t be dosed to like Ginny, even if it means she’ll keep trying to be seductive,” George said, suppressing a small shudder.

“Although, I saw Mum having words with Ron a few times. Can you imagine if she tries setting you up with *him* ?” Fred said.

Harry had a full body shudder. Bad enough to have Ginny throwing herself at him trying to become Lady Potter, to be forced to marry *Ron*, who had made his opinions on homosexuality very clear, was awful to think about.

“Let’s not turn Harry off his dinner with such thoughts,” George said, “though on this topic, how are the boys?”

George wiggled his eyebrows, and they both ended up teasing Harry, demanding to know how his relationship was going. Harry countered by asking about Angelina, which made Fred sigh wistfully. Apparently the lockdown on information meant that Mrs Weasley was keeping a firm grip on the family owl, Errol, inspecting every letter before it could be sent. Fred didn’t want her to even know he was seeing Angelina, let alone find out what they wrote to each other about.

“You could borrow Hedwig if you like?” Harry suggested.

“And keep you from writing to your boos? No way,” Fred said, “besides, we’ll need an owl of our own anyway if we’re going to be doing owl-orders, so I can write to her then. I was able to send off a few letters when we visited Lee earlier, so she knows not to expect much from me.”

“Ah, the relationship woes,” George said.

“Just you wait, when you get into a relationship of your own, I am going to tease you relentlessly!”

“Who’s to say I’m not already in a relationship?”

“I knew it! I knew those were totally heart eyes you were giving that hunk from Durmstrang!”

“Erik was a one time thing. I could be seeing someone else!”

“I’m your twin! I’d know!”

Harry listened to the pair of them bickering fondly. For two people who were so in sync most of the time, sometimes to an almost creepy degree, it was nice to hear them act like actual siblings. It was something Harry never got to experience.

“So do you mean to suggest you’re two-timing hunky Erik with somebody else!” Fred gasped dramatically.

“Does that mean I’m two-timing Seamus and Dean?” Harry interjected.

“Yes,” they both said with hesitation.

“Consensually-”

“-with the agreement of both parties-”

“-and the involvement of both parties-”

“-they’re two-timing you with each other-

“-it’s a perfect love triangle,” they finished together.

That it was. As scary as it was at the start, now that Harry was in it, he wanted nothing else. He couldn’t wait to see them again. His birthday was in a few days. Harry would need to find out if they were free. It would be the perfect chance to get together.

Unfortunately, Harry wasn’t the only one who remembered that his birthday was coming up.

“Harry dear, I know things have been a bit hectic this last week, but we don’t want you to feel like we’ve forgotten your birthday,” Mrs Weasley said that night at dinner.

The Order meeting had finished, but thankfully most of the members had left. The only ones still there were the Weasley's, Tonks, and a muscular, bald, black man called Kingsley Shacklebolt. He was an Auror like Tonks, though more senior, and Sirius assured him he was a man of integrity. He had greeted Harry when they first met with a firm handshake, not once acting star struck like some of the other Order members he'd seen in passing had done.

Everyone's eyes turned to Mrs Weasley when she said that, then they landed on Harry.

"Is there anything you'd like me to make for dinner? Ron's told me that treacle tart's your favourite, and we can have a bit of a party, though it'll have to be a quiet affair I'm afraid, what with security to worry about."

"Um, you don't have to go out of your way for me," Harry said.

"It's no bother, dear!"

Harry hurriedly racked his brain.

"Could- could we have a lunch instead of a dinner?" Harry asked, "the evening's around here are usually busier and I don't want to put people out of their way."

"Are you sure? It'll be a smaller occasion that way as Arthur and the others will be at work," Mrs Weasley said.

"That's alright. I've never had big celebrations for my birthday so I think it would just make me uncomfortable to have a lot of people there," Harry said.

Mrs Weasley frowned for a moment, then her expression turned kind. She bustled back to the kitchen counter, dirty dishes following behind her.

Sirius found him later in the swimming pool. Harry swam a few more lengths before coming to a stop near his godfather.

"Burning off some energy?" Sirius said.

"Needed to get away before she could start coming up with ridiculous plans," Harry said, "I don't want her to make a big fuss about my birthday."

"Because you don't want to spend it with them, I get it," Sirius said, "good call on asking for a birthday lunch instead of an evening party."

"I've never celebrated my birthday with Ron and Hermione. It's bad enough they keep trying to act like my friends. I don't want them to ruin it."

"Don't worry Harry. Leave everything to me. I'll make sure your fifteenth birthday is one to remember."

Harry would have to trust Sirius's word. As his birthday drew closer and closer, Ron kept trying to act as though they were best friends again. It didn't matter how politely Harry brushed him off, he kept talking as though nothing had happened last year. It came to a head

when Ron sat on the arm of the armchair Harry was sitting in in the public drawing room. He clapped Harry's shoulder in a very familiar way, grinning.

"Mate, what're you reading all the time for? You're turning into a little Hermione with your nose constantly in a book."

Harry held back the retort he longed to give. He stood and made to leave, only for Ron to grab his arm and turn him around.

"What's the matter with you? We haven't hung out in ages!"

"What's the matter with me? What's the matter with *you* ? Are you forgetting everything that happened last year?" Harry said hotly, "we're not friends Ronald. You threw our friendship away when my name came out of the Goblet of Fire and you turned your back on me."

"Mate, that was just a mistake. I said I was sorry!"

"So? Even when I gave you another chance, you trampled all over my goodwill with the awful things you said about me after the second task. I'm surprised you want to be standing so close to a perverted freak."

A complicated expression crossed Ron's face. Outwardly it appeared remorseful but underneath there was something like discomfort and disgust.

"That ... I shouldn't have said those things."

"No, you shouldn't."

"I've been trying to think differently, but it's hard!"

"I don't care. I've given you plenty of chances and you've thrown them back in my face every single time. I don't want to be friends with you, and nothing you say is going to change my mind."

"I said I was sorry!"

"And I never said I forgave you. Just leave me alone."

Harry turned and stormed off, leaving Ron scowling in the drawing room as he escaped to the private side of the house. When Sirius found him later, he was working his feelings out on a few training dummies in the duelling room. Rather than say anything, Sirius slipped out his own wand and took his place. They bowed to each other and fell into a vigorous duel that left Harry heaving on the ground ten minutes later. He didn't exactly feel better, but he no longer felt like he wanted to punch someone, preferably a certain redhead, in the face.

If Harry firmly ending his friendship with Ron caused any awkwardness, Harry decided to ignore it. At meals, he always sat next to Sirius, chatting with him and Remus about various things he'd read about or heard on the wireless. Occasionally Tonks or Kingsley would be at dinner, and getting to speak to two Aurors was great. Tonks took after Sirius with her mischievous streak, and Kingsley felt like an island of calm amid a raging sea. Ron spent

most meals sulking, either about not getting to go out and fly, or not being told what the Order was doing, or that Harry wasn't speaking to him, or any number of other things. Harry was just glad Hermione hadn't tried to rekindle their friendship.

Harry woke up on the morning of his birthday to a small pile of letters and a very cheery Hedwig. He gave her a few treats, promising her some bacon from breakfast later, and read through them. They were from the friends he'd been corresponding with this summer, all of them wishing him a happy birthday. It made his heart warm to see them all.

Mrs Weasley was hard at work at the stove when Harry entered the kitchen, Hedwig perched on his shoulder. Sirius and Arthur were sitting together, each with a mug of tea in hand, and Harry slipped into a seat between them.

"Happy birthday Harry," Arthur said, "fifteen eh? Two more years and you'll officially be an adult. Looking forward to it."

"Kind of. I just want to get through school first."

"That's always how it is. Enjoy these next few years as much as you can. The future is always uncertain. It's best to not to borrow too many problems from the future when the here and now is calling."

Their conversation got Mrs Weasley's attention.

"Happy birthday Harry dear!"

She enveloped him in his seat in another suffocating hug, dislodging Hedwig from her perch. The owl hopped over to the back of Sirius's seat, feathers ruffled and giving Mrs Weasley a distinctly disapproving look.

"We'll do presents later at your birthday lunch if that's alright," Mrs Weasley said.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny appeared, and Harry had to suffer through another chorus of happy birthdays, which thankfully ended when Sirius gave him a hug of his own.

"We'll do presents after your *actual* party," he whispered into Harry's ear.

That gave Harry the strength to get through breakfast, eating his way through a small stack of pancakes that didn't set off his lord's ring. He hid away in Fred and George's room for most of the morning, enjoying getting to watch their process of inventing products. It was surprisingly efficient. The twins may joke that they had a mental bond, but it was clear how similar their thought processes were. They also did a lot of independent work, with Fred scribbling away at a long sheet of parchment covered in Arithmantic calculations while George worked over a bubbling cauldron.

Unfortunately, he couldn't hide away forever, and he re-joined the rest of the house shortly before the special lunch Mrs Weasley was making for him. Apparently Mrs Weasley had insisted everyone dress for the occasion, as he barely stepped foot on the ground floor before he was chivvied back upstairs to get changed into something smarter.

When he came back down in a smart shirt and jeans, higher quality than he'd ever worn before but not flaunting his wealth, he saw Ginny had clearly tried to dress to impress. She was wearing a blouse with a plunging neckline and a skirt that fluttered when she moved. When she saw him, Harry could practically see something vulgar in her eyes. Her position changed as she leaned against the wall, becoming more coy and coquettish.

Ginny wasn't the only one. Ron was dressed like Harry in a smart shirt and jeans, though they were cheaper in make and quality. They hugged his frame in a purposeful way, though considering Ron didn't have a frame besides lazy, lanky teenager, and unlike Ginny he wasn't making any effort to appear more attractive, the effect was very much diminished. That both Ron and Ginny were dressed in this way felt purposeful to Harry. Judging by Sirius's expression, he felt so too.

Lunch was not the most awkward thing Harry had to suffer through only because Remus had managed to arrive in time. Even though Ginny was able to sit across from him, Harry chatted to Sirius, Remus and the twins. Mrs Weasley clearly didn't appreciate that Harry was ignoring his 'friends', and she cleared her throat loudly.

"Presents!" she announced.

With a wave of her wand, a stack of wrapped parcels floated into the dining room and came to rest in front of Harry. Harry smiled, unsure what he was meant to do here. His ring heated up. Sirius moved the pile down the table so it was in front of him instead.

"Here," he said, handing Harry a parcel.

Unwrapping presents for an audience was definitely more awkward than dinner, and Harry put on a brave face to get through it without incident. Mrs Weasley had given him miniature homemade treacle tarts and a knitted fleece.

"For when it gets chilly at night," she said.

Arthur hadn't gotten him a gift but Harry wasn't expecting one. The twins gave him some Honeydukes chocolate, with a note inside telling him he'd get his true gift later. It made Harry curious about when this later would be. The parcel from Hermione was box shaped and slightly heavy, and Harry could tell it was a book before he'd even opened it. Sure enough, he received a brand new copy of *The Complete History of the Goblin Rebellions*.

"With that, you won't need to borrow any of my notes to pass your History of Magic OWL this year," Hermione said, sounding both pleased with herself and slightly smug.

Harry simply smiled at her.

The final two gifts were from Ron and Ginny. Harry opened the small parcel from Ron to find a bottle of what he thought was perfume.

"It's this awesome aftershave!" Ron said, "it's supposed to make you completely irresistible to the ladies, if you know what I mean."

“Ron,” his mother scolded him.

The bottle was made of polished crystal, worked into the shape of a teardrop. It reminded Harry of the fancy perfumes Aunt Petunia liked to buy. He unscrewed the top to give it a sniff, but it didn't really smell of anything. Judging by the barely concealed look on Mrs Weasley's face, it probably was meant to.

“I've heard of that brand before. Hope it wasn't too expensive for you,” Sirius said.

“Yeah. Where did you get the money for that?” Fred asked.

“Um, I saved, and there was the grant from Gringotts,” Ron said, looking to his mother for confirmation.

That caught Harry's attention. What sort of grant from Gringotts would allow Ron to buy aftershave? He put the bottle aside and picked up Ginny's present, another small box, but this one was the one making Harry's ring warm up. Sirius caught Harry's eye, silently telling him that he'd felt it as well. Carefully, Harry opened it. Inside was a necklace, a small stone hanging from a gold chain.

“It's not much, but I thought you'd look good with it,” Ginny said.

There were definitely enchantments on this necklace, probably to try and make him fall in love with her or something like that. He closed the small box and handed it to Sirius.

“Let me guess, another grant from Gringotts?” Fred asked, a deep frown on his face.

“Yes,” Mrs Weasley snapped, “I applied for assistance before Ron and Ginny went to Hogwarts, but the grant was only available for the youngest in the family. Don't be jealous because we couldn't get you the same.”

Fred looked like he wanted to argue further, but Harry's hand on his leg stopped him. Ron had just admitted to receiving money, but he was lying about where it was coming from. That surely had to constitute fraud, and since Harry had proof that it was his money, with any luck this would be enough to justify having it all repaid. All he would need was Arthur's confirmation that they never applied for any assistance, and Gringotts would confirm that no such grants existed.

With a clap of her hands, Mrs Weasley roused them all into a chorus of Happy Birthday as she floated in a large treacle tart. Harry tried to enjoy it, because Mrs Weasley did make good treacle, but his heart wasn't in it.

Eventually, the birthday lunch came to an end and Harry excused himself by taking his presents up to his room. Sirius subtly put Ginny's present in his pocket, and Harry found him and Remus bent over it in Sirius's study later, their wands out.

“So what spell was she trying to put on me?” Harry asked in lieu of a greeting.

“From what we can tell, a stronger attraction enchantment than the potions you're supposed to be getting, and a lust enhancer. Both of them were directed to Ginny,” Sirius said, “I can't

believe she did that so brazenly! Not to mention the way she kept leaning forward as though hoping her breasts would fall out of her shirt!”

“And the aftershave was definitely supposed to do something as well, but I think Kreacher must have neutralised it,” Harry said.

“I’ll check Kreacher’s records later,” Sirius said, “my question is how did Ginny manage to enchant that necklace? The enchantments are recent and she’s had no mail in the last few days.”

“Somebody must have enchanted it for her. I remember her scores from my year of teaching. She’s a fairly average witch, all things considered. Definitely not the sort of prodigy who could pull off a complex enchantment like that with only three years of magical education,” Remus said.

“Well we know the plan was for her to become Lady Potter, so my guess is either Mrs Weasley or Dumbledore,” Harry said, “I need to send Arthur a message asking about those grants.”

“Gringotts is not going to like it if they hear Molly’s been lying about that. They’re very protective of the gold they give out. They only ever give loans, never grants,” Sirius said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if they froze all of her accounts and conducted a full audit. This will probably help you get your money back.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Sirius placed the necklace back in its box, sealing it away when Harry said he didn’t want to wear it. It didn’t look bad, but he didn’t want to encourage Ginny by making it seem like he liked her gift. He didn’t need her to keep trying to seduce him. Harry and Sirius stayed in the office as they wrote their letters.

“Are you happy wearing those or would you like to change into something else?” Sirius asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we’ve still got your proper party to go to,” Sirius said.

“The one you won’t tell me about? How formal an occasion is it?”

“Not too formal. Not dress-robles-for-a-ball formal at any rate, but you should still be wearing something smart.”

“Hold on then.”

Harry rushed back to his room, going through his wardrobe. What he was wearing was fine for a simple party at home, but he had no idea where Sirius was planning to take him. He had a few different dress robes he could wear, but he decided in the end to go for a navy button down and black jeans. Something that highlighted his new physique but not restricting his

movement with how tight it was. Sirius gave him an approving nod when he returned to the office.

“Alright then. Let’s go.”

“Where are we going? And how are we getting there?”

“I hope you don’t mind, but we’re going to Potter Manor,” Sirius said, “and we’ll be going out the front door.”

“The others won’t like that.”

“The others don’t get a say in it.”

Sure enough, Mrs Weasley caught them when they came downstairs. She was confused when she saw them in different clothes than before, but that changed to fury when they passed her towards the front door.

“And just where do you think you’re going?” she screeched.

“I am going to spend some time with my godson on his birthday,” Sirius said simply, “we’ll be back by lunch tomorrow.”

Mrs Weasley went apoplectic, but Sirius ushered Harry out the door before she could do anything, her yelling cut off by the door shutting behind them.

“5 galleons she immediately contacts Dumbledore,” Harry said.

“That’s a suckers bet,” Sirius said, “but it’s my house and you’re my godson. As much as Molly may have her ‘house rules’, I am not beholden to them and neither are you. I’m not letting her or Dumbledore get in the way of you enjoying your birthday.”

“Thank you Sirius,” Harry said quietly, and Sirius wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

A second later, they apparated, appearing at the gate to Potter Manor. The Potter magic washed over them as they crossed the threshold, walking down a well maintained country lane. The perfectly trimmed hedges gave way to flower beds, and the Manor itself came into view. It was then that Harry realised that there were other people in the Manor.

“Sirius?”

“So I may have invited a few guests,” Sirius said, “all people we can trust I assure you!”

Harry was cautious, but then the front doors were swinging open.

“Happy Birthday!”

Harry stood there stunned at the small group of people gathered in the entrance hall. There was Neville and his grandmother, Parvati and Lavender, as well as Angelina, Alicia and Katie. Andromeda and Ted were with them too. At the front of the group, and the first to

come forward and seize him in a hug was Seamus and Dean. A kiss was pressed to each of his cheeks, and he hugged his boyfriends back just as fiercely.

“What the- I don’t- what?” Harry said dumbly.

“You said you never got to have a birthday party before,” Sirius said, “and what sort of party wouldn’t have your friends?”

Seeing them all here for him on his birthday, Harry’s heart swelled. Words completely failed him. His eyes itched, tears threatening to form and spill down his cheeks. For how badly this day started, Harry didn’t think it could have ended better.

Chapter End Notes

Rating change in anticipation of next chapter.

A much better birthday

Chapter Notes

Mature scene ahead.

Starts: "He couldn't take it any more. Harry stepped forward..."

Ends: "He had no idea how long it took..."

Harry's only experience of what a birthday party looked like was his cousin Dudley. When he was younger, Aunt Petunia used to throw lavish celebrations. All of Dudley's friends would be invited to Number Four Privet Drive. There would be games and presents, and copious amounts of chocolate, cake and sweets would be consumed, while fizzy drinks would be kept flowing. The adults would watch as their children grew steadily more and more hyper, practically bouncing off the walls as they cooed about how rambunctious they were. As he grew older, those mega parties turned into expensive outings where Dudley could invite a friend.

He was never allowed to take part in any of them growing up. Harry was either locked in his cupboard or forced to stay in the corner away from the other children, all with the strictest instructions not to ruin Dudley's special day. Aside from the disastrous trip to the zoo, he never got to go on any of the outings either. Harry's own birthday was completely unremarked upon. He was only glad that Dudley's birthday was towards the end of June, meaning Harry was still at Hogwarts and didn't have to put up with it.

The party Sirius held for his fifteenth birthday was small, not too lavish, but Harry still loved it immensely. After he managed to reconnect his brain and his mouth, he went amongst all of his guests and thanked them for coming. Celio appeared and ushered them all along into the ballroom, which had been decorated for the occasion. There was a pile of presents on a table at one side. In the excitement, Harry didn't feel awkward at all as everyone urged him to open them.

These gifts were a lot more thoughtful than the ones he'd received at Grimmauld Place. A book on the natural occurrences of Arithmancy in Herbology from the Longbottoms. A tasteful broach and locket from Parvati and Lavender ("To bring out your lovely eyes!"). Angelina, Alicia and Katie had gotten him a high quality pair of Seekers gloves and a subscription to Quidditch Weekly. From Andromeda and Ted were a few new sets of robes, which Harry trusted would both fit him perfectly and be up to date in style.

"We'll give you our gift later," Dean said.

This caused a few whispers from around the room that had Harry's cheeks flushing. Before he could consider the implications of that too much, the ballroom doors burst open, and Fred and George sauntered in followed by an exasperated Remus.

“Have no fear everyone! The fun has arrived!” Fred announced, only to be pounced on by Angelina.

“Happy birthday mate,” George said, rolling his eyes at his brother's reunion with his girlfriend, “here’s your gift from us.”

It was a sample of their latest products, as well as a small pendant.

“That’ll protect you from anything we make,” George explained, “it’d suck if anyone bought our stuff only to use it on you.”

“Thanks so much.”

The final gifts were from Sirius and Remus, but it was another one that would be shown later. Another mystery for Harry to puzzle over.

With all the presents done, the party got underway. Food and drinks were served on platters on a buffet table, and people drifted to and fro as they all chatted away with one another. Harry talked to everyone as much as he could, catching up with how their summers had gone. The atmosphere was much nicer than the one he left at Grimmauld Place, and he couldn’t help how much he was soaking it in.

Throughout it all, he had his hand holding either Seamus’s or Dean’s. Nobody seemed to care as the three of them moved around the room. The adults stuck together, talking amongst themselves as they watched the children hang out. It honestly wasn’t too dissimilar to what Harry remembered from Dudley’s parties, only a lot calmer. Of course, as soon as he thought that, the music started.

This wasn’t a Ball, so there wasn’t any ballroom dancing, but it didn’t stop most of them from enjoying themselves. Andromeda dragged Sirius onto the floor, the pair of them easily joining in with the younger teens. It was loud and chaotic, but it was all so much fun. Harry completely lost track of time until a slower song began to play. Fred wrapped his arms around Angelina, the pair of them swaying gently on the spot. George walked over to Lady Longbottom and very dramatically asked her to dance with him, complete with a ridiculously low bow. Lady Longbottom rolled her eyes at the dramatics, but accepted his hand anyway.

It was in this quiet that Sirius put a hand on his shoulder.

“Mind if I steal you away for a moment?”

The pair of them left the party, heading upstairs.

“Thank you so much for all of this,” Harry said, “it’s- I want to say it’s too much, but it’s not. It’s just- thank you.”

“You shouldn’t have to thank me for giving you a birthday party. This should have been what you had growing up, but now isn’t the time for that kind of sadness. I’m glad we get to enjoy the time we have together now,” Sirius said.

“So where are we going?”

“I’m going to show you your birthday present from me and Remus. I figured you’d want to see it yourself before anyone else.”

They reached the Hall of Portraits. The previous Lords and Ladies all bowed and curtsied to him as he passed. Harry was confused about what could possibly be in this hallway, but then they reached where James and Lily’s portrait should have been. In its place was a curtain, blocking off the view of what lay behind.

“Go ahead. Open it,” Sirius said.

Harry cautiously reached out and pulled open the curtain ties. The fabric fell away. Where before there had only been nothing, the frame that Lily had picked out contained a portrait. It wasn’t like the other portraits, as James and Lily were the only occupants. They weren’t dressed in their finery, positioned in the same way as their ancestors. Instead, James wore sharp black dress robes and Lily a stunning white dress, her red hair flowing in waves down her back. Both of them looked at each other with such love in their eyes, and when they looked out and their eyes met Harry’s, he could have sworn he felt the same love directed at him.

Lord James Potter and Lady Lily Potter, on their wedding day, read the plaque beneath the portrait.

“I got a letter from two someone’s very close to you saying that they felt your parents deserved to be here,” Sirius said, “they suggested using a photograph, but Remus and I were able to find a magical artist who could turn the photo into a portrait. We felt that this showed them at their best.”

“They look really happy,” Harry said, “happy to be together.”

“They really were. I don’t think I’d ever seen James smile so readily and so genuinely as the day he married Lily. They loved each other dearly, and they passed all of that love onto their son.”

“I think it’s perfect,” Harry fought to keep the wetness from his voice, “thank you so much.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank those boys of yours. I’d thought this frame would be empty forever, an unforgivable gap in the Potter Family history, but thanks to you three, we were able to make sure James and Lily could stand alongside those that came before and those that will come after.”

It took a little while for Harry to compose himself enough to return to the party downstairs. When he did, another slow song was playing. Most had taken this opportunity to get some more refreshments, but there were a few still on the dancefloor. Harry’s eyes immediately went to Seamus and Dean. The pair of them were slowly swaying together, in each other’s arms. It was such a beautiful sight that Harry was drawn to it like magnetism. Dean spotted him, and he opened up his arms to welcome Harry in.

Harry needed no further encouragement. He joined them, pressing loving kisses to their lips in turn.

“Thank you.”

It felt like that was all he’d been saying recently, but he truly meant it.

“Lord Black showed you his gift then?” Seamus asked.

“He did, but he said it was your idea.”

“It was worth it. What happened to your family was horrible. You shouldn’t have had to be reminded of it every time you saw the empty frame,” Seamus said.

“Did they pick a nice photo?” Dean asked.

Harry nodded. He loved them. He loved these boys so very much. For once, Harry wasn’t going to question whatever twist of fate led him to this moment. He’d much rather think of the future he would spend with these two.

Thinking of the future reminded him that they said they would give him his birthday present later. Harry had no idea what they were planning, and something about that excited him. As they danced, they pressed close, and so many possibilities flooded through Harry’s mind, rapidly taking him to places he’d considered but never wanted to think about in too much detail for fear of how he would react.

Was *that* what they had planned for him? Surely they would have told him that they wanted to take that step. Was Harry even ready for it? He had no idea. Now that the thought was in his head, Harry couldn’t stop thinking about it. Yes he wanted it, but he was also terrified at the same time. What if he messed up? How would they even do it with the three of them?

“What are you thinking about?” Dean whispered to him.

Harry was jolted out of his thoughts, making any excuse he could think of. He wasn’t sure if Dean believed him or not, but like the star he was, Dean didn’t question it.

As the party began to wind down in the evening, everyone went out into the garden, sitting down on various chairs and blankets that had been set up for them. Harry settled himself between his boyfriends, letting his head rest on Seamus’s shoulder while holding Dean’s hand in his lap. Just when he was wondering what was to come, Fred and George wowed them all with a fantastic display of their new fireworks. The sky lit up with a cacophony of coloured lights and noise. Rockets sailed through the air, leaving streaming trails of sparks as they flew in coordinated patterns. Harry could already tell the twins had hit on a money maker.

And just like that, the best birthday of Harry’s life came to an end. One by one his guests began to leave, either through the Floo in the receiving room or apparating from beyond the gate. In what felt like no time at all, Harry was left with his boyfriends, Sirius and Remus, and the twins.

“Did you have a good time?” Sirius asked.

“The best, a lot better than if I’d stayed at Grimmauld Place,” Harry said, “how did you manage to get away?”

Fred grinned.

“We may have set off a prank that made our dear old mum want us out of her sight,” he said.

“She won’t notice that we’re gone, not now that we can apparate ourselves,” George added, “I don’t think she was all that happy with how your birthday celebration went.”

“I think it went well personally,” Harry said, “it’s not my fault that I enjoyed myself a lot more when I wasn’t with them.”

“You had to sneak out of your own house just to come to your own birthday party? That’s messed up,” Seamus said.

“It is, but for now there’s nothing we can do,” Sirius said, “at least it’s not been entirely for nothing. No doubt I’ll get an earful from her tomorrow about putting Harry at risk, but she can go blow smoke for all I care.”

“It’s funny watching her fume thinking she can control the pair of you when she clearly can’t,” Fred said.

“Speaking of, we need to decide whether or not we’re going back to Grimmauld Place tonight,” Remus said.

“I’d rather make the most of the time I’ve got and go back tomorrow,” Harry said, “Celio can prepare rooms for us all.”

“We’re on the same page there,” Sirius said, “Seamus, Dean, you’re more than welcome to stay, or we can take you home if you need to.”

“Mum said it would be fine if I stay,” Dean said, and Seamus said, “same here.”

“Excellent! Then how about a mug of hot chocolate before bed?”

The hot chocolate was nice, but Harry couldn’t help thinking about what would come after. Sirius showed Remus, Fred and George to their rooms, leaving Harry with Seamus and Dean.

“So where will we be sleeping?” Dean asked.

“Well, I could have some rooms made up for you, but if you want, you could stay with me?”

Dean smiled, taking his hand, while Seamus beamed and hugged both of them. They both let out small exclamations when they arrived at Harry’s master bedroom. Celio had put all of his presents on his desk, and the bed was freshly made with clean sheets. Everything was perfect.

“I think it’s time for our gift. We weren’t sure how to really explain it with everyone else there, and we know they’d tease us,” Dean said.

Inwardly Harry was very confused, but before he could ask, Dean handed him a small box. Inside was a chain with a silver disk hanging from it. The disk was divided into three segments, each with a different coloured crystal embedded in it.

“It’s beautiful,” Harry said.

“It’s not just that,” Dean explained, “we know how hard it is for you having to put up with everyone else at your home, so we wanted a way we could easily get in touch with you that wasn’t owl mail.”

“Dean and I put our heads together and came up with this,” Seamus continued, “each segment is connected to a different disk. If you hold it to your lips while pushing a little magic into one of the segments, you can record a short message. Whoever has the corresponding disk will then feel it heat up and can access the message.”

“That sounds like a really complicated bit of spellwork,” Harry said.

“It was Seamus’s handiwork,” Dean said, smiling fondly at the sandy blonde.

“I may have been the one to cast the charm, but you were the one who did all the calculations to figure out how it would work,” Seamus said.

Harry took the necklace from the box and put it on. The metal of the chain felt cool against his neck.

“Thank you so much, both of you,” Harry said, “who has the other disks?”

They each reached into their own shirts, and pulled out the same necklaces.

“I’m really glad you accepted yours, otherwise this would have been very awkward,” Seamus said.

“Happy birthday Harry,” Dean said.

He couldn’t take it any more. Harry stepped forward, wrapping his arms around them both the best he could. His lips crashed against Dean’s. Dean startled but a second later accepted the kiss, opening his mouth to allow Harry to probe deeper. Seamus’s mouth on his neck caused Harry to moan, and he shifted so he could kiss the other boy just as deeply. Their hands wandered. Harry felt suddenly very constricted in what he was wearing, especially when his shirt rode up, Dean feeling up his back.

Seamus and Dean pulled away from their kiss slightly breathless when they felt Harry tugging at their shirts. Seamus smiled and pulled his shirt up and over his head. He reached out to fumble at Harry’s buttons, their lips coming together for another passionate kiss that Harry was lost in. The cooler air in the bedroom touched his chest, bringing Harry back to awareness.

Seeing Dean trailing kisses down the side of Seamus’s neck had Harry’s heart hammering, blood rushing south. The three of them were without shirts. It was the work of a moment for Harry to pull Seamus’s jeans down, and another moment for him to toss them aside. He moved onto Dean, divesting his other boyfriend of his pants. Harry was pushed backwards, his thighs hitting the bed causing him to drop onto the edge. With a smirk, Seamus put his thumbs in the waistband of his underwear, lightly tugging them down in a teasing manner. He

would have continued to taunt Harry if Dean hadn't been there. He gave the sandy blonde a light smack to his bottom, and Harry's breath caught in his throat.

Time froze, Harry's attention was completely focused on the now naked boys standing before him. It was just like that day in the dormitory bathroom, but Harry didn't think he'd ever seen such a beautiful sight. He didn't know which one of them moved first, but the next thing Harry knew, his jeans and underwear were in a pile on the floor and all three of them were in his bed.

Harry ended up on his back with Seamus and Dean on either side. The feeling of their skin pressing together, top to bottom completely bare and free, was utterly intoxicating. They peppered him with kisses, their mouths finding clear spaces all over, and Harry returned those kisses with gusto. As Harry's tongue twined with Dean's, he felt Seamus move in closer. The book Sirius gave him never said anything about a three way kiss, but they fell into something approximating one. It was sloppy and messy, but it left Harry utterly breathless.

A hand palmed his aching cock, ripping a gasp from Harry's throat and bringing the kiss to an end. All three of them were rock hard, their dicks pressing against Harry's hips as they leaned in to make out with him. It was Seamus who'd touched him, a gentle caress that ran down the length of his cock and felt his balls, sending jolts of electric pleasure coursing through him.

"Are you alright?" Dean asked, "I can feel your heart racing."

He saw where Seamus's hand was.

"We don't have to go that far if you don't want to," he said.

"Yeah, sorry if I was too pushy."

"You weren't. I'm- I think I just built it up too much in my head," Harry said, "when you said you wanted to give me my present later, so many thoughts went through my head."

"Good thoughts?" Seamus asked.

"Very good thoughts, but I guess I may have spooked myself a little," Harry admitted.

"Well, like I said, we don't have to go that far, and we can stop right now if you want," Dean said.

"I'll be alright. This," Harry gestured to the three of them, "this is nice."

Seamus grinned. He shifted so he was straddling Harry's legs and took his length more firmly in his hand. The friction caused Harry to gasp and buck his hips up, capturing Dean's lips for another searing kiss. It felt so good! Harry never thought he would ever feel this way, nor do these kinds of things. Dean groaned into his mouth as Seamus also started working his dick with his free hand.

Harry's hips kept moving on their own, chasing the sensation of Seamus's hand. He could feel Dean doing the same beside him. The bed shifted as Seamus leaned over the pair of

them, darting in to claim Dean's lips when Harry backed off. His chest with the burgeoning muscles were so close, all Harry had to do was lean up. The book said this was supposed to feel good, and Harry had no reason to disbelieve it, so he carefully teased one of Seamus's nipples with his tongue and drew it into his mouth.

The action took Seamus completely by surprise. He let out a loud groan. Harry had no idea what he was doing, or if he was doing it right, but if it kept drawing out those kinds of noises, then he would keep going. Seamus tried to keep pumping their cocks, but Dean trailed kisses down the side of his throat, completely throwing off his rhythm. Before he could find it again, Dean and Harry pulled him down, sandwiching him between them.

They may not be going all the way, but the electricity in the air had all three of them on fire. Harry was barely in control, his hips bucking and thrusting, his dick grinding against Seamus's. It wasn't just them. From behind Seamus, Dean was also at work, feeling the press and heat as his dick ground against Seamus's ass. The three were pressed so closely together, and the room was filled with the sounds of their pleasure.

Caught between his boyfriends, Seamus was awash with ecstasy. All he could do was bury his face into Harry's shoulder, holding onto his boyfriend tightly. It gave Harry the perfect view of Dean, and the pair of them sealed their lips together with another deep kiss. Of course, the three were only fifteen years old, engaging in such acts with their boyfriends for the first time. With all the stimulation, they didn't last much longer.

Seamus cried out, gripping Harry tighter and pushing his hips forward harder. Harry felt something hot and sticky flood the space between them, but it was blown away the next second when his own release came. It was like a crescendo of pleasure. Harry's vision went white, his body floating, and all he could do was drift through the bliss of his orgasm.

He had no idea how long it took for them to come down from their highs. When they did, all three of them were panting, their bodies feeling rung out.

"That-" Harry tried to speak but the words completely failed him.

"I know," Dean said.

"If it feels that good just doing this, imagine what actual sex is going to be like," Seamus said, "bloody hell I think I'll be in heaven."

Harry chuckled, which served to remind him of the mess they'd made. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation at the moment, but he would rather not go to sleep and let it dry.

"We should probably get cleaned up before we sleep," Harry said.

"I don't think I could manage a shower right now," Dean said.

"It's a good thing cleaning charms exist."

There were some in the book Sirius gave him. Harry may have been mortified having to read it, but he still took note of the important things. He looked around for his wand, only then

realising that it was with his clothes in a pile on the floor. Dean rolled onto his back but made no further move to get up.

“You two beauties stay where you are. I’ll get my wand and clean us up,” Seamus said, sitting up.

Cum had soaked his front, and Harry saw it running down his back as well. Seamus didn’t seem to mind it.

“You both got me good.”

Seamus shuffled down the bed and got up, stretching with a yawn. Harry and Dean shuffled closer together. He was still warm and fuzzy from the post-orgasm bliss, and the pair of them traded lazy kisses with one another.

“I think I could watch the pair of you making out with each other for ages,” Seamus said, drawing Harry’s attention.

The sandy blonde held all three of their wands.

“I take it we’re not going for round two tonight?”

“Can you even get it up again?” Dean asked.

“Of course. Give me a few minutes and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Not tonight. Right now, I just want to sleep,” Harry said, and Dean nodded.

Seamus smiled fondly. He waved his wand and something pleasantly cool washed over the three of them. The stickiness vanished. Harry let out a pleased hum. He settled down to cuddle with Dean as Seamus put the three wands on the bedside table. A light blanket was pulled over the three of them, and strong arms wound around Harry’s chest. It was very easy to fall asleep that night. No nightmares plagued him. The only dreams Harry had were pleasant ones; dreams of content happiness, where he was able to share warm, happy times with the boys in bed with him.

Harry woke up the next morning to the sunlight creeping between a gap in the curtains, softly illuminating the room. He was filled with a floaty, fluttery sensation and a pleasant sense of warmth. That had been a very restful sleep, one Harry didn’t realise he needed.

A weight shifted in his arms as Dean still slept soundly. All the memories of last night came rushing back to him and a smile appeared before he could think. They hadn’t had sex, but they had come close, and Harry got to sleep with his boyfriends on his birthday. He could still feel every inch of Dean pressed against him, bare skin in contact with bare skin. He splayed his fingers and felt the smooth planes of Dean’s chest. It was an amazing feeling.

Dean shuffled in his sleep, his hips moving back, and Harry had to stifle a yelp as his morning wood was pressed into Dean’s crack. It made possibilities swirl within him, and his

cock came to full attention at the prospect of continuing last night's activities. Luckily his brain was awake enough to restrain himself. Perhaps when they were a bit older and more experienced in such matters, Harry could wake his boyfriend with sex, but not right now.

It didn't take much for Dean to start waking, light sleeper that he was. Just to be a tease, Harry canted his hips forward. To his surprise, Dean pushed back against him so Harry ended up grinding his dick against his ass. Harry let out a deep breath.

"Morning," Dean mumbled sleepily.

"Good morning," Harry leaned over to kiss his cheek, "did you sleep well?"

"I did. I hope you did as well," Dean said, "I can certainly feel that you're pleased to see me."

"I got to sleep with my boyfriends last night in both meanings of the term, so I'm pretty happy right now," Harry said, "if none of us had anywhere to be today, I'd suggest we all just stay in bed, but that's probably not going to happen."

"Probably not," Dean agreed, "not going for a swim?"

"And miss out on cuddles in bed with my boys? Besides, I'm not sure when we'll need to get back to Grimmauld Place."

Dean rolled over and then slotted himself in Harry's arms so they were facing each other.

"It sucks that they're living in your house and not letting you just live your life."

"I know."

"I'm really proud of how well you're handling it."

"It's hard, but I'm managing as best I can. It'd be better if I got to see you two more."

"We'll see you as often as we can, and you've got your necklace so you can talk to us."

Harry lifted a hand to feel the cool metal. Their necklaces had been the only things still on them last night. Harry's eyes drifted over the thin chain around Dean's neck, knowing that Seamus also wore the same thing.

"You both need to come and visit Grimmauld Place. Seamus hasn't seen it yet," Harry said.

"Will we be able to? What about Ron and Hermione?"

"We'll stay in the private part of the house so they won't find us. We've got our own private entrances and everything. We could even go and explore some of Muggle London if we wanted," Harry said, "or I could come and visit the pair of you."

"As much as Mum is alright with us being in a relationship, and even being betrothed, I don't think she'd be able to handle the three of us sharing a bed," Dean said, "it's only a single, so we wouldn't all fit unless we were on top of each other."

“We’d make it work, or we could make a big bed out of blankets on the floor.”

“I remember doing that when I was a kid,” Dean said fondly.

Something shifted behind Harry. They both looked over to see Seamus still fast asleep, his back pressed against Harry’s.

“We should probably start getting up now, before your godfather comes knocking,” Dean said.

“He won’t be able to get in here,” Harry said, “only the Lord can enter the Lord’s bedroom unless specifically invited. I don’t really feel like moving.”

“Me neither, but we should get up and get dressed before we get distracted.”

“But I like having you naked in my bed.”

Dean shook his head fondly.

“Down boy. There’ll be time for more of that later,” he leaned in close to whisper in Harry’s ear, “I can promise you that.”

He pressed a kiss to Harry’s cheek, then sat up with surprising energy. Harry remained motionless, slightly lightheaded as blood tried to rush north to flood his cheeks and south to bring his member to attention.

“I’ll leave you to wake up Seamus,” Dean said with a teasing grin.

Harry wanted to complain, but then Dean slid out of the bed with grace. The view of him walking away to the attached bathroom stole his words.

Waking Seamus was an interesting experience, one which Harry quite enjoyed. His boyfriend was never the most functional in the morning, and Harry suspected that he’d be even less so following a content night’s sleep after what they’d done. He stroked his hand down Seamus’s side and whispered into his ear. Seamus responded by sleepily grabbing his arm and pulling on it so Harry was spooning him. Harry chuckled but continued trying to rouse him.

“Come on Shay. It’s time to get up now.”

“It’s too early,” Seamus mumbled, eyes still closed.

“No, it’s not,” Harry said, though he actually had no idea what the time was, “come on, Dean’s waiting for us in the shower.”

It took a little more coaxing but Harry managed to get Seamus sitting up, blinking around at the room blearily. When his sleepy eyes met Harry’s, he leaned in to give him a kiss, giving Harry a pleased hum. The pair of them walked hand in hand to the bathroom, and Seamus’s breath caught when they were met with the glorious sight of Dean standing under the spray of the large rainfall shower, water running down the length of his body.

While it was definitely tempting, they didn't do anything while they showered, though they definitely were in each other's spaces a lot more than was strictly necessary. Harry enjoyed getting to wash Dean's back, and then shivered when Seamus, unprompted, began washing his. It was surprisingly domestic getting to share a shower with his boys. They would have to see if they could do this when they went back to Hogwarts.

Washed, dried and dressed in their clothes from last night, Harry led Seamus and Dean downstairs. Remus and Sirius were already up, Sirius nursing a cup of tea in the dining room as he read a copy of the Daily Prophet. He gave them a knowing look which caused Harry and Seamus's cheeks to flush. If Dean didn't have darker skin, he likely would have been the same.

"Did you have fun last night?"

"Sirius!" Harry groaned, dropping his head to the table, earning a chuckle from his godfather.

"Relax. I don't need, nor want, to know what you three did behind closed doors, so long as you were smart and safe about it," Sirius said, "but it's interesting to know that *that* is where you mind went when I asked. I was actually asking about your birthday party."

"You're a big fat liar," Harry said, "but yes, I did enjoy my party."

"Excellent, because it's the first of many to come. I've got years worth of birthday parties to make up for, so each one from now on will get more and more extravagant until I'm satisfied."

"You really don't need to do that!" Harry hurried to say.

"I know, and I'm mostly joking."

Letty appeared to serve them all breakfast as Fred and George came downstairs, and they all tucked into bacon and eggs.

"Anything interesting in the paper?" Fred asked.

"Nothing really. Fudge is still insisting that Dumbledore is lying about Voldemort, and your name keeps getting dragged into it Harry," Sirius said, "it's getting a bit ridiculous really, so I'll send them a cease and desist letter. Fudge and Dumbledore can have their little spat but they don't need to talk about you to do so."

"Do you think that'll work?" Seamus asked, "Mam's been getting annoyed with the Daily Prophet. She keeps going on about journalistic standards."

"At the very least, it will hopefully keep them from writing about you in the main body of an article, but it likely won't stop them from including you in people's comments. It's better than nothing, but both Dumbledore and Fudge have referred to you to both support and deny Voldemort's return. It'll be a start," Sirius said.

The clock chimed.

“Eight o’clock,” Sirius said, “when we’re finished here, I’ll take Dean back to his Mum. Seamus, are you alright taking the Floo?”

The boy nodded.

“When I’m back, we’ll head back to Grimmauld Place to face the music,” Sirius said, “will you be joining us Remus?”

“I’ve got errands to run today. I’ll be back when the fire’s died down a bit.”

“Coward,” Sirius grumbled.

Like all the previous times, it was bittersweet having to say goodbye to his boyfriends. Harry gave Dean a firm hug and a kiss before Sirius led him down the path to the gate. Seamus hung around a bit longer, the pair taking one last chance to cuddle, but he did have to leave eventually. Harry watched him vanish into the green flames of the Floo wistfully.

“It’ll be alright Harry. You’ll see them again soon,” George said, a steadying hand on his shoulder.

“It’s probably a bit ridiculous how much I miss them when they’re not there,” Harry said.

“I don’t think so. It just shows how much you care.”

“Just wait until you get back to Hogwarts,” Fred said, “you won’t have to put up with the bothers from the very beginning *and* you’ll get to spend as much time as you like with them. Just make sure your schoolwork doesn’t suffer.”

“It won’t. Even before we started dating, we were good at making sure we got our work done,” Harry said, “it helps that we hang out with Neville and the girls as well.”

Sirius returned soon after. None of them were exactly ready to go back to Grimmauld Place, but they all pulled up their Gryffindor courage. As soon as they walked through the front doors, Mrs Weasley descended in a whirlwind of rage.

“Where have you been!” she screeched to high heavens, “do you have any idea how worried we all were! How completely irresponsible of you Sirius Black! None of us had any idea where you’d taken Harry. Do you not care about his safety!”

“That is quite enough of that Molly,” Sirius snapped, “as I am his guardian, where I take my godson is no business of yours, and I am perfectly capable of keeping him safe.”

“You should have cleared it with Dumbledore first! Who knows what might have happened otherwise!”

“It is no more Albus’s business than it is yours,” Sirius said coolly, “now if you’re quite done making a scene, we would like to come inside.”

Mrs Weasley huffed, taking a few steps back so they could all properly enter the house.

“I spoke with Dumbledore and he completely agrees that you were irresponsible in taking Harry out of this house. The protections placed here are for his safety and for you to wilfully take him out of them was incredibly dangerous!” Mrs Weasley said, “where on earth was so important that you had to take him away from his friends on his birthday!”

“If you must know, I took Harry to this lovely little remote village in Wales that I remember from my youth. We had a quiet pub dinner and when we realised it was getting late, we decided to book a couple of rooms in a local hotel so we weren’t having to rush,” Sirius lied, “it was a perfectly relaxing end to a great birthday celebration, wouldn’t you agree Harry?”

“Absolutely,” he said.

Mrs Weasley’s ire turned to him, but a particularly sharp look from Sirius made her hold her tongue. Stomping down the stairs came Ron and Hermione.

“Mate, where’d you go! You can’t just run off on your birthday!”

Harry didn’t want to have to deal with this.

“I’m going upstairs,” he announced, pushing past Mrs Weasley and between Ron and Hermione to get to the stairs.

Once he was safely secure on the second floor, Harry felt a heat against his chest. It was the necklace Seamus and Dean had given him. Both segments were warm to the touch, indicating he had messages from them. Harry smiled, lying on his bed as he listened to them. Sirius may have lied about where they’d been and what they’d done, but Harry was honest when he said he agreed. It had been a brilliant end to one of the best nights of Harry’s life.

Legalese

The atmosphere in Grimmauld Place was moody after Harry's birthday escape. Mrs Weasley was still put out that Sirius had taken Harry out of the house without a guard, as her occasional snide comments made perfectly clear. The afternoon after Harry's birthday, all the kids were shooed upstairs for an impromptu Order meeting. As Sirius told him later, this was actually just Dumbledore appearing to give him a very disappointed lecture about risky behaviour. Sirius stood his ground, claiming that Harry deserved to get out of the house on his birthday. He made a very noncommittal noise when Dumbledore insisted that there would be no future outings.

The other occupants were similarly grumpy. Ron complained to his mother about being cooped up in Grimmauld Place endlessly, and Harry wondered once again why it was so important that they bring the kids with them. There was little for them to do in the public part of the house, and they couldn't even go and explore Muggle London without prior approval and a chaperone. Considering the Order was busy, this never happened.

Hermione had been placated with reading her way through the books on the shelves in the reading room, but she quickly bemoaned the dark nature of what was written in them. Sirius told him about those books. There were no actual spells in them, and some of the things described were a bit unpleasant, but they weren't all Dark Magic. Some of it was surprisingly good, like the book on first aid and healing Harry found one day. Harry was just very glad that Hermione didn't have access to the Black Library. She would simultaneously be ravenously pouring through every book she could get her hands on while complaining about the content. Either way she would have been insufferable.

Ginny kept trying to have conversations with him, her attempts at flirting inept and not that subtle. She wasn't taking Ancient Runes or Arithmancy, but she had clearly been told Harry was, so her attempts to talk to him about things she 'just happened to read' were blatantly trying to appeal to his interests. When her verbal attempts to seduce Harry failed, she tried for a more visual approach. After his birthday, Harry didn't think he ever saw her wearing a blouse or shirt that didn't somehow show off her chest. It got to the point one day that Mrs Weasley sent her back upstairs in the morning to get dressed properly. Even if Harry wasn't gay and currently happily in a relationship, Ginny's actions just seemed desperate and childish, not something he wanted any part of.

Harry crossed the landing on the first floor on his way to breakfast one morning, building himself up for another day, when his eyes caught something odd. Ron's bedroom was behind the stairs leading up to the second floor, and normally he kept the door shut at all times. Apparently this was to discourage the twins from taking advantage of the easy prey. Today though, the door was wide open, giving Harry an unobstructed view inside the room where Ron was completely naked. He was facing away, bent over his trunk as he rooted around in it, his ass entirely on display for all to see.

Now, Harry had seen Ron naked before. It was an occupational hazard of sharing a dormitory, and the showers at school were mostly open, but while they were no longer

friends, Harry knew that Ron was never so openly naked like this. After showers he tied his towel around his waist, and he dressed quickly even when Harry stayed in his room that one summer. That he would be like this in an unfamiliar environment seemed very odd to Harry.

He kept this observation to himself, because for all he knew, Ron may have changed in the last two years when he wasn't paying attention.

Harry spent the morning dodging attempts at chatting (Ron), discussing schoolwork (Hermione), and awkward getting-to-know-you type conversations (Ginny). Sirius was out, leaving him to fend for himself. After lunch, Remus came over, and they went to the duelling room to work on Harry's technique.

Remus was a different kind of fighter than Sirius. Sirius fought like fire, raw and raging, rampaging through his defences and overwhelming him with force. Remus was more like water. He was calmer yet constantly shifted around Harry's attacks, adapting and overcoming whatever Harry threw at him, before striking when Harry least expected it. It was a challenge, but one Harry relished, and by the time they were done, Harry was panting from exertion on the floor.

"You've improved since we first started," Remus said, handing him a bottle of water.

"Still can't beat you," Harry said in return.

"I am older and have more experience than you, and you are also holding back your full power so as to not hurt me. I have no doubt in a proper duel with actual stakes, your opponent would be hard pressed to fight against you," Remus said, "how is your Occlumency practice going?"

"Well, I think? Sirius tries to see if he can get inside my head every now and again, but he never makes it past the Grindylow before he pulls back."

"An offensive Occlumency shield is a powerful thing. If they can't overpower it, either to retreat or dive in further, you may end up holding their mind hostage inside yours, leaving them incredibly vulnerable."

"So why don't more people use those kinds of shields?"

"Because they can be tricky to construct, and for most people when they think of offence, they think of duelling with powerful spells, or perhaps poisons. They try constructing a powerful sorcerer to act as their mental guardian, not realising how difficult it is to maintain that level of power when it is needed," Remus said, "you on the other hand have many experiences in the lake that made it easy for you to construct the image. You're also not trying to make your offences do anything that they wouldn't normally do anyway, which again makes it a lot less taxing. Finally, your defences aren't there to cause harm to the mind of the person entering, merely to hold them and not let them go."

"I reckon Dumbledore will get quite a shock if he ever tries to get inside my head," Harry said.

“I’m sure he will, but that doesn’t mean you should give him the opportunity,” Remus warned, “he doesn’t appear to know how much you’ve pulled away from him, but I think he suspects you might start to now that your friendship with Ron and Hermione has ended. That’s likely the actual reason he insisted they all move in, so that you could rekindle that friendship and be brought back into the fold.”

“Not bloody likely. Ron’s a dick, Hermione’s insufferable, and I don’t know if I can politely say what Ginny is.”

The duelling room door opened to reveal Kreacher.

“Lord Black requests Master Harry’s presence,” the old Elf said.

“Thank you Kreacher. I’ll be right there.”

Sirius was waiting for him in his study. Many sheets of parchment littered his desk, and Sirius looked up from them when he entered.

“You look a mess.”

“Excuse me for not having a shower after duelling, but somebody requested my presence,” Harry said, “what’s up? Is everything alright?”

“There’s been some developments, some good and some uncertain,” Sirius said.

He cleared away most of the papers and gestured for Harry to sit across from him.

“We were definitely right to have a betrothal contract signed for you, Dean and Seamus. In my meeting with my account manager, I was shown these. They were filed with the Ministry and Gringotts on August 1st, the day after your birthday,” Sirius said.

He pushed a small pile of parchment towards him. Harry read through the front page and gawked. It was a betrothal contract between Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley.

“I’ll spare you all the legal jargon. Needless to say, when Mrs Finnegan worried about a restrictive contract, this is what she meant,” Sirius said, “you would be required to openly court Ginny and take her on dates at least twice a month. There’s a fidelity clause forcing you to be loyal only to her. You would have to provide her with at least one full blood Heir, which a transference ritual would force you to carry to term, something which is highly inappropriate as the head of the family. All your money and assets would fall under the conservatorship of Ginny, Molly and Albus, and she would hold the right to veto any decision you might make. There’s also the stipulation that upon Ginny’s seventeenth birthday, this contract would be upgraded to a marriage contract. Failure to meet these expectations on your part would result in legal and magical consequences.”

“They can’t enforce this, can they?” Harry asked, his face paling as he heard how this would have essentially turned him into Ginny’s slave.

“Absolutely not, thank Merlin. Even without the contract you already have, they made several mistakes with this one,” Sirius said calmly, “firstly, Molly was the one to sign this

contract. As she is not the head of her household, Arthur has the right to reject it, which he very likely will do. Secondly, I am your guardian and I did not sign this, meaning that it is legally null and void.”

“But then how did they file it?”

Sirius tapped the part of the front page where the signatures were. On the line for Harry’s guardian’s signature, there was a very familiar looping script.

“Dumbledore signed this!”

“He did. The only people who can sign documents like this for a minor are their legal guardians or their magical guardian. We have been unable to find documentation about who your magical guardian was, but now whether or not he actually held the role, Dumbledore has claimed it. What’s more, this document also contains his magical signature, which my account manager confirmed was his, thus legally defining him as your magical guardian,” Sirius said, “that means we can tie him to everything he has done. All the money he authorised to be transferred from your accounts can be repaid, and legal action can be brought against him for all the harm he has done to you.”

“We can- we can actually do that,” Harry said.

“Yes. The Goblins asked whether I wanted to reclaim the money right then and there, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

“This is a lot. I thought I’d just be cutting Ron off after what he said about the Gringotts grant. I didn’t think I’d be able to get all the money back so soon,” Harry said, “what do you think I should do?”

“It’s up to you in the end. Personally, I want to see them all burn for what they did to you.”

“I do too, but I feel we should be cautious about this,” Harry trailed off, deep in thought. “The money that was stolen can be reclaimed immediately. That’ll hamper them in the short term. I think we should hold off on any legal action for the time being. Voldemort is still a threat. I hate to admit it, but he’s likely to be more careful knowing Dumbledore’s still around. Once Voldemort’s out of the way, we can go after him with everything we’ve got.”

Sirius frowned, clearly not happy with it.

“Dumbledore has a lot of power, you know this,” Harry said, “as much as Fudge is smearing him in the Daily Prophet, he still has a lot of good will. If we try and bring charges against him now, there’s too much risk that he could sweep it all under the rug, and then when Voldemort is revealed, everyone will be clamouring for him to save them and it’ll be like nothing ever happened.”

“That’s true. I hate it but it’s true.” Sirius sighed. “So we hold off on throwing Dumbledore to the wolves, let Fudge keep picking away at his reputation. I’ve been working with Lady Longbottom to discuss education, so we can keep a very close eye on what is going on at

Hogwarts. Needless to say, we won't let Albus get away with any of his usual tricks. Once we've undermined the public's faith in him enough, then we bring the charges."

"Exactly. Dumbledore's probably not going to be idle while this is happening, so we can all keep gathering evidence to further support our case."

"I can get behind this plan. It's like a long con. How very Slytherin of you."

"I am Lord Slytherin. I should probably show the traits of my house from time to time," Harry said.

Sirius laughed.

"Oh to be a fly on the wall when Voldemort finds out that his sworn enemy is his lord!"

When he calmed down, he tapped the pile of parchment containing Ginny's betrothal contract.

"It's a bit redundant, but you missed a key fact here. There's not just one contract."

Harry frowned. He flicked through the pile, only for his eyebrows to shoot into his hairline when he saw it. There was a second betrothal contract for Harry James Potter and *Ronald Bilius Weasley*.

"They wanted to marry me off to *Ron!*" Harry exclaimed.

"I know. I couldn't believe it either when the Goblins showed it to me."

"But- but he hates gay people. He thought it was disgusting when he found out I like men. Why on earth would they do this?"

"I think the plan was still to make you marry Ginny in case you could be swayed or dosed into liking women, but just in case that failed and you still liked men, they likely drew this up as a backup," Sirius said, "his contract is very similar to Ginny's. Loyalty clause, conservatorship of assets, upgrade to a marriage contract when you turned seventeen. The main difference was that there was to be no open courting. You would also be the one to take the Bearer Potion to produce Heirs. In fact, it was a bit weird how specific they were about how the pair of you were to have sex. Unless Ron decided otherwise, you were to lie face down and not move. You weren't to look at him and you needed to muffle any noises you might make. It's a bit creepy the thought they put into your future sex life."

"That was probably Ron and Mrs Weasley's true thoughts at work. Ron may have been forced to get me pregnant, but that didn't mean he had to like it, or be reminded that he was having sex with a man," Harry said, "but this one also can't be enforced?"

"You can chuck them in the fire if you'd like. That's about how much worth they have. These are only copies anyway. Gringotts has the original as evidence."

It took no time at all for Harry to create a fire in the hearth and toss the pile of parchment into it. It felt good to watch it smoulder and burn.

“I’ll get in touch with Gringotts to begin the reclaiming. There is one other thing I’d like your thoughts on.” Sirius pushed a letter towards him. “I received that earlier this morning and I’m not sure how we want to handle this.”

If Harry was shocked by the betrothal contracts, seeing this letter, written on the finest quality parchment and with perfect handwriting, made him utterly speechless.

Lord Black,

I realise that now of all times is not the most appropriate for you to receive this letter from me. I would not blame you if you immediately threw it into the fire, but I felt that I must at least try to reach out to you.

This information is likely not new to you given your connections with certain factions, but the Dark Lord was able to return to a flesh and blood body at the end of May. He has been calling all of his old supporters to his cause, as well as reaching out to recruit new servants. My husband is amongst those who have taken up the call once again. The Dark Lord must not be permitted to succeed in his goals.

I realise that there is no love between us, and I am not reaching out to you for my own sake. Lucius has made his choice, and as his wife I am honour-bound to follow, but please Lord Black, I am begging you to help save my son. Draco is only fifteen, the same age as Harry. He parrots Lucius’s words and ideas not because he believes them but because he is desperate for his father’s approval. I am terrified that Lucius will be able to sink his claws in further and ask Draco to take the Dark Mark, likely calling it the highest honour, and not knowing any better, Draco will accept.

There is little that I am able to do to protect my son myself, but I am also a Black. If it means tearing the entire world apart and burning the Malfoy name to the ground, I will do it if it keeps Draco safe. You have very little reason to heed me, but I beg of you to at least consider my request. I will be visiting my mother and father in two days. I shall be alone and our privacy will be assured.

Yours most sincerely, my Lord,

Narcissa Malfoy

“Malfoy’s mother was a Black?” Harry couldn’t help asking when he finished reading.

“She’s Andromeda’s youngest sister. The perfect pureblood daughter in just about every way,” Sirius said, “I know you don’t have the best relationship with the Malfoy Heir, so I wasn’t sure how best to proceed.”

“Would Voldemort really make him take the Dark Mark?” Harry asked.

“He might. We both know that Voldemort doesn’t really care for his followers at all. They’re just useful pawns, and children tend not to be all that useful outside of leverage to get their parents to do what they want. In the last war, there were definitely some Hogwarts-age children who would gladly do as Voldemort asked, and in many ways they did, but he never

usually Marked them. He typically left it to their parents to direct them. When they turned seventeen, he gave them the Dark Mark as a 'reward' for their loyal service," Sirius said, "that wasn't to say he didn't Mark any of them. The youngest we ever saw was a fifteen year old. The poor lad had been forced into it by his parents and got caught up in a raid and died from a stray spell."

Sirius swallowed, a flash of grief crossing his face.

"My brother, Regulus, was Marked when he was just sixteen. That was probably my dear mothers doing. No doubt she thought it was such a great honour for the Dark Lord to accept Reggie into his service. I have no idea what Reggie thought of it. I'd run away by then."

"Malfoy's a git. He's an entitled, spoiled, rude brat who acts like he's never faced any hardship in his life and expects everything to be handed to him just because of his name," Harry said, "but I don't think it's right for him to be forced into signing his life away to a homicidal maniac because of it."

"Even if he's a blood supremacist?"

"He's fifteen. There's still a chance he can become better if given the chance, but even if he doesn't, he doesn't deserve to be condemned to Voldemort just because his dad wants him to."

"You're a very kind boy Harry. There's not many who would have made that kind of choice," Sirius said, "some could call it hypocritical. Don't Ron and Hermione deserve the same kind of chance?"

"Maybe, but they've also provably done me harm. All Draco's done so far is be a dick."

"Point taken," Sirius said, "alright. I'll go and meet with Narcissa to discuss what exactly she wants and I'll make my decision then. Not sure what I'll actually be capable of doing, but she might be able to offer us some useful information."

"Take Remus with you just in case it's a trap," Harry said.

"Don't worry. I will, but I don't think it'll be needed. Narcissa is a lot of things but she is not the sort of person to set a trap like this, especially not when she went all out in calling me Lord Black in her letter."

It was still a worry that Narcissa was trying to lure Sirius out on Lucius's orders. Though Harry had to admit, if they were going to do that, they should have laid the groundwork for it well before now. With any luck, this would go well, but it was too soon to tell if they would gain an ally out of it. Harry would just have to trust in Sirius's judgement. He knew his cousin better than Harry did.

The last time Sirius saw Narcissa was when he was fifteen. It was at Grandfather Arcturus's birthday and all the family had been invited. Sirius and Regulus were there, forced into stuffy

formal robes by their mother, and they were greeted by Cygnus Black and his three daughters. Andromeda was seventeen, hiding her emotions behind a thick mask but in hindsight she was clearly on the verge of eloping with Ted. Bellatrix was manic even as a sixteen year old, and then there was Narcissa.

She was every bit the perfect pureblood, soaking in her mother's teachings like a sponge. At fourteen, she carried herself with grace and poise, moving effortlessly in these social circles. Her face was also a mask, polite and charming, but also with an air of cold superiority. Sirius hadn't liked any of his family back then, and that included Narcissa. He didn't like the way she sometimes felt like a statue, an impressive piece of art to be paraded around but never interacted with, and her demeanour encouraged that lack of interaction.

When he heard she had been married to Lucius Malfoy, it was to Sirius confirmation that she would carry on the prejudice that plagued many old pureblood families. It wasn't at all surprising when he learned Lucius was a Death Eater, and it irked him to no end that he was carted off to Azkaban without trial while Lucius was able to get off scot free by claiming the Imperius Curse and making several sizable donations. That Draco also had a poor attitude was perhaps inevitable given his father.

Narcissa hadn't specified in her letter where they were to meet, but anyone who knew the Black family would understand. Sirius apparated outside the private cemetery grounds. He could feel the hum of the wards surrounding them, the magic welcoming him and accepting him to mourn the dead. Only the family could enter here, and as Lord Black, he could feel that only one person was inside.

"I'll secure the entrance," Remus said, "are you sure I can't come inside?"

"The Black's may have had a penchant for madness, but family was important to them. Even when there was strife and discord between members, there were some places that were considered sacred and demanded peace and respect. The Blacks no longer with us should not be disturbed by petty mortal concerns," Sirius said, "and only a Black may come to pay their respects here. I'll be fine."

"Alright. Try not to take long. I don't think Harry will be happy to know you went in there alone."

Sirius nodded and stepped through the gate. This cemetery had been where the Blacks had been buried for centuries. Rows upon rows of headstones detailed the family history in almost as much detail as the family tree did. Sirius passed through them, taking note of who had married who, watching as the same names appeared again and again. Nott, Lestrangle, Malfoy, in the older stones there was also Gaunt. Sirius caught a few Potters, and he even spied a single Longbottom. As the headstones grew more recent, there were more instances of Blacks marrying Blacks.

Eventually he was far enough in the cemetery to see the other person there. Narcissa was the most beautiful of her three sisters, and the years had not diminished that beauty. Dressed in an elegant ebony dress, her sleek black hair was pulled back and held in place by a glittering hairpin. She did not acknowledge his presence when he approached her, her eyes focused on the headstone before her, bearing the names Cygnus Black and Druella Black nee Rosier.

“I didn’t think you would come.”

“I’m as surprised as you,” Sirius said.

“Aunt and Uncle are here, as is Regulus. You should pay your respects.”

“That isn’t why I came here today, Lady Malfoy. I came because you wanted my help.”

The only change in Narcissa’s carefully crafted mask was her eyes drifting shut, opening again a moment later, still not looking at Sirius.

“The Dark Lord is gathering his forces again. Lucius has eagerly re-joined his ranks and I fear that Draco will be caught up in it as well. He is only a child. He does not deserve to be thrown into a war where the outcome is always uncertain.”

“He’s a child, yes, but so is Harry. Nobody seems to care that Harry has never had a choice either, your Dark Lord saw to that,” Sirius said, “Narcissa, if you want me to help Draco, I’m going to need more than he’s just a child.”

“Shouldn’t that be reason enough?” Her head turned to his with the barest hint of a glare on her face. “Is Albus Dumbledore not the champion of children?”

“Does Lord Voldemort not consider magical children precious like all purebloods should?” Sirius countered.

“You would leave Draco, a member of your family, to die?”

“I would understand why you would turn to me to keep your son safe from the man your husband and Lord has sworn himself to.”

Narcissa was infuriatingly unreadable. She always had been. Nothing of her true feelings shone through her perfect mask. Sirius was also not the most patient. It took every ounce of his willpower to hold her stare without breaking, without making demands that she tell him everything or else he would leave her there. He was still tempted to do that, but Narcissa was right. Narcissa, and by extension Draco, was family, and as Lord Black, Sirius had a duty to at least hear her out.

She looked away first, her eyes returning to the headstone.

“Draco’s was a difficult pregnancy, and for many years after we tried for a second child but were unsuccessful. Lucius accepted it, though it was clear he was displeased. Even though he was only a toddler, I think Draco saw that and became determined to prove to Lucius that he alone could be enough. When he was younger, it was adorable to watch him toddle around trying to act like a proper Lord. It certainly made teaching him his duties easier,” Narcissa paused, “but as he got older, Draco grew more desperate for his fathers approval, something Lucius was never quick to give. He emulated Lucius’s mannerisms, the way he acted, the way he spoke, all hoping that Lucius would be proud of him.”

“He picked up blood prejudice,” Sirius commented.

“Lucius says those things so Draco repeats them. Truthfully, I don’t know what Draco actually believes, but I suspect whatever prejudices he has may not be as strong nor as deep as he pretends.”

“All of this doesn’t explain why you want me to protect him. Even if Lucius is aloof with his own son, by all accounts there’s no danger there. Draco’s following in his father’s footsteps, which may or may not lead to him walking off a cliff,” Sirius said, “you’re not a stupid woman, Narcissa. Reaching out to me with everything going on is a big risk, one you wouldn’t take unless you felt it absolutely necessary. Something changed, didn’t it?”

“You are aware of the Triwizard Tournament that took place at Hogwarts this last year?”

“How could I not be when my godson was forced to compete in it,” Sirius said sardonically.

“The castle received visitors from Beauxbaton and Durmstrang. Those schools brought some younger students to encourage international relations, though only one was in Draco’s year. As part of his lessons, Draco has learned French from an early age, so he occasionally helped the Beauxbaton students get around the castle,” Narcissa explained, “there was one student named Elio who was struggling with English. Draco helped tutor him so he could improve. As the months passed, he became quite taken with the boy. They’ve been exchanging letters since summer started, and Lucius found out.”

“And that’s an issue? Draco wouldn’t be the first Malfoy man to court another man.”

“But he would be the first Heir,” Narcissa said, “the Malfoys have a gallery containing portraits of the Lord’s family going back to the very beginning. Call it coincidence or fate, but there has always been a Lord and Lady Malfoy.”

Narcissa closed her eyes again.

“Lucius is a very proud man. When he looks at those portraits, all he can see is *his* future, the continuation of *his* line as it has always been. Had we had other children and they sought a partner of the same sex, I’m not sure he would have an issue with it, but Draco is his Heir and one day his portrait will join the others. I don’t know if Draco’s feelings for this boy are genuine, or if it is merely the sort of crush all children have that fades with time, but the possibility threatens Lucius’s vision, and he has made his displeasure quite clear,” Narcissa said, “Draco doesn’t know what he has done to earn his father’s ire. Lucius didn’t see fit to tell him, so Draco is desperate to regain his approval, and the Dark Lord is ever circling.”

“You think Lucius will make him take the Dark Mark to regain his favour,” Sirius said.

“Or Draco himself will suggest it,” Narcissa said, “he is my child, my *only* child. I have made my peace that I will not come out of this war unscathed, however it plays out, but I will not allow Draco to suffer needlessly. Children should not have to suffer for the actions of their parents, something you know very well.”

That he did. The reputation of the Blacks had haunted Sirius for his first few years at Hogwarts, only stopping when Sirius developed a new, much louder and more noticeable

reputation for himself. Draco seemed caught up in a mess of Lucius's making, and Narcissa was right when she said he was just a kid.

"I'm not sure what I would even be able to do. Draco doesn't know me beyond stories of me abandoning my family. There is no way he would accept my help even if I offered it," Sirius said.

"Then do not give him a choice. Lock him up in your home if you have to," Narcissa said.

"I am not making anyone a prisoner," Sirius growled, "and I will not force my godson to put up with someone who hates his guts. Draco's opinions have not endeared him to Harry at all, and Harry is my priority here."

"Not everyone can escape the trappings of family, but I understand that you must put your godson first, just as I must put my son first."

"I still don't know what I'll be able to do. Give me some time to think about this," Sirius said, "but I'll need something from you in return."

Narcissa's expression closed up immediately, her gaze turning cold and calculating.

"I will not betray my husband, not even for you Lord Black."

"Narcissa, the only way to truly keep Draco safe from Lucius and Voldemort's clutches is to make sure Voldemort doesn't win," Sirius said, "to do that, I need to know what he is planning, or any information you can give me that might help me win this war before too much blood is spilt."

"I cannot be a spy for you," Narcissa said.

"I need something Narcissa. You cannot expect me to shoulder the risk of potentially sheltering your child for absolutely nothing."

When Narcissa looked like she was going to remain silent, Sirius turned to leave. He had heard what she had to say, he'd listened to her request and said he'd consider it, but he had other things that required his concern far more than his cousin once removed. Before he could take more than a few steps away, Narcissa's voice reached him.

"I cannot spy for you as I am not a Death Eater," she said, "but I can listen."

Sirius stopped and faced her. Her mask of composure had slipped slightly, showing a small amount of unease.

"I am Lady Malfoy. Many of my husband's associates have been entertained at Malfoy Manor, and they speak of things that perhaps they should not say. If I hear anything of worth, I shall pass it along to you."

"You can do that? Will they not find it suspicious that you're listening in on them?"

For the first time that Sirius could remember, Narcissa's lips twitched into the ghost of a smug smirk.

"The lessons of our childhood come in handy when executed perfectly."

And suddenly Sirius could see it. The perfect lady Narcissa was raised to be, sipping tea out of china cups, mingling with the socialites her husband associated with. Every move, every action, every fibre of her being executed as the perfect shadow to Lucius, blending in so naturally and seamlessly, she may as well have been part of the furniture, not worth paying attention to. Invisibility by playing along to all the standards society expected, never standing out at all. The Death Eaters Lucius hung around with probably said all sorts of stuff within her earshot, not caring that she could hear them.

"Just be sure to stay safe. It'll be just as dangerous for Draco if you get discovered," Sirius said.

"Unlike you, I can play my part well," Narcissa said coolly.

"Then have you heard anything already?"

"There has only been talk of gathering followers. I believe envoys have been sent to the werewolves and the giants, but only because Fenrir Greyback has been discussed," Narcissa turned her nose up at the thought of the man. It was a sentiment Sirius agreed with. "The Dark Lord is secretive with his plans. There is something in the Department of Mysteries he wants, and he has also turned his attention to Hogwarts as well."

The Order already knew about the first, but the second was news to Sirius. What would Voldemort want at Hogwarts? He left the school alone during the first war because Dumbledore was Headmaster. They all thought he would do the same again, but this suggested otherwise. Did Voldemort believe himself powerful enough to take the school? He'd be in for a rude awakening when he discovered Harry had inherited Lordships for two of the four Founders lines, and that Neville had another. Even without Ravenclaw, the pair of them could reinforce the wards to withstand even Voldemort at the height of his strength and influence. What then did Voldemort want?

"I have been here long enough to pay my respects. I must leave," Narcissa said.

Just before she passed him, she stopped.

"Please, think about what I asked."

With that she strode away, leaving Sirius to his many conflicting thoughts.

Relaxation and tension

August continued to pass by at a crawl. Harry avoided the others in the public part of the house as best he could without drawing too much of their ire, but it was hard to keep his temper in check. Ginny continued to act provocatively towards him, as though hoping to lure him in with her physique. All it did was cement in Harry's mind that he was well and truly gay. At least Ron didn't do that, which was a small mercy.

Sirius told him about Narcissa's request, and Harry was torn. On the one hand, he didn't like Malfoy. He was arrogant and already showed he bought into blood supremacy. If he joined up with Voldemort, then he could go down with the ship. However, Harry was also sympathetic to the idea that Malfoy was just trying to please his father. Lucius Malfoy was not a pleasant man, likely less so to live with. Harry could see a young Draco trying to gain his fathers approval, even if it meant spouting such awful things. The child was not the parent, and should not be judged as such.

All Sirius asked him to do was not be antagonistic towards Malfoy when they went back to Hogwarts in September. This request was easy, as Harry had been infuriatingly polite to Malfoy and the other Slytherins last year, only reacting to their provocations by pointing out how rude and uncouth they were being. It surprisingly earned him some good will from the Slytherins, and Malfoy had mostly left him alone aside from sneering.

Thinking about Malfoy and Voldemort's interest in Hogwarts provided a welcome distraction from the other occupants of Grimmauld Place, as was the ability to swim whenever he wanted. The pool Sirius built for him was much better than the one at the Muggle gym. He didn't always swim lengths. Sometimes he floated around, sometimes he rested his arms against the edge of the pool, looking out of the floor to ceiling windows. The view across the rooftops of Muggle London was surprisingly interesting.

Harry was swimming lengths when he heard somebody come into the room, the door to the lockers sliding open. He paused, treading water, to find that it was Sirius.

"I've got a meeting with Lady Longbottom today. I'll likely be gone for a few hours," Sirius said, "are you going to be hiding up here all day?"

"Probably. Ron still hasn't done his summer homework and Hermione's getting in a tizzy because of it. I'd rather not deal with them."

"That's good to hear. Hopefully you'll enjoy the company I'm leaving you with."

Harry was confused for a moment but then the locker room door slid open again, revealing Seamus and Dean.

"Have fun kids. Don't do anything I wouldn't do, and certainly don't do anything I would!"

Sirius left them with a jaunty wave. Harry swam as fast as he could towards the shore. He pulled himself out of the water and yanked the pair of them into a hug, ignoring their protests

at him getting them wet.

“One of these days we’ll meet because we planned in advance,” Harry said, unable to help the massive smile on his face.

“Spontaneity is the spice of life. I can’t say I can complain about getting to see you,” Seamus said, looking him up and down, “especially not when you’re wearing those.”

“We haven’t interrupted your morning swim have we?” Dean asked.

“I did that before breakfast. This is me ignoring my houseguests.”

“This is a very nice pool. Is this the one Sirius had made for you so you didn’t have to go to the gym?”

“The very one.”

On a whim, Harry turned and dove fairly gracefully back into the water.

“You can join me if you like. Nobody else can get up here,” he said when he surfaced.

“Damn. I didn’t bring my swim shorts with me. Did you Dea-” Seamus’s voice trailed off.

To both of their surprise, Dean was already stripping off his clothes, not stopping until they were all in a neat pile and he was completely bare. Neither of them could take their eyes off him as he slid into the pool.

“I thought you were supposed to be the sensible one?” Seamus said.

“I figured you could just leave your underwear on,” Harry said.

“You said nobody else can get in here, so why not? Are either of you really going to complain?”

That was all the encouragement Seamus needed. His clothes joined Dean’s in a slightly messier pile, and he jumped into the pool with a big splash. The three of them were beaming at one another, then Seamus grinned mischievously.

“One of us is still overdressed, wouldn’t you agree Dean?”

Dean mimicked Seamus’s grin. The pair of them dove for Harry, trying their best to pounce on him. Harry knew what they were trying to do. As fun as it would be, he wasn’t going to make it easy for them. It reminded him of the time they snuck into the prefect’s bathroom together. There was nobody around to tell them off or call them childish, so the three of them messed around in the water, content to be in each others presence. Eventually Seamus managed to grab Harry’s shoulders, Dean diving under the water and yanking Harry’s swim briefs down while he was pinned.

It was nice getting to spend time together. Harry taught them how to float on their backs, and they agreed that it was quite relaxing, though Seamus wasn’t that good at it. They rested at

the edge of the pool, facing out of the windows.

“When do you have to go back home?” Harry asked.

“Tomorrow,” Seamus said, pulling himself out of the water so he could sit on the edge instead, “we packed an overnight bag.”

“That’s alright with you?” Dean asked.

“Are you kidding? That’s great!”

“I’ll finally get to see where you live. It’s already pretty impressive,” Seamus said, “we won’t have to see Ron and Hermione though?”

“Not unless you have some weird desire to,” Harry said, “we can stick to the private part of the house. I wouldn’t subject you to them, especially after what happened.”

“What? What did they do?”

Harry filled them in on the betrothal contracts Mrs Weasley and Dumbledore tried to file. Both Dean and Seamus were livid.

“That bastard!” Seamus growled, “after what he said to you, to us, about how men liking men made us disgusting and perverted, he gets his own mother to try and marry you off to him!”

“Hey now, it’s alright,” Harry shuffled over so his arms were resting on Seamus’s lap instead of the poolside, “Sirius said they weren’t in any way legal or enforceable, and we got there first anyway. There’s no way in hell that I’d marry Ron or Ginny.”

“It’s the fact that they’d even try. Mam told me a bit more about why she was worried when we entered into our contract,” Seamus said, “apparently when she went to school, she was friends with a pureblood girl. Her family had agreed to marry her off to a second son of some other pureblood family so she was already engaged when she went to Hogwarts. The pair of them met at school but both realised after about a year that a relationship wouldn’t work out between them. The contract their parents signed was really strict with basically no way out so they were forced to marry one another when she graduated. They couldn’t even fool around with other people since the contract had loyalty clauses.”

“That’s awful,” Dean said.

“It is, so when Harry suggested we enter into a contract, that’s what she immediately thought of.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you, to anyone,” Harry said.

“I know you wouldn’t,” Seamus said, running his hands through Harry’s damp hair, “she was just worried. She didn’t want any of us to be trapped in a relationship we couldn’t get out of. She said she was actually quite impressed at how relaxed our contract was. I’m glad that it can protect you.”

“It protects all of us,” Harry said.

They continued to lounge at the side of the pool, talking quietly to one another, when Dean spoke up.

“We should probably get out before we all turn into prunes.”

That was probably for the best, only when they all pulled themselves out of the pool, they realised something.

“We don’t have any towels to dry off. We probably should have thought of that before we jumped in,” Dean said.

“We all need to shower anyway so there’s no point in getting dressed,” Harry said, “let’s go back to my room.”

“Like this?” Seamus said.

“It’ll be alright. Nobody can come up to these floors and Sirius is out. We can be all sneaky about it,” Harry said.

Seamus grinned at the mischief, and while Dean looked less enthused, he still agreed. The three of them gathered up their clothes into bundles. The pool wasn’t that far from the door leading to the landing connected to the public side of the house. While Harry was sure that Sirius would still be out for a little while, he couldn’t be sure that Remus wasn’t about. It would be absolutely mortifying if he caught the three of them sneaking around Grimmauld Place completely naked.

They came across nobody in the private part of the house, stepping through the door to the second floor landing. Downstairs Harry could hear people moving about. There were a few bangs from Fred and George’s room and Mrs Weasley yelled something from down in the kitchen. Seamus peeked over the bannister curiously.

“They can’t see us up here, right?”

“They shouldn’t be able to, nor can they hear us,” Harry said, “Ron complained about it once at dinner when he tried to follow me up the stairs.”

The three of them stared downstairs for a moment, before heading into Harry’s room. The attached bathroom had a shower big enough for all three of them to use it comfortably at the same time, a fact they readily took advantage of. There were many passionate kisses exchanged beneath the falling water, and their hands wandered, but they didn’t progress much further. Before long they were washed and dried.

“I kind of want to go downstairs just to see how they’d all react,” Seamus said when they were all dressed, brushing his hair at Harry’s mirror.

“They’d completely freak out. Ron would demand to know why you were here and Mrs Weasley would accuse Sirius of giving out the secret willy-nilly,” Harry said.

“I suppose, though it would be quite amusing to see all the colours Ron and Ginny would turn when I made out with you right in front of them,” Seamus said.

“But then we would have to deal with the fallout,” Dean said, “frankly, I’d rather not put up with their comments about us. It’s already bad enough that they want to marry Harry off to one of them. When they find out he’s already in a relationship, it’ll be bad, but with two boys? It’ll be utter chaos.”

“Harry’s not the only one in a relationship with two boys,” Seamus sauntered over and captured Dean’s lips, “you’re stuck with me too.”

Dean rolled his eyes fondly at Seamus’s exuberance.

Harry was finally able to show Seamus around Grimmauld Place as he gave him the full tour, leaving the boy suitably in awe. Like Dean, Seamus was impressed with the observatory but he was more drawn to the private Potions lab. Apparently along with drilling him on Charms, Mrs Finnegan was determined that Seamus would do well in his Potions OWL.

“It’s been a nightmare but we don’t really have anywhere to brew besides the dining table, and that’s not all that sanitary,” Seamus said, “getting to actually make Potions without Snape breathing down our necks would be good.”

“He’s not been quite so bad now that Harry’s not with Ron and Hermione,” Dean pointed out, “still a dick, but he doesn’t have as much to say about the quality of our potions. If Neville’s been cleansed of those potions and spells he was under, I wouldn’t be surprised if Snape left us alone.”

“That’d be the day,” Harry muttered.

Lunch was served to them in the informal dining room, Kreacher going all out now that he had an excuse to cook. It was the first time Seamus met the old House Elf, and when Kreacher left to attend to his other duties, he couldn’t help but snort.

“Why is it that he makes him taking care of you sound so threatening?”

“He was alone for about ten years after Sirius’s mother died so he had no one to take care of and the house kind of fell apart. Now he has a family again, so he *will* make sure you’re well looked after and you *will* accept it without complaint,” Harry said, “it’s actually kind of nice.”

As they tucked into delicious sandwiches and sliced fruits, Harry amused himself with thoughts of the others downstairs having to eat very basic sandwiches courtesy of Mrs Weasley. Sirius never ate lunch with the other occupants of Grimmauld Place and he made it clear to Mrs Weasley that he wouldn’t be paying for meals that he didn’t eat, which meant he only paid for breakfast and dinner. As such, Mrs Weasley had to pay for lunch supplies, and the difference in the quality showed.

Sirius returned from his meeting with Lady Longbottom later in the afternoon. He found the three of them in one of the living rooms, sitting together on a sofa. Rather, Harry and Dean

were sitting. Seamus was lying across them, his legs in Dean's lap and his head in Harry's. Neither of them minded this. Dean was quite happily reading a book on Astronomy from the Black library and Harry's fingers carded through Seamus's sandy blonde locks. Normally this would have sent Seamus into a relaxed doze, but the wireless was on and the pair of them were listening to Puddlemere United playing off against the Wigtown Wanderers. Both of them would tense slightly, listening intently when something exciting happened, only to settle down again when the moment passed.

"What's the score?" Sirius asked.

"100-80 to Wigtown but it's been a close game," Harry said, "Wood was brought in for a bit when a stray Bludger hit the Puddlemere Keeper."

"They're an hour in and the Snitch has only been spotted once," Seamus said.

"Sounds exciting," Sirius said, "Harry, do you mind if I bring Arthur up here?"

"That's fine, but can he even come up here?"

"I may have told the others that the wards will only let family upstairs, but truthfully they'll let anyone I allow through. Besides, Arthur's mother was born Cedrella Black so he's got enough of the family in him."

When Harry nodded, Sirius left.

"Isn't Arthur Ron's dad?" Dean asked, "is he going to have a problem with us?"

"He shouldn't. Fred and George said that he doesn't care who his kids love so long as they're happy."

"Good, because I am very comfortable right now and I don't want to move," Seamus said.

Arthur seemed pleasantly surprised when Sirius brought him to the living room, looking around at everything with interest. His eyes widened when he saw the position Harry was in with Seamus but he didn't linger or comment. Instead he sat down in the offered armchair, with Sirius claiming the other one. Kreacher appeared with a platter of tea and biscuits.

"I'd wondered where your House Elf was. Kreacher, was it? I hoped he wasn't tucked away somewhere because Molly completely commandeered your house," Arthur chuckled, "but what we've been staying in is barely any of it, isn't it?"

"Meaning no offence to you Arthur, but I know what your living situation has been like. I wasn't going to give Molly and your kids a free ride to luxury," Sirius said.

"No offence taken. The Burrow is a lot humbler than how I grew up but I'm proud that I was able to make a living for myself and a family even without the Weasley assets, though our standing was always much more modest than the Blacks. I think Mother missed the luxury sometimes but she loved Dad more than enough to make up for it."

Arthur beamed warmly at Harry.

“It’s good to see you, Harry. I don’t believe I’ve met your friends before.”

“This is Seamus and Dean,” Harry said, “my boyfriends.”

Arthur’s kind smile didn’t fade at that news, though he did look surprised to hear Harry was in a relationship with both boys.

“It’s nice to meet you both. I’m Arthur Weasley.” A small pained expression crossed his features. “Fred and George told me the things Ron said to you three after the second task. I can only apologise for his attitude. I swear it didn’t come from me.”

“It’s alright Arthur. I don’t blame you for how Ron turned out.”

“Though if you can keep your wife from trying to marry our boyfriend off, that’d be great,” Seamus said, earning a light smack to his leg from Dean.

“Don’t be rude Seamus,” Dean chided.

“It’s quite alright. I understand your frustration. I had no idea Molly tried doing that until I received a summons from Gringotts to discuss the matter,” Arthur said.

“Speaking of Gringotts, we have some positive news on that front,” Sirius said, grinning, “somebody is now richer than he was before.”

“The money was reclaimed?” Harry asked.

“It was. All the goblins needed was proof that Dumbledore was your magical guardian. Given all of the other evidence we have of his actions against you, it was easy to reverse all his decisions regarding your money,” Sirius said.

“I was called in by the Weasley Account Manager. At first I thought I’d face sanctions because of what Molly did, but the Potter Account Manager was also there. They found the vaults that the payments to Molly, Ron and Ginny were going to and closed them down once the money had been reclaimed,” Arthur said, “all that’s left is my personal vault, which Molly also has access to, but I was able to put severe restrictions on that access from now on. I’m now fully in control of the Weasley finances.”

“That’s great news!” Harry said.

No doubt Mrs Weasley would not be happy when she found out. Neither would Ron, who always complained the loudest about how poor his family was.

“Sorry if this is a really rude question Mr Weasley,” Dean asked hesitantly, putting his book to one side, “but after everything she’s done and all the ways she’s gone behind your back, why don’t you just divorce her?”

“It’s not a rude question,” Arthur assured Dean kindly, “divorce isn’t a very common thing in the magical world, especially not amongst the noble families.”

“How come?” Harry asked, genuinely curious.

“Because of the nature of family magic and inheritance, magical people tend to be very cautious when it comes to voluntarily casting somebody out of a family, which is ultimately what divorce would do,” Sirius explained, “for most magical families it’s not so bad, but for the noble families, where there are often significant family magic and assets to be potentially fought over, any divorce proceedings must be brought before a representative from the Wizengamot, usually the Chief Warlock, and Gringotts for a judgement.”

“Since I never claimed my lordship, the issue of family magic is moot for me, but the Weasleys technically are a noble family,” Arthur said, “as Dumbledore is still currently the Chief Warlock, I don’t want to even consider bringing anything before him.”

“He won’t be Chief Warlock for long,” Seamus said, his head still in Harry’s lap, “Mam says it’s only a matter of time before he gets ousted.”

“Fudge is getting paranoid, especially since Dumbledore, for all his intelligence, is being remarkably stupid about how he’s going about things. Yes it’s important to spread the word about Voldemort’s return so we can all prepare, but there are better ways to go about it now that the Ministry has made its position clear. To keep making such sweeping public statements is just inviting trouble,” Sirius said.

“I’ve been thinking. Once this war is over, I don’t think I can fathom staying with Molly any longer,” Arthur said, “so that is when I have considered divorcing her and taking up my Lordship as I should have done years ago. To do that, I will need to declare an Heir. I spoke with Bill about this earlier and he is happy to take that responsibility. He’s also an accomplished cursebreaker working for Gringotts so he may be able to help you with the search for horcruxes. How is that going?”

“There’s only two left but they’re behind powerful wards so the goblins can’t find them,” Harry groaned, “we’re so close. Once they’ve been destroyed, Voldemort will be mortal. He can be killed for good.”

“I’m sure the goblins will find them,” Arthur reassured him, “they’re just as eager to be rid of him as the rest of us are.”

It was only a small reassurance. That the goblins can’t locate them implied that there were powerful protections at work, more so than was around the Gaunt cottage where the ring had been hidden. With Voldemort returned to his body, Harry worried that he would think to check on his horcruxes. How would he respond if he found out they were gone? Would he double down on the remaining ones, moving them to places the goblins could not reach?

These worries continued to plague him as he settled down for bed that night. Having his boys with him helped alleviate them to an extent but Dean noticed his mood once they’d changed into their pyjamas.

“It’ll be alright,” he said, “we’ll find them somehow. This time next year you’ll be free of that particular shadow and able to live your life completely freely.”

“I wish I had that level of confidence,” Harry said.

“You do. It just gets a little buried sometimes.”

Dean pulled him into bed, tucking Harry firmly against his chest. It felt nice to be held like this. They had a perfect view of Seamus coming out of the bathroom, dressed only in a pair of underwear.

“Really?” Dean asked.

“It’s been hot this summer!” Seamus said, “are you really going to complain? I seem to remember us all wearing significantly less than this the last time we slept together.

“I haven’t said anything. I’m just enjoying the view,” Harry commented.

“And that is why I’m going to cuddle Harry tonight.”

Seamus climbed in on Harry’s other side, the bed more than big enough for all of them. Dean pouted but then Seamus gave him a deep, utterly vulgar kiss. Harry felt the stirring in Dean’s loins from where it was pressed against his rear. They parted with a wet smacking sound, and Seamus settled in, pulling the covers up.

“That ... was not fair,” Dean said slightly breathlessly.

Seamus didn’t say anything and Harry couldn’t help laughing at the ridiculousness. The worries of the day drifted away as Harry fell into a peaceful sleep, safe in the arms of his boys.

There were only two weeks before Harry was due to return to Hogwarts. The Order met more frequently than they had at the start of the summer, and from what Sirius told him, the tidings were starting to turn darker.

“Kingsley said that the Dementors have been getting restless. They’re still obeying the Ministries commands, but the human guards at Azkaban have reported them not being as quick to do so. Petulant was the way they described them,” Sirius said, “Voldemort would give them a broader scope to feed and they know it.”

At that news, Harry was drilled on the Patronus Charm to make sure he could still do it, Sirius and Remus both determined that he would not be caught undefended. There had been whispers about Dementors being spotted in London, While unsubstantiated, these rumours made Mrs Weasley more determined to have eyes on Harry as much as possible, all so she could be sure he wasn’t sneaking out of the house. She forcefully asked that Harry share a room with Ron, and when she was denied, she then demanded to be given access to the second floor so she could check on him. Sirius didn’t even bother deigning that with a response.

It wasn’t just Dementors. The Order had investigated several suspicious events in the Muggle world. Rail lines had been damaged, a water treatment plant had to be shut down for weeks when contamination was found, and more than one Muggle had been found to be acting so

erratically and out of character that it could only be magical. The Death Eaters hadn't yet progressed to outright attacks, but Sirius said it was only a matter of time. The longer Fudge continued to deny it, the more comfortable they would feel with acting without consequence.

Of course, Harry knew all of this stuff but the other occupants of Grimmauld Place didn't. At dinners, Ron and Ginny continued to pester their mother for information. They had clearly picked up on the shifting mood of the adults. Mrs Weasley, very loudly and angrily, told them they were to be told nothing. Tempers were running high, so it was unsurprising to hear the crash one morning when Harry came down for breakfast, followed by Mrs Weasley's yelling.

Harry burst into the kitchen. Pieces of broken plates lay strewn about the floor at Ron's feet, while Ron looked slightly shocked. Mrs Weasley was glaring daggers at Fred, who uncharacteristically was glaring right back.

"Just because you're allowed to use magic now does not mean you have to whip your wands out for everything!" she screeched.

"I was only floating the plates to the table like you do every morning! It's not my fault Ron wasn't watching where he was going!"

"Don't you dare blame your brother for your irresponsible use of magic!"

"How else am I supposed to practise this stuff! It was going fine until Ron got in the way!"

Sirius sat at the head of the table, taking several deep breaths until eventually the arguing got too much.

"For Merlin's sake Molly, stop yelling. They're just some bloody plates!" he snapped. With a flick of his wand, the plates all reformed and rose up to rest in a stack on the table. "You're a witch. Act like it."

Mrs Weasley turned her glare on him but Arthur interjected before she could say anything.

"I quite agree, Sirius. There was absolutely no need for that Molly. Fred did nothing wrong," Arthur said sternly, "Ron, you need to pay attention to your surroundings."

"Arthur-" Mrs Weasley seethed.

"That's my final word on this."

Arthur sat down near Sirius, leaving a space for Harry to sit between them. Fred and George sat opposite, cutting off an eager looking Ginny and forcing her, Ron and Hermione further down the table. It was a slightly tense meal, and Harry had no doubt Kreacher would be making several more notes of dosing attempts in his log. The Elf had been very diligent in his duty to keep them safe, even going so far as to put the fear of God into the twins to keep them from trying to tamper with meals.

"This sucks," Fred said.

He, George and Harry had hidden themselves away in the twins' bedroom. Two potions were bubbling away in their cauldrons but other than that there were no experiments or tinkering. Fred lay flat on his bed, staring at the high ceiling, leaving George and Harry to sit on the other bed.

"We're adults now. She can't boss us around like this!"

"Only two more weeks and then we're at Hogwarts," George reminded him, "then after that we won't have to have anything more to do with her."

"If I could let you up to the private part of the house, I would," Harry said.

"No, you don't need to do that. Please don't take my moaning about our mother as me asking for that," Fred said, "George is right. We just need to hang on a little longer."

"It was good that Dad stood up for you. Hopefully he drops Mum like a sack of bricks when this is all over," George said.

"Maybe he could become Lord Weasley? He's told us a few stories of what Weasley Hall is like and I'm dead curious about it," Fred said.

"Can you imagine the look on Malfoy's face if he did that? I know the Weasley's were never on the same level as them but it'd be funny for dear little Draco to have to suddenly act like we were his peers," Fred said, "though speaking of Malfoy's, you said the Death Eaters are on the move?"

"The Order seems to think so. They said it's only a matter of time before they start getting more brazen," Harry said, "Fudge's head is so far in the sand, by the time it's too obvious to deny it'll be too late."

"Let's just hope we can end You-Know-Who before that happens," George said, "Bill's always saying that the goblins always succeed in the end when they set their minds on something."

Harry had met Bill a few days ago. Apparently he had moved to the London branch of Gringotts so he was back in the country to help the Order. While he missed the tombs, he said he was glad to spend some time with his family. From the hidden tension Harry saw when Bill interacted with his mother, Arthur had told him everything. There was a slight twitch every time Mrs Weasley criticised his appearance, but nothing was said.

"Though speaking of Bill, did you hear the news?" George said, a teasing grin on his face.

"News?"

"Yes! Word on the street is that Gringotts hired a new junior cursebreaker, a recent graduate from Beauxbaton. She's not in Bill's department, but he's been helping her improve her English," George said, "ring any bells?"

"Fleur got a job at Gringotts? That's fantastic!"

The last Harry heard she was still trying to find a job in England. Her family was very supportive of her decision, even if they missed her terribly, but Fleur said that if she hadn't found a job by the end of summer, she would search for somebody to take her on as an apprentice so she could pursue a Mastery in Ancient Runes. Harry would have to write to congratulate her.

"It is indeed, and we finally found what it took to break through eternal bachelor Bill Weasley's sky high walls. Just add a bit of Veela and he's smitten."

"He's not just attracted to her because of that though?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Oh no, Bill didn't even notice the first time they met. Apparently all of the other guys in the office had to shake themselves out of it but Bill was completely unaffected like the oblivious idiot he is. No no, he grew very fond of her for entirely non-Veela related reasons," Fred assured him.

That was good. He was glad that Fleur could find somebody who liked her without being distracted by the fact that she was a Veela.

"I wonder if Bill knows anything about horcruxes," Harry wondered aloud.

"He probably does, though it probably wouldn't be best to just outright ask him. If he knows, then Dad would have asked when he told him," George said.

"I just wish we could find the last two and be done with it," Harry admitted.

"Don't we all," George said, "but like I said, the goblins are on it and they'll get it done."

"Can't you use that fancy ritual to find them? The one you learned from Godric Gryffindor?" Fred asked, "or since you're Lord Slytherin, couldn't you somehow use that to find them? I mean, the horcruxes are bits of his soul, right? That means they're still part of him, just separated from his body."

Harry hadn't thought of either of these, however the more he considered them, he didn't think either would be particularly helpful. The Ritual of Remembrance would only allow him to view a magical memory of the place he was in, and it was extremely unlikely that Voldemort hid a horcrux here. As for using his power as Lord Slytherin to find them, whenever he'd delved into the Slytherin magic to view its members, his senses had been drowned out by Voldemort's main body. Apparently dissociated pieces of soul, even if they were larger, mattered less than the part that was thinking, feeling, and acting within a body.

It was only when Harry got ready for bed that he stopped. Even if the Ritual of Remembrance wouldn't help him find the horcruxes, he was still curious as to what it would show him. He could see what Sirius was like when he was a little kid. He retrieved his focus stone and stripped out of his clothes, lying on his bed with the stone on his chest, when doubt crept up on him.

Sirius had told him stories of what his family was like. While not every member did, most skewed towards the darker side of magic, and their attitudes ranged from ambivalent to

deeply prejudiced. The portrait of Sirius's mother, Walberga Black, that had once been permanently stuck to the hallway downstairs was a testament to the views of the Blacks in recent times. Did he really want to subject himself to that?

Harry thought about it some more and then shrugged off the doubt. Among his many titles, Harry was Heir Black. Whether he agreed with them or not, they were his family now too. If he was going to hold this title until Sirius either had a child of his own, or until Harry passed it onto his own child, he needed to know more of what the Blacks were like without the sanitisation that Sirius would apply. It may have been going behind Sirius's back slightly, but Harry decided to follow his Gryffindor side and dove right in.

The unknown yet important actions

Opening his eyes in the magical memory, Harry was met with a very familiar bedroom. This was the Heir bedroom, decorated in Gryffindor red and gold with posters of scantily clad men and women on the walls. It bore all the hallmarks of Sirius's handiwork, no doubt designed to piss his mother off as much as possible. There was a layer of dust on everything, implying that Sirius hadn't been here in some time. Harry floated through the door, allowing magic to guide him to what it wanted him to see.

The rest of the house was much like it was in the present day, though the atmosphere felt gloomier, more oppressive. It hadn't yet fallen into disrepair so Harry wasn't sure when exactly this was. The house was quiet. Harry couldn't hear anyone moving about. The lamps were off, meaning it was late at night. The layout of the house was different, but at least the landings were familiar. Harry looked down to the ground floor.

Light was spilling out into the hall from a room downstairs, so that was where Harry went. It was a drawing room, one that Sirius had tucked away in the private part of the house in the present. A fire crackled in the hearth, filling the room with warmth. A few lamps were also lit, allowing the lone occupant of the room to continue reading. He was a man a few years older than Harry, he guessed seventeen or eighteen. Black hair was slicked back, a style not dissimilar to what Harry had seen Malfoy wear. His robes were high end, clearly tailored to him. At first, Harry thought this was a younger, posher version of Sirius, but it couldn't be. Sirius had run away from home when he was sixteen and wouldn't have been caught dead acting so much like a pureblood. That meant there was only one person this could be.

This was Regulus Black, Sirius's younger brother.

Sirius often described Regulus as the son their parents wished was born first, and Harry could kind of see why. Even though nobody was around, and by all reckoning he was alone in the house, Regulus held himself with all the grace and nobility one would expect from a noble house. It seemed as easy as breathing, unlike Sirius who even now had to consciously maintain his more proper public mask.

It took a few minutes of shameless staring for Harry to realise that Regulus wasn't actually reading. A book was open in his lap and his eyes moved over the pages, but it didn't seem to be sinking in. The air was expectant, and Regulus occasionally glanced towards the clock. At 11:47pm, a time which didn't seem significant to Harry but must have done to Regulus, Regulus closed his book.

"Kreacher," he said calmly.

There was a loud crash and a splash. Kreacher appeared, soaking wet and thrashing his small limbs about. Harry could hear his croaking breaths as he moaned in pain. Regulus was shocked for all of a second before he rushed into action. He waved his wand over the Elf, casting spells to dry him off. Regulus scooped Kreacher up and raced up the stairs, Harry following behind him. The room they went into must have been Regulus's, the decorations

matching what Harry expected a Slytherin fanboy would have. Placing Kreacher down on the bed, Regulus rummaged through a trunk and pulled out various potions bottles.

It was only the knowledge that this was a memory and that Kreacher was still alive and well that gave Harry the strength to keep watching. Kreacher sounded positively wretched. He clearly wasn't seeing what was around, kept flinching and fighting against Regulus when he tried to help him. Regulus never once ordered him to stop though. He bore with the Elfs resistance patiently, tending to him with surprising care.

By the time the sun rose, Kreacher was sleeping soundly and Regulus packed his things away, settling in a chair beside the bed to wait. In the magical memory, it wasn't clear how much time passed, but eventually Kreacher stirred.

"Master Regulus?" he croaked.

"I am sorry this happened to you Kreacher," Regulus said.

"Kreacher followed Master Regulus's orders."

"You did, and you did a good job," Regulus said, "though had I known that the Dark Lord would have hurt you so much, I would have thought of something else, perhaps offered myself in your stead."

"No! Master Regulus should not! Kreacher will keep Master Regulus safe!"

Kreacher descended into a coughing fit, needing Regulus's help to take slow, calm sips of water. It was then that Kreacher noticed the time.

"Kreacher must attend to his duties. Mistress Walburga will be most displeased-"

"Mother is visiting Uncle Cygnus. She will return in three days' time," Regulus said, "you need to stay here and rest."

"But Master Regulus will need his breakfast."

"I am capable of fending for myself enough to allow you to recover," Regulus said, then more sternly, "I do not wish to order you Kreacher. Please do not make me."

Harry expected Kreacher to fight it, and the hesitance was clear in his eyes, but to his surprise, Kreacher sighed and lay down.

"If it is what Master Regulus wishes."

Regulus's face relaxed, a softer expression replacing the stern one.

It took a day for Kreacher to recover from whatever had been done to him. For Harry, this passed by in a series of images, far quicker than had he experienced it in real time. When things slowed down again, coming back into real time, Kreacher was hobbling around Regulus's bedroom when the man returned. He helped Kreacher into the seat, while Regulus sat on the edge of the bed.

“How are you feeling?” Regulus asked.

“Much better thanks to Master Regulus. The nasty potion has gone.”

Regulus frowned at that.

“Kreacher, this is very important.” Regulus looked deeply troubled. It made him look much older than his years. “I need you to tell me what the Dark Lord required a House Elf for.”

What followed was a harrowing tale, one which Harry may have dismissed for being too cruel had he not known it was Voldemort at the centre of it. Kreacher told Regulus about being brought to a cave on the shore, one which the waves crashed into strongly. He described a wide open cavern beyond containing an eerily still lake. Voldemort took the pair of them across on a boat, and Kreacher saw countless dead bodies floating in the water. In the centre of the lake was an island containing a stone basin full of a potion Kreacher didn’t recognise.

“The Dark Lord made Kreacher drink the potion. Kreacher did not want to. It made Kreacher terribly thirsty and he saw all sorts of horrible things, but the Dark Lord did not relent. When Kreacher finished, he put a silver locket in the basin and filled it with more potion. He left Kreacher on that island alone. Kreacher was so thirsty. He went to drink from the lake but then the dead people grabbed him and pulled him under,” Kreacher said, “Master Regulus called Kreacher home, so Kreacher came.”

Regulus looked incredibly disturbed, a feeling Harry mirrored.

“Can you describe the locket for me?” Regulus asked.

“It was made of silver,” Kreacher said, “Kreacher thinks he saw a small emerald in it, and possibly snake details.”

“Was it magical in any way?”

“Kreacher does not know. Kreacher had drunk the potion before the Dark Lord brought it out.”

“Could it be- did he turn that into one?”

Regulus stood, going over to his desk. From a hidden drawer, he pulled out countless sheets of notes, rifling through them.

“Master?”

“You must not tell anyone this Kreacher,” Regulus said authoritatively, “not Mother, not anyone from the family, and certainly not the Dark Lord.”

“Of course Master Regulus.”

“It must be,” Regulus muttered to himself, “why else would he go to such trouble just to hide a locket. It has to be important to him, but what could be so important to the Dark Lord? He

doesn't care about anything except his life, so it has to be. That monster actually made one."

"Master Regulus speaks of the Dark Lord in a strange way," Kreacher said, "why does Master Regulus think the Dark Lord is a monster?"

Regulus completely froze, eyes darting to peer through Harry at the closed door. For the first time since Harry had entered the magical memory, Regulus looked something other than calm. He looked young and scared.

"This is something else you must not tell anyone," he said, "but I fear that the Dark Lord has committed a grave sin and dabbled in some of the most evil magics in the world. I believe he has made a horcrux."

"A horcrux?"

"Killing another human being out of malice causes damage to the soul, splitting it in two. There is a spell that would then allow you to remove one of the pieces and house it in an external object, called a horcrux. While the horcrux remains, the wizard's soul cannot pass on, allowing him to linger on in this world even beyond death," Regulus said.

"So the Dark Lord has become immortal?" Kreacher said.

"In a sense. To make a horcrux is one of the most despicable things a wizard can do. The Dark Lord must not be allowed to live with this."

"But is this not a good thing? The Dark Lord will be able to lead the magical world back to the way it should be forever now," Kreacher said.

"Will he? Look at all he has done. The number of purebloods has fallen under his rule. The attitudes he endorses, that Mother and Father endorse, will only lead us all to wreck and ruin," Regulus said, "but the Dark Lord does not care for it. If he did, he wouldn't be so cavalier with killing his own forces when they displease him. He willingly removes magical blood from ancient lines with no thought to consequences. The MacKinnons, the Prewitts, all pureblood families brought to near or total extinction because of him."

"All Blood Traitors," Kreacher spat.

"I wonder about that," Regulus chuckled darkly, "I truly do."

Regulus stood and went over to the window. Harry felt the fear in him. He was absolutely terrified, but then Harry watched as Regulus drew himself up to his full height, his form full of resolution.

"We leave tonight," he said.

The memory changed, fast forwarding once again. Harry was alone in Regulus's bedroom, but he felt this wasn't where he was supposed to be. He rushed downstairs to the same drawing room as last night. Regulus stood at the hearth, reading through a letter. He nodded and folded it up tightly, placing it inside a plain locket. He wore much finer clothes than

earlier, and something in Harry knew that these were the finest clothes he owned. That was when Kreacher arrived.

“Master Regulus?”

“You have been a good Elf Kreacher. The best any wizard could ask for.”

“Kreacher lives to serve the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,” Kreacher said.

“Then I ask that you serve me one last time,” Regulus knelt down so he was eye to eye with Kreacher, “I need you to take me to the cave Voldemort brought you to.”

Kreacher’s eyes widened, filling with fear, but Regulus remained stoic. The Elf took one of Regulus’s hands and the pair of them disappeared with a crack. Harry was left alone. As he was viewing a memory from the magic of Grimmauld Place, he had no idea where they had gone. Time moved forward again, and for the first time since Harry started using the Ritual of Remembrance did he truly feel like it had been hours. It was almost a parallel to the tense air when he first arrived, Regulus waiting for Kreacher only now Harry was waiting for Regulus.

There was another crack and Kreacher reappeared. He immediately dropped to his knees, great heaving sobs wracking his small body. Hanging from a chain clutched in Kreacher’s hand was a silver locket. Two serpents were entwined on the front, wrapping around a small green emerald and an ornate S. There it was.

Harry didn’t want to watch any more, and thankfully the ritual did not force him to. He didn’t need to because like the previous times he used it, information came flooding to him. He knew that Kreacher, bound by Regulus’s order, could not tell Walberga where her son had gone. Kreacher had done all that he could to destroy the locket but nothing he tried had any effect. Each attempt only led to him punishing himself more and more harshly. Harry knew that the despair of it drove Kreacher mad until he drowned in it, the house falling into disrepair all around him. Sirius was imprisoned, Walberga died, leaving Kreacher alone with the failure to complete the final order his beloved master had given him.

Harry awoke with a start, breathing heavily. It took him a moment to realise the tears running down his cheeks. Everything he’d seen in the Ritual of Remembrance slotted into place, and the implications settled within him. Regulus had died, not because of cowardice, or because he failed in some mission Voldemort had given him, but so that he could end Voldemort’s life. He had retrieved a horcrux, without knowing about the others, and it was still here somewhere in Grimmauld Place.

The horcrux was here!

He bolted out of bed, hand gripping the door handle before he remembered he wasn’t wearing anything. Harry grabbed the nearest pair of pyjama shorts, pulled them on, and raced out the door, only to nearly barrel right into Sirius.

“Hold on there. Where’s the fire?”

Sirius's jolly expression dropped when he took in Harry properly.

"Harry? What's wrong?"

"A horcrux, one of the ones we couldn't find. It's here in Grimmauld Place."

"What the- but- don't be ridiculous."

Harry ignored him, pushing past him and into the private part of the house. From the tour Sirius gave him, he knew where Sirius had put many of the heirlooms that weren't immediately dangerous, and that was where he started. Voldemort may have put powerful curses on it as further protection, but Harry figured that part of the protection of a horcrux was anonymity. People weren't supposed to know it was horcrux when they found it, and a cursed locket may cause people to look further than they should.

The room was lined with cabinets along two of the walls, each one containing priceless jewellery and artefacts that the Black family had gathered over the centuries. Some had magical properties, good and bad, while others were just obscenely expensive or had a long, proud history. Harry hadn't entered this room before, but as soon as he stepped across the threshold, he could feel it.

"Harry, you're scaring me," Sirius said, catching up to him.

"It's here."

Part of his magic reached out, and Harry felt something weakly reach back. He followed that feeling to the cabinet furthest from the door. On the middle shelf, nestled neatly on a velvet cushion, was the locket. Now that he was seeing it in person not in a memory, Harry recognised the feeling he was getting from it.

"Slytherin's locket," Harry said, "he made a horcrux out of Slytherin's locket."

Sirius looked between Harry and the locket in the cabinet.

"Are you sure? Remus and I thought this was a wedding gift from the Selwyns."

"I can feel the Slytherin magic in it. The horcrux has tried to pervert it, but the magic is still there, fighting back against it."

Harry opened the cabinet, only for Sirius to pull him away. He cast a few spells at it, frowning more and more with each one.

"I'm only picking up traces of Dark magic, but given the properties Slytherin's locket was supposed to possess, the fact I can't even detect that is very suspicious," Sirius said, "how did you even know it was here?"

"I saw it in a magical memory," Harry said, "I- I wanted to know what I would see if I tried it here."

"And you managed to see the horcrux being brought here, but how?"

Sirius summoned a pair of dragon-hide gloves, carefully picking the locket up by its chain.

“Unless he gave it to one of his Death Eaters, like he did the diary and the cup, meaning it was my brother who brought it here.”

“It wasn’t-”

Before Harry had a chance to explain, the door creaked open. Whatever Kreacher was going to say didn’t come as he froze at the sight of Sirius holding the locket.

“Master Regulus’s locket,” he said.

“Kreacher,” Sirius started with a note of anger in his voice.

“Wait, Sirius, it’s not what you think!” Harry said.

He took a deep breath, not baulking when Sirius’s ire turned to him, and he explained everything he saw in the magical memory. The anger quickly left Sirius as he listened to what happened between Voldemort, Regulus and Kreacher. Kreacher inched closer and closer as he spoke, as though mesmerised by his words. Sirius’s arms hung limply at his sides. He let out a noise of grief when Harry said that Regulus and Kreacher left and only Kreacher returned.

“But Kreacher did not tell anyone! Kreacher obeyed his Masters orders so how did Master Harry find out?” Kreacher said, practically hyperventilating, “Kreacher did not tell Mistress Walberga when she grieved for her son. Kreacher did not tell Lord Black when he returned to the family. Master Regulus told Kreacher to not tell anyone, so Kreacher told no-one!”

“You didn’t disobey him or go against his order Kreacher,” Harry said, “magic wanted this knowledge to be known, so it showed me. You are still a good Elf.”

Tears pooled in Kreachers eyes.

“No, Kreacher is not a good Elf. Kreacher could not do what Master Regulus wanted,” he broke down in sobs, “Master Regulus told him to destroy the locket but Kreacher could not do it! Kreacher tried everything, he swears! Kreacher is a bad Elf!”

Harry dropped to his knees, pulling Kreacher into a hug. Kreacher wasn’t the sort of Elf who accepted affection from his masters, but he didn’t resist Harry’s attempt to hold him together as the old wound of Regulus’s death opened up once more.

“You are not a bad Elf Kreacher,” Sirius said hoarsely, “you did the best that you could. Nobody could expect anything more than what you did. I know for certain that Regulus would never have held it against you.”

Sirius then dropped to his knees, hugging both Harry and Kreacher tightly, his eyes screwed shut.

“You’re a fool,” Sirius said, “a stupid, idiotic bloody fool Reggie.”

It took a little while for them all to collect themselves. Sirius stood up again, scrubbing his face with his free hand. The other still held Slytherin's locket that Kreacher couldn't look away from.

"Kreacher, I need you to find a box we can seal this in," Sirius said.

"But it must be destroyed, Lord Black. Master Regulus ordered Kreacher to do it."

"And I swear to you that the evil sealed within will be destroyed. If the locket can be saved, then it will, but rest assured that Voldemort will be down one more horcrux after this," Sirius said.

Kreacher pulled himself up and disappeared, reappearing with a wooden box. Sirius put the locket inside and sealed it shut.

"What do we do now?" Harry asked.

"I will take this to Gringotts for the Goblins to handle. It's a precious heirloom of Salazar Slytherin. They will do all they can to cleanse it of the horcrux without destroying it, but they may have to," Sirius said, "*you* will stay here and get dressed. When I get back, you and I will be going out."

Harry bit back the request to go with him to Gringotts, seeing the look of grief in Sirius's face.

"Where are we going?"

"Haven't decided yet. Somewhere fun where nobody will bother us," Sirius said, "Kreacher, we'll be having dinner in the informal dining room tonight. I'm thinking beef wellington would be good. Have you had that before Harry?"

"I haven't."

"Even better," Sirius said, "now then. If you'll excuse me."

Sirius strode out of the room. Kreacher watched him go and chuckled beneath his breath.

"Master Regulus's favourite dinner."

Sirius returned an hour later and true to his word, he and Harry absconded from the house without telling anyone else. They apparated to somewhere in the north of England. It was a seaside town, the smell of salt and the sound of gulls in the air. It had arcade amusements, and they spent a few hours playing all the games there. Sirius proved to be a champion of the penny falls and Harry somehow managed to win a small plush fish in one of the claw machines. When they'd had enough of the games, they treated themselves to fish and chips for lunch.

They returned to Grimmauld Place through the private entrance. It had been a very good day, all things considered, and neither of them wanted to ruin it by interacting with Mrs Weasley. They stayed in the private part of the house. Harry found Sirius in the room containing the

Black family tree. The tapestry spanned several walls, wrapping around to show the line of Blacks throughout history. Sirius stood near the end of the tree. There was a small cluster of names there. A solid line connected Orion Black to Walberga Black, and from them were connected two other names: Sirius Orion and Regulus Arcturus. The canvas around Sirius's name seemed slightly scorched.

"My dear old mother had a habit of trying to tamper with this," Sirius said, tapping the scorches, "anyone who she felt was cast out of the family, she would try and blast their names from the family tree. Blood Traitors did not deserve to be part of the grand lineage of the Blacks, she said. The madness must have settled in by then, because all of her attempts failed."

"You weren't cast out of the family?" Harry said.

"Socially, financially, I was, aside from my personal vault and some money Uncle Alphard left for me. It was the same with Andromeda. There is a ritual a family head can use to cut somebody off from the family more permanently. It would be like they were never there until the family head performed a reverse ritual to welcome them in," Sirius said, "whether my mother didn't know it, couldn't get Lord Arcturus to perform it, or if in her madness she just didn't think of it, the ritual never happened."

"He seemed very calm and collected when I saw him," Harry said, indicating Regulus's name on the tapestry.

It earned a small snort from Sirius.

"That he definitely was. Reggie was never one for grand shows of emotion, even when we were little kids. He wasn't very impulsive either, which means he had been planning on destroying Voldemorts horcruxes for a while," he said, "Merlin's beard Reggie. I was so angry when I heard he had taken the Dark Mark, but also devastated. He was my baby brother and never had I felt like I'd failed him quite as much as I did then. If only he felt he could have reached out to me, maybe things would have been different."

"We don't know what protections Voldemort had in that cave. Maybe neither of you would have come back alive," Harry said.

"That's true. When this is all over and the book inevitably gets written, I'm making sure that Regulus's part is known. He doesn't deserve to be remembered as just another one of Voldemorts Death Eaters."

They tucked into beef wellington for dinner in the informal dining room. According to Kreacher, Mrs Weasley was quite incensed that she hadn't seen them at all, but neither of them particularly cared. Harry ate his food, which was delicious, while trading stories with his godfather. When he went to bed, he sent messages through his necklace to his boyfriends, telling them what they'd found.

He opened his eyes in the Ring Realm. It had been a while since he'd been here, his mind usually so busy and hectic that he never found the right time to centre himself to come.

James, Godric and Salazar stood before him. James gave him a warm smile, and Godric his usual boisterous wave, but Salazar looked grave.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think he would have made a horcrux out of your locket,” Harry said.

“You do not need to apologise, Lord Potter. You are not the one at fault here. That entirely lies with my despicable idiot of a descendent,” Salazar said, “as if defiling Helga’s cup with his filth wasn’t bad enough, he tried tainting an heirloom of his own house!”

“I just hope the Goblins will be able to cleanse it like they did with Hufflepuffs cup,” Harry said, “but I think the soul piece in the locket may have been bigger so I’m not sure.”

“We will have to trust the Goblins. Their skill over metalwork and artificing is unparalleled,” Godric said.

“Indeed. The locket’s purpose will also be of help in that regard,” Salazar said.

“What was the locket’s purpose? I’ll admit, you guys are almost mythical figures so there’s not a whole lot that’s actually accurately recorded,” James said, “I didn’t even know you had a locket that was worth all this attention.”

“The locket was originally a gift for dear Erin on our wedding day. She wore it ever since until her time came to move on from this world,” Salazar said, “she died many, many years before I did, a victim of a horrible curse.”

“I’m so sorry,” Harry said.

“Thank you. I did not wish for anyone to suffer as she did, so I turned my attention to my gift to her that she loved so dearly. I used my knowledge of dark magic and my skill in healing to imbue the locket with a powerful enchantment. Never again would it contain tiny mementos of loved ones. Instead, when worn, the locket would draw in and contain any curse the wearer is afflicted by so that they may be cured. Once the curse was completely drawn out, the locket would then slowly and harmlessly release it back into the natural magic, effectively neutralising it,” Salazar said.

“That seems very powerful,” James said.

“It was my friends. I remember well the day that Salazar saved my life with it,” Godric said.

“So I do not believe we should be too worried. I highly doubt that the locket would be able to neutralise a piece of soul, I never envisioned that being its function, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the soul fragment became inadvertently trapped within it. With any luck, the Goblins will be able to cleanse it without damage. However, I’d rather it be destroyed than continue to house my descendants soul.”

“I’m more concerned with why he thought it would be a good idea to do that in the first place? I mean, it’s an heirloom of his own family! Surely he’d want to flaunt that!” James said.

“The more one splits their soul, the more of themselves they lose,” Salazar said.

“It is concerning but I feel that there is a connection we are missing,” Godric said, drawing all attention to him, “discounting young Harry, the horcuxes we know about are his childhood diary, the ring of his family house, the cup of Hufflepuff and the locket of Slytherin. The diary and the ring are things which are tied directly to him, but the cup and the locket are less so.”

“He was the Heir of Slytherin so that’s probably why he felt entitled to the locket,” Salazar said.

“Yes, but clearly he did not know the full extent of your locket as he so brazenly turned it into a horcrux. I feel that he did not use it for its magical power but rather what it represented.”

“He used it because it was a relic of Salazar Slytherin, just like the cup is a relic of Helga Hufflepuff,” James said.

“Exactly!”

“Being an Heir to a founder may have made him feel like he was owed the rest. As far as we know, there were no other founders Heirs present at the time so he may have felt like he deserved to have it all as the only one remaining,” James said.

“And he’s planning something with Hogwarts. We don’t know what but Sirius said he’s turning his sights to the castle,” Harry added.

“If he used something from me and Helga, then it stands to reason that the remaining horcrux is either something from Godric or Rowena,” Salazar said.

“The only thing which could be considered mine is my sword,” Godric said, “everything else should still be at Gryffindor Castle, which Voldemort would not have access to.”

“Then we should consider Rowena. You and I both know what he would use,” Salazar said.

“Surely he wouldn’t. The benefits he would gain from keeping it whole and pure would far outweigh what he would get from making it a horcrux.”

“But as we both know, stories tend to get distorted and exaggerated over time. Who’s to say that anyone alive today would even believe them?”

“Care to share with the rest of the class?” James cut in.

“Yeah, you lost us both.”

Godric and Salazar shared a look before answering them.

“Rowena was a most remarkable witch. Her contributions to the store of magical knowledge cannot be understated, but she was not known for her magical artefacts with one major exception,” Godric said, “her diadem.”

“Rowena’s diadem was enchanted to improve mental processing. When worn, it would allow the wearer to clearly think and focus on the task at hand. Many who wore it claimed that it

offered perfect insight, or granted wisdom, but these are simply the explanations of those who didn't understand. The diadem could not give knowledge that you didn't already have, but it could allow you to access that knowledge with perfect clarity," Salazar said, "if there is anything of hers that Voldemort would use for a horcrux, it would be that."

"But alas, we do not know what became of it after Rowena's daughter Helena stole it," Godric said, "and we do not know where Voldemort may have hidden it once it was found."

It wasn't the best news to hear, but it was more than Harry had when he went to sleep. At least now they knew what they were looking for. Harry thanked the pair of them. With only a single horcrux remaining, the end was in sight. Hopefully soon, Voldemort would be defeated for good, and Harry could turn his attention to dismantling Dumbledore's influence. After that, he could enjoy a quiet, normal life with Seamus and Dean.

It was so close Harry wanted to race forward, but he knew he needed to be patient. Wars weren't won in a single day, and if Voldemort could be defeated so easily he never would have made it this far. All Harry could do was trust that as they kept moving forward, they were moving in the right direction along the path that would lead towards peace.

Pink omens for the coming year

As soon as he woke up the next morning, Harry told Sirius about what he learned in the Ring Realm. He agreed that it was good to know what they were looking for, but there was still the issue that they couldn't find it behind whatever wards were blocking the Goblin scans. Sirius and Remus promised that they would research Ravenclaw's lost diadem to try and find any clues as to its whereabouts. If they could follow the trail that Voldemort did, then maybe they could figure out what he then did with it.

August carried on, with only a week to go before they returned to Hogwarts. Harry felt the disk of his necklace warm against his skin. It was a message from Dean to the both of them.

"Heads up. Hogwarts letters have arrived."

Harry had been wondering when they'd get there. They were usually earlier than this. Harry pressed his disk to his lips, sending a message of thanks back to him.

When he went downstairs for breakfast, Mrs Weasley was bustling away at the stove, preparing her usual enormous spread. Sirius was at his place at the head of the table, frowning as he read through a few letters. The only other person there was Ron, who had a very delighted look on his face. He grinned when he saw Harry.

"Hogwarts letters are here. Go on, open it!"

He thrust Harry's letter to him, looking expectant. Harry took it, sitting down next to Sirius and opening it up. It contained the usual instructions about the date and time of departure from the Hogwarts Express, as well as the booklist for this year. Most of the books were expected. For Defence Against the Dark Arts, they had been assigned a book called Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard, meaning they must have found a new teacher for this class. There wasn't a new book for Study of Ancient Runes, but for Arithmancy there was Spell Composition. Professor Vector said they would begin spellcrafting in sixth-year so this book probably laid the foundation for that.

When he finished reading through it all, he looked up to see Ron looking very confused.

"Is that all?"

"Were you expecting anything else?" Harry said.

"I just thought you would be made Quidditch Captain. I mean, since I got-"

"Ron's been made a prefect!" Mrs Weasley piped up, just as everyone else filed in for breakfast, "that makes everyone in the family now!"

"So that makes us next door neighbours?" Fred muttered darkly, scowling as he and George sat down next to Harry.

“Oh, we’ll have to get you something nice to celebrate, and a party! Yes, we’ll have a party tonight!”

“That’s fantastic news Ron!” Hermione said, a gleaming prefect badge already pinned to her own chest. She turned in her seat to face Harry, “you’re not mad Harry?”

“Do I look mad?”

“It’s just that this is a really important honour that Ron’s been given. It wasn’t his fault so you shouldn’t blame him.”

“Have you heard me complaining?”

“Now Harry, there’s no need to be rude just because Ron was made a prefect and not you,” Mrs Weasley said, bustling about as she served the food, still all smiles at the news.

“I seriously could not care less about being made a prefect,” Harry said.

And that was completely true. Harry had no desire to be a prefect. It was a responsibility he did not want, but as he ate his breakfast, he couldn’t help thinking about it more. If he didn’t want the role, then there was no way that Ron did. More to the point, who in their right mind would choose *Ron* to be the fifth year boys prefect. There were way better choices out there. Neville was really kind and approachable. He’d do great at helping the first-years. There was also Dean, who was calm and sensible, always good as the voice of reason. Either of them would likely do a better job, so why had Ron been chosen?

He caught Sirius’s eye and the look his godfather gave him made him understand. This had Dumbledore written all over it. By giving the prefect positions to Ron and Hermione, they would have a level of authority over Harry. Whether Dumbledore wanted them to boss him around, or else use it as a way to insinuate their way back into his life, was unclear, but Harry inwardly scoffed at the idea. This was going to be a disaster.

“When are we going to Diagon Alley Mum?” Ginny asked, “with all of us here, there’s a lot to buy.”

“Hmm, I’ll need to check in with the Order to arrange some guards for us. It’ll probably be in a few days’ time,” Mrs Weasley said.

As much as he would have loved to go shopping with his boyfriends, he also didn’t want to subject them to Mrs Weasley if at all possible. When they asked him when he was going, he told them honestly that he didn’t know but that they shouldn’t wait for him. It took a little convincing but eventually they agreed.

The trip to Diagon Alley happened five days later, only two days before they were due to return to Hogwarts. Mrs Weasley was up early, yelling her way up and down the stairs. Harry sat with Sirius in the public living room, listening to her try and corral her children along with her ‘very busy’ schedule. Ron and Ginny were still getting ready and it was driving her mad. Various Order members had arrived to act as their guards. Tonks winked at him while

Kingsley politely nodded. Bill pulled both Fred and George into a headlock when they came downstairs, extracting promises from them that they'd behave.

"Alright, we're all here!" Mrs Weasley announced when Ron and Ginny finally appeared, "each person will be apparating to the Leaky Cauldron with an Order member. Fred and George-

"We can apparate ourselves," Fred said.

Mrs Weasley pursed her lips.

"We have our licenses," George said, staring his mother down.

"I'll be right behind them. It'll be fine," Bill said calmly.

"Alright, fine. Fred and George will take themselves. Tonks will take Ron and Kingsley will take Hermione. I've got Ginny and Harry-

"I will be taking Harry," Sirius said, putting his arm around Harry's shoulders.

"Ok, Harry, you can go with Sirius."

It was amusing the way she made it sound like she was giving them permission. One by one, Mrs Weasley let them out onto the front step. The remaining Order members, Dedalus Diggle and Emmeline Vance, went first, followed by Fred, George and Bill. Sirius pulled Harry closer and with a twist they appeared in a large empty room. Harry could hear the sounds of people somewhere close by. Sirius moved them to the side of the room. He realised why when a moment later, Ron and Tonks appeared, joining them at the side as Hermione Kingsley arrived, followed swiftly by Mrs Weasley and Ginny.

"Come on then. To Gringotts!" Mrs Weasley declared.

Harry and Sirius walked at the back of the group of Weasley's, allowing the redheads to carve a path through the busy crowd as they made their way towards the white marble building.

"Do we really need to go with them?" Harry asked quietly, "we've both got our pouches."

"I need to exchange for some Muggle money, which I can only do here. I've also got a letter for the Black Account Manager which I might as well give while we're at the bank," Sirius said, "besides, don't you want to see their faces when they realise you reclaimed your money?"

Mrs Weasley had reached the front of the queue, approaching a Goblin teller and demanding money from the Weasley vault. Sirius and Harry approached a different Goblin much more calmly, and while Sirius finished his business, Harry listened in. Mrs Weasley was red-faced, struggling to keep her voice at a quiet screech.

"What do you mean there's not enough? There should be more than enough money for this!"

"I am sorry madam. Unless you would like to take out a loan, I can only process the amount that is currently in your vault," the teller said dispassionately.

Mrs Weasley grimaced, then leaned in closer to the teller.

"But what about my *personal* vault? That should more than cover the rest."

"I am afraid there is no personal vault in your name. The only vault you have access to is the personal vault of Arthur Weasley, which does not have the amount you are requesting."

"What do you mean-"

Mrs Weasley cut herself off, her lips pursed and her face set. She glanced about where the customers behind her were trying to see what the hold up was. In fear of making a scene, she accepted what she was being give.

"Will that be all today, Lord Black?" the teller Sirius was speaking with said.

"Other than the show, I think that's everything," Sirius said, eyeing the irate Mrs Weasley with carefully hidden joy, a look which was mirrored by the Goblin.

They regrouped at the bottom of the steps leading up to Gringotts.

"Mum, what did he mean that the vault's empty? Are we broke?" Ron asked.

"You don't need to worry about that. There's just a small issue with the Goblins that I'll have your father come down and sort," Mrs Weasley said.

Meaning she'll try and browbeat Dumbledore into sending them more money, Harry thought.

"Alright. I think we should go and get books first before splitting up to get the rest," Mrs Weasley decided, already striding off towards Flourish and Blotts.

Sirius held him back.

"It's already going to be mad enough shopping in a big group like that, and I am not giving any of them the chance to try and cajole you into buying things for them, especially now that they've learned about their new financial position. They've already stolen enough money from you," Sirius said.

Instead of following the rest to buy their books, Harry and Sirius first went to Madam Malkin's to get new school robes. While he probably wouldn't be as tall as he should have been, Harry was still encouraged by the few inches of height he had managed to gain courtesy of regular meals and exercise. Madam Malkin was as efficient as ever, taking his measurements and making fittings to a full set of robes. They also visited a few other clothes shops to get more casual wear and new shoes.

When they were done shopping for clothes, Sirius shrunk down the packages and Harry put them in his bag. They dropped by Eelops Owl Emporium for treats for Hedwig, before swinging by the apothecary for Potions ingredients.

“I’ve never been a huge fan of these places,” Sirius commented as Harry browsed for what he needed, “the smell really irritates my nose.”

“You didn’t have to come in with me. I know what I need.”

“And give that lot an excuse to complain because I left you alone? Not a chance.”

Fortunately, Harry knew what he needed and he was done quickly. Back outside in the fresh air, Kreacher appeared. Some magical ingredients didn’t react well to being shrunk, so Kreacher agreed to take them. The Elf turned his nose up at the state of the Alley but took the ingredients without complaint.

“Robes, treats, ingredients,” Sirius checked off, “what’s next? Just books?”

“I think so?” Harry checked his list, “my cauldron should still be fine for another year or so, and I got a new telescope last year, so it’s just books left.”

“Then let’s get going, because I know you’ll want to browse for additional reading while we’re there,” Sirius said.

Sirius looked around at the crowds wandering about Diagon Alley.

“Why couldn’t they have sent out the lists earlier than this? I hate it when it’s so busy.”

“They probably had to wait until they found a new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor,” Harry said.

“Then they should have sent out the list earlier as it was with either a note saying the Defence book was to be determined, or they should have covered the cost of it themselves,” Sirius said, “I wonder if it’s really worth the hassle.”

As they approached Flourish and Blotts, they saw a small crowd forming near the entrance to the Alley.

“This probably isn’t good,” Sirius said, pushing his way forward, Harry struggling to follow.

Just inside Diagon Alley, not three steps away from the brick archway connecting to the Leaky Cauldron, a woman was arguing with a short, squat woman in the most vivid pink robes Harry had ever seen. The taller woman’s two children were behind her, with the teenage girl holding her younger brother closely.

“I really must insist on you showing some identification,” the pink woman said, her voice soft and almost girlish.

“And I’m telling you, you have no right to ask that of me!”

“I am the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic, so you’ll find that I do have that right,” the pink woman said, “now you will tell me how you got into our Alley, or I will have to have you escorted out.”

“There will be none of that,” Sirius said, moving to stand between the two women.

“Lord Black,” the pink woman said with a small sneer, taking in Sirius’s Muggle clothes, “this does not concern you.”

“You’re causing an unnecessary disturbance when we’re all trying to go about our business Dolores, so it does concern me,” Sirius said.

Harry hadn’t seen Sirius acting as Lord Black before, but it was clear to see now. Sirius projected an air of unbothered attitude that somehow still oozed class.

“I was merely trying to determine how this *Muggle* was able to enter Diagon Alley so as to mitigate a potential breach in our security,” the pink woman said.

“Clearly at least one of her children is magical. How else would she have gotten in,” Sirius said.

He pointedly turned his back on the pink woman to address the small family.

“May I ask how you came here? Did you come through the pub?” Sirius asked kindly.

“We did. Both my children can do magic. Milly is going into her sixth-year and Seth will be starting his first,” the woman said.

“Really?” Sirius said. He knelt down so he was at Seth’s level. “I bet you’ve been really excited hearing all the stories your big sister’s been telling you. What class are you looking forward to the most?”

The boy, Seth, looked very nervous, glancing up at his mum and big sister.

“Herbology,” he said quietly.

“Seth loves helping our Gran in her garden,” the sister, Milly, said, “but he’s also excited to fly.”

“Flying’s a load of fun, especially once you get the hang of it. Has your sister told you about Quidditch?” Seth nodded. “My godson plays Quidditch.”

“Really?” Seth said, his nerves abandoned as his eyes lit up.

“He does. I’m sure if you practise really hard, you’ll get to play too.”

Sirius smiled at Seth, then stood to his full height and faced the pink woman. His mask fell back over his face, his expression disdainful as he stared her down.

“As you can see Dolores, these are magical children, meaning they and their parents have just as much right to be here as you do,” Sirius said, “I will have to see if your challenging constitutes harassment. If it does, you’ll be hearing from me, and I had better not find out you’ve done this to anyone else.”

“Is that a threat, Lord Black?” the pink woman said.

“I’d never do something as crass as threaten you. No, no, that was a promise. Please leave before you disturb our day any more.”

The dismissal was clear. The pink woman glared up at Sirius, somehow attempted to sneer down her nose at him despite the fact she was significantly shorter, before she stormed off. When she was gone and the spectators dispersed, Harry joined his godfather.

“Odious woman,” Sirius commented, then to the family, “sorry about that. Apparently some people never learned proper manners.”

He held his hand out to the mother.

“Sirius Black, a pleasure.”

“Fran Richardson,” she said, shaking his hand, “that woman called you Lord Black?”

“Ah yes, I have something of a high position in our parliament, I suppose that’s the best way to describe it,” Sirius said, “but I’m off duty right now, or I should be unless some people decide to be rude.”

“We’ve been coming here for the last five years to get Milly’s school supplies and we’ve never been challenged before,” Fran said.

“And nor should you be. As I said, you’ve got the same right to be here as I do,” Sirius said.

“Thank you for standing up for us. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if we got kicked out, what with the letters being sent out so late,” Fran said.

She spotted Harry standing there.

“Are you Mr Black’s godson?”

“I am,” he held out his hand to her, “I’m Harry.”

Fran shook it and so did Milly.

“Milly Richardson, sixth-year Hufflepuff,” she introduced herself, “I saw you last year in the tournament.”

“That was you,” Fran said with wide eyes, “Milly told me all about that. I couldn’t believe they would do something like that at a school!”

“Did you really beat a dragon?” Seth asked, eyes wide with wonder.

“I did. It was quite scary but I managed to get through it in one piece,” Harry said.

“It’s hard to imagine all the things you kids do at Hogwarts. Milly tries to write as often as she can, but we live in a block of flats so we don’t want it to look suspicious if an owl keeps

flying back and forth,” Fran said.

“You can apply for a special ward to be placed on your property so that others won’t notice the owls,” Sirius said. He took some spare parchment and scribbled down an address. “Send a letter here and somebody should come out and set it up. That way you can stay in touch with your children without fear of awkward questions or accidentally exposing anything. That address should be flagged as magical in the Muggle post system.”

“Thank you so much. That helps ease my mind,” Fran said.

Seth tucked himself against his mothers side.

“Can we go shopping now?” he asked.

“Of course darling. I think we could do with a treat first,” Fran said, “thank you again Mr Black.”

They waved the family off, watching them as they disappeared into the crowds of Diagon Alley.

“Who was that woman?” Harry asked.

“Dolores Umbridge. She works for the Ministry, somehow managing to rise higher and higher despite not really being the best. Probably knows how to say the right words in the right ears to promote herself,” Sirius said.

“She didn’t seem all that fond of you.”

“Because she’s a blood supremacist who doesn’t like that Muggle customs have started creeping into the magical world. I’m wearing jeans, when in her mind as a Lord I should be in resplendent robes. Don’t ask Remus about her unless you want to listen to an impassioned rant about her opinions on anything even slightly less than fully human,” Sirius said, “it’s probably for the best if you don’t draw her attention. She can be vicious if she finds somebody to sink her teeth into.”

They finally made it to Flourish and Blotts. The morning rush had eased somewhat, letting Harry more easily navigate the cramped bookshop. Sirius carried his schoolbooks while Harry browsed the shelves, selecting a few books on more advanced Transfiguration, spellcrafting and Ritual Magic. They paid for them all, shrinking them down and putting them in his bag. Even though they’d only been shopping for a few hours, Harry felt quite tired. The confrontation with Umbridge and the reminder that there were people beyond Voldemort and his Death Eaters who believed things like that irked him.

More than that, when he looked around at the people going about their daily lives, he wondered how they could be so calm. Voldemort was out there somewhere, biding his time before he acted. Even if they didn’t believe that, Fudge was smearing somebody who up till a few months ago had been almost universally beloved. Despite that, the general public seemed wholly unconcerned, and Harry wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

“Fancy an ice cream?” Sirius asked.

“Could- could we go home?”

Sirius looked him in the eye.

“Of course.”

A quick apparition later, they were stepping through the back door to the private part of Grimmauld Place. Kreacher greeted them, guiding them to the informal dining room where he served them a delicious lunch.

“You seemed a bit melancholy when we left,” Sirius said.

“I just- none of them seemed worried at all,” Harry said, “if they believe Dumbledore, then why are they not worried about Voldemort? But if they believe Fudge instead, why are not worried that somebody they looked up to for long is trying to stir up trouble?”

“They probably are worried about these things, and many others besides. That doesn’t mean that they stop going about their lives,” Sirius said, “a group is very different to individuals. An individual may be capable of thinking through the various streams of information they receive and coming to a conclusion, but a group can’t think like that. There’s always an element of peer pressure. Humans are social creatures, so if nobody else in the group is worried, then why should they be?”

“That’s dumb,” Harry said.

“A word which describes the human race quite well I’ve found.”

The sound of the front door opening and many voices speaking loudly over one another heralded the return of the Weasley’s. Ron carried a long thin package that Harry recognised as a broom, complaining about not being able to buy broom polish. Ginny was likewise complaining about having to get second hand robes *again*. Hermione already had her head buried in one of her new books, and she snapped at the people around her not to disturb her. Fred and George slipped away as soon as they could.

“Harry!” Mrs Weasley exclaimed when he came down to dinner that evening, “where were you? We didn’t see you at all today.”

“Sirius and I decided to start with the other things on my list since Flourish and Blotts was really busy. I guess we just kept missing each other, and when we bought all my stuff we came home.”

“And when we all came home as well? You didn’t sneak out of the house again?”

“Leave him be Molly. He was clearly just upstairs,” Arthur said wearily.

“Well I wouldn’t know because Sirius refuses to allow me up there!” Mrs Weasley snapped, “for all we know, Harry could have gone off on his own without any supervision or protection!”

“I was in my room sorting out my new things,” Harry said, which was all perfectly true.

“I’ve told you before Molly why you can’t go upstairs but by all means, keep trying,” Sirius said, “if the house wards deem your attempts to be a threat, I won’t be the one explaining to Dumbledore why the Den Mother was kicked out of headquarters.”

“There we have it. Harry was in the house, so do not go accusing him of things,” Arthur said firmly.

Mrs Weasley did not look at all happy about being ganged up on by Sirius and Arthur. Harry checked Kreacher’s logs later to find that she had tried dosing all three of them to make them compliant. When Sirius saw that, he swore.

“With all this evidence, she’ll be lucky to see the outside of a cell in Azkaban. Not only is she trying to dose you, but she’s also trying to dose the head of her family *and* the head of a different family. All three are serious crimes.” He rubbed his hands together with glee. “I can’t wait until we bring the hammer down on her.”

The next day was full of commotion. It was August 31st, meaning they would be leaving for Hogwarts the next day, and Mrs Weasley was determined they would all be packed and ready to go on time tomorrow morning. Harry was more than happy to pack his things away. It was the perfect excuse to get away from them all. While the trunk he bought when he was eleven still worked fine, Sirius had bought him a new one since he had more to pack than previous years. It had three separate compartments; one for clothes, one for books, and one for everything else. Between him, Sirius and Kreacher, Harry got everything packed by lunch time.

Knowing that downstairs would still be utter chaos, Harry settled in on his bed to read. Following Sirius’s advice, he decided to start with Defensive Magical Theory to try and get a feel for what the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was like. What he found was shocking to say the least.

The first chapter was full of flowery language, promising a comprehensive guide to the theory behind defensive magic and offering suggestions for how to handle difficult situations, but the following chapters? Harry skimmed through the pages and did not find a single reference to any specific defensive spells. It was all generalities, like "shield spells", or "spells to incapacitate". In short, nothing that would actually help them if they had to put these suggestions into practice.

Then there were the opinions sprinkled throughout. Most of the time it wasn’t too bad, but Slinkhard clearly had thoughts about magic that became very obvious very quickly. The chapter on magical creatures was a thinly veiled excuse for Slinkhard to opine about how savage such creatures were and how they could never hope to match up to the intelligence of a full blooded human. When discussing techniques for de-escalation without resorting to

magic, Slinkhard made comments that when dealing with Muggleborns, there was hardly any worth drawing your wand at all.

Harry slammed the book closed and went to find Sirius. This was his OWL year and he was determined to do well. There was no way he was going to be learning Defence Against the Dark Arts from such an awful textbook. Sirius was in his office when Harry burst in, immediately stopping what he was doing when Harry told him about the book. Harry even showed it to him, and Sirius's frown deepened as he skimmed through it.

"Lady Longbottom told me that Dumbledore had more trouble than usual finding somebody to take the Defence Against the Dark Arts job. Fudge pushed through Educational Decree Number 22 giving the Ministry the authority to appoint somebody if the Headmaster is unable to, which they apparently used here," Sirius said, "clearly this person has a very hard-line way of thinking."

"I know it sounds selfish but I really want to do well on my OWLs, and I know loads of other people do as well. This isn't fair!"

"No it isn't." Sirius thought for a moment. "There's three things I can suggest. The first, and worst, is to stick with it. It's possible that whoever the Professor is, they may be a good teacher even with the awful prejudices."

Harry grimaced.

"Understandable. The second option is to sign up for an OWL correspondence from the Ministry in Defence Against the Dark Arts," Sirius said.

"Correspondence course?"

"Mhm. Not everyone in magical Britain attends Hogwarts. To help those being taught at home, the Department of Magical Education has set up a correspondence program to support their studies. Basically, lectures are recorded and sent out to the student, along with assignments. The student then completes them and sends them back. That way they can still complete their official education even without going to Hogwarts."

"What's the third option?"

"The third option is to sign up for a different correspondence course, this time from the International Confederation of Wizards," Sirius said, "most education systems either match the ICW standards or are close enough they're still transferable."

"What would you suggest?"

"Personally I'd go with option three. An ICW correspondence course is more expensive than a Ministry one, but given the direction the Ministry is going, I don't trust that they won't try and interfere with it somehow," Sirius said.

"Will I even be allowed to take a correspondence course if I'm still at Hogwarts? It feels like it defeats the purpose of going to school."

“Of course you will. There’s something in the Hogwarts charter about it. It happens every now and again that somebody wants to take a course not offered at Hogwarts so if they have their guardians permission, they can take it via correspondence,” Sirius said, “it would only be disallowed if the student was taking more than half of their classes that way, but since you would only be taking one, it’s fine.”

“Two,” Harry said, “if I’m going to do this, I want to take History of Magic by correspondence as well.”

“Really?”

“I told you, I want to do well in my OWLs even if I don’t carry the subject on to NEWTs. There’s no way I can do that with Professor Binns teaching me.”

“That’s completely understandable,” Sirius said, clapping his hands together, “right then. One ICW correspondence course in Defence Against the Dark Arts and History of Magic coming up! Let’s get this letter written.”

Together they wrote the letter to the ICW Education Department. Sirius said the letter would be taken to Gringotts, who would then have it instantaneously transferred to the ICW headquarters in Switzerland. That way they wouldn’t be waiting ages for a reply.

It was a small reassurance when Harry went to bed that night, knowing that whatever ended up happening, he had a decent chance of getting a good grade in his OWLs. Though as he changed into his pyjamas, he felt slightly guilty that he was doing this alone. Perhaps he should have asked if his friends could join him in this? Harry would just have to wait and see what the Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor was actually like first. If they were terrible, he was more than willing to help his friends to study so they could also do well.

The disk on his necklace warmed up. Harry smiled, pulling it out from his pyjama top. Both segments were warm.

“See you both on the train,” Dean said.

“Can’t wait to see you two,” Seamus said.

Harry’s heart swelled and he quickly sent his own messages back. That was one positive of going back to Hogwarts. He would get to spend even more time with his boyfriends, and without even having to dodge around Ron and Hermione. Harry could only hope that these were signs he’d have a somewhat normal year this year.

Fifth year begins

The first of September was, as could easily be predicted, absolute chaos. The Order had been called in once again to escort Harry and the others to the train safely, but despite them not needing to leave until 10:30, the madness started at 8. Mrs Weasley stomped up and down the stairs, yelling at everyone to finish getting ready. Ron hadn't finished packing yet, which both Mrs Weasley and Hermione got at him for. He could be heard moaning that he just wanted to relax and not worry about it.

Fred and George decided to help him along by putting illusions of spiders in his clothes. The sound of his screaming when they all came tumbling out was even louder than Mrs Weasley.

Harry came downstairs to find Mrs Weasley distinctly red faced and harassed. Breakfast was a simpler fare as Mrs Weasley didn't have the time to make a full spread, but Harry wasn't complaining. Once he'd eaten, he brought his trunk downstairs and waited in the living room for everyone else. Sirius and Remus waited with him, and the twins joined him not long after. Harry listened to the four of them trading stories about their various pranks.

"Harry, when we get on the train, find a compartment and seal yourself inside. Only let your friends in," Fred said.

"What? Why?"

"We overheard Ginny talking about trying to corner you on the train," George said, "she made it sound like it would be really romantic, but she went quiet when she saw we were there. I wouldn't put it past her to try something."

"For Merlin's sake, I'm *gay*! Even if she hadn't done what she did, I've shown no interest in her whatsoever. Why can't she just leave me alone and not throw herself at me like a cheap-" Harry cut himself off, not wanting to be excessively rude.

"Go on," Fred said, smirking, "she's like a cheap -?"

"It doesn't matter. Thanks for the heads up."

"No thanks needed. We've got your back," George said, elbowing Fred.

Sirius checked his watch and sighed.

"If it gets to 10:30 and they're still not ready, I'm taking you three to the station myself," Sirius said, "Molly and the others be damned."

At 10:29, the sound of three heavy trunks came banging down the stairs. Harry and the twins joined the others in the entrance hall.

"Come on. Quickly now. We've got a schedule to keep!" Mrs Weasley yelled, as though it wasn't her and her precious babies who were holding everyone up.

Much like their trip to Diagon Alley, they apparated to Kings Cross in pairs. Moody had gone first to scout the area. Sirius had his arm around Harry's shoulders, and Kingsley joined them for additional security. They appeared in a room tucked away on the Muggle side of the platform. Sirius retrieved a trolley for his trunk, and when they were all there, they set off for Platform Nine and Three Quarters. Kings Cross was as busy as it ever was, ordinary people going about their everyday lives here, there and everywhere. It was the sort of hustle and bustle that Harry quite liked. It reminded him that the world still turned.

"Hurry to the platform. It's too busy to be completely safe," Kingsley said, a stalwart presence on Harry's other side.

They stuck to the rear of the group, the tide of redheads clearing a path. When they reached the barrier between Platforms Nine and Ten, they each took turns to surreptitiously approach and slip through without being noticed by the Muggles. Platform Nine and Three Quarters was just as lively as the rest of Kings Cross.

"Have a good year. You've got your mirror so you can stay in touch. Feel free to talk to me about anything, and I mean *anything*," Sirius said, pulling him in for a tight hug, "you'd better get on board so you can find a good seat."

He indicated where Ron and Hermione were boarding a carriage, so Harry went to the one furthest away. Mindful of Fred's warning, Harry kept his eyes open for an empty compartment. Luckily, he found one quite quickly, containing only Neville, Parvati and Lavender. He slipped inside quickly and stowed his trunk in the luggage rack.

"Hey guys," Harry asked, getting greetings in return, "did you have a good summer?"

"It was alright. Padma and I went to visit family in India," Parvati said.

"My dad kept getting at me to study for my OWLs, as if I wouldn't be doing enough of that at school this year!" Lavender said, "please tell me we're going to have some fun this year and not living full time in the library?"

"Breaks are important," Harry said, "no matter what Hermione says."

Harry kept his eyes on the compartment door. He was hesitant to seal it just yet, but he also didn't want Ron or Hermione trying to sit with him. Luckily, Seamus and Dean walked past. Harry opened the door and beckoned them inside. Once their luggage was safely stowed, he waved his wand over the door, locking it. For good measure, he also pulled the privacy screen down. Feeling more secure, Harry hugged his boys tightly.

"You guys are so sweet!" Lavender squealed.

"I know. Oh how I wish we could share this tea, but alas, friends are more important than juicy gossip," Parvati said sagely.

The three of them parted, taking their seats.

"Though is nobody going to say anything about Harry locking us in," Parvati said.

“Sorry about that. I know I should have asked first but I just didn’t want to risk Ron and Hermione trying to sit with us,” Harry said.

“You really think they would?” Lavender asked, “I mean, they made their opinions of you quite clear.”

“Yes, they would. For reasons outside my control, Ron and Hermione ended up staying with me and my godfather for most of the summer,” Harry said.

“How awful!”

“It was. Luckily, Sirius’s house is big enough that we could seal away most of it in a way they couldn’t access, meaning I didn’t have to interact with them if I didn’t want to. In the times I was with them, they kept trying to be my friend again like nothing had happened,” Harry said, “I don’t want to give them the chance to get close to me.”

“We won’t let them do that,” Neville said firmly.

“Absolutely not!” Lavender said.

“I’m just hoping they don’t try to force the issue with their new authority,” Harry said, then when he saw the others’ confused faces, he continued, “Ron and Hermione are the new Gryffindor Prefects.”

“What!” Neville, Lavender and Seamus all said, aghast.

“Seriously?” Dean said.

“I could kind of, maybe, sort of, understand making Granger a prefect, but *Weasley*? Who in their right mind would make *him* a prefect!” Seamus said.

“I think the Heads of House make the initial choices and then the Headmaster has to approve them,” Neville, “I highly doubt that McGonagall would pick Ron so it has to be Dumbledore.”

“Well that’s just stupid. Why would the Headmaster know better than the Head of House? He doesn’t really interact with the students at all,” Parvati said.

“I’ll be honest, I kind of thought they’d pick you Harry,” Lavender said, “sure you were a bit of a troublemaker in first-year, and there was that whole business with the Chamber of Secrets in second-year, but third-year onwards you became really sensible and dependable. You’d make a great prefect.”

“I never wanted the position.”

“Like you’ve wanted everything else that people have hoisted on you?” Dean pointed out.

“The poor firsties,” Parvati said, “they’re not going to get any help from Ron, and Hermione is more likely to be really overwhelming and boss them around than be useful.”

“There’s still the sixth and seventh year prefects,” Lavender pointed out, “and if they have any questions, I’m sure somebody will be able to help them.”

“To be honest, I think we should be the ones to help them out anyway.”

All eyes turned to Harry when he said this.

“What do you mean?” Seamus asked.

“Remember Viggo? He said that at Durmstrang, each first-year is assigned a fourth-year to act as a mentor for their time at school until it’s their turn to take on a mentee. I’m not saying we need to do anything quite so formal or individual, but we’ve spent the last four years at Hogwarts. We’ve got experience with all the little tricks to get by, the things that Ron and Hermione won’t be able to help with,” Harry explained, “tips for how to balance all the homework they get given, the best books to read to help with each subject-”

“How to get around the castle without getting lost,” Neville said ruefully.

“Exactly! They’re not going to get that sort of help from Ron and Hermione, but they can get it from us,” Harry said.

The others all looked contemplative.

“Granger’s not going to like it if we step on her toes as a prefect,” Seamus said.

“I’m past the point of caring about what Hermione wants,” Harry said, “if she does her job properly, we won’t need to do anything at all.”

The train continued to work its way through the English countryside. The hot weather that had been bearing down on them all summer continued. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky as the trolley witch came and went. Harry cast a cooling charm in the compartment. He lounged against the window, chatting to Neville about their plans to continue growing the Gillyweed in the lake. Parvati was reading through a glossy magazine, while Seamus, Dean and Lavender played a game of Exploding Snap. It was a very pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

Eventually, the sun began to dip in the sky, bathing everything in warm orange light. Parvati and Lavender left the four of them to change into their school robes. The train pulled into Hogsmeade Station and there was the usual chaos as everyone disembarked. Harry stepped onto the platform, expecting to hear the familiar voice calling “First years!”, only it never came, or rather, somebody else was there to guide the new students.

“That’s Professor Grubbly-Plank,” Dean said, “she taught us for a few weeks last year when Professor Hagrid was busy monitoring the unicorn foaling.”

“Wonder where Hagrid is then,” Harry said.

The boys got separated from the girls as they made their way to the carriages, the four of them managing to get into a carriage together. They were joined by Fred and George.

“Our dear siblings didn’t look happy,” Fred said.

“Perchance did they not get to sit with their bestest friendo?” George said.

Harry rolled his eyes at their antics. The carriage moved onwards down the lane. The trees loomed on either side of them, but Harry felt the Hogwarts magic reaching out to him. He forgot that he was not the only one who’d be able to feel it now. They passed through the iron gates. Harry closed his eyes, drinking in the protective feeling as it washed over him. Across from him, Neville swayed in his seat, letting out a small groan.

“Did it feel like that for you too?” Neville asked him.

“Like a tidal wave of magic that wraps you up in a hug? Absolutely,” Harry replied.

Hogwarts Castle stood tall and proud as the carriages pulled up at the front doors, ready to welcome its students home for another year. Parvati and Lavender found them again as they reached the Great Hall.

“I hate how mad it gets on the platform,” Parvati said, “we ended up riding in with Cho Chang and another girl from Ravenclaw. Luna, was it?”

“Luna Lovegood,” Lavender said.

“I’ve heard about her. Isn’t she supposed to be a bit odd?” Neville said.

“She is, but she was pleasant company.”

They took their seats at the Gryffindor table. Harry was bracketed by Seamus and Dean, with the other three sitting opposite. Fred and George grinned as they sat down next to Seamus.

“You look happy,” Harry commented.

“I had quite a lovely reunion,” Fred said, winking at Angelina, who shook her head fondly, “does this mean I’m forgiven for not writing as much as I could over the summer?”

“I suppose,” Angelina said, “but you’ll definitely be making it up to me.”

“You can count on that.”

“Oh please don’t start again,” Alicia said, “the heart eyes on the train were bad enough. I do not want to listen to you two flirting when I’m trying to eat.”

“Fine. I guess we’ll just have to flirt *in private* then,” Fred said.

“I’m not sure the innuendo is better,” Katie said.

The Great Hall filled up. Harry spotted a few of the other fifth-years from the other houses, and he waved in greeting when they saw him too. Up at the staff table, Dumbledore was surveying them all with his usual grandfatherly air, eyes twinkling kindly. The twinkle

dimmed when he looked over at the Gryffindor table and saw how far apart Harry was from Ron and Hermione. Obviously the plan for those two to rekindle the friendship failed.

Professor Grubbly-Plank slunk in through a side door, taking her seat just as the doors to the Great Hall opened and Professor McGonagall led in a bunch of nervous looking first-years. Harry was struck by how small they all looked, quite sure he hadn't been *that* small when he was their age. The group stopped at the stool where the Sorting Hat sat waiting for them. The hat's brim opened and it began to sing.

It was impressive how each year the Sorting Hat was able to construct a completely original song extolling the virtues of each of the four houses, but this year the Hat had opted for a different theme. It warned of coming strife and the need for greater unity. The four houses could come together as one, each of their unique attributes complimenting and compensating for each other. When it finished, the applause was slightly confused.

Then the Sorting began. Harry made sure to clap just as loudly regardless of which house the students were sorted into, even if that was Slytherin. He had put a lot of effort into promoting house unity last year and he wasn't going to let it go to waste just because Voldemort was back. After the first few names, those around him got the message, and it quickly spread over the entire Great Hall.

The first student, and first new Gryffindor, was a boy called Euan Abercrombie. He looked relieved when the Hat called out its decision, but when Harry smiled to welcome him, he grew nervous again. Right, the Daily Prophet had been trying to tie Harry into Dumbledore's lies, making him out to be an addled liar before Sirius got his claws into them to make them stop. Apparently some people had believed that.

Slowly but surely, all the students were sorted. Harry recognised Seth Richardson from Diagon Alley. The incredibly nervous boy sat on the stool for a whole minute before *Gryffindor* was called. Instead of looking relieved, he looked even more scared, glancing over to the Hufflepuff table where his older sister was. He eventually sat down in the free seat next to Dean, joined almost immediately by another new first-year, Eric Tipleby.

Once the last student was sorted, Dumbledore rose from his seat. Everyone went quiet.

"Welcome everyone to another year here at Hogwarts. I won't keep you long, as I am sure you are all eagerly looking forward to our most excellent feast. I simply have a few brief notices to give out," he said, "we have a few changes in staffing this year. First, Professor Hagrid has gone on temporary leave to visit some truly remarkable magical creatures overseas. As such, I would like us all to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking over Care of Magical Creatures until his return."

There was polite applause from the students.

"She's alright," Seamus whispered, "a good teacher but she's stricter than Professor Hagrid."

"Taking over the role of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher will be Professor Dolores Umbridge. I'm sure we shall all wish the Professor the best of luck," Dumbledore said, indicating the seat at the far end of the table.

The name immediately registered, and Harry suddenly wondered how he could possibly have missed her. Umbridge was in garish pink robes, a saccharine smile painted on her face. With how short and squat she was, the way she looked out across the sea of students gave the impression of a toad searching for its next meal. The pink bow she wore didn't help with its resemblance to a fly. Dumbledore opened his mouth to continue speaking, only to cut himself off at the sound of a dainty, girlish cough. Umbridge rose from her seat, not that it added much to her height.

"Thank you, Headmaster, for those kind words of welcome. It is so nice to see such happy faces smiling up at me. I'm sure we're all going to be wonderful friends."

Her girlish, overly sweet tone made it sound like she was speaking to a bunch of toddlers, and not a single person in her audience was smiling.

"The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of the utmost importance." The abrupt change in her tone to something serious and rehearsed caught a few people off guard. "As times change, so too do practises, and as we all learn together, our understanding of proper educational practices improves along with it."

Her speech was hard to listen to. It had the same kind of soporific effect that Professor Binns had, though delivered under the guise of a politician spouting pretty sounding words to try and win voters. Around him, Harry saw more than one person grow intensely bored. The first-years all looked very confused. Umbridge did not seem to care for the restlessness of her audience as she ploughed on with her speech. Harry had gotten better at focusing during Professor Binns' lessons, but he only managed to pay attention as she brought her speech to the end.

"Each Headmaster and Headmistress has brought something new to this historic school." She gave a small deferential bow to Dumbledore before continuing. "This is good, though we must be cautious. Progress simply for the sake of progress must be discouraged. I hope we can all work together to preserve what can be preserved, perfect what can be perfected, and prune those practices we find that ought to be prohibited."

She gave them a girly giggle and sat down. Dumbledore clapped, jolting the students from their boredom, and there was a light smattering of applause.

"Thank you Professor Umbridge. That was most illuminating."

Dumbledore quickly gave the rest of the start of term notices before bidding them all to eat. The tables groaned as food appeared on all the tables. Harry loaded a plate, thinking over Umbridge's words.

"Who even is she?" Lavender asked, "nobody else has ever interrupted Dumbledore's opening speech before."

"She works for the Ministry. According to Sirius, she's pretty high up as well," Harry said.

"In that case, her speech definitely was illuminating," Dean said.

“How so?” Seamus asked.

“If she’s high up at the Ministry, what’s she doing here teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts? It’s obvious. She’s here because ‘progress simply for the sake of progress must be discouraged’,” Dean said, “she’s here to try and wrestle Dumbledore’s control of Hogwarts away and into the hands of the Ministry.”

That wasn’t a very comforting thought, but it made a lot of sense. With all the noise Dumbledore had been making, the Ministry was keen to find ways to remove his power and influence. His position of Chief Warlock was stripped from him in the middle of August, and there were talks of petitioning the ICW to remove him from the position of Supreme Mugwump. As Headmaster, Dumbledore had a lot of influence over the future generations of witches and wizards in Britain, so of course they would want to take that power away, or curtail and shackle it as much as they could.

Harry was just glad he’d signed up for the ICW correspondence course. If Umbridge was here as a Ministry plant, there was no way she would be interested in actually teaching them anything.

Harry returned to the dormitory the next morning, feeling refreshed after an early swim in the lake. It felt good to be back into his normal routine, one he’d managed to mostly keep up over the summer with the pool at Grimmauld Place. Braich the Giant Squid had been excited to see him, the pair of them swimming together for a little while. Harry had a feeling they would be visited by Braich the instant Neville entered the water, the Hufflepuff Guardian Spirit recognising the new Lord Hufflepuff.

The dormitory was still quiet when he entered. Seamus and Neville were still sleeping, and Ron’s hangings were shut tight. Dean’s bed was empty, but when Harry opened the bathroom door, he heard a shower running. Dean was standing beneath the spray, facing the wall, and Harry’s breath caught at the sight of the water running down his back and *lower*. Because he could, Harry stripped and joined his boyfriend in the same shower stall, wrapping his arms slowly around Dean’s chest.

“Good morning Harry,” Dean said when he glanced behind him.

“Morning. You’re up early. Usually you’re the one joining me in the shower.”

“First day excitement and nerves, I guess,” Dean said, “though by the feel of it, you don’t mind in the slightest.”

Harry really didn’t. He would never get over the feeling of their bare skin pressing together. The top to bottom contact with nothing between them was intoxicating. Dean looked exquisite, and as he said, the other boy could feel Harry’s erection where it was pressed against the crease of his ass.

“Need a hand with that?”

As tempting as it was, Harry knew that the others would likely be up earlier so they could be ready for their first day of classes, and they'd promised Neville to be respectful in their shared spaces. It didn't stop him from turning Dean around so he could kiss him deeply. No sooner had Harry moved over to a different stall did the bathroom door open. Seamus came stumbling in for a shower to wake him up, followed by Neville.

When the three of them were finished, they returned to the dormitory, towels around their waist. Ron's hangings were shut, the redhead likely still asleep. In years gone by, Harry would have woken him up, but as he got dressed and packed his bag for the day, Harry didn't even consider it. Ron was an OWL student now, and a prefect to boot. He could wake himself up.

"How late to classes do you reckon he'll be?" Seamus asked as they went down to breakfast.

"Depends on how stressed Hermione gets with her own classwork," Harry said, "she always saw it as her responsibility to make sure we both got to classes on time, so she'll probably wake him up, but once things start getting serious and the work piles up, I wouldn't be surprised if she stops doing it."

"Our bet still stands, remember," Seamus smirked.

"I'll happily accept my winnings," Harry said, earning a light shove from the sandy blonde.

The Great Hall was alive with noise and energy when they arrived. Harry was pleased to see a few people greeting friends from different houses, going over to their tables to chat and catch up. Likely once timetables had been handed out, the house tables would start mixing again. That was Harry's hope at least.

The morning post arrived with its usual flurry of owls. Not expecting anything, Harry was surprised when a very stern looking grey owl landed in front of him, sticking its leg out for him to accept the letter. Harry did so, and the owl took off before Harry could offer it some bacon. The letter was stamped with the seal of the International Confederation of Wizards.

"Why is the ICW writing to you?" Neville asked, shocked.

Thankfully his voice was quiet enough that nobody else heard him.

"I signed up for an ICW correspondence OWL course for Defence Against the Dark Arts and History of Magic. I really want to do well in my OWLs this year, so Sirius suggested this since we couldn't count on the quality of the instruction," Harry explained, "I can always cancel it if Umbridge turns out to be good, but it'll at least be another resource, especially for History of Magic."

"That's not a bad idea," Seamus said.

"Could we use it too? I mean, you'll probably be given assignments and stuff you need to complete for it, but the study materials they give you should be applicable to us as well, right?" Dean asked.

“Of course you can,” Harry said immediately.

Even if they didn’t ask, Harry was more than happy to help his friends with their studies as much as he could, knowing that they would also return the favour. It was very different to Ron and Hermione, where Hermione would lord studying over them like a weapon and Ron would resist at every turn.

Harry opened the letter, surprised when there were two within the envelope.

Dear Mr Harry Potter

Thank you very much for signing up for “Defence Against the Dark Arts - OWL”. This letter will describe the structure of the course, including reference material and assessment guidelines.

This course will be delivered as a series of recorded lectures. Each Monday, you will receive an owl containing the lectures for that week. You may view these in your own time, but I would highly recommend having a fixed schedule so that you may fit them around your other studies. You will then be tested on that material via either a written assignment or a practical demonstration.

Enclosed with this letter is a list of suggested reading materials for this course. You are strongly recommended to read through the introduction sections of ‘Practical Applications of Defensive Magic’ and ‘Curses and Their Counters’ before your first set of lectures is delivered on Monday 9th September.

Written assignments and practical demonstrations should be submitted by owl to the below address no later than end of day Friday of the week they were assigned. They will then be marked and feedback returned to you on Monday at least a week later. Details for how to admit practical demonstrations will be provided later.

The address was the Gringotts branch in Diagon Alley.

As you are currently a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, you are free to continue your usual studies of Defence Against the Dark Arts. Arrangements regarding your attendance to the school-supplied course of study are the sole purview of the administration of Hogwarts. Please note that enrolment in this correspondence course does not automatically sign you up to take the OWL examination. This must be done either through Hogwarts or by directly contacting the relevant examination authority.

Once again, I would like to extend my thanks for signing up to this course. I look forward to reviewing your work and helping you along your journey in Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Kind regards,

Yasuko Okura

Defence Against the Dark Arts Lead Instructor

Department of Magical Education

International Confederation of Wizards

The other letter read much the same, only it was about History of Magic. Dean and Seamus read the letters over his shoulder.

As breakfast slowly wound down, McGonagall made her way down the Gryffindor table handing out timetables.

"I hope the four of you are ready for your OWL year to begin," she said when she reached Harry and the others.

"As ready as we'll ever be Professor," Dean said.

"That's good to hear," McGonagall said, handing Dean his timetable. "Potter, I received your letter informing me about your enrolment in the ICW correspondence courses. I presume that is what your letters were this morning?"

Harry nodded.

"I have no issue with you taking such courses. I'm actually quite pleased to see how seriously you're taking your education," McGonagall said, "I realise that effectively you are taking two extra courses this year. My suggestion would be to continue to attend your regular classes with Professor Umbridge and Professor Binns for the next few weeks to see how well you can handle the workload. If there are any issues, we can meet to discuss possible arrangements."

"Thank you Professor," Harry said gratefully.

McGonagall gave him a firm nod and handed him his timetable.

"What a Monday," Seamus said, "it could either be kind of alright or really bad."

"Double Defence Against the Dark Arts first thing, then a break for me. I'm guessing you two have Ancient Runes?" Dean said. Harry and Seamus nodded. "Then after lunch we have Double Potions with the Slytherins. Yeah, either terrible or kind of meh depending on what Umbridge is like."

"Considering what our previous Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers have been like, I'm reserving the right to assume it'll be bad," Harry said.

Up at the top table, Umbridge was tucking into a bowl of porridge. Her eyes swept across the Great Hall, taking in all of the students. It was a calculating gaze, one that belied her forcefully sweet demeanour. Sirius said she was not somebody to draw the attention of. If she was here at the Ministry's request, then Harry would have to tread carefully.

They hadn't even started lessons yet and Harry already dreaded it.

First day pinks

This would be their fifth Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher they'd had since they started Hogwarts, which probably didn't bode well at all. Of the previous four, Harry could only say that one of them was actually good. Quirrell had been too scared of his own shadow, possession by Voldemort notwithstanding; Lockhart had been a complete fraud; and Moody wasn't Moody but a Death Eater in disguise who used illegal curses on them in the guise of preparing them for the world. All in all, Harry was not looking forward to what Umbridge had in store for them.

Harry and the other Gryffindor fifth-years made their way to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom with some trepidation. This was an important year for them, after all.

"I just hope she's better at teaching than that awful Slinkhard book," Seamus said, hand in hand with Dean, "there was some utter rubbish in that when I read through it."

"I'm not holding out much hope," Harry said.

As they approached the room, Seamus let go of Dean. While they weren't trying to hide their relationship, Umbridge was an unknown variable, and so none of them knew how she'd react to them being together. They filed into the classroom, Harry sitting with Dean, while Seamus and Neville took the desk behind them and Parvati and Lavender sat in front of them. Everyone left the middle desk in the front row empty out of habit for Hermione, nobody wanting to put up with the girl's irritation.

Five minutes before the bell, Hermione rushed into the room, beelining for the desk set aside for her without a second thought. As the time ticked by before the start of the lesson, she kept glancing up at the clock and then behind her at the door.

"Ron," Dean mouthed, and Harry nodded.

Apparently she hadn't decided to wake him up after all. Harry wondered how late he would be.

The bell rang and the door opened once again. Umbridge walked in, once again dressed in bright pink robes. She strode to the front of the room and turned to face them, her expression twisted into what was clearly supposed to be a kind and welcoming face.

"Good morning class," she said.

There was no response. Umbridge tutted.

"Now that simply won't do. When I saw 'good morning class', I would like you all to respond 'good morning Professor Umbridge'," she said, "let's try it again. Good morning class."

"Good morning Professor Umbridge," they chorused back to her.

“Wands away everyone. I would like you to get your books out,” Umbridge said, and there was ruffling as people did so, “I’m glad to see you’ve all purchased a copy of Defensive Magical Theory. This will be our foundation for this carefully structured, Ministry approved course of defensive magic.”

She flicked her rather stubby wand and words appeared on the blackboard, bearing the title *Course Aims*.

“Your previous instruction in this subject has been disturbingly uneven, leaving me with the great responsibility of preparing you for your Ordinary Wizarding Levels, more commonly known as OWLs. Study hard and you shall be rewarded. Fail to do so and the consequences may be severe.”

Umbridge said all of that in a soft, girlish tone, speaking to them as though they were only five years old, not fifteen. When she talked about the consequences, a little smile flashed across her face. She opened her mouth to continue speaking when the door slammed open. Ron came stumbling into the room, his robes a mess and his shirt untucked. He had his bag haphazardly slung over one shoulder, and when he passed Harry, he saw his shoes were untied. It was like he’d rolled out of bed only thirty seconds ago. Ron muttered apologies to nobody in particular as he crossed the length of the room and dropped into the seat next to Hermione, leaning over to not so quietly whisper “what have I missed?”

“You have missed the first five minutes of my class, Mr Weasley, for which you shall serve detention,” Umbridge said, peering down her nose at Ron. “Now, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted. For this first lesson, I would like each of you to read through Chapter 1: Basics for Beginners in Defensive Magical Theory. If you finish before the end of the lesson, start over. I really want you to take in what Slinkhard is saying,” she trailed off when she saw a raised hand, “yes, Ms?”

“Granger. Hermione Granger,” Hermione said.

“Do you have a question about the instructions I have just given you Ms Granger?”

“There’s nothing in your course aims about using defensive spells,” Hermione said, ignoring Umbridge’s question.

“Why on Earth would you need to use spells in my classroom?” Umbridge responded with a slight, almost mocking laugh, as though the very idea was hilarious.

“We’re not going to use magic?” Ron blurted out.

“We will be studying defensive magic from a theoretical point of view, which should be more than enough,” Umbridge said.

A few more hands went up. Umbridge clearly didn’t appreciate being questioned but for now she was tolerating it as she called on Parvati.

“But Professor, isn’t there a practical portion of the Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL?” she asked.

“It is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be sufficient, so as long as you study the theory well enough, you should be able to apply that knowledge to your examinations, which is what school is all about.”

More than one person looked aghast at the thought that the first time they would get to use magic would be in their OWL exam. Harry wanted to stay quiet. Sirius warned him about drawing Umbridge’s attention, but he just couldn’t. He signed up for the ICW correspondence course because he wanted to do well, but Harry was aware that not everyone was in the position to do the same yet they still wanted to get a good grade. Umbridge was strangling the magical potential of an entire cohort of children, not to mention preventing them from learning to adequately defend themselves. He would just have to be smart about how he did it.

Harry raised his hand.

“Yes Mr Potter?” Umbridge said, not even pretending to not know his name.

“Will you be providing us with a list of spells that we’re to learn the theory of?” Harry asked.

That seemed to take Umbridge aback a bit, though she quickly recovered.

“We will be following the curriculum as laid out in Defensive Magical Theory, which should be more than sufficient,” Umbridge said, sweet and condescending.

“This book?” Harry asked, “only this book only speaks about spells in generality. It doesn’t give specific examples of spells to use, nor does it describe the theory of how to use them, so will we be using any other reference material in this class?”

“I do not wish to hear any further unwarranted criticisms of my class. The Ministry has approved the curriculum and has endorsed Mr Slinkhard’s book. I dare say fully qualified and educated professionals in their field know just a teensy bit more about this than a group of fifteen year olds,” Umbridge said, a hint of sharpness beneath the sweetness in her voice.

“But how are we supposed to be prepared for what’s out there?” Hermione demanded.

“There is nothing out there dear,” Umbridge said, her tone returning to full condescension, “who could imagine anyone wanting to hurt children such as yourselves?”

“You-Know-Who would,” Hermione said defiantly, “and his Death Eaters.”

Umbridge seemed to be expecting this. She gave Hermione a pitying, faux-empathetic look.

“You have been told that a certain Dark wizard is among us once again, that he means to do us all immeasurable harm.” Each word was soft, outwardly comforting but the sort that hides a dagger beneath. “This is a lie.”

As she said this, Umbridge looked Harry right in the eye. Harry kept his face impassive, not letting any emotion show. That was clearly aimed at him, and he would not give her the satisfaction of getting a reaction out of him. Her cheek twitched when she got no response.

“There will be no more questions, no more talking!” Umbridge snapped when Hermione opened her mouth to argue, “10 points from Gryffindor for disrupting my class Ms Granger. If everybody could please turn to page 4 and read through Chapter 1: Basics for Beginners.”

The room was filled with the sound of pages turning. Everyone sucked it up and started reading. Only Hermione remained stubbornly still, glaring at Umbridge. Umbridge was quite content to ignore her. Harry let out a slow breath, opening his own copy of Defensive Magical Theory. The material was no less dull than when he had read it during the summer, and he was right that this book would be next to useless to help them with their exams.

Dean’s thigh pressed against his beneath the table, the movement grounding him. He looked up to see Umbridge staring at him, her expression smug. Whatever else she was told to do when she came here, it was clear that she was trying to get him to respond to her provocations. Any outbursts would be held up as proof that he was an attention seeking liar, and that his word could not be trusted. It was a low blow as far as strategies went, but Harry would do his damndest to give her absolutely nothing.

Or at least, nothing regarding his supposed status as a liar. So long as Harry kept his complaints purely to her abilities as a teacher, pointing out how she was not capable of preparing them adequately for their OWLs, then it would be a lot harder for her to use that against him. Even better, the more he did it, the more likely other people would agree with him and likewise push back against her. If Umbridge thought she could walk all over them, she would be sorely mistaken.

“What a complete waste of time,” Seamus grumbled when the lesson finally ended.

Nobody said anything to disagree.

“I mean, what is the point in her being here if she’s not even going to teach us? We may as well have just been assigned a book to read and be done with it!”

“I know I already agreed, but you’ll definitely be allowed to borrow my ICW study materials,” Harry said, “come on, we’ve got Ancient Runes now.”

Harry led his grumbling boyfriend away as they bid goodbye to Seamus and Dean. When they were alone in the corridors, he slipped his hand into Seamus’s. The remaining tension leaked out of him.

“It’ll be alright,” Harry said.

“I know.” Seamus sighed. “It’s just Mam was getting at me all summer about doing well in my OWLs, and I really do want to, but then we get assigned an absolutely terrible Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, one who doesn’t even want us to use magic in class. It just feels like a kick in the teeth, you know?”

“I do but it’ll be alright. I think Sirius and Lady Longbottom will be keeping a closer eye on Hogwarts this year so if she doesn’t get better, we can let them know and hopefully they can

do something.”

It was only a small comfort, but it was better than nothing. They reached the fourth-floor heading for Ancient Runes, only to come across a small group of students. Harry recognised them as the three Gryffindor first-years boys.

“Everything alright?” he called out to them.

They all jumped when they saw him. Euan Abercrombie inched away from him. Eric Tipley showed no such fear, bounding over to Harry and dragging an extremely shy Seth Richardson along behind him.

“We’re lost,” Eric declared.

“Oh dear. Where’re you trying to go?” Harry asked.

“We’ve got Transfiguration but we can’t find the classroom,” Eric said, “Hogwarts is really confusing.”

“You’re not wrong there. Come on, I can show you where to go,” Harry said, then to Seamus, “save me a seat in Ancient Runes?”

“Sure. I’ll let Babbling know where you are in case you run late.”

They parted ways and Harry led the three boys towards the staircases. He set a quicker pace as Transfiguration was taught on the first floor, so they would need to hurry if they didn’t want to be late. McGonagall probably wouldn’t penalise them for getting lost, but still. As they walked, Eric happily chatted away about the feast last night and how cool it was in the new dormitory.

“I’ve never slept in a room with other people before. It kind of felt like a sleepover. Is that what sleepovers feel like?” Eric continued, unphased when nobody answered his question. “The bathroom’s quite fancy too, but I’m not sure what to think of how open the showers are. Are there no curtains or anything?”

“There aren’t, but you get used to it quite quickly,” Harry said, “and there’s only three of you so you’ll each have one to yourself.”

“There’s three of us but there’s *five* girls in our year. Isn’t that weird? I thought they would try and keep things balanced.”

“It’s not that weird. In my year there are five boys and three girls. I think it varies year to year because I’m pretty sure the year below me is more evenly balanced,” Harry said, “what class have you just had?”

“We had Herbology with Professor Sprout!” Eric said happily.

“Did you have fun in Herbology Seth?” Harry asked, “I remember you saying it was what you were looking forward to at Hogwarts.”

Seth jumped a little at being addressed. He met Harry's kind expression for a few seconds before ducking his head.

"I liked it," he said quietly.

Harry smiled, letting the attention fall away from the boy.

While normally Harry would have taken a few shortcuts and secret passageways to get to where he wanted to be, for the purposes of showing the first-years around, he stuck to the main thoroughfares. They'd figure out faster ways to get around on their own, which Harry told them about. The three boys listened as he told them some of the tricks to getting around the castle, all while assuring them that it was alright to be a bit confused at first and that they could ask for help. By the time they reached the Transfiguration classroom, even Euan looked less guarded around him.

"Here we are, and we made it on time."

They all thanked him and hurried off. Harry watched them until they entered the classroom, before hurrying back up to the fourth-floor for Ancient Runes. He arrived just as the bell rang. Babbling simply directed him to the free seat next to Seamus with an appreciative smile as she began her lecture. At the desk in front of them, Hermione and Ernie both looked unhappy.

"I hope you all had lovely summers. For many of you, this will be your most important year when studying Ancient Runes, as this is the year that you all will take your OWL examinations in June. We will be working hard this year to make sure you all have the chance to do well. I will be extremely happy if all of you finish the year with a thorough grounding in the use of Ancient Runes, even if you don't go on to do a NEWT in the subject," Babbling said, "the material will once again increase in difficulty. It is very important that you remain on top of it, as your other classes will also be ramping up in preparation for the exams. If you find yourself stuck, you may ask me after lessons for additional help, or you may ask your classmates. Oftentimes the best way to learn something is to teach it."

Just as she did at the beginning of fourth-year, Babbling began the lesson with a review of the previous year's material. The revision was clearly necessary for some as when she set them to speak to their deskmates in Old Norse, there were more than a few who struggled. In front of them, Ernie managed to speak mostly correctly, only stumbling a few times and occasionally making a few mistakes. His scowl grew every time that Hermione jumped in to point those mistakes out. When it was Hermione's turn, she insisted on making sure every sentence was perfect. Every time she said something wrong, she started over, and as a result, she sounded stiff and robotic.

Harry couldn't entirely hide the grin when Professor Babbling pointed this out.

"So how much did you practise Old Norse over the summer?" Seamus asked him.

"As much as I could. Sirius knows basic Runes but he didn't formally take the class so he can't speak it. Remus did though, so he would help me when he came over," Harry said, "what about you?"

“Mam didn’t take it, but I’ve got cousins who did. Mam insisted that we practise together.”

“Shall we see how well it’s paid off?”

“Let’s do it.”

Harry and Seamus ended up having a pretty good, if not overly complex conversation in Old Norse. Neither of them could say they were fluent, but they were conversational enough that it still came across mostly naturally. Babbling certainly seemed happy to hear it when she came by their table.

“Alright then!” Babbling clapped her hands together at the front of the room to get everyone’s attention. “For the rest of this lesson, I’d like you to work on the runic array that I’ll be handing out. You need to figure out what it does and any ways you can improve it. You can either work individually or with your deskmate.”

Sheets of parchment floated out to each of them, bearing a simple looking array. Hermione snatched hers out of the air, immediately getting to work and completely ignoring Ernie. Ernie sighed, taking his own and making a start on figuring it out. Harry and Seamus didn’t even need to say anything. It wasn’t that they worked together in class all the time (Babbling insisted that everyone also worked on their own so they didn’t become reliant on other people), but whenever they had the opportunity to, they fell into a fairly comfortable pattern.

For the next twenty minutes, they worked in tandem. Harry’s parchment was full of scribbles and notes as they deciphered what turned out to be a simple preservation array. Once they’d figured that out, they turned to Seamus’s parchment to figure out how they could improve it.

“This array basically provides a layer keeping external stuff out, like germs and water and stuff, so if you were to put food in here it would keep for longer,” Harry said, “but there’s nothing stopping anything already on or in the food from growing.”

“So we need to add some sort of purification modification,” Seamus flicked through their books, “perhaps something for temperature regulation as well.”

“Could we add strings that would maintain individual temperatures?” Harry wondered, “so if you put something hot inside, it would stay hot, something cold would stay cold, but a hot thing next to a cold thing wouldn’t heat up the cold thing and vice versa.”

“Let’s give it a go.”

By the time Babbling called for them to finish, they’d added rune strings to the array to prevent decay even from things already within the objects, as well as to maintain a global temperature within the array. Maintaining the individual temperatures of each object was harder to figure out, but Harry was sure they were on the right lines.

When the bell rang for lunch, Harry watched as Hermione stormed off. Ernie left too with a weary sigh.

“What’s up with those two? I know they don’t particularly get along in this class, but that seemed worse than usual,” Harry said.

Seamus scowled.

“Hermione caused a bit of a stink before you got here. Ernie and I were sitting at our usual tables, but when Hermione saw you weren’t there, she kicked up a fuss, insisting that Ernie move to sit next to me since she didn’t want her class performance to be sabotaged by somebody who refused to work with her.”

“ *He* refuses to work with *her*? ” Harry said.

“I know. Ernie didn’t like her insinuating that he was the one causing the issues. I told her that I was saving you a seat, but she got on her high horse saying that it wasn’t fair to the other students to reserve a seat for somebody who was late when they needed somewhere to sit,” Seamus said, “I think Ernie would have happily given up and moved, but then Babbling came over and basically told her to stop causing a fuss and sit down.”

“I’m glad she did,” Harry said, “I could not have handled an hour of putting up with Hermione’s nagging, not any more, but I’m sure that was her plan. Try and sit with me in class to either dose me somehow or magically become my friend through her own winning personality.”

“I thought so too, but Babbling didn’t seem very happy with her. I caught the look she gave her when Hermione scowled at you when you came in.”

Dean was already at the Gryffindor table when they arrived for lunch. He was conveniently nowhere near a fuming Hermione who had her head buried in a book. They filled him in on the little drama that happened in Ancient Runes. Once they’d eaten, they went to their afternoon lessons, a dreaded double period of Potions.

As usual, the Gryffindors took this class with the Slytherins. Harry greeted them politely as they all waited outside the classroom. He received a few nods in return. It was a bit of a cooler response than at the end of last year, but with Voldemort back, Harry figured the Slytherin’s may be keeping to themselves more so nobody on either side questioned their allegiances.

“What the hell Harry!” came the most unwelcome shout from Ron, “these snakes don’t deserve that!”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“Everyone is deserving of basic courtesy Ron,” he said flatly, “it makes everything a lot easier.”

“But you know how they treat people! I bet they’re all glad that You-Know-Who’s back!”

“There’s no point in arguing about it. I’ve said all I have to say on this topic.”

Harry turned away, completely ignoring Ron who sputtered at the dismissal. The Slytherin's were eyeing the redhead with derision but held their tongues. Even Malfoy did nothing more than scoff. As for the other Gryffindors, none of them came to Ron's defence. His ears burned red. Before he could do anything, Snape swept down the corridor, robes billowing.

"Inside," was all he said, and they filed into the room.

Harry set up his cauldron with the other Gryffindor boys. There was only a maximum of four to a table, meaning Ron had no opportunity to get close to him. Parvati and Lavender steered well clear of him, leaving him to stomp over to where Hermione was setting up her cauldron. Snape stood at the front of the room. Any thoughts he might have about the slight easing of tensions between the two houses were kept well hidden.

"It shouldn't need to be said, but this is a very important year for you all. In June you will sit your Ordinary Wizarding Levels. These are important examinations where you will demonstrate all that you have learned about the properties, composition and uses of magical potions. I have no doubt that for many of you, this is where your time in Potions ends. I only accept the best into my NEWT class, a standard which I have yet to see in here," Snape said, his voice low and ominous, "but alas, we still have a year to go before that happy parting. Until then, you shall have to work hard lest you utterly shame yourselves in your OWLs."

He tapped his wand to the board and instructions appeared in white chalk.

"Today you shall be brewing the Draft of Peace, a potion to calm nerves and anxiety that often appears in OWL exams. Be warned that being too heavy handed with your ingredients may lead to heavy, and in some cases irreversible, sleep. You have an hour and a half."

The room was soon filled with the heat of cauldrons, the smell of potions fumes, and the sound of chopping. Snape did not tolerate idle chatter, and after Sirius and Remus's lectures over the summer, Harry understood why. Potions could be incredibly dangerous if brewed incorrectly. They required focus, so distractions should be kept to a minimum.

It didn't stop Harry from quietly coaching Neville through the lesson. It wasn't so much the material that he struggled with, rather the nerves. Even without the potions and spells affecting him, Snape scared Neville, causing him to lose his head and make mistakes when he came prowling by, often resulting in a ruined potion. All Harry did was keep him calmer, talking him through the potion and reminding him of the warnings.

Harry felt much more comfortable preparing the ingredients. Without having to worry about Hermione's nagging and Ron's distractions, he was able to work his way through the potion without issue. Snape came over only once, sneering at his cauldron for a little while before leaving without saying a word. Harry lowered the temperature of his cauldron, adding the final drops of hellebore, and then allowed his potion to simmer. The liquid slowly turned a pale white and began emitting a thin, silvery vapour.

The others at his table had also done well. Dean's was the correct colour but wasn't producing vapour. Both Seamus and Neville's were just slightly too grey in colour. As they bottled up their samples for Snape to grade, Harry was confident that none of them had failed, not like Ron who's cauldron was emitting a shower of green sparks.

It was only their first day of school, but Harry felt tired. Every one of his teachers so far had stressed the importance of OWLs, and no doubt everyone else would as well. It really served to pile on the pressure. It felt good when the day finally ended. Snape released them. Harry and the others went up to put their bags back in their dormitory before heading down for dinner. No sooner had Harry sat down when Angelina slipped into the seats opposite him.

“Harry, glad I could catch you,” she said, “question, are you still interested in playing Seeker for the Gryffindor team?”

“Yes?” Harry replied, unsure why she was even asking, “did I not tell you earlier?”

Angelina visibly deflated.

“Oh thank god. I couldn't remember if you had, and I was so worried you might want to stop since you've got OWLs this year.”

“Honestly, I think I'd go mad if all I had to do was study,” Harry said, “what brought this on?”

“I didn't know if I'd need to organise tryouts for a new Seeker as well as a new Keeper,” Angelina gestured to her chest where a silver badge in the shape of a small shield with a stylised C was pinned.

“You're the new Quidditch Captain? That's fantastic!” Harry said.

“Thank you. For a second I thought you'd get it, what with you organising the Quidditch games last year.”

“I didn't have as much to do with that as you'd think, and you were the one that really ran our team even if it had my name on it,” Harry said, “you'll do brilliantly as Captain.”

“I appreciate the support. It's my last year so I really want Gryffindor to win so I can go out on a high note,” Angelina said, “we'll be holding Keeper tryouts this Friday. I want the whole team there so we can see how well the newbie fits in.”

“I'll be there. Don't worry.”

“Excellent! Now I just need to wrangle the twins and we'll be sorted.”

“Good luck,” Harry called after her as she stood and left the table.

“It'll be good to go back to regular Quidditch games again, though it sucks you guys didn't get to finish the last one,” Seamus said.

“Has there been any word about Cedric?” Dean asked carefully.

No, there hadn't. As far as Harry knew, he was still recovering in St Mungo's in a magical coma. The Healers were taking each day as they came. The combination of spells used on him caused a lot of damage, which while they had healed it as much as they could, all that

remained was for Cedric and his own magic to take over. It was slow going, but Andromeda said the fact that he wasn't worsening was a good sign.

"Why is Umbridge looking at you?" Neville asked.

Harry glanced up at the top table to find that Umbridge was, in fact, staring at him. She sipped from a teacup, scanning the students like she did at the opening feast, but she kept coming back to stare at him. The look in her eyes was calculating, like she was trying to figure him out. She glanced over to where Angelina was sitting and a smug little smile appeared on her face.

"I don't think I made a very good first impression," Harry commented idly.

"Not as bad as Hermione," Dean said, "it's probably the first time she's been so brazen with a teacher."

"Hopefully she gets the message that it's just not worth engaging with her. All it will do is give her ammunition. We all need to be on our best behaviour around her."

Harry would play along until he could figure out her endgame. Was it just to be a spy for the Ministry, or was there something more at play? He would need to tell Sirius as soon as possible. If he was working with Lady Longbottom to more closely scrutinise Hogwarts, then hopefully they could head off whatever causes Umbridge would take up and neutralise them before she got the chance to sink her claws in.

Why couldn't he ever just have a normal year at Hogwarts? If it wasn't a not-insignificant chance of dying, then it was having to deal with meddling individuals. Even worse, the meddler this time around was a politician. At least Harry had the ICW course to keep him on track for his Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL, one devoid of any suspiciously toad-like Ministry toadies attempting to sabotage his education.

Correspondence

Chapter Notes

Mature scenes ahead.

Starts: "Harry let out a breath when he felt..."

Ends: "God that was hot."

Starts: "Initially Harry had just planned to..."

Ends: "I could have helped with that..."

As the first week passed, just as Harry suspected, each of the teachers gave them stern warnings about taking their studies seriously in preparation for their OWLs before launching into the material for the year. The difficulty in their classes certainly ramped up. Already they had a pile of homework to complete, so Harry and the other fifth-years set themselves up in the common room to work their way through it. Between the five of them, they managed to keep on top of it.

Hermione was being her usual self, diving into her homework with gusto in an attempt to massively overachieve. Not for the first time Harry wondered whether the stress she always felt about school work was at least in part due to the fact that she always wrote essays that were significantly longer than required. Forcing herself to work like that for every single subject must be exhausting. Having read through her essays before, Harry knew that Hermione seemingly did not want to consolidate her knowledge into the key facts when *every* fact could be included.

The end of the first week finally arrived, and with it came the tryouts for the Gryffindor Keeper. Harry changed into his robes with the rest of the team and strode out onto the field to see a small group of people. There weren't that many as there was only a single position to fill. Ron was there with his new broom, his expression slightly smug as though he expected this to be a done deal since his two brothers and 'best friend' were on the team.

As Seeker, Harry rarely had much to do with the rest of the team. His game was almost entirely separate from the others, meaning that after everybody warmed up with a few laps around the pitch, he didn't have much to do when it came time to put the potential Keepers through their paces. He hovered in place opposite Angelina as Katie and Alicia each took turns trying to score goals. While he might not be involved in this in a game, Harry still watched carefully as each Keeper tried to block the five penalties shot their way.

There was some potential there, and Harry could easily see some of the younger players being excellent Keepers with a bit more practice. In the end, the position went to Cormac MacLaggen, a sixth-year. He wasn't a fantastic pick as he seemed very full of himself, but he was the only one of the group of applicants to save all five penalties. Ron, who only saved

four, was glaring at Harry as though silently demanding he do something. When Harry didn't, he stormed off.

The weekend finally arrived. Harry enjoyed a very pleasant swim and an even more pleasant shower afterwards, because this time Dean decided to join him. The pair of them stood beneath the shower head, wrapped in each other's arms.

"It feels like you could use a hand," Dean whispered to him.

"You're no better."

Harry let out a breath when he felt Dean's hand wrap around his cock. He glanced at the door, but it was still early enough that nobody else would be up, so he moved his own hand to grasp Dean. They slowly worked each other's lengths, drawing out little moans and groans. Harry had a hard time keeping his rhythm steady from the pleasure coursing through him, and it was only his desire to make Dean feel just as good that kept him going. The pleasure reached its peak, and they both spilled their seed over the other's hand.

"God that was hot."

Harry and Dean jolted at the sound of Seamus's voice. Seamus was standing in the entrance to the showers, face flushed and completely transfixed on them. He palmed his own cock through the fabric of his pyjama shorts.

"You could join us if you'd like," Harry suggested.

"I really want to, but Neville was getting up when I came in here. Merlin's blood beard," Seamus said, "I'm gonna need a cold shower."

"Sorry Shay," Dean said, "we can wake you up next time."

Seamus waved them off, stripping out of his clothes and hopping into his own shower. Harry and Dean quickly cleaned themselves up. By the time Neville came in to brush his teeth and wash his face, the pair of them were drying off, everything completely innocent.

"I sent Gran a letter about Umbridge's first class and what she said we'd be doing, or not doing," Neville said when the three of them went back into the dormitory, "she's going to raise it with the governors."

"Do you reckon that'll do anything?" Dean asked.

"At the very least it'll put her on notice. With Lucius Malfoy no longer a governor, Gran has more power to get things done."

Harry nodded, then frowned when he reached his bed. Ron's hangings, which normally were shut tight, were slightly open on one side, the side facing Harry's bed. He hadn't noticed it when he got up to go swimming. It gave Harry a view of Ron in bed, snoring away in his sleep, but that wasn't the weird part. The weird part was that Ron was completely naked, his ass on display for Harry to see.

Was this another attempt to somehow endear Ron to Harry? Was it the backup plan when it became clear that Harry wasn't being drawn in by Ginny's attempts at being seductive, so they decided to try again with Ron? The attempts were just as pathetic. Just because Harry was gay, it didn't mean he'd salivate over every ass he saw, especially not when he already had two asses he could enjoy. Harry therefore ignored Ron, heading down to breakfast with his friends.

After breakfast was Quidditch practice. Angelina seemed a little nervous to be in the role of Captain, but she quickly found her feet. It surprisingly helped that McLaggen attempted to steamroll over her, trying to 'coach' each position on how to play better. Angelina shut him down every single time, rapidly developing an iron will and reminding him of who the Captain was. McLaggen sulked but stuck to the goal hoops for the rest of training.

"I don't get why she was so up in arms about me offering some advice," McLaggen said in the changing room afterwards. "I've been playing for years so I've got loads of experience."

"Yeah, well Angie's also been playing for years, and she's the Captain while you're a newbie to the team, so you should be deferring to her," Fred said.

"Only because Wood hogged the Keeper position, and then there weren't any proper tryouts for the Champion games last year, otherwise I would have been on the team much sooner," McLaggen said, "speaking of, Potter, I've got some tricks to improve your Seeking which I picked up when I played over the summer."

"I'll take it under advisement," Harry said, his tone flat.

"Don't you have homework to do," Fred said, rather pointedly.

Eventually McLaggen left, and all the boys on the Quidditch team sighed in relief.

"Is it too late to pick somebody else?" George asked.

"Unfortunately he flew the best out of everyone. The next best was Ron, and I'm pretty sure you would have sooner killed him than played on a team with him," Harry said.

"Truer words have never been spoken," Fred said, "but I swear, if McLaggen doesn't keep his mitts off my Beaters bat, I'm going to use it to crack his head open."

The three of them headed back up to the common room to enjoy the rest of their day. After dinner, Harry was reading a book in his bed when his hangings parted. Seamus and Dean slipped inside to sit with him. Harry waved his wand to put up some privacy wards. Even though they weren't really doing anything, Harry still enjoyed the peaceful company.

"We should probably get ready for bed soon," he said a little later after the sun had set.

"I don't know. I'm comfy right here," Seamus said, lounging in Harry's bed.

"Sleeping in t-shirt and jeans?"

"If I have to."

“As nice as it is to have you in my bed, you’d be more comfortable in pyjamas.”

“True, and I quite like being in your bed as well. It’s a shame they’re not all that big.”

“They’re bigger than a single bed,” Dean said, “in fairness, they probably weren’t thinking of three people trying to sleep in them at once.”

“I guess I’ll just have to go to my bed, all alone, without anybody to sleep next to ... and potentially get up to something naughty with,” Seamus said lightly.

“Is- is this about what happened this morning with me and Harry?” Dean asked, “did you have a problem with us doing that without you?”

“What? Of course not,” Seamus said, sitting up, “it was awesome.”

Seamus put a hand on Dean’s shoulder.

“Look, there’s three of us and we’re not attached at the hip. There’s gonna be times where you and Harry get hot and steamy, or me and Harry, or me and you. I don’t have a problem with it at all. If you want me to join in, that’s great. If you want a bit of privacy, that’s fine with me too,” Seamus said, “the only time I insist we all be there is when we go all the way for the first time, but after that it’s fair game. Is that alright with you?”

“Yeah,” Dean said, “we probably should have talked about this before we started doing that kind of stuff.”

“It’s not as though we planned that first night on Harry’s birthday, and it was so good!” Seamus said.

“I don’t think many people would think about this kind of stuff right from the beginning,” Harry said, “so we’re all agreed?”

Harry, likewise, had no issue with his boyfriends being intimate with each other. It continued to take his breath away whenever he saw them together, and just the thought of them doing *that* made his dick twitch in his pants. When they both nodded, Harry drew upon his Gryffindor courage.

“Good, then there should be no complaints when I-”

He pushed Seamus so he was lying back down again and then undid the button on his jeans. Seamus’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline.

“Harry-”

“Is this alright?”

“I have no idea what you’re planning but keep going.”

Harry pulled Seamus’s jeans and underwear down to his knees, freeing the dick from its confines. He couldn’t help taking a moment just to look at it, seeing the way it rested in its

nest of blond curls, slowly coming to attention. Initially Harry had just planned to give Seamus a handjob like he did with Dean that morning, but instead he dove right in, pressing a kiss to the shaft that had it hardening immediately.

“Merlin’s beard!” Seamus cried out.

He continued to press kisses and small licks along Seamus’s length until it became fully erect. Glancing up, he saw Seamus staring at him, eyes wide and face flushed. Dean was also watching him with an intensely curious expression. Drawing on his courage once again, Harry descended and carefully brought the tip of Seamus’s cock into his mouth.

It was only the unnecessary level of detail the book Sirius gave him went into that kept Harry from being completely in the dark about what he was supposed to be doing. Seamus jolted when he started, hands scrambling to find purchase in his bedding. Harry moved slowly downwards, taking in more. He tasted the slightly salty liquid leaking out of Seamus’s dick while allowing his tongue to explore.

When he felt comfortable with the length, he hollowed out his cheeks and sucked. Seamus wriggled, a long groan being drawn from him. He bobbed his head up and down slowly, his tongue moving over every inch it could reach, slicking it up. Harry kept going, surprisingly aroused by what he was doing. One of Seamus’s hands rested in Harry’s hair but it didn’t grip tightly or be forceful. It was merely there to feel him moving. Harry looked up to see Seamus panting heavily, eyes closed.

“Harry, I’m gonna- I’m gonna- !”

That was all the warning Harry got before Seamus’s back arched and a salty fluid shot into his mouth. He wasn’t expecting it, and when he spluttered some of it leaked out, but Harry almost reflexively swallowed the rest. The action drew out more moans from Seamus. When it was done, Harry pulled off Seamus’s cock, which flopped limp and spent. As Seamus heaved several deep breaths, Dean was working himself furiously. He gave a small cry and he came over his hand.

“I could have helped with that,” Harry said.

“You were busy. Seamus was right this morning. That looked hot,” Dean panted.

“Because it was,” Seamus said when he caught his breath, “blimey Harry, I was not expecting you to do that.”

“Neither was I if I’m honest.”

Seamus sat up and gave Harry a deep kiss.

“So that’s what I taste like,” he said. Then he smirked, “but don’t think you’re getting out of this.”

He manhandled Harry until he was lying between them. With a wave of his wand, he and Dean were cleaned up, and they both descended on Harry. What followed was a haze of

pleasure as Harry's mouth and neck were attacked with kisses, and hands worked his cock and balls.

Eventually though, they had to bring their activities to an end when they heard the others coming up to bed. Neville gave them a knowing look when all three of them slipped out from behind the hangings, gesturing to Ron's bed then to the bathroom. They all got the idea. They dressed into their pyjamas, then waited for Ron to finish and shut himself into bed, before going to get washed. While the taste of Seamus's seed wasn't unpleasant, Harry still appreciated getting to wash it out and brush his teeth.

When he went to bed that night, Harry felt perfectly sated. The only thing that would have made it better was if his boyfriends could sleep beside him.

Monday morning arrived and Harry joined his friends at the Gryffindor table for breakfast. Dean had his Arithmancy homework on the table next to his bowl of porridge as he finished solving the last of the problems Professor Vector had set for them. Further down the table, an irate Hermione dragged a dishevelled Ron into the seat beside her, whispering harshly to him all the while.

"Ready for another terrible Monday?" Seamus asked.

None of them were looking forward to another Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson with Umbridge, not after their lessons on Monday and Friday.

"Doesn't your correspondence course start today?" Dean asked.

"It does," Harry said, "I was thinking I'd find an empty classroom or ask McGonagall if I could use hers after class today to make a start."

"Or you could use that cool room Sirius showed you at the end of last year," Seamus suggested, "that'd give you some more privacy, especially if word gets out about what you're doing."

That was true. It wasn't clear how Umbridge would react if she knew he wasn't taking her 'Ministry-approved' course of study. He didn't even know if Dumbledore knew, and if Ron or Hermione found out, then they'd be insufferable about it. Harry was already expecting another argument between her and Umbridge today.

When the post owls arrived, two serious looking eagle owls swooped over Harry. He cleared a space, and they both dropped their parcels in front of him. They each had a letter attached as well, one for Defence Against the Dark Arts, the other for History of Magic. He quickly read through them, noting down what they said.

Despite the excitement about starting these courses, they still had regular classes to go to, meaning that Harry and the others trudged towards the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. Umbridge was waiting for them this time, surveying them as they entered with that saccharine smile. Harry once again sat next to Dean, ignoring the way Umbridge's eyes

lingered on him. Ron and Hermione were among the last to arrive, but they weren't late either.

"Good morning class," Umbridge said, and they all chorused back to her, "wands away."

The few who had been hopeful stowed their wands back in their bags with a murmured grumble.

"Last lesson we made a good headway into the basics for beginners, and I believe you now should have a thorough grasp of what Slinkhard was trying to convey in that chapter. For this lesson, I would like you to turn to page 19 and read through Chapter 2: Common Defensive Theories and Their Derivation. There will be no need to talk."

This chapter was just as dull as the last, and once again contained no useful information whatsoever. From what Harry could grasp, anything remotely factual in this book was better explained by other, less biased sources. As it was, the author's prejudices made it very difficult to parse what he was trying to convey.

For example, one defensive theory it talked about was the concept of proportional force. The idea was to respond in defence using only enough force to overcome that which was used against you, but no more. It wasn't a bad idea in general, especially for most applications, but Slinkhard's biases reared their ugly heads when it came time to give examples. He used a scenario of a Muggleborn attacking a wizard, denigrating the Muggleborn as magically inferior and therefore no true threat, but then immediately advocated for overwhelming force to be used in defence, up to and including snapping the Muggleborn's wand upon victory. This, Slinkhard argued, was because the Muggleborn had tried rising above their station, a serious infraction, and thus this response was proportional.

He caught Dean's sidelong look, and grimaced in sympathy.

Umbridge wasn't looking at him. Her attention was entirely held by Hermione, who had her hand in the air. Standing from her desk, Umbridge moved over to Hermione and spoke in a low condescending voice.

"Is there something you don't understand about the chapter, dear?"

"I've already read Chapter 2," Hermione said, not bothering to lower her voice.

"Then you may move onto Chapter 3."

"I've read that as well. In fact, I've read the entire book."

"Then you should have no problem summarising Slinkhard's view on anti-jinxes in Chapter 15," Umbridge said with a small sneer.

"Slinkhard believes that anti-jinxes are named incorrectly. He feels that anti-jinxes are just jinxes that people make excuses to use on each other," Hermione said immediately.

As much as he loathed to admit it, Hermione's ability to learn books verbatim was sometimes impressive. Umbridge certainly thought so, though her expression smoothed out quickly.

“But I think that-” Hermione started.

“Ms Granger, I did not ask for your opinion on matters that you are not qualified to comment on,” Umbridge said, “and I have entertained these silly disruptions for long enough. I will be deducting ten points from Gryffindor, and if you speak out of turn again, it will be detention.”

Hermione looked completely aghast. Up till now, the only teacher who had had an issue with Hermione being a reading-addicted overachiever was Snape, but he had issues with everybody. The other teachers had learned that Hermione would always have her hand up to answer questions, and they would always be basically word for word from the textbooks. Umbridge smiled sweetly as though daring her to argue against it, but Hermione wisely kept her mouth shut.

When Umbridge turned to return to her desk, her smug expression faltered when she saw Harry’s hand in the air. Her face twisted, smoothing out into the sweet condescension once more as she went over to Harry’s desk.

“Do *you* not understand the material in this chapter, Mr Potter?”

“I was curious about the pacifistic defensive stratagem Slinkhard discusses in this chapter,” Harry said, “he advocates that an assaulted witch or wizard should utilise purely defensive countermeasures until the appropriate authorities arrive. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that.”

“I’m sure if you read through the chapter thoroughly, you will come to understand what Slinkhard is trying to convey,” Umbridge said sweetly.

“Except he doesn’t explain beyond that. What does he mean by purely defensive? Would that only encompass shields and wards, or would other things which don’t harm the attacker also count? What about shields that reflect spells back on the caster? They’re purely defensive but can cause harm.”

“We are only on Chapter 2 of this book Mr Potter. These concepts will be expanded upon in more detail later.”

“Except they aren’t,” Harry stated, “and Mr Slinkhard isn’t our Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. You are, so I was hoping that you could elaborate more on these concepts, or else provide references so I can research them in my own time.”

Umbridge was no longer looking at him with faux-sweetness. There was a flash of fury in her eyes as she sneered at him.

“Like I said to Ms Granger, I have tolerated enough pointless interruptions. I will take another 10 points from Gryffindor. You have your instructions. There will be no further questions!” she snapped.

True to her word, she ignored the people who had their hand up for the rest of the double period. Harry caught the eye of a few of his classmates, who all looked distinctly disgruntled about how Umbridge handled that. Harry had been asking specifically about her course

material, asking her to expand upon it like teachers are supposed to do, and yet Umbridge had shut him down, calling it pointless.

“I’m going to be writing to Gran about that. Umbridge is supposed to be a teacher,” Neville said when the class finally ended.

At least Ancient Runes was much better. Even double Potions in the afternoon was better than Defence Against the Dark Arts. What Harry was really looking forward to though was his correspondence course.

When the final bell rang, Harry ran up to his dormitory to retrieve the package he was sent. Seamus and Dean followed him, and the three of them went to the Room of Requirement. None of them knew what to expect from it. Harry paced back and forth before the blank stretch of wall, wishing for a room to learn Defence Against the Dark Arts in. The room that appeared was like a nicer version of the classroom a few floors below. Close to the door were three writing desks. In one corner of the room were a couple of bookshelves with a collection of cushions and beanbags arranged around it. Most of the space in the room was cordoned off as a place to practise spells.

“It looks pretty cool,” Seamus said, “this room is amazing. How on earth did the Founders manage to make this?”

“Apparently it was a brainchild of Rowena Ravenclaw, but Godric and Salazar could never quite figure out how she managed it,” Harry said.

“Shall we make a start?” Dean asked.

Harry pulled out the package labelled *Defence Against the Dark Arts* from his bag. It contained a box with the ICW logo on it. The box was bigger on the inside, with many empty slots that reminded Harry of a CD rack. There was only a single metal disk about a 1cm thick inside. One side was matte, with the number 1 engraved in it, while the other side was reflective.

Each of these lessons will be delivered by magical projections imbued into these disks. To access the lesson, place it on the floor or on your desk number side down and tap it with your wand, read the note that came with it. Not seeing any reason not to, Harry put the disk on the ground in front of the three desks, and the three of them got set up with their parchment and quills.

When he tapped the disk with his wand, the reflective part lit up. Small particles of light streamed upwards from it, forming into the shape of a person. It was like a hologram from a sci-fi show as the figure was slightly transparent. It was a woman of Asian descent, slightly shorter than Harry was, with grey streaks in her hair. She wore a pin on the front of her robes bearing the crest of the International Confederation of Wizards. As though she actually was in the room with them, she smiled.

“Greetings. My name is Professor Yasuko Okura, and I will be your instructor for this ICW correspondence course in Defence Against the Dark Arts, OWL level,” the figure said, “by the end of this course, you should have a thorough understanding of defensive magic, and the

practical knowledge to be able to apply that in a variety of settings. If you study the material hard enough, I have no doubt that you will perform well in your OWL examinations.”

Harry, Seamus and Dean listened to Professor Okura as she explained how the lectures would be structured, including the features of the magical projections. While each of them contained two hours worth of material, they could also be paused, rewound or fast forwarded as needed. They then proceeded to take notes as Okura began her lecture on the basics of defensive spellcasting. It touched on some of the things Slinkhard had brought up in his book, but she explained them in a much better way that actually put the theory into context.

“You may have heard a lot of this before, but it is worth revisiting. Defensive magic comes in many shapes and forms. The approach you take must be as varied as the things you seek to counter. Dealing with another magical person is very different than dealing with a magical creature, so there is no one size fits all solution,” Okura said, “for now, we shall begin with dealing with other wizards, and to do so, we shall learn a simple defensive spell: the Disarming Charm.”

She smiled at them.

“If you aren’t already, you will need to move to an open space as we shall begin practising some spells.”

The three of them stood and drew their wands.

“But we already know this spell,” Dean said, “we learned it last year, and Harry’s really good at it.”

“Then I guess we’ll see if we’ve still got it,” Harry said.

They took their positions in the marked section of the room.

“The Disarming Charm is fairly easy to understand. When successfully cast on another person, it causes whatever they are holding to be pulled from their grips, disarming them of that object. At the lowest level, this charm will only cause the object to fall to the ground near them, which will give you a chance to either disengage from the fight and retreat, or follow up with another spell while they are unable to counter,” Okura said, “let’s try this spell out now.”

The projection showed the wand movements and gave the incantation, a jet of red light shooting from Okura’s wand at a training dummy.

“If you don’t have anyone to practise with, you may cast your spells at this projection. You’ll get a red X if you have cast the spell incorrectly, an orange circle if you have cast it correctly but lack the power for it to be effective, and a green tick if you have cast everything correctly with enough power.”

“That’s a pretty cool feature,” Seamus said, “do you reckon that’s how they’ll mark your practical work?”

“It must be. Either that or they’ll find some way to record what I’m doing,” Harry said.

They had half an hour to practise the spell. After all the practice Harry had with duelling over the summer, disarming was as easy as breathing. When he disarmed both Seamus and Dean five times in a row easily, each time their wands arcing through the air towards him, they switched so that Harry could help them with it. When they were done with each other, they each cast the spell at the projection, getting three green ticks.

“I hope you managed to successfully cast Expelliarmus. Disarming is a very useful tool, and one that should not be discounted in favour of some of the more flashy spells out there, but likewise it should also not be overly relied upon. Given its simplicity, it is also easy to block, especially if your opponent knows it’s coming. A skilled adversary will always be ready for the possibility of being disarmed and will take measures to counter it, which we will talk about in the next hour of this first set of lectures,” Okura said, “I suggest you take a break as we’ve been busy for the last hour. Come back when you are feeling fresh.”

The projection paused on its own. Harry tapped it with its wand, and the semi-transparent figure of Professor Okura faded away.

“I think I’ll finish this tomorrow,” Harry said, “I need to meet with Professor McGonagall about Umbridge.”

“You’re going to ask to not attend her lessons any more,” Dean said.

“I’m sorry. I hate to leave you to her,” Harry said.

“Don’t worry about us,” Dean said, “you said we can borrow your ICW materials to study from so we’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, that was a really good first lesson,” Seamus said, “to be honest, I’m more worried about how Umbridge will react to you dropping her class.”

“She doesn’t get a say in it,” Harry said firmly, “and hopefully if Neville can sic his grandmother on her, then maybe things will get better.”

“If they don’t, I will be joining you,” Seamus said, just as firmly, “we wouldn’t be the first students to self-study for a class. It’s just usually not one of the core classes. Can we also self-study with you for History of Magic? We’ve only been back for one week and Binns is already draining my will to live.”

They went to see McGonagall after dinner. When Harry told her that he wanted to move to only doing the ICW courses for Defence Against the Dark Arts and History of Magic, her lips pursed.

“It’s only been a week, Potter, and you’ve only had three lessons with her. I thought we said you’d stick with it for a month and then we’d make a decision?”

“And in those three lessons, she told us very clearly that we weren’t going to be doing any magic. We won’t be learning anything practical, only theory from an incredibly biased book

that doesn't reference any spells by name, and she won't be providing any additional material to help us study," Harry said, "and when I asked her to elaborate on the material we were covering in that very lesson, instead of doing so like any competent teacher would, she told me that it was a pointless distraction and took points off me. I'm sorry Professor, but I am not going to allow my education to suffer because the person Dumbledore was forced to hire refuses to teach."

"I had heard that her lessons were ... *different* in comparison to most, but I hadn't realised it was quite like this," McGonagall said, "and you're sure I can't convince you otherwise?"

"No," Harry said.

"Very well. I shall approve your decision to study Defence Against the Dark Arts solely from self-study, meaning you don't need to attend her classes. Your correspondence course is assessed?" Harry nodded. "Then I would like to see your grades. If I find you're slacking, then I do not care about the quality of education, I will put you back with Umbridge, is that clear?"

"Crystal clear Professor," Harry said, "can I also do the same for History of Magic?"

McGonagall sighed but agreed without a fuss.

"Are the pair of you here for moral support or did you have a question for me?" McGonagall asked Seamus and Dean.

"Um, we wondered if we could join Harry in self-studying History of Magic?" Dean asked, "I know we haven't signed up for a course to make up for it, but Harry said we can use his materials, and we can send an owl to the ICW to see if we can join the same course-"

"And of Defence Against the Dark Arts? Will you be joining Mr Potter in that too?"

"For now, we're going to stick with it," Seamus said, "but we would like to if she doesn't get better."

McGonagall looked like she was fighting to maintain her composure, though Harry wasn't sure if she wanted to be proud of them or angry with them.

"I am glad to see the three of you prioritising your education. I wish it didn't need to come to this. Hogwarts has always given its teachers the freedom to teach how they see fit so long as they followed certain guidelines and ensured that students could pass their OWLs and NEWTs," McGonagall said, "I can approve you to self-study for History of Magic as I'm sure Professor Binns won't mind. Unfortunately, I won't be able to do so for any other classes unless you have already signed up for a program that will make up for it, and I can only do it for two classes at most."

"Thank you Professor," Seamus and Dean both said.

"The same conditions that apply to Potter apply to you two. I don't want to see you slacking in History of Magic, otherwise I'll put you back in Binns' class," McGonagall said, "now

away with you.”

Elated with their success, they shared what had done with Neville. He was sad that they wouldn't be with him in History of Magic anymore, but he understood their decision. When they told him about their plan for Defence Against the Dark Arts, Neville chuckled.

“If she doesn't shape up, I wouldn't be surprised if more people don't do the same. I bet that'll really wind her up,” Neville said, “though if you two jump ship, there's no way I'm sticking around either.”

“My offer to Seamus and Dean applies to you and the girls,” Harry said, “you're more than welcome to use my study materials once I'm done with them.”

“I will definitely be taking you up on that,” Neville said, “do you think you could also help me practise the spells as well?”

These new changes saw Harry, Seamus and Dean parting ways with their fellow Gryffindor fifth-years after lunch on Tuesday as they headed to the Room of Requirement. The classroom it made for them was much like the one it made for Defence Against the Dark Arts, and just like that course, Harry received a box containing a metal disk engraved with the number 1. They took their places at the desks, and Harry activated the disk.

The instructor for this course was a woman named Juni Nilsson. She appeared before them as an older lady that immediately gave off grandmother vibes when she started talking.

“Hello there. My name is Professor Juni Nilsson, and I'll be your instructor for the ICW correspondence course in History of Magic, OWL level. Together we'll explore many varied topics in magical history, giving you a thorough grounding for you to do well in your examinations. I know you'll all do wonderfully.”

The next two hours was the best History of Magic lesson Harry had ever had. Professor Nilsson gave them an introduction to the Goblin wars, and it was far more engaging than any lecture Binns had given. She told it like she was telling a story to her grandkids. Harry couldn't help being enthralled, happily taking notes as she led them through the events that preceded the wars that served as its catalyst. When it ended and she gave them the assignment for that week, a ten inch essay on the three major factions that formed at the start of the first Goblin war, Harry didn't even complain. She even gave them a few suggestions about books to read that they might find helpful, and for once, Harry was actually excited to do his History of Magic homework.

“That- that was a really good lesson,” Dean said as they packed away their things.

“Why couldn't we have had a teacher like that for the first four years of Hogwarts?” Seamus asked, “why did we have to be stuck with Binns?”

It was another question they could have Lady Longbottom investigate, or perhaps Harry would let Sirius know. The more people they had questioning how Dumbledore ran Hogwarts, the more scrutiny there was, and the easier it would be for them to catch Dumbledore messing up. Magical people were generally protective of their kids, so the more

mistakes they could find in how Dumbledore had handled Hogwarts, the better. It would make it easier to oust him without backlash.

Even if it caused a storm down the line, at least for now Harry was simply content that he actually had decent teachers this year, and all it took was dropping two classes at Hogwarts.

The first escalation

It was a good thing that Harry dropped Umbridge's Defence Against the Dark Arts and Binns' History of Magic classes because it let him manage his time so much easier. Between all of his regular Hogwarts classes, ICW courses, Quidditch practice three times a week, and keeping on top of homework and assignments, Harry found himself pleasantly busy.

The double period of Defence Against the Dark Arts on Monday was filled by the two hours of ICW material for that subject. He was joined on Tuesday by Seamus and Dean to fill the double period with History of Magic. The Defence Against the Dark Arts period he had on Friday was then used to round off his assignments before sending them off to be graded. Harry felt proud that he was able to keep on top of it.

Umbridge wasn't at the staff table at breakfast on the Thursday after Harry dropped her class. She reappeared at lunch with a look of thunder on her face. It just made Harry more glad that he wouldn't have to put up with her in lessons. Seamus and Dean reported that she looked furious when he didn't show up to class on Friday.

She wasn't the only one. Many times Harry caught Hermione glaring at him from across the common room. He made sure to stay with his friends whenever he saw this, as no doubt she was waiting for him to be on his own before she would pounce. He didn't really want to put up with her complaining. When Seamus got up to use the bathroom, and Dean went to get something from his bag in the dormitory, she made her move, but before she could reach him, Fred and George descended.

"What's this we hear about you skipping classes?" Fred said, "and apparently bringing along your boys with you?"

"My, how brazen dear Harry," George said.

Both of them were smirking.

"I'm not skipping classes. I'm self-studying Defence and History using an ICW correspondence course," Harry said.

That brought the twins up short, both stunned.

"You can do that?"

"You can, so long as most of your classes are still Hogwarts-taught," Harry winced, "it can also be a bit expensive."

"Ah. Something to look into when we graduate then Georgie," Fred said.

"Where did you even hear that?" Harry asked.

"Where do you think?" George said.

“Ron’s been moaning about you skipping because Hermione won’t let him join you, and you can probably guess what her opinion on the matter is,” Fred said.

“I can, which is why I don’t want to hear it,” Harry said, “it’s none of her business how I approach my education.”

“We wholeheartedly agree,” George said, “Freddie, I think our beloved fifth year prefects are looking a bit too relaxed. What say we inject a bit of energy into their lives?”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea.”

They left him, and the next moment they were putting on a raucous display of their new fireworks. Hermione, who had been about to beeline over to Harry, changed course to go and lecture them, dragging a clearly reluctant Ron with her.

Somehow the news that Harry was self-studying for two classes hadn’t spread throughout the whole school by next Monday. He received his first set of marked assignments for both courses along with the set of lectures for that week, and Harry was pleased to see he had done well in both. Seamus and Dean hadn’t heard back from their inquiries about joining Harry in the History of Magic course so they too could be marked. When Harry failed to show up for her class, since he was too busy listening to Professor Okura explain the difference between a curse and a counter curse, Umbridge descended from the top table at dinner. She made her way towards where Harry was sitting.

“Mr Potter, I will see you this evening for detention,” she said softly.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Why?” she repeated with a silly little laugh, as though the question itself was ridiculous, “surely you must have realised your absence from my classes would not go unpunished. No no, I do not tolerate truants, and so you will report to my office at 8 o’clock for detention.”

“My absences have all been excused,” Harry said, “ask Professor McGonagall.”

“I highly doubt that,” Umbridge scoffed, “I expect you to be there on time.”

With that she strode away, not giving Harry any time to respond.

“What’re you going to do?” Dean asked, “are you going to go?”

“No,” Harry said, to his own surprise, “I can’t be punished for not going to a class that I’m not a part of any more.”

He still sent a message to McGonagall to let her know what had happened, and what he intended to do about it. The next morning, following Harry’s non-attendance, Umbridge glared at him from the top table, her eyes ablaze with fury. Harry remembered Sirius’s warnings to not draw her attention, but his education was important. If Fudge thought getting one of his people into Hogwarts would be simple, Harry would make sure he reconsidered. Why couldn’t he have at least planted somebody in the school who knew the subject they were required to teach?

"Because he doesn't want you trained in combat," Sirius said when they spoke via the mirror.

"Combat? Does he think we're forming some sort of wizard army?" Harry scoffed.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but it's what Tonks and Kingsley picked up at the Ministry. Fudge's campaign in the Daily Prophet hasn't stopped Dumbledore from speaking out about Voldemort, so he forced Umbridge into the school to try and get the inside scoop. He's already been removed from his positions in the Wizengamot and the ICW. Fudge is turning his sights to the last seat of Dumbledore's power," Sirius said.

"That sounds very paranoid."

"Because it is. Fudge has grown comfortable in his position as Minister, but he knows that there are forces out there that would threaten that, and when powerful people feel threatened they tend to lash out," Sirius said, "I expect he and Umbridge will be the ones to escalate."

"How so?"

"Lady Longbottom called an emergency meeting of the governors last week to address Umbridge's teaching style. Umbridge was brought in to justify her decisions, and let's just say that the governors are not happy with it. They basically told her that she needs to do a better job and that if the Ministry is going to insist on a non-standard curriculum, then the governors would insist that she teach the ICW curriculum or be sacked. In this matter, the governors have more authority," Sirius said, "I don't think she believed she would get push back from the adults, and with you exposing her and successfully standing up to her, Umbridge will have realised that she doesn't have nearly as much power as she thought she would."

"So they're going to do something that will give her that power back," Harry surmised.

"Exactly. I don't know what the retaliation will be, but be prepared for it. Just remember that you're the one in the right here, and you've gone through the appropriate channels to do what you've done."

What the retaliation was became apparent as early as the next Monday. A notice went up in the Entrance Hall overnight, and there was a small cluster of students gathered around it when Harry went down for breakfast. As the tallest, Dean peered over everyone's heads to read it.

"Dolores Jane Umbridge has been appointed the Hogwarts High Inquisitor in accordance with Educational Decree Number 23. Signed, Cornelius Fudge," he read aloud.

"What's a High Inquisitor?" Seamus asked.

"Not sure but it sounds like someone with authority. This must be how Umbridge is trying to regain control," Harry said.

The Great Hall was abuzz with the news of Umbridge's new position, which only grew louder when the mail owls arrived with the Daily Prophet. Dean was the only one with a

subscription, so they all waited for him to finish with it before they could read it. Dean scanned the front page and scoffed.

“Listen to this,” he said, “after revolutionising the teaching of Defence Against the Dark Arts, Dolores Jane Umbridge has been appointed to be the first ever High Inquisitor of Hogwarts. Her educational philosophy has already proven to be a big success but she felt that she was not getting the support she needed from her fellow teachers, says Percy Weasley, Junior Assistant to the Minister. As High Inquisitor, Madam Umbridge will have the power to address what some in the Ministry are calling the ‘seriously falling standards at Hogwarts’ by inspecting the abilities of the other teachers to determine their suitability for their role.”

“What a load of rubbish,” Seamus said immediately, “revolutionising the teaching of Defence Against the Dark Arts? She makes us read from a book and parrot its opinions back at her for three hours a week. That’s hardly revolutionary!”

Harry was more concerned with the second part. Umbridge now had the ability to inspect the other teachers. It sounded like she had the ability to fire them if they weren’t up to her liking. That was an awful lot of power for one person, who already displayed several prominent biases, to have. Anyone she felt wasn’t towing the Ministry line on anything could be fired based on some trumped up charge of ‘not living up to the highest standards’. Harry wasn’t a fan of the power Dumbledore held as Headmaster, but that didn’t mean he wanted Fudge and the Ministry to have that power either.

Fred and George slid into the seats across from them.

“So you’ve just read about the new position?” Fred said.

“Isn’t it great!” George said after.

“How on earth could this be great?” Harry asked.

“Because she’s painted a huge target on her back,” George said, “think about it. She’s a month in and already all the students hate her guts. This’ll just give everyone even more reasons to hate her.”

“And if they wish to take their revenge in a non-dangerous but highly annoying way, well, we just happen to have a range of products that can do just that,” Fred grinned.

“Whatever you do, be careful. This is just the start of Umbridge’s little crusade at Hogwarts. Do not let her target you. I need you both here,” Harry said firmly.

“Don’t worry Harry. We know. We’ll be careful,” Fred said, “but we’re not going to let Umbridge get away with anything. If she thinks she can just walk in and take over, she’s got another thing coming.”

The twins left them to their breakfast.

“She’s going to be even more insufferable in class now,” Neville said.

“Do you reckon we’ll have any inspected lessons today?” Dean asked.

“No idea, but whatever happens, we cannot give her any ammunition. We need to be on our best behaviour so she doesn’t target us with anything,” Harry said.

Umbridge wasn’t in Ancient Runes, which Harry was very pleased about. However, when they took their seats in the dungeons for Potions, there was a faint little cough from the door. Snape, who had been about to put the recipe on the board, stopped what he was doing and turned to face the woman. Umbridge stood out starkly in the darkened room with her bright pink robes. She had a little smile on her face as she held a clipboard.

“I take it you received my note letting you know the date and time of your inspection?” she said, her tone soft and simpering.

Snape’s face was carefully blank.

“Obviously,” he enunciated carefully, as though he was trying to project just how much he thought she was an idiot without actually saying it.

Umbridge didn’t pick up on it, taking a seat in the corner of the room. Throughout Snape’s introductory lecture as he explained the potion they would be making, the scratching of a quill was a constant background noise. When they were told to start brewing, Umbridge stood. She paced around the room, looking in people’s cauldrons or occasionally asking them a question.

“I’m glad to see you’re *finally* showing up to class, Mr Potter,” she said when she descended on their table.

“I haven’t missed a single class, Professor,” Harry said calmly.

Umbridge tutted.

“Then I suppose you can provide me with a summary of what you have been learning so far this year?” she asked.

“We’ve been studying a variety of potions that are tested at OWL level, including their antidotes. Last week we finished the antidote for wort-rash, and now we’re starting the Strengthening Solution,” Harry said easily, inwardly enjoying the way Umbridge pursed her lips.

“And you’ve been receiving regular homework?”

“We have.”

Truthfully, Harry was quite pleased with his performance in this class. No longer hiding his true ability, his essays had vastly improved. He was consistently getting E’s on his homework, a fact which made Snape twitch with irritation every time he handed it back. Seamus and Dean were also getting E’s or A’s, and Neville was pretty consistently getting A’s.

“That’s good to hear,” Umbridge said, though her tone said otherwise.

She left them to it, wandering over to Snape to pepper him with probing questions. Harry didn't bother listening in. As fun as it would be to hear Snape have to answer her, it was an unnecessary distraction when he had a tricky potion to make.

The bell rang, and Umbridge left before the rest of the class. Harry handed in a sample of potion and headed back up to the dormitory with his friends, though he didn't stay for long. It was Quidditch practice, and Angelina was pushing them hard. The first game against Slytherin was coming up soon, and all of them wanted it to go well. McLaggen was still an overbearing ass, but Angelina was more than happy to silence him with a jinx.

Harry felt quite pleased with how things were going, which of course was when he found himself accosted in the common room. No sooner had he stepped through the portrait hole than Hermione came storming up to him. A quick glance around told him that none of his friends were nearby, so he let out a long sigh.

"Harry! I need to talk to you!"

"I don't have anything to say to you," was all Harry said, trying to walk past her, but Hermione moved to block him.

"No, this has gone on long enough. Skipping classes is a terrible thing to do, especially in such an important year!" Hermione snapped at him, "you need to take your education seriously!"

"I am taking my education seriously, which is why I am not going to Umbridge's lessons," Harry said, "it's not up to you what I do with my time."

"As a prefect, I have a duty to ensure my house is upholding the highest standards! I completely get not wanting to go to that woman's awful lessons, but trying to study on your own is not the way to go about it! I could help you come up with a study plan if you would just talk to me!"

"I don't need any help from you," Harry said simply, "and don't try pulling the prefect card. Everything I've done has been above board. You don't have to like it, but you do have to accept it."

She tried to keep arguing, but Harry stormed past her. It was only when he was halfway up the stairs to his dormitory that he realised that Hermione was following him. Girls could come up to the boys side of the dormitory? That was completely unfair. It happened at least once a year that a boy would try going up the right hand staircase, even with completely innocent intentions, only to be dumped on their asses as the stairs turned into a slide. Why did the girls get that kind of special treatment?

The Hogwarts magic perked up at this thought.

"I'm just trying to help you! Don't you want to do well in your- ah!"

Hermione was cut off mid sentence as the stairs beneath her feet suddenly flattened into a smooth surface. She fell down and slid all the way back to the common room. Harry smiled

to himself, closing the door to his dormitory behind him. Only Seamus was there, lounging on his bed reading a book.

“What was the commotion?” he asked.

“Hermione was determined to give me a lecture about ‘skipping classes’. The stairs dumped her out when she tried following me up here,” Harry said.

“They’ve never done that before,” Seamus said.

“Well they do now.”

Seamus thought about it before, then smirked.

“Gryffindor magic?”

“Pretty much, though I didn’t know I could do that. Hogwarts seemed to agree with me that it wasn’t fair,” Harry said as he opened up his trunk, retrieving his school bag.

“You just got back from training and you’re going straight into homework?”

“Now that Hermione can’t come up here, she’ll probably try sending Ron up. I’m going to check if that lecture is imminent or not.”

He pulled out the Marauders Map, activated it, and scanned it for Ron’s name. With everyone in the castle, it was harder to do, but Harry had gotten good at finding specific people. Seamus leaned over his shoulder to help. Ron wasn’t in Gryffindor Tower, and he wasn’t in the library (not that Harry thought he’d be there when Hermione wasn’t). Harry eventually found him in the boys toilets on the first floor.

“He’s nowhere near us so I think we’ll be fine,” Harry said.

“Yeah, he’s in a bathroom with Colin Creevey,” Seamus pointed out.

Harry looked again, and sure enough, Colin’s dot was also in the bathroom with Ron.

“He’s not bullying Colin, do you think?” Seamus asked, “Colin went to the Yule Ball with a boy after all.”

“He’d better not be but I can keep an eye on it just to be safe,” Harry said, “where are the others?”

“Neville went to work on Muggle Studies with Padma, and Dean said he’d help Parvati and Lavender with Potions. I just wanted to quietly read for a bit.”

“That’s alright. I’ll go take a shower and not disturb you any more.”

Perhaps he should have expected Seamus to follow him into the bathroom after he said that, but Harry didn’t mind when a pair of arms wound around his torso when he stood beneath the spray. It felt good, and they enjoyed a moment to just relax together. Harry turned and kissed

Seamus deeply, but they didn't go beyond that. Harry was too tired from training, and while they thought they may have some privacy, they couldn't guarantee that their dorm mates wouldn't come wandering in. They enjoyed a nice shower together where Harry got to work out some of the kinks and knots he'd picked up from Quidditch, melting beneath the tender ministrations of his boyfriend.

They didn't have any more inspected lessons for the rest of the week, which Harry thought odd. Then again, each class had at least 5 year groups that Umbridge could appear in. Fred and George reported that she showed up for their Charms class, and through Parvati, Padma said she inspected Professor Sprout when the Ravenclaws and Slytherins had Herbology. Harry wasn't too worried about either class. Both teachers were good at their jobs, both in terms of exam grades and the rapport they built with their students. No doubt Flitwick and Sprout would pass with flying colours.

The weekend arrived, bringing with it the first Hogsmeade visit of the year, which the students eagerly took advantage of. Harry was looking forward to getting out of the castle for a bit while the weather wasn't too cold.

"I take it you three will be going together," Neville said.

"We are," Harry frowned, "you can come with us if you like?"

"I wouldn't want to be a third wheel, fourth wheel on your date," Neville said.

That only caused Seamus and Dean to laugh.

"We're not that attached at the hip," Seamus said, "we can still all go together as friends."

"Yeah. We're sorry if we made you feel excluded," Dean said.

"No! You didn't!" Neville hurriedly said, "I totally get that you'll want to spend time together. I just wanted to know before we went!"

"Oh? Did you have plans for this Hogsmeade trip? Meeting anyone else there?" Seamus teased, only for Neville to blush.

"Nothing like that."

"But there is someone?" Harry asked.

"It's not like that, but I had wondered about asking if Padma wanted to go to Hogsmeade with me *as friends*," Neville said.

The blush gave him away but Harry wisely didn't say anything. The pair of them had been studying together quite a bit, and not just for Muggle Studies, a class they shared. Perhaps he would check in with Parvati to see if she knew anything from her sister's end, but then thought better of it. Parvati had kept his secrets about his relationship with Dean and Seamus. It wouldn't be fair to then ask her about her sister and Neville.

They left the Gryffindor common room together. It was as they were crossing the Great Hall that an unwelcome voice called out to him. Hermione strode towards him, and Harry heaved out a sigh.

“Harry, could I have a word with you?”

“That entirely depends on what it is you have to say,” Harry said bluntly.

“There’s something I need to talk to you about,” Hermione said, giving the other three boys a significant look, “in private.”

“Not going to happen,” Harry said, “whatever you have to say to me can be said in front of my friends or not at all.”

Hermione scowled but gestured to them all to follow her, which they did so carefully. She led them to an unused classroom on the ground floor. As soon as the door closed, she whirled around to face him.

“It’s about Defence Against the-”

“I’ve already said everything I care to on that subject,” Harry cut her off.

“No! Not about your self-studying!” Hermione snapped, “it’s just, we’re not learning anything with that awful teacher! We’ve got really important exams coming up and there’s no way we’ll be prepared, so I’m putting together a study group so we can teach ourselves.”

“Good for you.”

“Only we need somebody to lead the group, to help run the sessions and be the point of contact between the members, and I would like that to be you.”

“No thanks,” Harry said, “I’m not interested.”

“Harry, this is important!”

“If it’s so important, then why don’t you lead the group? It’s your idea.”

“It has to be you!” Hermione looked as though she had sucked on a lemon. “You’re the best in our year at Defence Against the Dark Arts, and you’ve already had weeks to learn the material on your own. I can help you plan the sessions but I really think it would be best if you ran them.”

“So in other words, I’ll be held up as the person that everyone can blame when something inevitably goes wrong,” Harry said, “thanks but no thanks. I’ve had enough of people using me as a scapegoat.”

“But Harry, this is important! You have a duty to help people!”

“Of the two of us, you have more of a duty than me. After all, you were the one trusted to be a prefect, so if you’re not going to take responsibility for your own idea, why the hell should

I do it?" Harry said, "you have my answer Hermione."

He turned around and led the others out of the room, leaving a fuming Hermione behind. It was only when they reached the fresh air outside that the simmering anger bubbling within him cooled.

"She had some nerve asking you that," Seamus said.

"I know," Harry said, "now, I have absolutely no qualms with helping any of you with Defence Against the Dark Arts. Seamus and Dean have already been using my ICW course materials, but you're more than welcome to use them as well Neville. Same with the girls."

"I think I'll take you up on that," Neville said.

"I don't get why she thought she could even ask that of you. You haven't publicly been friends with her in over half a year," Dean said, "she even tried to make it seem like you were the only choice because you're better than her at Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Which you are, by the way," Seamus cut in.

"It's funny, because looking back, I've never once gotten that impression from her. Even when she was supposed to be my friend, she treated me like I was stupid. She would talk about looking over my essays to find the mistakes, because of course they'd be there, and when I said no thank you, do you know what she said? 'Don't you want them to be good?' As if I wasn't capable of writing a good essay without her," Harry said, "to then turn around and act as though I'm actually better than her at a subject is both insulting and hilarious. Did you see her face when she said it?"

"I bet it really grated on her pride," Seamus said.

"I get why she would want to set up a study group for Defence Against the Dark Arts. My question is about the timing," Dean said, "it's been a month and we all learned Umbridge was a terrible teacher on the very first day. Why take so long to realise that something needed to be done about it?"

"It's been building up for a while," Neville said, "you've seen the way that Hermione's been fuming in Umbridge's classes. Umbridge completely ignores her now when she's got her hand up. I think it's the first time that Hermione hasn't been liked by a teacher and she's not taking it well."

"Well she'd better get used to it. Umbridge isn't going to change her opinion of her," Dean said, "at least she's smart enough to stop blurting out her opinions. Ron hasn't so he keeps getting detention."

They followed the steady stream of students walking the familiar path to Hogsmeade. The village was as charming and as quaint as ever. It reminded Harry of the village Seamus lived in. The locals were all pleasant people, not minding the occasional influx of teenagers they received.

“Where should we head first?” Seamus asked.

“It’s my Mum’s birthday soon so I’d like to send her a present,” Dean said, “hopefully I can find something nice for her in Gladrags.”

“Probably best to wait for the mad rush to die down,” Harry said, gesturing to Honeydukes.

It was one of the most popular shops in the village and was always busy with students. Harry saw Ron enter, only to exit not long after, empty handed and looking annoyed. It likely meant there weren’t any free samples, and without Harry’s money, Ron couldn’t pay for anything himself. Not wanting to be anywhere near his former friend, the four of them headed off for Gladrags.

The small shop sold a wide variety of clothing, some brand new and some second-hand. It was run by an older lady and her daughter. Madam Gladrag smiled sweetly at them, and when Dean said he was looking for a birthday present for his mother, she led him over to the women’s section, helping him to find the perfect gift. Harry also browsed with a different present in mind. Dean’s birthday was on November 13th, and while Harry could owl-order a gift, he wanted to see if he could get something himself.

He ended up finding a lovely winter cloak in a deep midnight blue. Seamus saw it too, and when Harry told him what it was for, he nodded in approval. Luckily Harry was able to buy it and shrink it down before Dean came over with his own purchase. After Gladrags, they went to the post office so Dean could send the present to his mother.

They picked up some extra stationary in Scrivenshafts before deciding to brave the chaos of Honeydukes. The initial mad rush of students had ended but it was still very busy. It was only the temptation of sweets that drew Harry in. While he was glad to have stocked up on chocolates, he was still glad when he stepped back out in the fresh air. Neville, who hadn’t come in with them, shook his head fondly.

“Shall we have lunch at the Three Broomsticks?” Harry asked when all four of them were together again.

“If there’s space,” Seamus said.

The pub was as busy as ever but they somehow managed to find a booth just as a group of wizards left. Unfortunately, hanging around at the bar was Ginny and she could clearly see them. Her face lit up and she made her way over to them.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Ginny said. She leaned against the side of the booth closest to Harry. Thankfully Dean was sitting in the way, the taller boy blocking her from getting into his space. “Where are Ron and Hermione?”

“I didn’t come to Hogsmeade with them,” Harry said plainly.

“Huh? Ron said you were?” Ginny shook her head, “anyway, do you mind if I join you? All of my friends have completely ditched me.”

“Sorry but no. I'd quite like to spend the day with my own friends,” Harry said.

“But Harry-”

“He’s given you his answer, Weasley,” Seamus said.

“I just wanted to hang out,” Ginny pouted.

“And we’d like to not be disturbed,” Dean said, “so can you please leave us?”

Ginny looked like she was going to argue but then Neville returned with a round of butterbeer and there was no more space at the booth. She gave Harry a demure smile before walking away, a sway to her hips that Harry didn’t bother looking at as he turned back to his friends. Dean immediately took his hand beneath the table.

“If she had leaned over any further, she would have shoved her breasts in my face,” he said.

“If I’d been sitting where you were, she probably would have done exactly that,” Harry said.

“Please tell me she wasn’t so brazen over the summer,” Dean said.

“She was. It was quite ridiculous.”

“Does she not know?” Neville asked, “I mean, about you three?”

“Not that I’m aware. Even if she does, it’s all in the plan to make her Lady Potter so she’s going to keep trying to seduce me.”

“Like hell will I let that happen,” Seamus said hotly.

“Relax Shay,” Harry said, brushing his foot against the other boys, “if nothing else, her attempts have only proven to me that I am completely gay, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“It makes me want to rub it in her face so badly, but I know that’d be a bad idea,” Seamus said, “oh well. I’ll just have to enjoy the moment when all the bad stuff is over and we can be completely open.”

Neville had a wistful look on his face.

“Don’t worry Neville. You’ll find someone for you,” Harry said kindly, hoping he was interpreting the look correctly.

“It’s not just that. When all the bad stuff is over, but the bad stuff seems to be getting pretty bad,” Neville said, “Fudge and Umbridge are insisting that Voldemort isn’t back. Dumbledore’s up to something with Ron, Hermione and Ginny as his errand runners. Then there’s whatever Voldemort is actually up to. Have you heard anything else about that?”

“I haven’t, and Sirius is getting worried about it too. The Death Eaters have been quiet lately. The incidents in the Muggle world have slowed, which probably means they’ve been gearing

up for something.”

The only question was what it could be. From what Sirius told Harry, the Order didn’t know. They kept thinking that it had something to do with whatever they were guarding in the Department of Mysteries. Narcissa hadn’t been able to pass along any information besides the fact that something was coming. It made for quite a stressful time, one that Madam Rosmerta’s excellent pub lunch couldn’t quite remedy.

It was only as they walked back up to the castle and passed through the gates that Harry relaxed. The Hogwarts magic washed over him, surrounding him with a sense of safety and security. Beside him, Neville let out a content sigh.

“Does it always feel like that? Like it’s welcoming you home?”

“Pretty much. I think it’s been a long time since there were any Heirs to the founders at Hogwarts so the castle really wants to make us feel welcome,” Harry said.

“It’s a bit mad to think that after so long, there’s three Heirs at Hogwarts at the same time,” Dean said.

“Well, it’s kind of cheating when Harry is Heir to two of the founders,” Seamus joked.

“Still, I wonder who Ravenclaw’s Heir is? I know none of us take Divination, but surely if all four founders’ lines are at Hogwarts at the same time, that has to be a sign of something,” Dean said.

It likely was. Remus said he would try looking into who Ravenclaw’s Heir could be now that they were down to just one Horcrux remaining, but with Voldemort back, he didn’t have much time when he wasn’t working for the Order. If they could find out who it was, maybe it would help them solve the mystery of whatever it was that had Voldemort so interested in Hogwarts. It could just be fondness for his old school, but he hadn’t done this the first time, so Harry felt that it had to be something more. Godric, Salazar, and Merlin himself had all alluded to a power that Hogwarts held, and Harry couldn’t help feeling that this power had a part yet to play in all of this.

For good or for ill.

Independent and impartial

Chapter Notes

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

They woke up to another message on the noticeboard. A new educational decree had been passed, giving the High Inquisitor authority over all extra-curricular groups, clubs or teams. They now needed Umbridge's approval to continue these activities, and she had the power to prevent them from taking place. Harry was left confused as to why she had taken this step, only to be reminded of the study group Hermione had tried setting up when he saw her scowling face.

This new decree caused a new complication, as Angelina came rushing up to him at breakfast.

"Harry, we need to ask Umbridge for permission for the Gryffindor Quidditch team to play!" she said slightly frantically.

"What? Why?"

"Because she specifically said *teams* in the decree. It's Gryffindor vs Slytherin this weekend and they've already gotten permission. Please, I know you have some kind of beef with her but you need to be on your best behaviour so she'll let us play!" Angelina pleaded.

"It's alright Angelina. I won't do anything to jeopardise the team," Harry said.

It didn't seem to help as she hurried off, not looking at all reassured. The only ones in Gryffindor who still got into trouble with Umbridge were Ron and Hermione, the rest following Harry's lead to keep their heads down and not give her any ammunition to use against them. Harry didn't think there would be any issue, only to come down for lunch to see Angelina sitting between Alicia and Katie, looking absolutely distraught.

"She's not given us permission," Angelina said, "she said she would take it under advisement and let us know her decision in due time."

"What! I swear I didn't do anything. I haven't even seen her today!"

"I don't think it's anything you did, Harry, or at least not directly," Katie said, "apparently the Ravenclaw team is in the same position according to Cho."

"It's completely unfair," Alicia said, "the Slytherins got permission as soon as they asked, and so did the Hufflepuffs. They can't have a tournament with only two teams!"

"The teachers won't stand for it. McGonagall loves Quidditch. There's no way she won't force her to let us play," Harry said.

Or at least that was his hope. McGonagall and Flitwick both looked disgruntled that week, but Umbridge still sat at meals looking smug. After the pushback she had received from her

lessons, no doubt she was enjoying holding this over their heads. When Friday rolled around and they still didn't have permission, Harry was actually starting to think that they wouldn't get to play. Would that mean Slytherin would win the game tomorrow by default, or since Gryffindor technically wasn't part of the tournament would it not count at all?

As he was mulling this over in the common room after classes finished, the portrait hole swung open and Angelina burst into the room.

"We got permission!"

A rousing cheer went up around the room. The Gryffindor team gathered around her.

"McGonagall tried convincing her but she wouldn't budge. It was only when McGonagall and Flitwick banded together that she had to give in. Even though her house already got permission, Professor Sprout joined them as well. They said that with their authority as the majority of the Heads of Houses, they could remove Quidditch as a school-wide activity, which would effectively disband the Slytherin team and prevent them from playing. They said either all houses get to play or none of them do. Umbridge had to go along with it."

"I'm not complaining because I'm glad we now get to play, but it's a bit mad it got this far," Katie said.

"I know. McGonagall said she would be submitting a formal complaint to the school governors about it, claiming that it was a massive abuse of authority," Angelina said, "but enough about Umbridge. We're down an entire week of training so I want us all to be well rested at least for the game tomorrow. I don't care what homework you've got to do, we are all going to bed early."

"Aye aye captain!" Fred and George said.

After four years on the Gryffindor team, Harry was no stranger to pre-match jitters, but when he woke up the next morning, it was to a distinctly heavy feeling. There was a lot riding on this match, or that was how it felt at least. The others on the team all had similar expressions when he went down to breakfast. Only McLaggen seemed unaffected by it, though Harry could see that his swagger was just a touch less genuine and more forced than usual.

Eventually, it was time for them to head down to the pitch. At least the weather was kind to them. The air was crisp with little wind, and the sky was mostly clear. The shining sun would catch nicely off the Snitch, as McLaggen insisted on trying to tell him. McLaggen continued this unwelcome stream of tips and advice as they changed into their Quidditch robes, right up until Angelina left the Captain's office.

"Alright everyone. We might not have been able to-" she started.

"Fred, George, you're gonna want to come out of the sun so they don't see you coming," McLaggen interrupted her.

"McLaggen, that's-"

“Slytherin tends to have a more aggressive Chasing style so Katie and Alicia, you need to-”

Harry saw the exact moment when Angelina had enough. She stormed up to McLaggen and shoved him against the wall. McLaggen’s mouth opened to complain, only to snap shut when he felt the tip of Angelina’s wand press against his neck.

“I’m only going to say this once and you are going to understand it,” Angelina hissed, “you are the *Keeper*. Not the Chasers, not the Seeker, and *not* the *Captain*! You will play your game and leave the others to theirs. I swear to all that is holy, if you try and tell the others how to play their positions in the middle of a game, I will hex you so hard and so deep, you won’t even be able to think about getting on a broom without feeling it. Is that clear?”

McLaggen nodded. Angelina stepped back, looking satisfied.

“Now then, as I was saying before I was rudely interrupted, Slytherin may have been able to train more this last week, but it goes without saying that we have the better players, and therefore the better team. Let’s show them how it’s done.”

It was much shorter and sweeter than any of Wood’s pre-match pep talks but it did the trick. They stepped out onto the field to a roar of cheers. Across from them, the Slytherin team did the same. They had two new Beaters, Crabbe and Goyle, who both looked imposing with their larger frames but Harry wasn’t too worried about them. Angelina and Montague, the Slytherin Captain, partook in the yearly tradition of trying to break each other’s hands as they shook them, and then all players were in the air.

With a whistle blast from Madam Hooch, the balls were released and the game began.

It felt good to be in the air, the rush of adrenaline making Harry’s heart soar as everything got underway. Angelina, Katie and Alicia were on fine form, working as a well oiled machine to keep the Quaffle moving towards the Slytherin goals, only to be disrupted by a powerful Bludger smashed their way by Crabbe. The Quaffle was caught by Pucey, who passed to Warrington. McLaggen was waiting by the Gryffindor hoops, looking very put out. Harry watched as he grew more focused, eyeing the Quaffle carefully. At the last second, Warrington tossed the Quaffle to Montague, who flew in from seemingly nowhere to shoot for the hoops. Thankfully, McLaggen reacted in time, and while he didn’t catch the Quaffle, he was able to knock it away from the goal.

As the game heated up, points being scored by both sides, Harry scoured the pitch for the Snitch. Malfoy was doing the same. There was a flash of gold near the stands but it turned out to just be somebody’s watch catching the sun. Then Harry spotted it. The Snitch was hovering right in the middle of the pitch. He dived for it, and a second later so did Malfoy. This Snitch was particularly twitchy. It skimmed perilously low to the ground, constantly twisting and turning so that even with his firebolt, Harry couldn’t make use of his superior speed.

It darted towards the stands, then suddenly veered out into open air. Harry was in hot pursuit, nearly unseated himself from his broom with the force of the turn. Malfoy was only a foot behind him when his hand clamped down on the small golden ball. Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the stadium erupted into roaring cheers as Gryffindor celebrated their victory.

Harry found himself in a pile of hugs from his teammates as they all landed. A short way away, Malfoy landed as well, joined by Crabbe, Goyle, and the rest of the Slytherin team. He looked put out.

That's when the insults started. It was the usual trash talk, with Malfoy insulting Harry and his parents, though it may have been Harry's imagination but it didn't seem as though Malfoy's heart was in it. When Harry failed to react, he turned his insults to Fred and George, but that had even less of an effect since Malfoy was targeting their mother. Thus, his attempts to rile the Gryffindor team into some kind of frenzy failed, and Harry and the others happily went back to the changing rooms without issue. Even McLaggen seemed enthused, though he kept his pompous air.

The celebration in the Gryffindor common room was as raucous as ever. Fred and George took the opportunity to demonstrate a few more of their joke products, which naturally drew Hermione's ire. Harry enjoyed himself with his friends, laughing and chatting with them until the party wound down. All things considered, it had been an exceptional day. Umbridge had tried her best to ruin it, but she had failed. Part of Harry knew she wouldn't take this latest attack on her authority lying down, but whatever she tried to do, they would find a way to stop her.

It had only been a week since the last educational decree, so nobody expected another one to be released quite so soon. Yet when Harry and the others went down to breakfast on Monday morning, they were met with another notice put up in the Entrance Hall.

"The High Inquisitor has been declared an independent and impartial role within the school, and as such, has been given the final authority over any punishments or sanctions, including those imposed by other members of staff, in accordance with Educational Decree blah blah blah," Dean read aloud for them.

"Another power grab by Umbridge?" Seamus said.

"Yes, and judging by the wording, I think it's a strategic one. Let's ask Neville if he's heard anything from his grandmother," Harry said.

It turned out that Neville had, in fact, heard from Lady Longbottom.

"When they heard about Umbridge withholding permission for the Gryffindor team to play right up until the last minute, they sent her a strongly worded letter telling her that the Governors were on McGonagall's side on this issue. They told her that if she continues to abuse her power, they would terminate her role at the school," Neville said.

"Then the latest decree makes sense," Harry said, "she's trying to consolidate her power into her role as High Inquisitor. By making it a supposedly 'independent and impartial' role, one appointed by the Ministry and not the school, she'll still be here even if they fire her as Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. She can inspect the teachers and kick out those she doesn't like, and now she can pick and choose which students to punish and how."

“If that’s true, then the only way to get rid of her will be to appeal to the Ministry, but they’re unlikely to change their mind about her. We’ll all need to be a lot more careful,” Neville said.

Harry spread this message to the twins, who then helped pass it around to the rest of Gryffindor house. He didn’t trust that Umbridge wouldn’t abuse this new authority.

October continued to pass them by. Harry did well in his lessons. With no more reason to pander to Ron or Hermione, he was able to do a lot better in his lessons. He still held back his full magical power as otherwise he overloaded his spells, but now whenever they learned something new, he was one of the first people in the class to get it. McGonagall and Flitwick were both very impressed with this. The other Gryffindor fifth-years, whether caught up in Harry’s new mindset or not, had also buckled down and consistently tried their best.

The best part about this was how frustrated it made Hermione. In every class there was now somebody who could challenge her as ‘the best’. Harry was a constant presence behind her in Transfiguration, and she had already reluctantly acknowledged his superiority in Defence Against the Dark Arts. Seamus was quickly showing his talent for Charms, and Neville had always been a prodigy in Herbology. Dean’s love of Astronomy shone through every lesson, and now that he was learning from better resources, his History of Magic grade had improved. Similarly, he and Harry had also done a lot better in Potions.

If Hermione’s place at the top of the Gryffindor fifth-years, if not the year as a whole, was threatened, Ron’s place at the bottom was cemented. He had never been very diligent with his schoolwork, but in this very crucial year, the only one who seemed to care about getting him through it was Hermione. At least twice a week, Ron was late for the first lesson of the morning because he still didn’t set an alarm himself, and he had received more than one detention for late or incomplete homework. It was a fairly regular sight to see Ron slaving away in the common room for hours, Hermione practically hovering over his shoulder to make him do the work.

“I know everyone has their own level of ability, but surely Ron can’t be so stupid he thinks he’ll just be able to coast by,” Dean said one day when they were hanging out in the dormitory.

“Maybe he does. I mean, he’s always had Hermione to help him, or Harry to copy off of,” Neville said, “maybe he’s gotten used to not having to put the work in.”

“Then he’s going to have a blast when the exams come around,” Seamus said.

“I am not betting on Ron’s OWLs,” Harry said immediately.

“That’s fine. We’ve already got a bet going,” Seamus said.

“You’re running out of time. Only two months to go before Christmas.”

“But they might still last as friends until the summer break, so there’s still plenty of time.”

When Harry woke up the next morning to go for a swim, the hangings on Ron’s bed were once again slightly open on the side facing Harry. Like the last time this happened, Ron was

naked, lying on top of his covers. One arm was curled up to cushion his head while the other was resting near his crotch. It could almost have been staged if Ron wasn't snoring away, proving that no, he really did fall asleep like that.

This had better not become a pattern. Harry did not want to have to put up with Ron's clumsy and frankly pitiful attempts to seduce him without actually having to actively pursue a guy. As if just because he was gay, all it would take to draw Harry in was seeing Ron naked. That wasn't going to happen, and if it escalated further, he would put his foot down quite strongly. Nudity in the bathroom was fair game, but in the dormitory when you weren't changing? Absolutely not.

He didn't get much of a chance to ponder that as he went down to breakfast. A notice had been put up in the Gryffindor common room last night offering career counselling with Professor McGonagall. Harry signed up for it, interested in what advice he could get. Truthfully, while he had thought about what his life would look like when he left Hogwarts, it hadn't extended to what sort of job he would have. Whatever it was, his duties as Lord of the three different houses would be part of it, but was that all he wanted to do?

As such, he made his way to his career appointment with an open mind. McGonagall was at her desk when he arrived, pamphlets littering her desk in stacks. Harry was about to call out a greeting to her, but then his eyes caught the blob of pink in the corner. Umbridge sat on a stool, her clipboard and quill at the ready.

"Come in Mr Potter," McGonagall said, "please have a seat."

He sat down across from her as she finished making a few notes on a piece of parchment. The scratching of a quill started up from the corner of the room.

"Um, Professor—"

"We're meeting today to discuss your potential future career along with the plan to get you there," McGonagall said, "Professor Umbridge insisted that, as High Inquisitor, you deserved to have an *unbiased* opinion in these meetings."

"The children have the right to understand the full extent of the opportunities available to them, just as they should not have their hopes unfairly raised by unscrupulous teachers," Umbridge said sweetly.

McGonagall took in a deep breath and let it out without a word.

"Well then Potter, have you given any thought as to what career you'd like to go into when you leave school?"

"Not really," Harry admitted sheepishly, "I've mostly just been trying to get by until now. Sorry."

"Don't apologise. You're not the first student to be in this position and you certainly won't be the last. It used to be that we would have these counselling sessions much later in the year, but a few years ago I decided to move it earlier for precisely this reason," McGonagall said,

rooting through a stack of parchment until she pulled one out, “alright then, let’s talk a bit about what jobs are available to you based on your classes and current grades.”

“Ok.”

“Overall, you’re doing well in all your classes. I have no doubt that with a bit of hard work, you’ll get excellent grades come the exams at the end of the year. Personally, I have been very impressed with the way you’ve applied yourself these last two years. It shows in the improvement in your Transfiguration work. Several of your other teachers have also been impressed with your performance lately. Professor Babbling in particular has been very pleased with having you in her class,” McGonagall said, “with the classes you’re taking, a wide variety of careers are open to you. Which classes are you particularly interested in?”

“Oh, uh-”

“I promise I won’t take it personally,” McGonagall commented with a small smile.

“Well, I like Defence Against the Dark Arts, and also Transfiguration and Ancient Runes,” Harry said.

“Three excellent subjects. You’ve always performed well in Defence Against the Dark Arts-”

Umbridge coughed. McGonagall only paused for a second before carrying on as though nothing happened.

“One of the obvious routes to take with Defence Against the Dark Arts is the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the Ministry. Criminals are more likely to use whatever force necessary to get away with what they’ve done, so a member of the Law Enforcement Squad well versed in defensive magic will be well situated. Then there’s obviously the Aurors, those who lead the investigations into dangerous witches and wizards and bring them to justice.” There was another little cough, louder this time, that McGonagall ignored. “Law enforcement isn’t the only option though. Defence Against the Dark Arts also opens up possibilities to become a Healer, along with excellent grades in Potions and Charms, to reverse the damage from hexes and curses. There’s also curse breaking, which also requires Ancient Runes.”

Umbridge coughed again, more prominently.

“Do you require a cough drop Dolores?” McGonagall asked, not even bothering to turn around to face the woman.

“Oh, no thank you Minerva,” Umbridge said.

“Very well. Now, with Transfiguration, the options are-”

“I would merely like to point out that Potter has not *always* performed well in Defence Against the Dark Arts,” Umbridge said, “after all, it was his failure to understand the curriculum that led to him dropping out of my class in favour of a non-standard, less thorough programme of study.”

“I’d hardly call a programme run by the International Confederation of Wizards ‘non-standard’ or ‘less thorough’, especially considering the British OWL curriculum is almost identical,” McGonagall said, “a curriculum that *you* have been told you need to adhere to by the governors, unless I’m very much mistaken.”

Umbridge pursed her lips as though sucking on a lemon. McGonagall continued as though she hadn’t interrupted.

“As I was saying, Transfiguration opens many doors for you as well.”

She described the various careers that Harry could pursue if he did well in Transfiguration and Ancient Runes. All of them sounded very interesting, and Harry still didn’t know what he wanted to be.

“Then there’s also professional Quidditch if it interests you,” McGonagall said, “from what I heard, Viktor Krum was very impressed with how you played last year.”

“I love Quidditch but I don’t think I can see myself playing it professionally. I’m not that good.”

“Don’t sell yourself short Potter, but I understand,” McGonagall said, “has anything we talked about today helped?”

“It’s good to know my options but I’m still not sure what I want to do,” Harry said, slightly apologetically.

“That’s alright. It’s why we have these meetings so soon in the year. What I’d suggest you do is to make sure you keep on top of your studies, which will keep your options open as much as possible.” McGonagall rooted through the piles of pamphlets on her desk and handed some across to him. “These have descriptions of the positions I’ve described today, as well as others which I think would be good for you to look at. There are many roles available at the Ministry requiring well rounded wizards and I think you’d fit in admirably if you so desire. Likewise if the Ministry isn’t for you, then there’s still plenty you can do.”

Umbridge scoffed derisively.

“Something you’d like to say Dolores?” McGonagall said, turning to raise a sharp eyebrow at the woman.

“The Ministry of Magic only accepts the best of the best into its ranks. Someone with Potter's background would hardly qualify.”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?” McGonagall asked.

“It means that the Ministry would never risk hiring somebody so willing to spread malicious lies for attention. Imagine the damage he could do!”

“Potter has told no lies.”

“Oh yes he has!” Umbridge snapped, “all of this ridiculousness about You-Know-Who started with him!”

“Didn’t Minister Fudge receive a cease and desist letter from my godfather to stop talking about me in the Daily Prophet?” Harry commented.

Umbridge turned her glare on him.

“Potter, I think we can bring this meeting to a close,” McGonagall said sternly, “please read over what I’ve given you and consider what we’ve discussed today.”

Harry didn’t need telling twice. He left the room before either woman could say anything. Career counselling hadn’t been as helpful as he’d hoped it would but it at least told him what his options were. If only Umbridge hadn’t been there with her ‘comments’ about him.

Umbridge had a face like thunder for the rest of the week. Harry often found her glaring at him during meals. As time passed by, her anger at him seemed to change from whatever had originally caused it to the lack of access she had to him in order to vent that anger. The only time they saw one another was at meals. In class, the other Gryffindors were behaving themselves, so the only people she could punish were Ron and Hermione, who continued to speak out against her awful lessons. That he was out from under her thumb seemed to irk her more than it should.

October continued to pass with Halloween looming closer. By all accounts, Umbridge hadn’t improved her lessons, but she had been exerting her power as High Inquisitor more in response to the complaints. As the final authority over punishments, Harry heard from several people that she had intervened in their detentions, changing them so they were served with Umbridge instead.

“It’s completely unfair is what it is,” Lavender said, “I’ve heard that she basically lets the Slytherins off scot free while everyone else is stuck doing lines for hours.”

“Great. Just what this school needs, another biased teacher,” Seamus said sarcastically.

“Ah but here’s the thing. The Slytherin’s don’t like it either,” Lavender said, “apparently the Slytherin’s are all about being sneaky. If they’re going to pull off some mischief, then they respect it if you don’t get caught. It shows great cunning apparently. If you got caught then your punishment was a just reward, but now Umbridge is messing that up. Sure Snape was biased toward them but he never interfered with punishments set by other teachers before. By giving them immunity from punishment, Umbridge is painting a bigger target on the Slytherin’s backs and they are not happy about it.”

“I heard that she’s doing it because she was a Slytherin when she was at Hogwarts. She probably thinks she’s doing it out of house loyalty, or to curry favour with the nobility that have Heirs in Slytherin, but it’s not going the way she thinks it is,” Parvati said.

“I don’t think anything she’s done since she came here has gone how she wanted,” Harry said.

Her teaching style was being resisted, her power as High Inquisitor was being questioned, and Harry wasn’t under her thumb at all. It was clearly infuriating her but there wasn’t anything she could do about it. The Governors were hounding her relentlessly and she was getting no support from the teachers. All she had was the power bestowed upon her by the Minister. If she didn’t have that, Harry had no doubt she’d be thrown from the castle immediately.

“I just wish we didn’t have to put up with such an awful teacher this year, and I’m not just talking about her classes. She was so mean to Professor Trelawney when she inspected her class,” Parvati said, “now she’s been put on probation but it’s not her fault. Umbridge makes her really nervous and it messes up her teaching.”

“It’s a good thing the only person who doesn’t really care about the class is Ron, and Umbridge hates him so she won’t use him to make the class seem worse,” Lavender said, “speaking of, where is he? Shouldn’t he be getting brow beaten by Hermione into doing his homework?”

Harry glanced around the room. Sure enough, Ron was nowhere to be seen. Hermione was at a table writing a too long essay for Arithmancy despite Professor Vector telling her repeatedly that she needed to be more concise. Harry knew Ron wasn’t in the dormitories as he had just come from there. If he wasn’t in the common room though, where was he?

“He probably took the chance to escape while he could. Hermione’s been even more insufferable than usual when it comes to school work this year. She bit off one of the first-years heads the other day because he interrupted her when she was reading. The poor thing!”

Harry watched Seth Richardson cautiously approach Hermione, a book clutched in his hands. Hermione hadn’t noticed him and Seth’s courage quickly gave out as he walked away. Harry returned to his own Transfiguration homework.

“Um, excuse me,” said a tiny voice from behind him.

It was Seth, who looked utterly terrified to be speaking to him. Harry smiled encouragingly, putting down his quill.

“Hey Seth. What’s up?”

“Could- could you h-help us with our homework? E-even just a little? I know you’re probably really busy and I’m sorry,” the boy trailed off, shrinking as much as he could while he stayed standing before them.

“Of course. What do you need help with?” Harry asked.

That made Seth look up at him.

“Transfiguration. We can’t figure it out.”

Harry followed Seth to the corner of the room where the other first-year boys were. Euan still looked a little guarded but not nearly as much as he had on the first day, while Eric practically lit up.

“Great job Seth! I can’t believe you managed to actually ask one of the older students! Thank you so much Harry. Can I call you Harry? It’s just that we tried asking Hermione for help last week and she snapped at us for interrupting her when she was busy but this is really confusing, and Seth said you seemed nice so maybe you could help-”

“It’s alright,” Harry said, cutting the chatterbox off, “I don’t mind helping out. Now where are you struggling?”

Seth showed him their assignment, a tricky one that Harry remembered from his own first year. He remembered not doing as well as he’d liked on it, but when they reviewed that material in third year it made a lot more sense. He scanned through the first year textbook to get a feel for the level they were at, and then started trying to explain the exceptions to Gamp’s Laws of Elemental Transfiguration.

With his career counselling session with McGonagall on his mind, Harry thought that this felt nice. Sitting down with a small group like this and teaching them things felt good, and Harry could almost see himself doing it full time. All three of the first-years listened with rapt attention. Eric, for all that he liked to fill the air with chatter, asked surprisingly insightful questions that Harry actually had to think about how to answer. Being a teacher could be nice, but then he thought about scaling this up to a class of thirty, many of whom didn’t want to be there, and suddenly the idea didn’t seem so appealing.

“Does this make sense?”

“Thank you,” Seth said quietly as he wrote down the things Harry explained.

“You’re really smart Harry,” Eric said, “do you think you could help us with Charms as well? Professor Flitwick’s been teaching us the Levitation Charm and I’m really struggling to get it right.”

“I could probably give you some help with it, but my friend Seamus is better than me at Charms,” Harry said, “if you’re struggling with the spells in class, I’d definitely recommend speaking to Professor Flitwick about it. He’s really nice and wants his students to succeed so I’m sure he’d be able to help you.”

“Harry, what are you doing?”

Harry looked over to see Hermione standing there, hands on her hips.

“Not that it’s any of your business but I was helping them with their Transfiguration homework,” Harry said.

“But that’s not your job! I’m a prefect! If they needed help then they should have asked me!”

“But they asked me. There’s nothing in the rules about non-prefects helping other students so what exactly is the issue?”

“The issue is that I’ve been trusted with the responsibility by the teachers and you haven’t, as you yourself said,” Hermione snapped. Then she put on a kind expression and addressed the three first-years, “what is it you need help with? First-year Transfiguration can be quite tricky but I’m sure you’ll all manage it with a bit of hard work.”

Seth shrunk down beneath her.

“No thank you Ms Granger. Harry already helped us with it,” Eric said, though not with his usual energy.

“Nonsense. Harry wasn’t very good at this when he was in first-year. If you want to do well then you need to do things properly. It won’t be good to develop bad habits early on,” Hermione began to lecture.

“Leave them alone, Hermione. You asked if they wanted your help and they gave you their answer. Accept it and move on,” Harry said, standing up from his seat.

Hermione glared at him, then at the first-years, before stomping away. Harry sighed and sat down again.

“She’s scary,” Seth whispered.

“I heard from one of the older years that you used to be friends with her,” Euan said.

“I did, but then she and my other friend from that time kept blowing up at me for no reason. I stopped being friends with either of them when they said really nasty stuff about me,” Harry said, “it’s alright now though. I’ve got much better friends.”

“That’s nice. Hogwarts is great for that. I love that I’ve got friends now,” Eric said with a big grin, pulling Seth and Euan into a hug.

Euan squawked and complained, and Seth wriggled and squirmed, but neither of them really tried to get out of it. It warmed Harry’s heart to see the three of them together, a little first-year trio sticking together. It made him think of his own first year.

Had any of it been real for Ron and Hermione? Had it all just been on Dumbledore’s orders? It was hard for Harry to go through his memories of that time when those questions constantly lingered over everything. Harry remembered the quiet moments where they would hang out in the common room, Hermione reading while Ron demolished him at chess. It had been quite fun, so some of it at least had to be genuine, but how could it have been when they’d been told to be his friend by Dumbledore?

Dumbledore. It all came back to Dumbledore. Whatever his instructions had once been, he clearly wasn’t enforcing them as strictly as before. Hermione kept shooting him seething glances from across the common room. Would this latest infraction of Harry’s ‘proper’ behaviour be reported back to the Headmaster? Even if it did, Harry doubted the man would

do anything. Ever since the start of term, Dumbledore had very pointedly avoided looking at Harry. It was obvious whenever Harry saw the man's twinkling blue eyes sweep across the Great Hall, and the way they would very noticeably dip when they would have otherwise landed on Harry.

It either meant that Dumbledore was on to them, or there was something else at work. Sirius said the Death Eaters had been suspiciously quiet. Harry caught the subtle tension in a couple of the teachers. No doubt all of them were expecting something to happen. Harry just hoped that whatever it was would be manageable, though that was a pipe dream. He was dealing with Voldemort, and when that man wanted to make an impact, an impact would be made, and what a devastating impact it would be.

Chapter End Notes

A bit early but funnily enough, I shall be busy tomorrow.

I hope everyone has a wonderful holiday.

Most unwelcome news

Halloween was always a memorable time to be at Hogwarts. The teachers went all out in the decorations. Live bats flew about the Great Hall, which was also lined with giant carved pumpkins big enough for three people to stand comfortably inside. Harry tried to enjoy the festivities along with everybody else, but previous experience made him wary. The troll break-in happened on Halloween, as had the opening of the Chamber of Secrets. The less he thought about last year with the Triwizard cup, the better.

The others picked up on his slightly dour mood and did their best to cheer him up. The night before Halloween, the four boys stayed up late with an impromptu Gobstones tournament that ended when Dean, thinking he had made a good roll, ended up getting spat on by all the stones currently in play. Thankfully it was the weekend so they could sleep in the next morning.

If there was one thing that Harry could enjoy about Halloween, it was the feast. As usual, the House Elves in the kitchen outdid themselves, serving up a truly delectable array of food. Harry tucked in, happily listening to Neville talking about their latest Muggle Studies assignment.

“It’s really fascinating. Because the Muggles don’t have access to magic, they’ve had to create a whole infrastructure to handle transportation across large distances. They’ve got a huge expanse of roads and rails to get around,” Neville said, “it was confusing to think about at first but then Professor Burbage linked it to how the Floo network operates and it made more sense.”

“At least the Floo network doesn’t get clogged up during rush hour,” Dean said.

“Mam says it sometimes does,” Seamus said, “it’s why the Ministry has so many grates for workers to enter and leave. Apparently, if too many people try to access the same grate at the same time, it can cause people to get backed up and they’ll be stuck spinning in the fire until the grate becomes free.”

Harry and Dean both shuddered at the thought.

“Padma said she also found it interesting,” Parvati said, “though she said she can’t wait until you guys start learning about the Muggle government. She’s always been into politics.”

“Professor Burbage said we’ll be doing that in sixth year. I’m- I’m not sure I’ll still be taking it then,” Neville said, sounding disappointed.

Parvati looked at him shrewdly.

“How’s Professor Trelawney?” Harry asked, “she’s still on probation, right?”

“She is. Umbridge inspects most of her lessons now. I think she’s getting used to it, but I can tell Umbridge still makes her nervous,” Parvati said.

“We try to go and see her a few times a week to support her,” Lavender said, then lowly she added, “also to discuss *you know what* .”

Harry glanced around but everyone else was too engrossed in their conversations to notice.

“Has she seen anything?”

“No. The future is getting harder and harder to see each day, which Professor Trelawney thinks is an ill omen in and of itself. It means that the future is constantly in flux and ever shifting. Any insights that may be gleaned will likely be too soon to do anything about,” Lavender said, “she hasn’t seen anything, but she said she’s been visited many times by the sound of stone crumbling and falling.”

“What about you Parvati? Have you had any more dreams?” Harry asked.

“None,” Parvati said with a frown, “I appreciate getting to sleep soundly, but it makes me feel useless. I have a gift but I can’t use it to help.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it. I know I don’t take Divination, but from everything you two have told me, it sounds like seeing the future is as much an art as it is a science.”

“Right. It can’t be forced, otherwise you’ll just end up seeing what you want to see instead of what actually *is*, ” Parvati said.

“At least nothing’s happened yet,” Lavender said, “but that just means he’s planning something, isn’t he?”

All Harry could do was nod, even as he hated the way Lavender’s expression fell. Why couldn’t they get to live a normal life? Why did Voldemort have to ruin it?

Up at the staff table, Dumbledore looked equally as tense. He was in a deep conversation with McGonagall. It made Harry wonder what they knew that he didn’t. Sirius filled him in after each Order meeting, and nothing was said at the last one about Voldemort’s plans. The Order was continuing to try and recruit while setting a regular guard rotation over the Department of Mysteries. Maybe Dumbledore was just having the same worries that Harry was.

At least Umbridge didn’t look happy either. She kept glancing down the staff table towards Dumbledore, likely trying to figure out whatever it was he was up to. Her attempts to spread her influence and grow her power at Hogwarts had not been going well, and it was likely grating on her nerves that she couldn’t ask pointed questions without being met with more resistance.

Her eyes met Harry’s for a moment, and her displeasure turned into an outright glare. Harry met her gaze steadily, uncaring, before returning to his meal. His Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons had been going exceedingly well. Professor Okura was a very good teacher, explaining the theory behind what they were doing in a much better way than any of his other teachers besides Remus. It took a few attempts to get used to casting spells at the holographic

image for his practical assessments, but Harry did so, and he was achieving high marks in that class. History of Magic too.

All of Harry's friends were now borrowing his resources. While they weren't taking the course themselves, the other fifth-years used his assignments to test themselves. Remus offered to mark them for them if they'd like, unofficially, and they seemed to be doing well too.

"When did that happen?" Seamus asked, gesturing to further down the table.

Harry followed his gaze, and his eyebrows rose. Ron wasn't sitting with Hermione, but instead with Colin Creevey. Colin was chatting away about something, and while Ron didn't speak, he was angled slightly towards him and appeared to be listening.

"I have absolutely no idea."

"Looks like he's dumped Hermione as a friend. You ready to pay up Potter?"

"There's still time so don't get your hopes up just yet Finnegan," Harry said, "besides, she's only a few seats away."

It was still odd though. In second year, Ron had been just as annoyed with Colin as Harry had been. Since then, he didn't think he'd seen the two interacting at all. Now though, well, Colin seemed happy enough at least.

The feast eventually began to wrap up, with people leaving back to the common rooms in twos and threes. Harry waited for his friends to finish up. Neville said he needed to return a book to the library, and Parvati needed to ask her sister something, so he and the girls peeled off from them.

"I need the loo. Wait for me?" Harry said.

Dean and Seamus both nodded. Harry nipped into the nearest bathroom but no sooner had the door closed when he heard noises coming from an open stall at the end of the row. It didn't sound like normal bathroom noises either. Harry inched closer to it, then froze when the inside of the stall came into view.

It was Ron and Colin. Colin was pressed up against the wall of the stall and Ron was practically devouring his mouth. The noises Harry could hear were little breathy moans being drawn from the younger boy. He must have made some sort of noise because the pair of them stopped and looked his way.

"Harry," Colin said breathlessly, going slightly pale.

Something complicated crossed Ron's face. The only thing Harry could glean from it was a hint of smugness. Without a word, Ron reached out and closed the stall door.

Suddenly no longer needing to use the bathroom. Seamus and Dean both made noises of concern at his swift return and confused expression but he waved them off, promising to tell them later. Honestly, Harry needed a moment to process what he'd just seen.

Ron, who had made his opinions on gay people quite clear last year, who called Harry a perverted freak just because he liked men, was being intimate with another boy, and not something chaste either. It wasn't holding hands, hugging or light kissing either. He was passionately making out with Colin Creevey, but why? Over the summer, Ron had tried to tell him he'd changed his opinions, but then there was the betrothal contract they'd tried setting up; the required process for intimacy basically required Ron to not have to be reminded that he was having sex with a man.

So why was he now with Colin, and why did he seem smug about it? Had he forced Colin into it? Colin had been completely smitten with Martin last year, but to go from him to Ron? As Harry tucked himself into bed that night, he made a promise to look into it. Ron had already strung Harry along on a fake friendship. Colin didn't deserve to be played around with by someone who likely didn't even care about him.

Seamus, Dean and Neville were just as shocked to hear about Ron's bathroom tryst with Colin as Harry was.

"I know he's been spending time away from Hermione, but I thought he was just studying elsewhere," Neville said, "you know how she can be."

"That bloody git. Do you reckon that's what he's been doing all those times he's been alone somewhere with Colin?" Seamus asked.

"Possibly. I'm just worried that he's forcing Colin into it somehow. I'm not sure how this would help, but Ron looked slightly smug when he realised I'd caught him," Harry said.

"It could be that he is being genuine and he just finally figured out his own feelings on the matter," Dean said, "Mum says she's seen it a couple of times at her school that a boy would bully another boy but not really mean it."

"Isn't homosexuality not really tolerated in the Muggle world?" Neville asked.

"I didn't mean that those boys were gay, but Mum said that if a boy doesn't know how to feel about something, that confusion might then express itself as anger. The anger goes away when the feelings are understood."

"Somehow I don't think this applies to Ron. There's too much going on elsewhere," Harry said.

It felt like a ploy, one more attempt to lure Harry back into the fold. The main thing that drove him away, officially at least, was Ron and Hermione's opinions on him being gay. It wouldn't surprise him if they thought that he would forgive them if Ron magically turned out to be gay too.

Even worse, it could turn out to be an attempt to somehow endear Harry to Ron so they could snare him into a relationship. Over the summer, Ginny had been very obvious with how she was trying to seduce him. It had been less obvious with Ron, but with the hindsight of the

attempted betrothal contract, there were definitely times when Ron wore clothes intended to make himself look more flattering. Then there were also the moments where Ron had been naked conveniently when Harry may see it.

They were lazy, low effort attempts to seduce him, but if this was some sort of long con, it would only further confirm that Harry could never forgive Ron. It was one thing to try and mess with Harry, but to play games with Colin's heart was beyond the pale.

Footsteps approached from behind. Harry glanced over his shoulder to see Colin walking up to them looking slightly nervous.

"Um, Harry, could I talk to you please?" Colin said, glancing between him and his friends, "in private?"

Harry nodded.

"We'll be close," Seamus said.

Colin led him further down the corridor and around the corner. It was out of the way enough for there to be nobody else around, but close enough that Harry didn't feel that Colin was leading him into a trap of some kind. The younger boy still looked nervous, and now slightly embarrassed.

"About last night, I'm- I'm so sorry you had to see that. I thought everybody would just head back up to the common room after the feast, otherwise I'd have asked Ron to close the door," Colin said.

"You don't need to apologise to me. It was an accident," Harry said, "though I do have questions."

"I'm sure you do. It's a bit of a shock, right?"

"It is. Ron wasn't exactly subtle with what he thought about me last year. He's not forcing you into this, is he?"

"No!" Colin rushed to say, then his cheeks flushed, "no, he's not. I know he said some awful things to you and your friends. I didn't think I could forgive him for it either but then he started sending me letters."

"When was this?"

"Towards the end of summer. At first I wasn't even going to respond to them, but then I read them and realised that he was mainly just asking me questions, you know, about what liking boys was like," Colin said, "he sounded really confused about it all, so I thought that, while I might not like what he said, I could maybe help him be better. Then when we got back to school, he asked to meet me and he was really grateful for all the help I gave him, and we just ... kept meeting up afterwards."

"So you're dating him?"

“I think so? Ron’s still quite nervous about everyone finding out after last year so we haven’t really put a label on it.” Colin’s eyes widened. “You can’t tell anyone!”

“Don’t worry. I won’t,” Harry neglected to mention the people he’d already told, “but he’s treating you well? He’s not pushing you to do things you don’t want to do?”

“No, he’s not. I mean, he’s the one who’s in control when we do things like that, but I don’t mind that. Oh no, that was probably way too much information.”

“It’s alright. I guess I was just a bit worried,” Harry said, “honestly, I thought you’d stay with Martin. You too got quite close last year.”

Colin’s cheeks flushed again.

“Martin was great. He really helped me figure things out about myself, but he accepted that I would probably want to be with someone who was a little closer to home,” Colin said, “I know Katie Bell’s still talking with Viktor, but I don’t know if I could do long distance.”

Harry could easily see that. Colin seemed to have a very big heart that loved deeply. Not being able to be with his partner would likely weigh on him heavily and quickly become unbearable. Still, there had to be somebody else at Hogwarts who’d be better for him than *Ron*. Harry kept that thought to himself though. He didn’t want to be seen shoving a wedge into business he had no right to be in.

The pair of them re-joined Neville, Seamus and Dean to head down to breakfast. Colin parted with them at the Gryffindor table, sitting with his friends, while Harry and the others sat next to Fred and George. Nothing was out of the ordinary, until the post owls arrived.

They appeared with their usual flurry of feathers. A copy of the Daily Prophet landed in front of Dean. Once he paid the owl, he unrolled it, opening up the front page and immediately froze. Seamus, sitting next to him, leaned over. His eyes widened.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked.

Dean laid the paper flat on the table between them.

MASS BREAKOUT AT AZKABAN

Beneath the brazen headline was a series of headshots showing the 14 prisoners that had escaped. Harry glared at the shivering, cowering form of Peter Pettigrew, only to then feel a shift in the magic surrounding him. The magic of Hogwarts trembled, and their goblets rattled. Beside him, Neville was completely still, eyes locked onto the pictures. Harry followed his gaze and realised exactly what it was.

“Come on Neville. Let’s go.”

He heaved the unresponsive boy to his feet and dragged him from the Great Hall. His boys and the twins followed behind them. Neville’s magic was bubbling close to the surface, the

Hufflepuff family magic interacting with the castle in a way that Harry could feel. Harry did his best to use his connection to Hogwarts via Gryffindor and Slytherin to calm him down. Dumbledore was connected to the wards, and the last thing they needed was for him to figure out that Neville was free because he lost control.

“Harry, what is going on? Is Neville alright?” Dean asked.

“Not here,” Harry said.

If the article said anything about Neville’s parents, then it would be all over the school by lunch. The Hogwarts rumour mill would be directed entirely at Neville, and that was the last thing he needed when he was so emotionally vulnerable. The Gryffindor common room was the first place he thought to go, but even that wasn’t private, especially not on the weekend. That left one other option.

They reached the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy and stopped outside the blank stretch of wall next to it. Fred and George both looked confused, but Harry paid them no mind, pacing back and forth in front of the wall. On his third pass, a door appeared.

“Inside, quickly.”

Harry had asked the Room of Requirement for a place that Neville would feel comfortable. What that apparently meant was a quiet living room with several squishy sofas and armchairs and a fire crackling in the hearth. Despite this, the temperature in the room was pleasant. There was a window, showing a beach, and the sounds of waves could be heard.

“This room is awesome,” the twins said together.

“Sirius showed it to me at the end of last year,” Harry said.

He led Neville over to one of the sofas. Neville curled his legs up and buried his face in his knees. Dean still had the paper and was currently scanning through it. He handed it across when Harry asked. He skimmed through it until he found what he was looking for.

Among the escapees are Peter Pettigrew, arrested nearly two years ago for mass murder; Bartemius Crouch Junior, who was rearrested at the end of May after it was discovered he had conspired with his father to escape; and Rabastan, Rodolphus and Bellatrix Lestrange, who were sentenced to life in Azkaban for the torture of Auror Frank Longbottom and his wife Alice.

It didn’t say Neville’s name, but it wasn’t hard to make the connection, especially for those who knew Neville lived with his grandmother. Dean had clearly worked it out. Harry put an arm around Neville’s shoulders.

“Come on you two,” Fred said to Seamus and Dean, “let’s go have a look at that beach.”

Seamus looked like he wanted to argue, but Fred didn’t let him, pulling him along and out the door leading to the ‘outside’. When it was just him and Neville, Harry didn’t say anything. No doubt there were a thousand thoughts raging through Neville’s mind right now, and it

wouldn't do to try and force them out in any particular order. Harry would let Neville start when he was ready.

"How bad is it?"

"Bad enough," Harry said.

"I never knew what they looked like," Neville said, "I knew their names, but Gran never let me see any pictures of them. At first that made me even more scared of them, but when I got older, it made me angry. I wanted to be able to look the monsters who hurt my parents in the eye."

"Did you try and find out what they looked like?"

"Once. Uncle Algie likes to collect Daily Prophets. He says he likes to track how opinions change over time. I found his archive when I was ten, and I looked back to that day," Neville said, "but I couldn't do it. They'd been a faceless monster that plagued my nightmares ever since I learned what happened to Mum and Dad, but putting a face to the name would make it *real*. It would make them people, with thoughts and feelings of their own, and I just- I couldn't-"

"It's alright Neville. I understand."

Seeing the picture of Bellatrix, who looked so much like Andromeda, screaming at him from a cell in Azkaban was deeply unnerving.

"I hate them. I really, really hate them, but then I hate myself for hating them because surely there had to be some reason they did what they did."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with hating them. They did you and your family a grievous wrong."

"What's going to happen now? They'll catch them, won't they?"

"I hope so. If not the Ministry, then I know Sirius and the others will be working on it."

He would need to get his mirror from the dormitory. Sirius may have already tried to contact him.

They stayed like that for a little while until the others returned. It turned out that Neville used to go on holidays to his mothers parents cottage by the sea when he was little before they died, and that was why the Room of Requirement picked something like this for him to be comfortable. According to Seamus and Dean, the beach was beautiful.

Fred and George nipped out of the room to get them all brunch, since they'd missed breakfast, and they took a blanket out to have a picnic on the beach.

"Dad took us to the beach once when we were really little," George said, "he had the day off and decided it would be a nice treat. Mum wasn't happy about it, but she still let us go. It was quite fun."

“Yeah, but then Mum had Ron and decided that six kids were too many to take to the beach,” Fred said, “it didn’t stop her from forcing one more on Dad.”

“Mum’s best friend from uni lived by the coast, so we’d go out and visit her at least once a year. It was fun,” Dean said, “we built sandcastles and had ice cream, though you had to be careful not to be mobbed by seagulls.”

“You know what, sandcastles sound like a great idea!” Fred said.

“We’re not exactly dressed for a trip to the beach, and we don’t have any stuff to make sandcastles with,” Dean pointed out.

“Ah, but that’s where you’re mistaken.”

Fred led them further down the beach. There was a small hut containing all sorts of buckets and spades, parasols, blankets, inflatable balls and rings, everything they could possibly need for a fun day out.

“Are those the only swimsuits they’ve got?” Seamus asked.

At the back of the hut were racks containing swimming trunks, but all of them were in the swim briefs style that Harry’s were.

“It’s either that or your undies, and I know which one I’d prefer to get wet,” George said, happily picking out a pair of bright orange speedos.

With a shrug, Harry picked a blue pair, not at all fussed with it. Neville too didn’t seem to mind. When it was clear they were outvoted, Dean and Seamus selected their own trunks.

“Aw, look at them Georgie. They’re all embarrassed!” Fred said when they were all changed.

“Shut up!” Seamus said.

“I’m sure your boyfriends don’t mind the view one bit,” George said.

“Come along Neville. We’ve got to show the lovebirds how it’s done,” Fred said.

He and George looped one of Neville’s arms and pulled him out of the hut, each of them toting buckets and spades.

“Oh it is on!”

Seamus grabbed Harry and Dean’s hands and dragged them both out onto the beach. The spirit of competition was in the air as both groups picked a patch of sand to build their castles. Harry hadn’t done this before. The Dursley’s never dreamed of taking him to the beach, but he quickly got the hang of it. Building with sand was as much an art as it was a science, and Dean showed he had a knack for it that Seamus ... lacked.

The end result was something that vaguely approximated Hogwarts, if slightly squished.

Fred, George and Neville's castle was tall and grand but didn't have as many details as theirs did. George then immediately imitated a giant monster, roaring and stomping towards their creation. Dean played along, creating a gate in their wall to evacuate the castle residents.

It was a lot of fun, and well worth it to see Neville smiling and laughing along with them. Harry joined him when Fred and George decided to tag team Seamus. One of them grabbed his arms, the other his legs, and together they tossed him into the sea with a big splash. Of course, his laughter only made them turn on him and he was tossed in alongside his boyfriend. By the time they finished messing around, it was well into the afternoon. The fake sun in the Room of Requirement was dipping down towards the horizon, and all five of them were wet and sandy.

"Thank you," Neville said when they'd retrieved towels to wipe themselves down.

"Don't mention it," Harry said.

"Seriously, don't," Fred said, "we had fun *and* got a new favourite place in the castle out of this."

None of them really wanted to return to the rest of the school, but they knew they couldn't hide away eventually. Neville took a deep, fortifying breath before leading them out of the Room. He kept his head held high until they reached the Fat Lady. The portrait swung open well before they got there, and Parvati and Lavender came rushing out. As soon as they saw Neville, they descended upon and swept him up into a hug.

"Why do you smell like the sea?" Lavender asked, "it's like you've been to a beach."

All of them shrugged. They'd probably read the girls into the secret of the Room sooner or later, but it wouldn't be out here in the open. Harry still appreciated their show of support.

They entered the common room as a group. Everyone went quiet when they saw them, but Neville ignored them, striding across the room with his chin up, unbent by the scrutiny. Harry and the other boys followed behind them, and they reached the boys dormitory without issue. Harry immediately retrieved his mirror. It was already a squeeze to fit three into one bed. With four it was even more so. After he had the mirror set up, he was pulled backwards so he was sitting in Seamus's lap, Dean on his left and Neville on his right.

"We probably should have done this when we were still in the Room of Requirement," Harry said.

"If we didn't have to worry about Ron then we could just do this normally," Seamus said, "but I'm not complaining right now."

He snuggled Harry in closer.

"Should I leave you three alone?" Neville said with a teasing grin.

"Not right now," Harry said, though his cheeks were red, "Sirius Black."

Sirius must have been anticipating his call because he answered a second later. The mirror changed to show Sirius sitting at what looked like the dining room table. Remus was next to him. When he saw the position they were in, he smirked, but then his eyes landed on Neville and he became more serious.

“I think I can guess what this is about,” he said, “Neville, I’ve been in contact with your grandmother. She’s oscillating between distraught and spitting mad but she’s alright. She’s fortified the defences at Longbottom Manor, so even if the Death Eaters were stupid enough to want to attack, they’d never even get close to her. I suspect she’ll send you a letter tomorrow morning.”

Neville relaxed slightly.

“What’s happening about the escaped Death Eaters?” Harry asked, “I don’t suppose Fudge has finally seen sense?”

“It would be fantastic if he had but alas, we’re not that lucky. From what we’ve heard, the Ministry is in shambles. Azkaban was supposed to be an inescapable fortress, both because of its location and because of the Dementors. However, between Sirius escaping two years ago and the revelation that Barty Crouch Junior was smuggled out by his father, that reputation has taken a substantial hit,” Remus said.

“Obviously we know who was behind it. Whether or not he had the Dementors help or if they just stood aside and let him, Voldemort has just bolstered his ranks with some of his most loyal lieutenants,” Sirius said, “Fudge is up in arms about it. Apparently he’s gotten it into his head that it must be another Crouch situation, somebody on the outside facilitating the break out. He’s been putting pressure on the Auror office to bring in anyone closely connected to any of the escapees to question them on their potential whereabouts.”

“Pettigrew was one of the ones to escape,” Harry muttered darkly.

“I know,” Sirius responded in kind, “but he’s not the only one I’ve got a connection to. Bellatrix Lestrange was born Bellatrix Black. She’s Andy’s sister and my cousin.”

He fixed Neville with a look of contrition.

“I am so sorry for the deep hurt that a member of my family has caused yours, Neville.”

“You don’t need to apologise, Lord Black,” Neville said, “she- she wasn’t a Black any more when she did it, and you weren’t the Lord then. You’re not responsible for her actions.”

“Bella was always a little fanatical. She would go through phases where she would obsessively pursue different interests until she moved onto the next one. It was adorable when it was something like horse riding or calligraphy, but given what my family was like, she very quickly took on the blood prejudices of her parents and wrapped it around the core of her being. I’m not surprised she was taken in so deeply by Lord Voldemort,” Sirius said, “the Black Madness is strong in her.”

“But surely the Ministry can’t think you’d know anything about this?” Dean asked, “I mean, you’ve made it clear that you don’t like her and don’t support her, and you were in prison for nearly as long as she was so it’s not like you’d know where she might go.”

“If it’s Amelia Bones calling the shots on this, which I suspect it will be, then it’ll be a simple interview where I can give any information I might have, with the ability to contact her later on if I remember anything more,” Sirius said, “if Fudge puts too much pressure on things though, it’s harder to say.

“But what is the Order doing about this? If Fudge isn’t going to accept the truth, then it’s up to you,” Harry said.

“Albus has called an emergency Order meeting tonight. No doubt our response is what we will discuss,” Remus said.

“If I were Voldemort, I would return to lying low and continue consolidating my power. The new Death Eaters will be helpful, but they’ll be weakened from their time in Azkaban. It’d be stupid to immediately put them to use in the field, and we unfortunately know that Voldemort is not stupid. He’d give them time to recover some of their strength before he sends them out again,” Sirius said.

“Has there been any word from the Goblins?”

“Unfortunately not. The final horcrux is still hidden behind powerful wards, wards that if anything have gotten stronger.”

“If You-Know-Who’s hunkering down again, then it probably means that whatever the final horcrux is is something close by to wherever they are,” Seamus said.

“That is the worst case scenario,” Sirius said, “but given the others, we’re all hoping that he’s hidden it somewhere else.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Harry said.

Sitting here at Hogwarts hearing about what was happening made him feel so useless. He knew that he was only fifteen and this was a war. It was the responsibility of the adults to keep their children safe, which meant fighting the war on their behalf. Harry knew this, but even without the spells and potions compelling him to reckless self-sacrifice, he didn’t like the idea of doing nothing when bad things were happening.

“Keep yourself safe and make sure you’re prepared,” Sirius said, “as much as I don’t want you to fight, I’d feel a lot better knowing that should it happen, you can handle yourself. Remember what we taught you over the summer. If you want, you can help your friends learn as well.”

“It’s better to know how to fight and not need to, than need to and not know how,” Harry said, echoing sentiments that Sirius had imparted upon him over the summer.

“Exactly,” Sirius said, “look after each other. Keep each other safe.”

“We’ll keep you informed when we know more.”

The call ended, the mirror’s surface turning reflective once again.

“So we’re just supposed to sit around and do nothing?” Seamus said.

“There isn’t a whole lot we can do,” Dean said calmly, “we’re only fifteen and not allowed to use magic outside of school.”

“It’s also not like the Ministry would even believe us if we said we were attacked by You-Know-Who,” Neville said.

“I feel like the only way Fudge would believe it is if Voldemort walked right up to him and went boo,” Seamus groaned.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Harry said.

There was only one horcrux left. Once they found that, Voldemort’s tethers to life would be cut and he would be just as mortal as everyone else. When he died, that would be it, and the world would finally be rid of him for good. They just needed to find it.

Harry leaned back into Seamus’s arms, trying not to fall into melancholy. They were so close now. The end of the road was in sight. Once Voldemort was dealt with, then they could move onto Dumbledore, and then that would be it. Harry wouldn’t need to hide anything any more. He could walk around freely, head held high, showing off exactly who it was.

A boy who had been through so much and survived. A boy with a bright future ahead of him, surrounded by love and friendship and family.

The job of grown ups

Chapter Notes

Mature scene ahead.

Starts: "His underwear followed swiftly..."

Ends: "Do I want to know where the pair of you..."

Come Monday, the breakout from Azkaban was still all anyone could talk about. Whispers about it were heard all over the castle. Harry was pleased to hear that doubt had begun to creep into their words. Despite the Ministry's insistence that all was well, and that the escaped prisoners would be rounded up quickly, Sirius told him that there was no way that would happen.

"The Dementors are being stubborn and refuse to leave Azkaban on Ministry orders, meaning it's entirely up to the Auror Office to find them, and there aren't any leads," he said.

This fact was also noticed by others.

"They posted Dementors around the school when just one prisoner escaped a couple of years ago. Now there's over a dozen, including one who had broken into Hogwarts, and there's nothing."

"I mean, they didn't even know that Barty Crouch had escaped the first time. The guards can't be that good at their jobs."

"Why would the Ministry try so hard to pretend that everything's alright? Those people are maniacs! We deserve to know what's going on!"

Nothing was said explicitly, or in earshot of more than a couple of people, because Umbridge had not taken the news well. At meals she was constantly scanning over the students, her smile eerily fixed and pointed as though she were wielding it like a spear. She doled out detentions to anyone she caught talking about it, which drove the gossip underground but didn't extinguish it.

"I'm sorry Neville. We tried to make the story go away but there's nothing else that's really big enough to draw this much attention," Lavender said one day as they headed out to Herbology.

"It was all we could do to stop people focusing so much on your parents," Parvati said.

"It's alright. I know that gossip is a terrifying thing," Neville said.

It really was. With no adequate explanation of how and why the fourteen Death Eaters escaped Azkaban, it seemed that more and more people were considering the only explanation that had been presented to them, the one Dumbledore had given them at the end of last year. More than one person came up to Harry to subtly ask for more details about what happened during the Third Task.

Harry ... wasn't sure how to handle this. On the one hand, it was the perfect opportunity to spread the message that Voldemort really was out there and they needed to be ready to resist him. On the other hand however, doing so would seemingly confirm Dumbledore's version of events, granting the headmaster more power and support. Harry didn't see Voldemort, but there was no other way for him to confirm that Voldemort was back without revealing a bunch of secrets he didn't want known.

"You don't have to do anything," Dean said as they walked to Arithmancy.

"But people keep asking me about what happened, and I don't know what to tell them," Harry said, "I can hardly say that Voldemort's back when I didn't see him. It'll just make people side with the Ministry again."

"Maybe, but also maybe not," Dean said, earning a confused look from Harry, "you keep acting as though there are only two players on the board, but there's not. There's You-Know-Who and Dumbledore, but there's also you."

"How does that make a difference?"

"It makes all the difference in the world. Are you not acting to stop both of them?" Dean said, "You-Know-Who wants people to be ignorant for as long as possible. Dumbledore wants people to believe You-Know-Who is back by telling them a false story. You just need to tell the truth about what happened and what you saw."

"But Voldemort-"

"You don't even need to bring him up. You could just say that you think *something* is out there considering what's been happening, but that you don't know what. The Ministry's hardly coming out with an alternative explanation for it, and people don't want to believe that You-Know-Who is back. It'd be a middle ground."

It made sense, he supposed. It could even work to undermine them both. It would reiterate that all was not well, as the Ministry kept claiming, but it wouldn't lend support for Dumbledore.

He laced his fingers with Dean's.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Dean said, "Dumbledore left breakfast early again today. Is he still hanging around random parts of the castle?"

Ever since the Azkaban breakout, the staff table had been distinctly sombre. It was common to see one or more of the teachers in deep discussions with one another. Dumbledore in particular looked very grave, speaking in hushed tones to McGonagall. In the week since it happened, Dumbledore had started occasionally missing meals. At first Harry thought he was leaving the school to do business for the Order, but a quick check of the Marauders Map proved him wrong. Dumbledore was still at Hogwarts, but he seemed to be wandering the halls, lingering strangely in different places. When Harry went to see those places himself, they were nondescript and plain.

“He is. I don’t get what he’s doing. It’s almost like he’s searching for something,” Harry said.

They reached the sixth floor.

“Why does this have to be so difficult?” Harry said, “we’re not even adults yet. Why can’t the grown ups act like it and do something?”

“A lot of them are,” Dean pointed out.

“I know, but there’s plenty of people who should be doing stuff who aren’t. I mean, what’s the point in the Minister continuing to insist that everything’s fine. It clearly isn’t. It doesn’t even have to be Voldemort. Enough bad stuff has happened that all the Ministry needs to do is just say that *something* bad is happening but that they’re investigating it. It would be so easy, but apparently those fully qualified wizards don’t think so.”

Harry knew he was rambling, and perhaps he shouldn’t, but it was just so frustrating. The Ministry was supposed to be in charge of Magical Britain, but Fudge seemed to be treating it like his own personal toy. It couldn’t be allowed to do things that Fudge didn’t want it to do, not if it meant he actually needed to take responsibility for it.

It felt good to get at least some of it off his chest, but then there was a dainty little cough from behind him. Harry and Dean turned around, subtly letting go of each other. Umbridge stood there looking inordinately pleased with herself.

“I believe I have already told you Mr Potter that fully qualified professionals are in a better position to decide these things than mere school children, and that includes what is deemed *easy* in running a country, so I’m afraid I cannot allow such disloyalty to the Ministry to stand,” she said, her tone sickeningly sweet, “I shall see you in my office this evening at 8pm for detention.”

With that, she strode off.

“I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have brought that topic up when we were out in public,” Dean said.

“No, no, she’s been dying to punish me in some way ever since the start of the year, and I shouldn’t have lost control like that,” Harry said, “come on, we don’t want to be late for Professor Vector.”

When classes finished for the day, Harry tracked down Angelina to let her know he'd be missing Quidditch practice because of Umbridge's detention. She pursed her lips but ultimately accepted it. It would be the first training session he'd missed so she let it slide. It still sucked, but Harry wouldn't put it past Umbridge to have set the day and time to specifically keep him from Quidditch.

Harry worked on homework in the common room after dinner, hoping to get as much done as he could since he didn't know how long Umbridge would keep him. He glanced at the clock and sighed when he saw he needed to leave.

"Good luck," Seamus said to him as he packed away his things.

"Do you need one of us to come wait for you?" Dean asked.

"If you've not got other things to do, but I don't know how long this'll be."

Seamus and Dean had a silent conversation, and then Dean packed up his things as well.

"I've got a book I need to finish reading for our Care of Magical Creatures homework, so I'll just hang out nearby and do that."

It felt strange to be walking back to the Defence Against the Dark Arts corridor after two months of not attending the class. Umbridge's office was nearby, and that was where he headed. At exactly 8pm, Harry knocked on the door and a soft voice called out "come in."

He had visited this office many times of the years, and had seen the changes each new teacher brought to it. Lockhart plastered practically every inch of the place with his face; Remus usually had some form of magical creature for the class to study; and the fake Moody had a wide variety of dark magic detectors set up about the place. Harry opened the door and had to blink because everything was so ... pink.

The walls had been painted pink. The desk was covered in a pink table cloth and the seats had pink covers on them. It was almost lurid and just so out of place compared to the rest of the castle. Umbridge was nearly hidden amongst the various overlapping shades of pink, her mousy brown hair the only thing making her stand out.

"Good evening Mr Potter," she smiled sweetly, "I'm glad to see that you can be punctual at least. You'll be doing some lines for me tonight."

She gestured to a small writing desk set up across the room from her. A piece of parchment was already laid out ready for him. He sat down and pulled a quill and ink pot from his bag. At the top of the page was written "I will not question my betters", an ominous statement if ever there was one.

"How many times?" Harry asked, keeping his voice calm and polite.

"Hmm, let's say 100 times and we can see if the message has sunk in," Umbridge said.

Without waiting for any more instructions, Harry started. The only sound in the room was the competing sound of quills, Harry scratching away his lines while Umbridge wrote a length

letter. Neither of them said anything, and that was how Harry wanted it to stay. The less he had to interact with Umbridge, the better. He would just write his lines and then be finished.

When he reached line 30, Umbridge stood and went over to a side table to fiddle about with a tea tray.

“I’m making myself a cup of tea. Would you like one Mr Potter?” Umbridge asked him.

Harry paused.

“No thank you Professor.”

“Nonsense. It would be very rude of me to make my own cup and not offer you something. If tea is not your preference, I have water and pumpkin juice?”

“A cup of tea please,” Harry answered, his mind whirring.

“How do you take it?”

“A bit of milk and some sugar.”

He wasn’t the biggest drinker of tea, but he occasionally had some with Sirius and Remus. Umbridge shifted over so she was completely blocking Harry’s view of what she was doing, and he went back to his task. A couple of lines later and Umbridge came over, a china tea cup balanced on a saucer.

“Here you are.”

“Thank you.”

He reached out to the cup as Umbridge sat down at her desk, and his suspicions were confirmed when he felt his ring heat up. It wasn’t just milk and sugar Umbridge put in his tea, but how was he going to get around drinking it?

“Is everything alright?” Umbridge asked.

“It’s still a bit hot. I’m just letting it cool down.”

“Just be sure to drink up before it gets too cold.”

Harry felt Umbridge’s gaze flicker over to him repeatedly as he continued to write. There was no opportunity to do anything. He could try and pretend to drink, but she might grow suspicious if the level in the cup didn’t drop. There was no time to pull out his wand and vanish some of it, but even then he hadn’t tried casting that spell wordlessly or wandlessly before. There was no choice but to drink it.

A look of triumph passed across Umbridge’s face when Harry lifted up his cup and took a sip. Almost immediately Harry felt a strange dullness pass over him, but that dullness was somehow removed from himself. It was a familiar sensation, and Harry realised it was because it was the same sensation he’d felt when the fake Moody had forced them all to drink

diluted versions of potions until they could resist their effects. Umbridge rounded her desk and stood in front of him. The way she stared down her nose at him would almost look imperious if she wasn't so short.

"Tell me what Albus Dumbledore is planning," she said, her voice soft but commanding.

An answer came bubbling up Harry's throat unbidden but he managed to stop it being said. This had to be Veritaserum. She was trying to force him to answer her questions truthfully. This could be incredibly bad for him, especially if she found out he could resist it.

"I don't know," Harry said, hoping his voice reflected the dullness he could still vaguely feel.

It was hard to concentrate because another sensation had joined the dullness, an unpleasant curdling in his gut.

"Why don't you know?" Umbridge hissed, her nostrils flaring.

"He doesn't talk to me, hasn't since last year. He won't even look at me," Harry said.

His face pinched as a pain began to build in his stomach. Umbridge didn't seem to notice as she glared at him.

"I find that very hard to believe," Umbridge said, "then tell me what you do know?"

This response Harry clamped down, the only sound that came out of his mouth was a low groan. He had to steady himself against the desk as a wave of nausea washed over him.

"Don't think you can lie your way out of this one as well. I asked you a question Mr Potter," Umbridge said sharply, "and you will-"

She was cut off when Harry's stomach heaved, and he had just enough control to turn away from her before its contents emptied out onto the office floor. Umbridge leapt back in disgust. She vanished the vomit then pulled Harry to his feet.

"Very well then," she said.

Dean hurriedly stood from where he'd been sitting on the floor nearby when the door to the office opened. Umbridge escorted Harry out, then she saw Dean.

"Mr Thomas, you will assist me in taking Mr Potter to the Hospital Wing."

Dean was quick to appear at Harry's side, slinging one of Harry's arms over his shoulder. Harry appreciated the support, his stomach still twinging painfully, and twice they had to stop as painful retches were pulled from him.

The Hospital Wing was empty when they arrived, save for Madam Pomfrey. The matron looked over when they arrived, then her eyes landed on Harry and she immediately bustled over, guiding him into a bed. She waved her wand over as Dean rubbed circles into his back.

"What happened?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

The question wasn't directed at him, but Harry allowed the Veritaserum to answer for him.

"My stomach didn't agree with whatever Professor Umbridge gave me."

"Mr Potter was serving detention with me this evening when I graciously offered him a cup of tea," Umbridge said, shooting Harry a contemptuous look, "Pomfrey, I need to know whether or not Mr Potter is faking these symptoms."

Harry caught the offence that crossed Madam Pomfrey's face at being called simply 'Pomfrey' but it was gone as soon as it appeared.

"I can assure you that he is not faking it," she said.

"Can you help him?" Dean asked.

"I will be able to. Don't you worry dear," Madam Pomfrey said, then to Umbridge she asked, "what exactly did you give him in his tea?"

"Milk and sugar," Umbridge said, eyes narrowed, "why?"

"Because this almost seems like an allergic reaction, which is odd since Potter hasn't shown any reaction to those things before. One moment."

Madam Pomfrey swept away. Umbridge scowled after her.

"I suppose you'll have to finish your detention at a later date," she said, before stomping out of the Hospital Wing.

If Madam Pomfrey was surprised that Umbridge had left already, she didn't show it. She returned carrying an empty sealed jar and a few small vials of potions.

"Alright Mr Potter. This is going to feel unpleasant but please bear with me," she said.

Harry was tempted to make a comment about how it already felt unpleasant, but then Madam Pomfrey tapped her wand to the jar and then directed it to his belly. The sensation that followed was awful. It was as though somebody had reached their hand down his throat and then scooped out a handful of his insides. He immediately retched again when it finished, and he looked up to see the jar had been filled with a brown coloured liquid.

"Here you are. An anti-nausea potion and a stomach soother. Hopefully these will help until I can analyse the stomach sample I've just taken," Madam Pomfrey said.

"Is that really necessary?" Harry couldn't help asking.

"Either you have developed a new allergy out of the blue, or else you have always had this allergy and only just discovered it now. Regardless, it would be better for everyone in the long run that we know what caused this reaction so that you can avoid it in the future," Madam Pomfrey said.

The potions did help settle his stomach so he wasn't actively nauseous, but he could still feel it churning away, occasionally stabbing at him painfully. Harry curled further into Dean, who obliged him with gentle back rubs. Madam Pomfrey returned shortly after, a grave look on her face. With a wave of her wand, curtains appeared around them and wards were raised for privacy.

"Please take this."

She gave him a vial of clear liquid. Harry took it and immediately the awful feeling in his gut vanished.

"Does that feel better?"

"It does. Thank you."

"Mr Potter, I'd like you to be honest with me. Did you see what Professor Umbridge put in your tea?"

"No, I didn't. Why?" Harry said, though he already knew where this was going.

"Do you know what Veritaserum is?" Harry nodded. "I found traces of it in your stomach sample. The potion I just gave to you was the antidote for it, and the fact that you're now feeling better proves it. Veritaserum is odourless, colourless, tasteless; unless one specifically tests for it it is impossible to know it is there, with one exception. Approximately 0.4% of the population is allergic to Veritaserum, experiencing a reaction as soon as they take it. Mr Potter, do you know of any other occasion that you might have been dosed with Veritaserum tonight?"

"I felt fine at dinner. The only other thing I can remember drinking is the cup of tea in Professor Umbridge's office."

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips.

"Very well. I shall do what I can to make sure she is reprimanded for this, though I'm not sure what would stick considering the position she's given herself."

"Surely it must be illegal to use a potion like that on somebody," Dean said, aghast.

"She reports directly to the Minister. Her power at Hogwarts comes from him as well. So long as she's in his good books, she'll be able to slip out of any consequences," Harry said.

"You can't seriously be saying we should do nothing!"

"I'm not," Harry said, "Madam Pomfrey, can you make an official record of this? Who will you need to inform?"

"My records are my own, and won't be seen by others unless necessary," Madam Pomfrey said, "as for informing others, I will need to inform your Head of House with regards to this change in your medical records. Given the circumstances, she will likely also inform your guardian."

Sirius would not be happy when he found out about this.

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Dean still didn’t look happy about it. “We have to play the long game, just like the others.”

Harry tried to convey his meaning without saying it. Fortunately, his boyfriend understood.

“I’m sorry this happened. It should go without saying that you should never accept any food or drink from Professor Umbridge again, and if you experience these symptoms again, you come straight to me,” Madam Pomfrey said sternly, “I don’t care if you’re in the middle of class or a detention or that ridiculous game you seem to love so much. You come straight here, do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” Harry was quick to say.

“Make sure that he does,” she said to Dean, “alright, you’re free to go. You may feel a bit washed out but that’s nothing a good night’s sleep won’t fix.”

Harry thanked her and left the Hospital Wing with Dean, already looking forward to the fireworks to come.

An irate Sirius descended on the castle at breakfast the next day. When Harry told him what happened via the mirrors when he got back to the dormitory, he had gone on a very colourful tirade, and would have come marching to Hogwarts right then and there if Remus hadn’t stopped him. He burst through the doors to the Great Hall, drawing everyone’s attention as his glare was fixed on the blob of pink that was Umbridge. Perhaps sensing the conflict that would no doubt ensue, McGonagall corralled him away, returning shortly after to very sternly demand Umbridge follow her.

Transfiguration was cancelled that morning, and as Harry heard from Seth, so was the first-years Defence Against the Dark Arts class. Every time Harry checked the Marauders Map, he saw Sirius, Umbridge and McGonagall in the latter's office. He was tempted to sneak over there and try to listen in, but Fred and George told him they’d already tried.

“The door’s been warded. We couldn’t hear a thing, and our Extendable Ears wouldn’t work either,” George said.

At lunch, McGonagall looked very irritable, and Umbridge had an expression of carefully concealed fury. Sirius hadn’t left and he caught Harry as he was heading in. Together they went up to the Room of Requirement, which took the form of a comfy lounge. Once the door was closed, Sirius pulled him in for a tight hug.

“Do not accept anything from that woman ever again,” he said.

“Don’t worry. I won’t.”

“I can’t believe she gave you Veritaserum. If you hadn’t been allergic to it, who knows what she might have pulled from you.”

“Actually,” Harry said, “it turns out the potion fake Moody gave us to increase our resistances was Veritaserum. I could choke down my answers before I could say them.”

“I’m not sure that’s much better to be honest.”

They sat together on a sofa. With a call, Kreacher appeared then vanished again.

“If fake Moody was giving you Veritaserum, you must have had a reaction to it last year,” Sirius said.

“I think he used a diluted dose because I don’t remember any of us being forced to tell the truth. I did think it was odd that I was the only one in the class who had an upset stomach because of it,” Harry said, “I guess Umbridge used a full dose on me.”

“You’ve probably guessed by now but nothing’s going to happen to her. I’ve put a formal complaint to both the school governors and to the Ministry, but it won’t work. She had you in detention as the High Inquisitor, not as a teacher, and with her having the final say over punishments, it’s out of the governor’s hands. As for the Ministry, she apparently had special permission from the Minister to use Veritaserum at her own discretion.”

“That’s ridiculous. What do they think we’re doing here?”

“It absolutely is ridiculous. Fudge’s paranoia is growing by the day. The Azkaban breakout has completely spooked him. He already thought, or convinced himself to think, that Dumbledore was conspiring against him, hence why he installed Umbridge here. I wouldn’t be surprised if he thought the students were in on it directly, so he gave Umbridge the means to question them.”

“Please tell me there’s something that can be done about him,” Harry said, “he’s not doing anything about Voldemort, but if nobody tries to stop him, Fudge could end up just as bad.”

“Unfortunately, of our three adversaries at the moment, Fudge is probably the hardest to deal with. Voldemort has a vested interest in having Fudge maintain the status quo, and Fudge is inclined to play along with that to maintain his power, especially with the likes of Lucius Malfoy whispering in his ear.”

Harry grumbled. He and Sirius filled each other in on everything else that had been going on. It was nice getting to spend time with his godfather, Kreacher reappearing with a platter of delicious sandwiches for them to eat. Harry escorted Sirius down to the castle gates, where he left him with another firm hug.

His afternoon classes passed by at a snail’s pace. Harry took diligent notes and still worked hard, but he was finding it difficult to be enthusiastic about it. How had it come to this where such obvious injustice couldn’t be fought against because a handful of people decided against it? The only reason Umbridge was still at Hogwarts was because of her role as High Inquisitor. Even if she got sacked from her teaching position, she would still be there, arguably with more opportunities to do damage since she wouldn’t have classes to teach.

Harry would just have to be patient. Just like Ron and Hermione, eventually Umbridge would do something that crossed the line too far for Fudge to rescue her, and that would be when Harry acted. If the teachers didn't get rid of her, then he would. It was another weight bearing down on him, joining so many others, and it felt like he would never be rid of it all.

When classes ended, Harry just wanted to go to bed and have a nap. He didn't have Quidditch today, and he was on top of his homework so it wouldn't be an issue. He would go up to the dormitory, close his hangings, and drift off for a little while. Unfortunately, his plan for relaxation was thwarted before he even reached the portrait hole.

"Harry!"

Harry sighed loudly as Hermione came up behind him. The other fifth-years came to a stop as well.

"What?" Harry said, perhaps rudely as Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"We have end of term tests coming up soon so I really think it's time for you to start studying," she said.

"You think I'm not doing that already?" Harry said but Hermione ignored him.

"I'd be more than willing to help with any of your classes, but I think it'll be particularly important for us to study for Defence Against the Dark Arts. With that toad teaching us, we're not learning anything at all!" she ranted, "I've put together a study group and I really think you should attend. We're meeting tonight."

"Noted. Is that everything?" Harry said, already turning to leave.

"Harry, don't just walk away from-"

"Hermione, I don't want to hear you talking about stuff that, frankly, you know nothing about," Harry said, turning back around to face her, feeling weary, "it's been a rough couple of days for me, and I really do not want to talk to you. Please, leave me alone."

"Harry-"

"You heard him, Granger," Seamus said, stepping between Harry and Hermione, "he's already given you more of his time than you deserve."

Hermione tried looking past him, but the others all moved so they were blocking her view. Harry took that chance to walk away, slipping through the portrait hole and into the Gryffindor common room. That his friends would so readily come to his defence made his heart swell, but at the same time he also felt another weight pressing down on him. Why couldn't Hermione just leave him alone? She was supposed to be intelligent, yet she completely ignored the clear signs Harry gave her that he wanted nothing to do with her. Was Dumbledore behind it? He still wouldn't look at Harry at mealtimes, so was this his way of trying to lure him back in?

He ignored everybody and went up to the dormitory, which was blessedly empty. If he had to deal with Ron after everything else, Harry thought he would actually scream, but a quick check of the Marauder's Map showed that Ron was downstairs in the prefect's bathroom doing who knows what. He never saw Ron and Colin going on dates, so either they were incredibly sneaky about it or whatever relationship they had was purely physical.

Harry lay on his bed, hangings closed, and stared up at the ceiling of his four-poster. As much as he wanted to relax, the conversation with Hermione, brief as it was, had upset him all over again, and he couldn't settle.

There was a knock on his four-poster from outside. Harry could see two figures outlined through the hangings. He gave them permission, and Seamus and Dean crawled into bed with him. Seamus knelt by his legs while Dean sat up near his head.

"You feeling alright?" Dean asked.

"Not really," Harry replied.

"Because of what Hermione said, or everything else?"

"Everything. It all feels like such a mess right now," Harry scrubbed his hands down his face, "Hermione was just more of the same."

"There are people working on it," Seamus reminded him, "your godfather and Professor Lupin are doing stuff. You're not in this alone. You've got them, and you've got us."

"I know I do. It's just- why did it have to happen this way? Why did Voldemort have to come for me? Why did Dumbledore have to mess with my family? Why can't the Ministry just do their jobs?" Harry sighed heavily, "I spent ten years thinking I wasn't worth anything, then suddenly I found out I was special because I could do magic. People actually seemed to *like* me. I made friends, and I felt accepted into a world that wanted me. Sure I didn't have parents, and I had the pressure of an evil wizard who wanted me dead, but I could handle that."

"Only then I found out that everything I thought I knew was a lie. The people I thought were my friends were anything but, and the headmaster I was supposed to be able to trust had been pulling me along like a puppet on a string my entire life. Now Voldemort's back and he's doing who knows what; the Ministry's doing absolutely nothing about it, unless you count inadvertently helping him as doing something; and I know I'm not alone and that things are being done to stop it all. It's just-" he couldn't help releasing another deep sigh, "- it's just too much sometimes."

He tried not to look at either of his boyfriends, knowing that they likely looked very saddened by what he just said. Dean tucked himself against Harry's side, and Seamus lay down with his head pillowed on Harry's stomach.

"You're a really strong person, Harry. I don't know if I'd be able to handle half as much as you've had to," Dean said, "I hate that you've had to deal with all of this, but you don't have to do it alone. You're stuck with us, remember? Let us take some of that weight off you."

“I don’t want to burden you with my problems,” Harry said, which made Seamus snort.

“The fact that you feel that way shows that you care, but that’s not how this works,” he said, “because we care about you too. Your problems are our problems, and we’ll help you with them whether you want us to or not.”

The guilt at bringing them along with him into the mess of his life was drowned out by overwhelming gratitude. Emotions surged up within him, and his eyes itched slightly.

“I love you,” Harry blurted out, “sorry, I just- I didn’t know what else to say, and I-”

His ramblings were cut off by Dean cupping his cheek, turning his face towards his and pressing a gentle kiss to his lips.

“I love you too.”

Harry felt like a puddle of mushy goo at those words, and he may have actually melted when he looked down to see Seamus look up at him.

“I’ll say it as often as you want me to. I love you Harry.”

A wet chuckle forced its way out. How had he gotten so incredibly lucky to find these boys? What stroke of cosmic fortune allowed something so good to enter his life? Never before had Harry had so many people to care about, but these two were people he could *love*, and they loved him in return.

“Dean’s pretty good too,” Seamus added on with a smirk.

“Pretty good? I’m exceptional,” Dean said in mock offence, “and here I was going to say that I love you.”

“You do? That’s great!” Seamus beamed, “because I love you too! I’m a lucky man indeed.”

Dean rolled his eyes, and then leaned over so he could kiss Seamus. Harry laughed at their antics. He missed the fond look his boyfriends shared with one another directed at him. They settled back into their places, with Dean lying alongside Harry and Seamus resting his head on Harry’s belly.

“Feeling better?” Dean asked him.

“Much better.”

“I know distractions aren’t always the best way to deal with bad thoughts but you looked like you could really do with one,” Dean said.

Seamus looked contemplative, like he was thinking very hard and was working up the courage to say something.

“Shay?” Harry prompted.

“I think- there’s something I’d like to try which should hopefully take your mind off of things. Only if you want to of course!”

“It’s alright. What did you have in mind?” Harry asked, making to sit up only to be stopped by Seamus’s hand on his chest.

“You just ... stay right there. I’ve got this.”

Seamus moved so he was between Harry’s legs. He leaned down to kiss him, then shuffled backwards. Harry and Dean watched him curiously, then Harry’s breath caught in his throat when Seamus moved to undo his belt buckle. He nodded when Seamus gave him a questioning look. He didn't think Seamus would be so willing to return the favour from a few weeks ago, but he wasn't complaining and he trusted his boyfriend wouldn't push him to do more than he was ready for.

In short order, the belt was unbuckled, the zipper unzipped, and Harry’s pants were pulled down to below his glutes. His underwear followed swiftly afterwards, exposing his rapidly growing erection. He was reminded of the night they’d spent at Potter Manor, the way Seamus had worked his cock with his hand. He also remembered what he'd recently done to Seamus, but even so, he was completely taken by surprise when Seamus leaned down and kissed his shaft then licked a careful line up its length. Harry gasped completely involuntarily.

Seamus peppered a few more kisses up and down his dick. He looked nervous but then visibly steeled himself. Harry couldn’t help moaning when Seamus took his dick into his mouth. It was hot and wet, and the way his tongue twisted and twined around him was unlike anything Harry had ever felt before. Seamus kept going until he’d taken in the entire length, somehow without gagging, his face pressed into Harry’s crotch. It was already more than Harry felt he could handle, but then Seamus started moving and Harry was lost to the bliss.

In his mind, he knew what Seamus was doing, but he didn't know if he could put it into words. Whatever it was, it felt *good*. As Seamus bobbed up and down, his tongue explored every inch of Harry’s cock. Jolts of electric pleasure shot through him and it was all Harry could do to not turn into a writhing, wriggling mess at the sensations his boyfriend was giving him. He felt his release building, rising steadily within him.

“Seamus- Shay, I’m-” Harry panted, but then Seamus hollowed out his cheeks and *sucked*.

His hips pushed upwards as his orgasm hit, and he spilled his seed into Seamus’s mouth. Seamus spluttered, but then Harry heard the sound of swallowing. Through the haze of pleasure, he saw Seamus wipe his mouth clean, before a very pleased expression appeared.

"Do I want to know where the pair of you learned to do that? ” Dean asked, a tent visible in his pants.

“Along with a very embarrassing Talk, after we signed the betrothal contract, Mam got me a very embarrassing book, which had no right to go into as much detail about gay sex as it did, but I suppose it came in handy.”

“Wizards Guide to Wizards?” Harry asked, though it came out slightly disjointed as he came down from his high.

“How’d you know?”

“It’s the book Sirius made me read, the one he threatened to set me homework on.”

“You learned how to give a blowjob from a book?” Dean asked incredulously.

“I can give you one too if you’d like,” Seamus wriggled his eyebrows.

“Oh you so will, and don’t think I won’t return the favour,” Dean said.

“Me ... too,” Harry said.

Seamus smiled warmly at the pair of them. He leaned over to kiss Dean, then he lay down on Harry’s other side and kissed him just as deeply. Harry caught the taste of salt.

“I will absolutely hold you to those favours, maybe even more-” Seamus said.

The door to the dormitory opened. They couldn’t tell who it was, but when they didn’t immediately leave, all three of them sagged.

“-when we can be sure we won’t be disturbed,” Seamus finished.

“If it’s Neville, we could probably ask him to leave,” Dean said.

“And if it’s Ron, he’ll kick up a fuss about the three of us being in the same bed wanting to be alone,” Seamus said, “I don’t trust he’s genuinely attracted to Colin, or any man, not after how he reacted to us.”

It was a bit of a damper on their fun, but it was alright. They’d have plenty of chances to do more with each other later. Harry pulled up his pants, still reeling slightly from Seamus’s actions. They spent the rest of the evening chatting amongst themselves, and Harry enjoyed it just as much. Dean was right. He didn’t have to do it alone any more. He had others who could help him, and the best part about it was that, once this was all over, they would still be right there with him.

More than exams

November continued to pass by at Hogwarts. All the teachers were preparing them for their end of term tests. For the fifth-years, this meant mock exams based on the OWL standards. It felt like they were trying to cram as much information as they could into their brains before the tests. Harry and his friends spent as much time as they could studying and practising their spells. This would be their first chance to really see how prepared they were for their OWLs in June.

Of course, this meant that Hermione was even twitchier. Already snappish at the best of times, when exam season came around, she got even worse. One of the desks in the corner of the room had been permanently claimed as hers, and she was often found there with her nose buried in a book or inches away from an essay she was frantically writing. The others gave her a wide berth, and the only reason she didn't demand total silence was because she put a privacy ward around herself. The only one 'allowed' close was Ron, and only because Hermione herself dragged him over to study.

"I am so glad you found this place," Parvati said, "if I could only spend time in the common room and the library, I think I would be reduced to tears."

Harry and the other fifth-years had taken to practising spells in the Room of Requirement, having explained the Room to Parvati and Lavender. Today it was an airy room with plenty of space, a few tables set up on one side with tea-cups that the girls were trying to charm to have legs. Seamus was with them, offering them help and advice.

"I just can't seem to get my legs to have any kind of strength!" Lavender whined as she produced another tea-cup that couldn't support itself with its new legs.

"You've got the incantation and wand movement right. Now it's just a matter of focus," Seamus explained, "instead of making four legs, try only making one. Focus on getting one leg right, then you can work up to four."

Neville and Harry were bent over a cauldron, revising the proper procedure to make the Strengthening Solution, while Dean was curled up in an armchair rereading his notes for History of Magic.

"Making Potions is a lot nicer when Snape isn't teaching it," Neville said, "I might even do well this year!"

"You *will* do well. There's no might about it," Harry said.

"Sure," Neville said, "still doesn't mean I'll take it for NEWT though."

They kept working for half an hour before switching subjects. Lavender had managed to make two perfect legs for her teacup under Seamus's patient tutelage, while Parvati's teacup was able to make a slow, if slightly wobbly, trek around the desk. Neville's Strengthening Solution was also much closer to the correct consistency than his attempt in class.

Harry spent the next half an hour lying on the floor next to Dean, various Arithmancy tables spread out in front of them. Neville joined Seamus in revising Care of Magical Creatures, while Parvati and Lavender borrowed Dean's Astronomy notes to make flashcards. It felt like a very productive way to spend the time. Harry felt much more confident about his ability to do well in his exams.

"We've got this, guys!" Lavender said cheerily as they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Is that a prediction?" Seamus asked.

"No, just positive reinforcement. If we believe we'll do well, then we will. Magic's funny like that," Lavender said.

"Is that actually a thing?" Harry couldn't help asking, "Sirius said that belief can have a big impact on magic but I've not read anything to say if it's true or not."

"Oh yes! Dad says that it's actually a really interesting area of magical theory to study," Parvati said, "magic is something within us that we tap into. We channel it to do the things we want with words and a wand, but also our mind, so of course magic can be affected by our state of mind."

"Mhm. If you believe a spell isn't going to work, then subconsciously you won't put as much effort into it, and then it really won't work," Lavender said, "so let's all think positively!"

"I'm positive that I can't wait for the Christmas holidays," Dean said.

That was something they could all agree on.

Ron was still studying with Hermione when they arrived at the common room. Harry bid the girls good night and they each headed up to their dormitories. Between classes, homework and studying for exams, they were all quite tired. Harry changed into his pyjamas and got into bed, a small amount of delight when Seamus joined him.

As they'd found out, the four-posters weren't really big enough for all three of them to sleep together comfortably for more than a single night, so a few times a week two of them would share. It always warmed Harry's heart to have one of his boyfriends beside him, and even when it was his turn to be on his own, he surprisingly didn't feel jealous, which he felt was good. It was good that he wasn't so completely dependent on them.

"Are you meditating again?" Seamus asked as he slipped under the covers, looking up at Harry who was sitting against the headboard.

"It's good Occlumency practice and helps calm me down. Is that alright?"

"Of course. Do you want to be the little spoon tonight, or the big spoon?"

"Could I be the little spoon?"

“Sure thing. Just cuddle in when you’re ready,” Seamus said as he settled himself more comfortably in bed.

Harry closed his eyes, feeling the magic of lines within him. Meditation was good for Occlumency practice but it was also good for making him more familiar with his Family Magic. He held a lot of power, and therefore it was his responsibility to make sure he had control over it.

He sank down into the magic, letting it wash over him. The Potter magic was a comforting warmth all around him. The Gryffindor magic was peaceful and soothing, like a field of wheat rippling in a gentle breeze. In contrast, the Slytherin magic was colder yet somehow refreshing, like swimming in a stream. Through both he could feel Hogwarts, and the castle reached back to him in return.

Sinking into the Black magic, he entered the void. The stars twinkled all around him, the distant lights of the Black family long dead. Several lights orbited more closely to him. A chain of solid silver connected him to one of them, which expanded into the form of Sirius. From him, a thin thread reached out to Andromeda and a woman Harry guessed was Narcissa, and connected to Andromeda was Tonks. The Lord may have been able to see more than this, but Harry was still happy seeing his family laid out so clearly.

It was much better than looking at the Slytherin magic. Voldemort was still there, connected to Harry via the same thin thread denoting their membership of the same family. Harry wasn’t sure what he could do with this connection, and whether or not he even wanted to do anything. Sirius told him about the ritual that would fully remove Voldemort from the Slytherin line, severing any connection he had to the family magic, and Harry planned to use it once all the horcruxes were destroyed.

He hoped that he could somehow glean more information on the remaining horcrux by feeling out the Slytherin magic, but if that was even possible, it would require probing the connection to Voldemort even further. Doing so would likely alert Voldemort, tipping him off that something was amiss.

Opening his eyes, Harry saw the lights in the dormitory were off. Seamus was breathing softly beside him, so Harry tucked himself beneath the blankets and shuffled backwards into Seamus. Even asleep, Seamus’s arms wrapped around him, cuddling Harry against his chest. Being wrapped in boyfriend’s strong embrace brought a sense of safety, allowing Harry to easily drift off into slumber.

December arrived, and with it came the end of term exams. These went about as well as Harry imagined that they would. Snape set them a particularly tricky potion to brew, and he seemed to take particular pleasure in watching them squirm as they attempted to complete it. Fortunately, all of their practice in the Room of Requirement paid off. Seamus didn’t blow up his cauldron from stress, and Neville managed to turn in a decent potion. Harry’s was as close to perfect as he could get it, a fact which Snape seemed to realise as he corked up a bottle and handed it over to him.

“At least that one’s out of the way,” Neville said, breathing a great sigh of relief as they left the dungeons afterwards.

“Don’t forget, we’ve still got Defence Against the Dark Arts,” Seamus grumbled.

Though they were using Harry’s correspondence course resources, they were still in Umbridge’s class. No doubt it would be full of absolute rubbish from Slinkhard’s book. Harry didn’t have a test for that class, but judging by his performance in his assignments, he felt he was doing very well. He kept his mouth shut as he parted from the others as they headed up to Umbridge’s classroom.

Just as he was deciding whether to go back to the common room or the library, Harry felt something. It was like a rot pressing against the edge of the wards near the Forbidden Forest. When he felt something larger try to cross, Harry instinctively responded, pushing a small amount of magic into the wards. They snapped shut, ejecting whatever had tried to gain access to the grounds. He felt another jolt of magic, and knew that it came from Neville.

Something very dark had just tried to get into Hogwarts. Harry stood by a window, looking out over the grounds as though he could see it. The Forbidden Forest remained as imposing and ancient as ever, unperturbed by what had just taken place.

“You felt it too.”

Harry nearly leapt out of skin. Standing beside him was a girl with long, silver blonde hair. She wore the blue of Ravenclaw house, though she had decorated her clothing with a butterbeer cork necklace and earrings that looked like small radishes.

“Um, what?” he said, rather dumbly.

Pale blue eyes turned to him, and Harry got the distinct impression that she was seeing more than just him.

“That presence. You felt it too,” the girl said.

“I did,” Harry said, “did you?”

The girl nodded. Harry racked his brain, trying to make sense of this new information. Who even was this girl? He was sure he’d seen her around the castle at some point, but the name was completely eluding him. Then it clicked. Parvati had pointed her out once as Luna Lovegood, a girl with a reputation for being rather odd, believing all sorts of fanciful stories about seemingly made up creatures. Now she was standing with Harry, telling him she could sense the same thing that he did. Did that mean-

He hurriedly glanced around but the corridor they were on was completely empty.

“Are you Heir Ravenclaw?” he asked in a hushed voice.

“Merely a humble Steward,” Luna said.

“A Steward?”

“Mhm,” Luna said, and did not elaborate any further.

“But you have access to the wards?”

“My Lord has granted me this access so that I may teach him,” Luna said.

Harry was very confused.

“You have many enemies. They seek a common goal,” Luna said.

“You mean Dumbledore and Voldemort. What could they possibly have in common?” Harry asked, then a chilling thought occurred to him, “is it me? Am I their common goal?”

“I’m not sure. The tides of the future are stronger now than they have ever been. No Seer could possibly see the outcome,” Luna said, “though I suspect that I may have to help you at some point.”

“Do you want to help me?”

“You have your duties Lord Potter and I have mine. On this I will have to defer to my Lord. You will know his answer,” Luna said.

Luna skipped off down the hall before Harry had a chance to answer. That entire conversation had left him incredibly confused, and also slightly worried. When he met back up with the others after class, Neville shared his worry. In the Room of Requirement, Harry relayed to them what he felt and what Luna told him.

“I heard she was a bit odd, but now it seems like there’s a lot more to her than meets the eye,” Seamus said, “but she couldn’t have been a bit clearer about the ominous future coming towards us?”

“She basically said the same thing as Parvati,” Harry said, “I’m more confused about what a Steward is.”

He turned to Neville.

“They’re a really old fashioned thing, which I suppose makes sense. None of the current noble families have one, and haven’t had one in at least 400 years,” Neville said, “if an Heir can be thought of as a backup to the Lord, then a Steward is basically like the backup to the entire family. If the Heir is unable to receive training from the Lord, for whatever reason, then the Steward is supposed to provide it. They’re also supposed to provide shelter and aid to the Lord’s family in times of crisis.”

“So if the entire family was wiped out except for the Heir, then the Steward stepped in to support them?” Dean asked.

“Exactly. They would help prepare the Heir to take their place as Lord,” Neville said, “until then they could be granted partial access to the Family Magic to help fulfil the Lord’s duties in the interim.”

“So whoever Heir Ravenclaw is, Luna is the Steward?” Harry said.

“It seems like it, but I had no idea. The Lovegoods have never been associated with nobility before,” Neville said, “Gran might know more about this than me. I’ll ask her when we go home for Christmas.”

Harry tried to not let this new discovery distract him from his studies. They still had their exams to worry about, so Harry put it to one side for him to think about later.

One by one, they finished their end of term exams. It was good practice for when their OWLs eventually came around. Harry tried not to take too much joy from it, but it somehow felt good to watch Ron and Hermione stressing about them, both from opposite ends of the preparedness spectrum. Ron was often seen at a table in the common room, forcing himself to read through his notes with a panicked look on his face. From what Harry could see of him during class, he spent a lot of time staring blankly at the parchment, his quill not moving.

Hermione was at the other extreme. Instead of panic, her expression was one of stress. She was always the first to start writing during their exams and the last one to finish, often asking for more parchment because she still was not able to consolidate her answers. Harry sometimes wondered whether she actually finished the exams at all with how much she over-answered every single question.

“Alright everyone. Quills down,” Professor Vector called.

She waved her wand and everyone's parchments flew through the air into a neat pile on her desk.

“We’re nearly done,” Harry said, “just Ancient Runes this afternoon and Astronomy in the evening. What about you?”

“Astronomy and then Care of Magical Creatures,” Dean said, “by the end of tomorrow, we’ll be finished. Will you and Seamus be having a nap after Ancient Runes?”

“I think so. It sucks to have three exams in one day, but I’d quite like to get them out of the way,” Harry said.

The Ancient Runes exam was tricky, but Harry felt confident with his performance. He breezed through the translation section, then steadily worked his way through the rune sequence questions. Each time he struggled to find an answer, he imagined Seamus was at his side, the pair of them working their way through a particularly complex problem. It usually helped, and it helped now. By the time Professor Babbling called the end of the exam, Harry thought that he had done well, a sentiment that Seamus shared.

The pair of them marched back up to the dormitory, tucking themselves into Harry’s bed for a nap. The Astronomy exam was tonight and they’d need all the rest they could get. An hour later, they joined the other fifth-years for dinner, before going over their notes.

The Black family had always had a passion for Astronomy, as evidenced by the fact they often named their children after stars and other astronomical phenomena. While it wasn’t

Harry's favourite subject, he didn't want to disappoint Sirius by doing badly. At 11pm, they all trooped up to the Astronomy tower. Telescopes had already been set up for them. Professor Sinistra waited until everyone had arrived and then set them off.

There was something slightly relaxing about falling into the steady rhythm of filling out his star chart. The air around him was silent save for the occasional scratching of quills and the creak as someone adjusted their telescope. Harry methodically worked his way through the night sky. Inwardly he smiled when he found Sirius in the stars. With fifteen minutes to spare, he finished his chart. All that was left was to check it over to make sure it was perfect.

When they were dismissed, Harry felt pleased with himself. That was his last exam, so now he could relax for the final week of term before the Christmas holidays began. Dean also looked happy with his performance.

"If you two don't get O's, I'll eat my hat," Seamus said, suppressing a big yawn.

"Did you not do well?"

"No, I think I did, but I could feel myself getting tired by the end of it," Seamus said, "I get why we learn about Astronomy, but surely there has to be a better way of teaching it than keeping kids up past midnight. I mean, you've got that observatory at Grimmauld Place. Why couldn't they do something similar here?"

"I actually have no idea. I don't see why they couldn't, unless there was some kind of patent on it and the Blacks didn't want to share how they did it," Harry said.

There wasn't much talking as they headed back to the dormitory. The common room was empty, the remains of a fire crackling in the hearth. Harry and the others all changed into their pyjamas, all of them wanting to go to sleep. While Harry may now be finished, Seamus, Dean and Neville all had their Care of Magical Creatures exam tomorrow. They exchanged goodnights before they each shut their hangings, tucked themselves beneath their covers, and went to sleep.

Harry woke with a start when he felt something pulling at his hangings. The dormitory was still dark, moonlight shining through the window enough to illuminate the shadow trying to gain access to his bed. Harry sat up, put his glasses on and pulled out his wand. His heart was hammering, and he was more than ready to start casting spells, but then he heard his name being called.

"Potter," the person said in a soft but insistent voice.

It was Professor McGonagall. Harry took down his privacy wards and opened his hangings. McGonagall stood beside his bed in a tartan dressing gown, her hair falling down past her shoulders. She looked grave.

"Potter, I need you to come with me."

She moved over to Ron's bed and set about waking him up. Harry watched it all suspiciously. Why was she waking up him and Ron specifically? Across the room, Dean's hangings opened and his boyfriend looked out, slightly bleary. When he spotted McGonagall, he became very confused.

"Wha- what's going on?" he asked.

"I apologise for waking you Mr Thomas. Please go back to sleep," she said, hurried but not unkindly.

It didn't stop Dean from worrying as Harry put on his shoes, following McGonagall and Ron out of the dormitory and down to the common room. There Fred, George and Ginny were waiting for them, all dressed in their pyjamas and looking very nervous.

"I need you all to come with me to Professor Dumbledore. There has been an incident involving your father."

"What? What happened?" Fred demanded.

"All I can say right now is that he was injured as part of his duties to the Order. Professor Dumbledore will have more information."

They followed after her without complaint, the worry practically rolling off the Weasleys in waves. Harry went with them, but he was left wondering why on earth he was involved in this. He was concerned about Arthur, but he wasn't family. It didn't make sense for Harry to be brought along too.

They reached the stone gargoyle, which moved aside as McGonagall gave it the password. They rode the spiralling staircase up to Dumbledore's office. Harry heard the murmuring of voices coming from inside, which abruptly went quiet when McGonagall knocked at the door. Dumbledore stopped his pacing when they all entered.

"Thank you for bringing them Minerva," Dumbledore said, "I am very sorry that this has happened."

"*What* has happened?" Fred practically growled.

"Arthur was on duty for the Order tonight. He was attacked by an unknown enemy and was grievously injured. Fortunately, another member of the Order had been coming to relieve him, and so was able to get him help as well as come up with an excuse as to why Arthur was where he was," Dumbledore said, "Arthur is currently in St Mungo's as we speak receiving treatment."

"Then what are we waiting for!" George said, "let's go!"

"I'm afraid we can't do that. It would look most bizarre for Arthur's children to show up at St Mungo's demanding to see their father when the hospital will be in the process of contacting Molly."

"You can't seriously expect us to sit around here and wait!"

“Of course not.” Dumbledore turned to one of the portraits. “Phineas, have all the arrangements been made?”

“Yes,” said the portrait of a reedy looking man that looked vaguely familiar, “my great-great-grandson is ready to receive his guests.”

“Excellent.” Dumbledore returned his attention to the Weasley’s. “In a moment, I will be sending you to Grimmauld Place. It is much closer to St Mungo’s than the Burrow, and it is also better protected should the enemy attempt to retaliate if they find out that Arthur is still alive.”

“You really think they’ll do that?” Ginny asked, her voice wet with tears.

“If I could give you certainty my dear, I would do so, but alas these are difficult times.”

“Is that why Harry’s coming too?” Ron asked.

“Indeed. We cannot be certain whether the attack on Arthur was because he’s a member of the Order, or because he is an associate of Harry’s.”

There was a flash of fire in the air, a single golden feather fluttering down to the ground.

“Umbridge has received word that you are out of your beds. We must hurry. Minerva, please head her off.”

McGonagall left the room. Dumbledore conjured a long length of rope. He tapped it with his wand and it glowed slightly. Each of the Weasley’s and Harry held onto it. Dumbledore slowly counted down from five. When he reached three, Harry looked up and met Dumbledore’s gaze. He instantly felt pressure on his mind. He increased the strength of his defences, and Harry knew the instant that Dumbledore fell afoul of them. Dumbledore’s eyes widened, the intrusion vanished, and Dumbledore stumbled backwards, struggling to catch his breath as the feeling of drowning subsided.

The last thing Harry saw was a look of fear on Dumbledore’s face before the portkey activated, the hook around his waist dragging him off into darkness.

They landed with a small crash in the kitchen in the public side of Grimmauld Place. Harry managed to catch himself before he fell, but Ron and Ginny weren’t so lucky. All the lights were off. There was no sign that anyone had been here for a while. The sound of footsteps rapidly approached. The kitchen door burst open, revealing Sirius. He was fully dressed despite the late hour, looking grave.

“Are you alright? Long distance portkeys can be a bit rough.”

“Never mind about us,” George said, “what about our dad?”

“Can you lend us cloaks or something? We need to go and see that he’s alright!” Ginny cried.

“I know Dumbledore has already explained this to you, but you need to stay here until we hear from Molly. It would look incredibly suspicious if Arthur’s children showed up without being informed. It’d draw an awful lot of unwanted attention,” Sirius held up his hands to stem the tide of protests, “I understand it’s not what you want to hear. Believe me, if it was my family in the hospital, nothing would stop me from battering down the door to be by their side. Be assured that Arthur is receiving the best treatment he possibly can.”

He waved his wand and bottles of butterbeer floated out from one of the cupboards.

“I’d suggest you all go up to bed and get some rest, but I’m not that foolish. Let’s take a moment to try and calm down,” Sirius said patiently.

Fred and George looked solemn, but they accepted the butterbeer, opening the bottles with a slight hiss. Ginny curled up on a seat, her butterbeer left unopened, while Ron looked between everybody, unsure what to do. Harry sat with Sirius at one end of the table. It felt like he was intruding on something private, and all he could do was mull over his thoughts.

Dumbledore took him away from school along with the Weasleys, supposedly for security concerns, but Harry wasn’t sure he believed that. If Harry was not safe at Hogwarts, then where else could he be safe? It was more likely that, given the unexpected situation, Dumbledore wanted Harry somewhere tucked away that he could more closely keep an eye on him. With Ron and Ginny out of Hogwarts, the number of people who could try and bring him back under control was greatly reduced, whereas at Grimmauld Place, there were fewer people and less space.

If Dumbledore believed the proximity would somehow force Harry to like them again, he must be more callous than he originally thought. As if Ron or Ginny would be thinking about that when their father was in the hospital. Then again, perhaps he was betting on Harry’s sympathy to kick in so that he would be the one to offer that olive branch. Either way, it was cold, playing on a tragedy to advance his plans.

The six of them sat there in the kitchen, slowly sipping their butterbeers, for what felt like hours. The clock struck 5am, and there was a bright flash of flame. It left a note behind, which Sirius snatched out of the air. He read it and sagged in relief.

“Arthur will be alright. He’s sleeping right now and will be available to receive visitors in a few hours,” Sirius said.

Fred and George slumped against each other, and Ginny let out a sob.

“Now then. I think it’s time we all got some sleep. Your bedrooms should be just how you left them. Come on, up you get.”

None of them resisted as Sirius chivvied them upstairs. They each reclaimed their bedrooms from the summer. When the bedroom doors shut, Sirius caught Harry’s eye. Harry followed him upstairs into the study. Sirius jabbed his wand at the hearth, the embers flaring back to life.

“I don’t know why I’m surprised that Dumbledore sent you along with the Weasleys. It seems like the sort of thing he’d do,” Sirius said.

“Is Arthur really going to be alright?”

“He is. He was on guard duty for the Order when something, officially we’re not entirely sure what, attacked him. Luckily, Tonks had been on her way to change shifts with him and found him pretty much as soon as the attack was over, meaning she was able to get him help almost immediately.”

“You said officially,” Harry pointed out, “you know what attacked him.”

“I met with Narcissa a few days ago, hoping that perhaps she could tell us more about where the escaped Death Eaters are. She couldn’t tell me that, but she did say that Voldemort seems to have acquired a snake. Apparently it’s very large. At first she thought it was a constrictor but then it bit a Death Eater that angered Voldemort and the man had suffered terribly from the venom,” Sirius said, “Tonks said she saw something long and thin close to the ground slipping away into the shadows, and while the Healers couldn’t figure out exactly what it was, apparently they said the injuries were consistent with something with fangs.”

“So Voldemort sent his snake to investigate the Department of Mysteries. It’s not like he can do it himself when the Ministry is doing a fantastic job pretending he’s not back,” Harry said, “what is even in the Department of Mysteries that’s so important to protect.”

“I wish I could say but I don’t actually know,” Sirius said, “I’m not part of the guard rotation, but from what Tonks has told me, they’re stationed at the entrance to the Department itself. Dumbledore has been very vague about what it is exactly they’re supposed to be guarding, but he insists that whatever it is is very important. Unfortunately, there’s a lot in the Department of Mysteries that it wouldn’t be a good idea for Voldemort to get his hands on.”

“And people just go along with that? Do they not question him?”

“Maybe if this was peace time, but with Voldemort back, the other Order members are more likely to go along with it. Dumbledore has always had a pretty good insight into what Voldemort wants, so he’s managed to build up some trust there,” Sirius said.

“That sucks. It’s not right. He’s asking people to risk their lives and he won’t even tell them why,” Harry said, “it’s all just part of his plan.”

“Just like sending the Weasleys here instead of the Burrow is part of the plan,” Sirius said.

“Did Mrs Weasley not appreciate not getting to live here full time when we all went back to Hogwarts?”

“No, I don’t think she did, which is why it will come as no shock that Dumbledore asked if they could all stay here again over the Christmas break. Officially it’s because Grimmauld Place is closer to St Mungo’s, but the hospital has a receiving room for the floo network. It wouldn’t take much more effort to get to and from the Burrow than here.”

“All my stuff’s still in my dormitory,” Harry said.

“Kreacher!”

The Elf appeared with a crack. One eyebrow raised in surprise when he saw Harry.

“Lord Black called?”

“I need you to go to Harry’s dormitory at Hogwarts and pack up all his stuff, then bring it back here,” Sirius said, “try and be as stealthy as you can.”

“Kreacher can do this.”

“Thank you Kreacher,” Harry said.

He felt the metal disk heat up against his chest with messages from both Seamus and Dean.

“You need to get some sleep as well. To bed with you. You’ll need all your strength for when Molly descends on this house.”

Harry’s room was just as he remembered it. He sat on the edge of his bed. His boyfriends were both worried about him, and he was quick to send them messages to reassure them. He explained what had happened, and asked them to keep an eye on things at Hogwarts. No doubt there would be some fallout from four students seemingly vanishing in the middle of the night. A family emergency may explain the Weasley’s, but Harry less so. All it did was draw undue attention to him, which, coming from Dumbledore, would never be the sort of attention he wanted.

The start of Yule

Chapter Notes

Mature scene ahead.

Starts: "... he ghosted a hand up ..."

Ends: "A quick wave of Dean's wand ..."

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

Harry was woken up a few hours later to the muffled sound of somebody stomping around downstairs. When he leaned over the bannister, he heard Mrs Weasley's voice calling for everyone to come down to breakfast. The only indication that she was worried about her husband were the slight bags under her eyes, and a tightness to her expression when her children immediately demanded to know when they could see their father.

"Arthur was sleeping when I left." She checked the clock on the wall. "He'll probably be getting his breakfast about now and then the Healers will be back to check on him. We should be free to visit at about ten o'clock."

Fred and George clearly weren't happy with having to wait, but for once seemed willing to listen to their mother. Harry took his seat next to Sirius as Mrs Weasley loaded the table up with a spread of food. It was like no time had passed and they were still in the summer holidays. Mrs Weasley moved around the kitchen as though she had never left. The twins certainly seemed to think so.

"Thank you Sirius," George pointedly said, "for letting us stay here."

"Yes, thank you so much," Fred said as well.

"It's no problem boys," Sirius said, giving them both a warm smile.

"I was so grateful when Albus told us we'd be able to stay here. Getting to St Mungo's is so much trickier from the Burrow you see," Mrs Weasley said, "of course, it'll be a bit of a hassle getting us all moved back in, but I'm sure we'll be able to manage."

"Mum, all our stuff is still at Hogwarts. What's going to happen to it?" Ginny asked.

"Albus said he'll have the House Elves collect your things and bring them here. There's no need to worry about anything," Mrs Weasley said, "tuck in everyone."

Harry's ring didn't heat up, not that he expected it to. This was all so sudden, even if Mrs Weasley had been planning on dosing him again, she wouldn't have had the chance to. Harry would need to remind Kreacher about his task to nullify the potions.

After they had all eaten, Mrs Weasley sent them all back upstairs to freshen up. His trunk was waiting at the foot of his bed, so he changed out of his pyjamas into fresh clothes. His necklace heated up again. According to Dean's message, the house castle was wondering where he and the Weasley's had gone. Umbridge was apparently furious about it.

Harry was the first to finish changing and he went back downstairs. He found Sirius in the public drawing room talking with Kingsley and Tonks. Both Aurors looked grim, though they greeted him kindly.

"Thank you," Harry said to Tonks.

"Don't mention it. I didn't really do anything special," Tonks said, "though if there's one positive to all this it's that the Ministry has decided to up its own security on the Department of Mysteries."

"Really?"

"Naturally there were questions about what Arthur was doing down there so late at night, but it was pointed out that regardless of his reason, he was still attacked and severely injured by an unknown party right outside what should be one of the most fortified and well defended Departments in the Ministry," Kingsley said, "Madam Bones has placed a permanent Auror guard on the entrance to the Department of Mysteries while they investigate the attack, and apparently the Unspeakables have also upped their own defences."

"So no more guard duty?" Harry asked.

"Hopefully not," Tonks said, then she playfully slapped Sirius's arm, "for someone supposedly not being informed, your godson seems to know an awful lot."

"Albus and I disagree on what constitutes need-to-know information," Sirius said, "I tell Harry what I think he needs to know."

"And your impassioned statement that he wasn't a member of the Order?"

"I stand by that. Harry isn't a part of the Order, but Voldemort won't care about that. The more Harry knows, the better he'll be able to protect himself, but it still should be up to the adults to sort out this mess."

"Have the knowledge but not need it, rather than need it and not have it. It's the sort of thing Mum always said to me growing up," Tonks mused, "must be a Black thing."

"It very much is."

"It's sensible," Kingsley said. He turned to Harry. "Do you know how to duel?"

"Um, Sirius has taught me some things," Harry said.

Kingsley nodded.

"I'd like to see that at some point. It's a shame there isn't a lot of space here."

Harry shared a look with Sirius.

Eventually the Weasleys all came downstairs and they all trooped out onto the front step. Kingsley apparated with the twins, Tonks with Ron, Mrs Weasley with Ginny, and Sirius with Harry. They appeared in a narrow side street tucked between two large shops. Beyond was a high street with a steady crowd of people doing last minute shopping, none of whom seemed to notice their sudden appearance.

Tonks led the way down the street, and eventually they came to a stop in front of a red bricked department store called Purge and Dowse. The displays in the windows were empty save for a couple of dusty mannequins. It certainly looked abandoned, but Harry could feel the faint whisper of magic about it. Tonks stepped closer to the glass and spoke in a clear tone.

“We have come to see Arthur Weasley.”

The mannequin inclined its head, gesturing with one hand. Tonks stepped forward and through the glass, vanishing as she did so. Harry blinked, taken aback, but then easily followed the others through.

Harry had been to St Mungo’s twice before, but neither time had truly allowed to see what the hospital was like. The Edith Tanhill ward was sealed off from the rest of the hospital, and being a patient didn’t leave much room for sightseeing. The lobby they appeared in was full of people, and Harry had to try his best not to stare at the variety of weird and wonderful ailments they saw. A bored yet harried looking witch at the reception desk directed people to where they needed to be. She was efficient at her job, and the line moved quickly.

The group was directed to the dangerous bites ward on the first floor. When they got there, Arthur was sitting propped up in bed. His skin was pale, and his arm was wrapped tightly in bandages. The Weasley children let out gasps of relief and sadness, rushing forward to be with their father.

“Dad!”

“Are you alright?”

“What happened?”

“Did they catch whatever it was that did this?”

“Calm down everyone. Calm down. I’m alright. I’m alright,” Arthur said, doing his best to give each of his children a hug, “try and keep your voices down. We wouldn’t want to disturb the others.”

There were two other people on the ward, though whether they were bothered by the sudden influx of visitors was hard to say.

Despite having just been attacked, Arthur was surprisingly chipper. He asked his children and Harry questions about how school was going, how they felt they’d done on their end of term

exams, and when Ron said that he was missing the Care of Magical Creatures exam, he frowned.

“But they’ll let you make it up in the new year, right?”

“I dunno. I didn’t think to ask.”

“Hmm, we’ll have to see. It’s an important year for you Ron. I want you to do as well as you can. These tests will help you figure out how well you’ll do in your OWLs,” Arthur said.

“I get it, Dad,” Ron groaned, “how could I not? It’s all the teachers ever seem to talk about!”

“With good reason,” Arthur said patiently, “I know you may not be as academically inclined as some of your older brothers, but I still want you to do as well as you can. It’s better to have as many options available to you as possible so you can find what you enjoy the most.”

“I would be enjoying Quidditch, but I didn’t make the team because of that tosser McLaggen,” Ron grumbled, shooting Harry a brief unhappy glare.

“There’s more to life than Quidditch, and there’s always next year as well,” Arthur said.

“I might try out for the team next year,” Ginny piped up, “Angelina and Alicia will be leaving at the end of the year, so there’ll be two Chaser spots open.”

Oh god, Harry did not want to have to put up with being on a Quidditch team with Ginny. That would be the worst thing in the world. Sirius gave him a shoulder bump in solidarity.

“Then it looks like try-outs next year will be particularly busy. Harry’ll have his work cut out for him if he gets made Captain,” Arthur gave him a smile, “not to sound ungrateful Harry, but I am surprised to see you here as well. How come you were pulled out of school too?”

“Albus felt it was the appropriate thing to do,” Mrs Weasley cut in, “for security reasons.”

Arthur frowned, but before he could say any more, Mrs Weasley overrode him.

“I think we need to be getting back for lunch,” she said, already chivvying her children to the door.

Fred and George looked mutinous, but acquiesced at Arthur’s look.

“Will you be alright Arthur?” Sirius asked.

“I will. Bill should be dropping by after lunch.”

They collected Tonks and Kingsley, who had been chatting with Andromeda while she was on a break, and they headed back to Grimmauld Place.

“Right then. Let’s get to work!” Mrs Weasley waved her wand. From a cupboard down the corridor, a set of mops, buckets and dusters flew towards her. “Before we all get too settled

in, the bedrooms upstairs all need a thorough cleaning. Honestly Sirius, how could you let them all go like that?"

"Nobody was staying in them," Sirius said with a shrug.

Mrs Weasley pursed her lips at the nonchalant answer. When the others were ordered up the stairs to get to work, Harry followed Sirius to the private part of the house. As soon as they closed the door, Harry let out a sigh of relief.

"You've not celebrated the Yuletide holidays before?" Sirius asked.

"No? I mean, Hogwarts celebrates Christmas, but I don't think that's what you mean," Harry said.

"It can be part of it, but Yule is more than that," Sirius said, "either way, this will be the best winter break you've ever had."

After the birthday celebration in summer, Harry could completely believe that.

The Hogwarts school term ended one week later, which Harry only remembered when Hermione showed up at Grimmauld Place. She appeared in a flurry of snowflakes from the blizzard outside, complaining about having to take the Knight Bus. The rest of the house was getting busy preparing Grimmauld Place for Christmas. Holly wreaths were hung on doors, tinsel was wound around the bannisters, and an animated Santa Claus puppet riding a tiny broom flew through the air saying Ho Ho Ho.

It was certainly very festive, but Harry didn't see much of this. More so than in summer, he spent most of his time in the private part of the house, which now was mainly because Ginny had decided to add her own spice to the decorations. Mistletoe had taken to appearing in inopportune places, and Ginny always seemed to be lurking somewhere nearby just waiting to pounce. The magical field mistletoe exuded wasn't especially strong when a lone person was caught in it, but with two it became practically inescapable until a kiss was exchanged. The first time it happened to Harry, Fred very dramatically swept him off his feet, only to give him a light peck on the cheek, allowing him to get away from a grumpy Ginny.

Sirius did not take kindly to this. One day when Harry went down to breakfast, he spotted a garland of mistletoe hanging just inside the door to the kitchen. He stopped, but Sirius, who was walking with him, kept going. Harry tried to warn him, but Sirius waved him off. Sirius paused in the mistletoe's magical field. Not taking his eyes off Ginny, Sirius took out his wand, pointed it up at the mistletoe, and the mistletoe promptly burst into flames. He floated the smouldering ball of ash and deposited it in front of the girl.

"If any more mistletoe makes it into this house without my permission, you'll have to find somewhere else to spend the holidays."

"Sirius Black!" Mrs Weasley snapped.

“No Molly, I’ve had enough. I’m letting your family stay here as a favour to Arthur, but you and your youngest children seem to constantly forget that this is *my* house. Your daughter has already spent a sizable chunk of her time here trying to force kisses onto my godson and I will not stand for it,” Sirius said sternly in response, “either control your daughter or I will.”

Mrs Weasley seethed but Sirius was entirely unrepentant. Harry felt a massive surge of gratitude for the man for standing up for him like that.

As Christmas approached, Harry was swept up in preparations for a very different celebration. Sirius was determined that they would celebrate the entirety of Yule, and it started with setting up a Yule altar. They flooded to Potter Manor, where they were joined by Andromeda and Ted. The four of them set off into the forest on the grounds. Snow blanketed the ground, crunching beneath their feet as they walked, and Harry pulled his cloak tighter around him to ward off the chill.

The forest was calm and quiet, silent save for them. They collected boughs from a few juniper trees, as well as pinecones and holly leaves; Harry even managed to find a few hazelnuts the squirrels hadn’t pilfered before their hibernation. It was all new to him, but under the supervision of the two Blacks, they found everything they needed. When they returned to Potter Manor and warmed up again, Andromeda showed him how to wind the juniper boughs into a wreath, weaving in a few sprigs of holly.

They took the wreath to the private drawing room, the one for family only, and set it up in front of the hearth. From her bag, Andromeda pulled out a large, yellow candle, which was placed in the centre of the wreath. Harry then arranged the pinecones and other symbols of winter around the wreath so that to his eye it looked like the sun.

“Yule marks the transition between the end of the long and difficult harvest and the return of the sun,” Andromeda said, “this what the Yule altar represents. The light of the sun is contained within the symbols of winter, held in trust and kept safe, until it can return in full to bathe us with its light.”

“Would you like to light it?” Sirius asked.

Harry nodded. Carefully, he tapped his wand to the candle wick and a small flame appeared. It was subtle, not entirely noticeable, but Harry felt a change in the magic around him. It was like an eddy had been released and the flow had smoothed out.

“What’s next?” Harry asked, growing excited.

“The first part of Yuletide is the lighting of the Yule log, which is done on the Solstice. It’s traditional for family and close friends to gather together for it so that they can share food that they’ve made. It’s just about the only time a noble lord or lady would enter the kitchen,” Sirius said.

“There’s also a ritual associated with the Yule log, though not everyone does that,” Andromeda said, “usually it is lit and burns in the hearth, but it can be done outside in a ritual circle. I hear it’s supposed to be quite the experience, though I’ve never tried it myself.”

“Could- could we try that?” Harry tentatively asked, “Ritual Magic is really interesting.”

“You know what? Why not? Let’s do the whole thing right!” Sirius declared.

Harry grinned.

They returned to Grimmauld Place. The Winter Solstice was in three days' time, so they needed to prepare for it now. Harry buzzed with excitement. None of the others in the house knew he and Sirius had left but they certainly picked up on his new mood. Thankfully, they didn’t ask him. Whether it was because they had finally gotten the message that he didn’t want to be friends with them, or they just assumed it was because Christmas was approaching, he had no idea and frankly he didn’t care.

The next day, Harry joined Sirius in the main kitchen. This room was a lot bigger than the servants' kitchen which Mrs Weasley had commandeered. The surfaces gleamed, pristine pots and pans hung from hooks on the walls, and everything felt sleek and organised. Kreacher watched them enter imperiously.

“Thank you for letting us use your kitchen Kreacher,” Harry said.

“Master Harry is polite,” Kreacher fixed Sirius with a serious expression, “Lord Black will not make a mess of Kreacher’s kitchen.”

“I shall certainly strive not to,” Sirius said, “I got enough ladle whacks from you when we did this as kids, I think I’ve still got the bruises.”

“So what are we making?”

“It’s traditional to make treats but my dear mother *hated* sweet things with a passion. When Reggie and I were still young, she let it slide, but I must have been about 8 or so when she demanded that our Yule treats could not be sweet, which naturally made them really boring and sucked all the fun out of it all,” Sirius said, “but I remember Aunt Dorea used to make these little honey cakes that Reggie and I would gladly have went to war against a million dark lords for, so that’s what we’ll be making.”

“Aunt Dorea? Do you mean my great grandmother?”

“The very one. The recipe should be here somewhere.”

Sirius opened one of the cabinets and pulled out a leather bound book, always mindful of Kreacher almost literally breathing down his neck. It looked like it was full of handwritten recipes.

“You can ask, you know,” Sirius said without even looking at Harry.

“It’s just- you said the Black’s have always had House Elves, and so have the Potters, so it just seems a bit odd that they’d have their own recipes.”

“Just because the nobility with House Elves don’t *need* to cook for themselves doesn’t mean they all don’t or can’t,” Sirius said, “everyone needs a hobby. Sometimes the children get

taught the basics so that if they end up marrying into a lower family without Elves they can still get by. I think the Weasley's were pretty famous for that before their drop in status. Aunt Dorea enjoyed baking when she could, and she wrote down a load of her old recipes for things. Ah, here it is!"

The recipe they followed was fairly simple. It had been a while since Harry had cooked anything, not since the summer before his second year when he'd still been living with the Dursleys and thus always had a laundry list of chores to complete. Cooking meals hadn't always been one of them as Aunt Petunia often used her culinary creations to boast to the neighbours, but every now and again, Harry would have to step in when she was either too busy or too lazy to cook.

Cooking with Sirius was a very different experience. It was a lot more chaotic, as Sirius treated the recipe as more of a guideline than a set of instructions, but it was also a lot of fun. Harry would not have been surprised if they had both been completely covered in flour and honey by the time they finished had Kreacher not been keeping a very close watch on them. As it was, when the honey cakes came out of the oven, they smelled heavenly, and tasted just as good.

The Winter Solstice, and thus the first day of Yule, approached. Harry sent off letters inviting both the Finnegan's and the Thomas's to join them, receiving positive responses. Everything was ready. They ignored the other occupants of Grimmauld Place, taking the floo directly to Potter Manor.

"We'll light the Yule log at sunset in the ritual circle. If we do it right, the log should stay burning until the new year when Yule ends," Sirius said, "you do realise what the ritual will require."

"If you're referring to our state of dress, then yes I am," Harry said.

Ritual Magic drew upon the natural magic that existed all around them. As such, it was best performed while in a state of nature. The various paintings of famous rituals made it very clear what that meant.

"I got us all ritual robes. They shouldn't interfere with the ritual itself, and I'm sure all parties involved will feel more comfortable wearing them than having to be fully nude," Sirius said.

At 1pm, the fire burned green and Andromeda and Ted arrived.

"Nymphadora would be here but she has been called in by the Aurors," Andromeda said.

"Can- can we trust her? I mean, to know more about me?" Harry couldn't help asking.

"My daughter has a good head on her shoulders. She may not have been raised a Black, but she values her family, especially now that Sirius and you are a part of it. She joined Dumbledore's Order to see Voldemort defeated, not out of any loyalty for her former headmaster," Andromeda said, "if need be, Sirius as Lord Black or I as her mother can bind her to secrecy but I do not think it will be necessary."

A few minutes later, Sirius returned with Dean and his mother, and then the Finnegan's arrived. It was almost like a repeat of the signing of the betrothal contract, only much more relaxed. The four families mingled much more than before. Dean and Ms Thomas didn't really know the significance of Yule, and the Finnegan's had never celebrated it before, so Sirius and Andromeda took some time to explain it. Naturally this led to a discussion of how each family celebrated the holidays, all the little things that were unique to them.

Sunset was at 3:40pm, so when the clock struck 3, Sirius clapped his hands together.

"I think we should all go and get ready. Aisling, you sure you don't want to be part of the ritual?"

"I'm quite sure Sirius. I'll quite happily stay inside where it's warm," Mrs Finnegan said.

Curtained screens had been set up in the sun room, making three areas for them to get changed into their ritual garb. Harry was expecting some kind of robe, but it was more like a small, thin towel. It was worn around the waist with a golden clasp on the right hip to fasten it together. It only went down to about two third of the way down his thighs, and much of the side of his right leg was open due to how the fabric fastened together. It was fairly close to being naked while still being covered.

Seamus and Dean both seemed a little self-conscious about it when they finished changing, but they put on a brave face. That bravery almost immediately collapsed when they stepped back out into the sun room and their parents saw them.

"I definitely made the right choice. You boys must be mad to want to go out there in this cold," Mrs Finnegan said.

"You've been sticking to it with those weights of yours," Mr Finnegan said, eyeing his son's muscles, "good job Seamus."

"Dad!" Seamus groaned, hugging himself as though trying to cover up.

"Are you sure you won't all get cold?" Ms Thomas asked, "surely you could put on a coat or something?"

"If anything, we're overdressed for what we have planned," Sirius said.

He and Ted were dressed the same as Harry and his boys. A moment later, Andromeda joined them, also in the same garb but with a second one to cover her chest.

"It's nearly sundown. We need to get a move on," she said.

"Alright then. Everyone follow me," Sirius said.

Sirius led them out of the doors along a paved path. Snow fell in lazy flurries and there was a distinct chill in the air, but the path was completely clear. There was a heat within the stones, and Harry could almost convince himself that it wasn't so bad even as the cold bit at his skin. The wind swirled, and with how exposed he was, it reached everywhere. Seamus and Dean

huddled on either the side of him, the three pressed close to one another for warmth. How the adults were fine was beyond him.

“It’ll be alright once we reach the circle,” Sirius called back.

It didn’t take them much longer to reach it. The Potter ritual circle was set up in a small orchard near the lake. The wind went still as soon as they crossed the threshold of trees. The paving stones ended but when they stepped off them, the ground was dry and completely clear of snow. It was a much simpler circle than what Harry had seen in the books. Three rounded stones about a foot tall were arranged in a triangle in the centre. More stones had been embedded into the ground to form seven rings; three rings intersected with only a single stone, three intersected with two, and a single ring intersected with all three stones.

As though stepping through a veil, the air became suddenly much warmer. It was like entering a pocket of summer. The ground was dry and the few flakes of snow that drifted down from the sky vanished as they crossed the threshold. Harry could practically feel the magic in the air around the ritual circle.

With some careful directions from Sirius and Andromeda, they all took their positions. Harry, Sirius and Andromeda each knelt in the gaps between the raised stones, while Ted, Seamus and Dean sat further away, forming a larger triangle to encase theirs. In the very centre of the ritual circle was the Yule log.

“Everyone close your eyes. Calm your mind. Allow your magic to flow within you,” Andromeda said.

Harry did so, finding it was very easy to do this. His magic came at his call, swirling all around him. Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin together, and all distinctly him. In the eerie quiet of the ritual circle, he could feel the others. The sun in the sky grew steadily lower and lower, and with its descent, Harry felt the air grow heavier and heavier, the magic of the people leeching out and suffusing into the ritual circle.

The sun vanished beneath the horizon and Andromeda spoke in a clear voice.

“Light the fire. Hold the light of the new year.”

Then it was Sirius’s turn. From what Harry could tell, he said the same thing but in French. Harry had researched this ritual a lot. Whoever took their place in the centre would say those words in a variety of languages. The first was always the mother tongue, then any secondary tongues, and finally the language of the ritual itself. As with many older rituals, this was Old Norse. Harry took a deep breath, before he spoke as clearly as he could.

“Ljós eldinn. Haldljóanar ór nrinnýr ár.”

As soon as those words left his lips, there was a spark. The Yule log began to smoulder before a small fire bloomed into life beneath it. In the otherwise pitch darkness, it was incredibly bright. Then runes lit up all over the elevated stones of the ritual circle. This spread throughout all of the sunken stones until the entire pattern was alight with a pale glow.

The fire of the Yule log grew. The flames licked over the entire surface of the log until it was completely ablaze. When it was, there was a bloom of magic that washed over all of them, filling them up with a heat unrelated to the temperature. It expanded beyond the boundary of the ritual circle, rushing outwards until it seemed to soak into every inch of the grounds. Harry felt it within him, and through him it moved on to Grimmauld Place, to Gryffindor Castle and Dun Slytherin, and finally to Hogwarts.

As it began to settle, Harry felt a shadow pass over him. Familiar presences walked past, settling around the circle in the same way he was sitting now. One was filled with the Potter magic, while the other was calmer yet somehow burned wilder. The first was James, which meant the second had to be Lily. There was nobody else in the ritual circle, but when Harry looked to his left, he was certain he could see her sitting on one of the stones. In the next moment, she was gone.

“That- that was-” Seamus said.

“Hard to put it into words?” Sirius smirked, “I don’t blame you. I was much younger than you the first time I did this ritual so I can’t really remember it all that well.”

“Magical people used to do things like this all the time?” Dean said, “I could feel it, all the magic in the air. It was incredible.”

“These ways aren’t practised as often. It’s more common for them to have been adapted into simpler things which feel like a ritual but aren’t actually, like putting your teeth under the pillow for the Tooth Fairy to come and collect,” Andromeda said, “there’s some power in them but not the full thing. You boys did very well.”

They all stood on shaky feet and the first thing Harry did was pull Seamus and Dean into a hug. They hugged him back just as strongly.

The walk back along the path to Potter Manor was completely different. The magic of the ritual buoyed them, shielding them from the cold despite the wind and the snow that swirled around them. Mr and Mrs Finnegan and Ms Thomas waited for them. Mrs Finnegan looked slightly faint.

“Mam? Are you alright?” Seamus asked, rushing over to her.

“I’m fine Seamus. I figured the magic would be strong but I didn’t expect it to be that strong,” she said, “I should be asking you that. You didn’t freeze your balls off out there, did you?”

“Mam!” Seamus groaned, but then he rubbed one of his arms, “I actually feel really good, not cold at all.”

“That’s the lingering magic of the ritual. It’ll fade away into the background soon,” Sirius said.

“Then you’d all best get dried and dressed. You might not be able to feel it now but you’re all soaked,” Mrs Finnegan said, messing Seamus’s hair and showering them all with snow.

Warm towels had been laid out for them all as they retreated back behind the curtains. When they had changed back into their clothes, Celio appeared with mugs of hot drinks. Together they enjoyed a dinner of roast pork, and afterwards they shared the small treats each of them made. Harry had to resist stuffing his face with Mrs Finnegan's homemade truffle chocolates, and Dean told him how much he liked the honey cakes.

Rooms were prepared for the guests to stay in and like his birthday, Seamus and Dean stayed with Harry. Nothing was said out loud, but he understood Mrs Finnegan's very pointed look that no funny business was to take place. They changed into their pyjamas, or rather he and Dean did. Seamus simply took off his shirt and trousers, leaving him in a loose tank top and briefs.

"We've both slept with you enough to know you actually do own pyjamas," Harry commented, "is there any particular reason you're not getting changed?"

"I feel really hot for some reason, and I'm trying to cool off a bit," Seamus said.

"Oh, so temperature hot, not the other kind of hot," Harry said.

"I'd like to think I'm the other kind of hot all the time," Seamus smirked, "do you disagree?"

"Absolutely not," Harry said immediately.

Seamus finished tidying up his clothes and then crawled up the bed so he was hovering above Harry. Harry's hands came up to rest on his hips, feeling where the waistband of his underwear gave way to smooth skin. The pair of them could only stare at each other and Harry was overcome with how much he loved this boy. Something must have shown on his face because Seamus leaned down, sealing his lips with a kiss.

"Thank you for inviting us to be a part of this," Seamus said.

"You're welcome. Sirius said Yule is a time for family, so of course I'd invite you."

That made Seamus smile, leaning in to kiss him again.

"I love you so much," he whispered into Harry's ear, "how the hell did I ever get so lucky?"

"I'm the lucky one," was all Harry could say.

The bed dipped as Dean mirrored Seamus's action, crawling up the bed behind him. Seamus hummed contently, and Harry felt Dean's hands join his on Seamus's rear.

"The pair of you looked like you were having fun," Dean said, "room for one more?"

"For you, always," Seamus said, "I was just thanking Harry for inviting us, and telling him how much I love him."

"Oh?"

“Mhm, and I’m glad you came as well,” Seamus twisted around to look at Dean behind him, “god I love you too.”

Seamus let out a sigh as Dean’s hands slipped under his briefs, gently pushing them down so they were below his cheeks, freeing his erection.

“Was that kind of what it felt like for you in third-year, back when you got your inheritance?” Dean asked.

“Kind of. My inheritance kind of felt sharper and more intense. This one spread out a lot more,” Harry said.

“I suppose you’ve got more places for your magic to go,” Dean mused, “for me, it all welled up within me in a way it never had before. I felt it reach out and it brushed up against the boys that I love.”

Dean touched Harry’s hand on Seamus’s hip, then scooped Seamus up, hugging him against his chest. Seamus didn’t protest the handling, his face happy.

“You go from forceful and active to pliant and passive so easily,” Harry commented.

“It’s easy because it’s you two; because when we take that step together, I want to experience all of you. On you, in you, above, below, everything there is to do, I want to do it right alongside you,” Seamus said.

“So you don’t mind what role you take?” Dean asked, “you don’t mind if you find pleasure from this end-” he ghosted a hand up the length of Seamus’s cock “- or from this end?”

He pushed his hips against Seamus’s ass.

“There are only two people I’d let have either, and both of them are in this room with me.”

“That’s good to hear,” Dean said.

“So good,” Harry said.

He pushed himself upward so he was closer to them. Seamus stifled a small gasp when Harry palmed his crotch.

“Because that’s what I want as well. We’ll figure out what we like eventually, and even if lordships and magic and all manner of other bullshit get in the way, we’ll always have each other,” Harry smiled, “I love you both so much.”

Seamus cried out and Harry’s hand became covered in sticky white fluid.

“That was quick,” Dean commented, “were you a little pent up?”

“Shut up. Give me five minutes and I’ll be raring to go again!”

“Well just hold right there,”

Dean pushed Seamus down so he was once again hovering over Harry. Harry saw him rubbing his own cock against the crack of Seamus's ass while working it with his hand. Blood instantly rushed south at the sight of it, and he hurriedly pushed aside the blankets as best he could to get to his own hardness. It didn't take long for either of them to reach their climaxes, Harry's seed joining Seamus's on his hand while Dean spilled over Seamus's lower back.

A quick wave of Dean's wand had them all clean and Seamus pulled his pants back up. They tucked themselves under the blankets, both Harry and Seamus cuddling up to Dean.

"Good night," he said to them.

They gave him their good nights in return, and the three of them settled in to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Take the Old Norse with a grain of salt as it's based on online translators. Hopefully it's not too bad.

Respecting boundaries at Christmas

Arthur was due to be discharged from St Mungo's on Christmas Eve, as they discovered when Mrs Weasley gathered everyone together so they could once again visit him. She kept shooting Harry and Sirius suspicious glances. It hadn't escaped her notice that neither of them were seen in Grimmauld Place on the solstice, but given that she couldn't get into the private part of the house, she couldn't outright accuse them of anything. It didn't stop her making snide comments about it though.

The twins knew what had happened. Apparently they had felt something in the house change when they performed the Yule ritual. They might not have known exactly what it was, but they understood it was important, especially when they felt their own magic reach out to it. Nobody else had felt it, which Harry took to mean it was his magic that the twins had felt.

With Tonks and Moody as guards, they trooped back to St Mungo's, which was now fully decorated ready for Christmas. They were also joined by Bill, who brought a very special guest with him.

"It is very good to see you again Harry," Fleur said, sweeping Harry up into a hug and kissing his cheek.

"It's good to see you too. How's Gringotts? How come you never said you were getting a job there?" Harry peppered her with questions.

"Let us walk and talk. I do not think a hospital lobby is the best place for such conversations," Fleur said.

"Who is this?" Mrs Weasley asked, pointedly looking between Fleur and Bill as though trying to dissect meaning.

"A friend from work. Since she's also here to visit somebody, we came together," Bill said.

Fred and George each gave Bill a raised eyebrow behind Mrs Weasley's back, but Bill ignored them. Fleur was carrying a small bouquet of flowers.

"I'm here to see Cedric if you'd like to join me," Fleur offered.

A stone sunk in Harry's stomach. He glanced at Sirius who gave him an encouraging smile.

"Go on. You know where we'll be."

"Sirius, I don't-" Mrs Weasley said.

"He'll be fine Molly. Let him see his friend," Sirius said sternly.

Mrs Weasley pursed her lips but Harry didn't give her a chance to respond before he followed Fleur. They continued up past the first floor where Arthur was, going all the way up to the fourth floor. This was where the spell damage wards were. Healers in green robes moved

about the place carrying clipboards, and for an awful moment Harry was reminded of Professor Umbridge, but it passed quite quickly when he saw the Healers treating their patients compassionately. Out of respect, Harry tried not to look through the windows into each of the rooms.

Towards the rear of the floor was the ward for long term care, where those patients whose recovery would take a while were kept. Harry wasn't expecting anyone else to be in Cedric's room, but when they entered they saw somebody sitting in one of the chairs at his bedside, a pair of knitting needles softly clacking away in her hands. Mrs Diggory looked over at the pair of them. A soft smile appeared on her face, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"We're sorry to disturb you Lady Diggory," Fleur said, giving her a small curtsy.

Harry inclined his head to her.

"It's alright. I'm glad to see the two of you," she gestured to the other seats, "please, come and join me."

As Harry approached the boy in the bed, guilt clawed away at his insides. The Healers had been doing all they could but six months in a magical coma had taken their toll. Cedric's skin was paler than it should be, his face thinner. His hair, which had sent all the girls and more than a few guys into a swoon, was messy and limp. It was almost the complete opposite of what the boy should have been, so full of life and energy and kindness.

Fleur arranged the bouquet in a vase on the bedside table. Mrs Diggory thanked her.

"How-" Harry's voice caught in his throat. He hurried to clear it. "How is he?"

"Still sleeping. Still healing," Mrs Diggory said, "though there are positive signs. He moves occasionally. The Healers come and check on him in the morning and his arm may be resting on his stomach when in the evening it had been by his side. I have seen him shuffle. The Healers say that it means he is regaining his energy."

"So he'll wake up soon?"

"I certainly hope so," Mrs Diggory said, taking her son's hand, "my baby boy is strong, and his father and I are here for him. Our magic reaches for him, and his reaches back."

"This never should have happened," Harry couldn't help saying.

"No, but it did. There is no use crying over spilt potion," Mrs Diggory said, "all we can do is make sure nothing like this happens ever again."

"I'm doing everything I can," Harry said, even if it didn't feel like it was enough.

Harry had tried to keep his friends safe, but Cedric had still ended up in a magical coma. It had been six months since the end of the third task and he was still sleeping, still recovering. Cedric should have graduated from Hogwarts, he should have been building his life right now, but because of Voldemort, all of that had to be put on hold.

Mrs Diggory looked at him kindly.

“I’m sure you are dear. You have been a good friend to Cedric. I’m glad that you’ve come to visit him. Both of you,” she said, “tell me how you’ve been. I’m sure Cedric would love to hear it as well.”

“Can he hear us?” Fleur asked.

“They’re not sure, but I like to think so. I talk to him anyway. It makes me feel better to know that if he’s listening, he won’t feel alone. He’ll know I’m here.”

So they talked about what had happened to them. Fleur told them how she managed to get a job at Gringotts, both to learn curse breaking and also to improve her English. While she didn’t mention Bill by name, she alluded to meeting somebody who she was very fond of. When it was Harry’s turn, he found he didn’t have a lot to say that wasn’t a secret. He talked about Umbridge and the mess she was making at the school. Mrs Diggory had a lot to say about that. Apparently she wasn’t the biggest fan of the woman.

“She’d better hope she doesn’t go anywhere near the Forbidden Forest or the lake while she’s at Hogwarts,” Mrs Diggory said, “a few years ago she tried pushing through legislation to have creatures like centaurs and merfolk rounded up and tagged. It took a lot of dedicated work by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to get her bill thrown out. How she managed to avoid any career fallout from such a ridiculous proposal is beyond me.”

“She knows how to say the right words in the right ears,” Harry said, “she has the favour of the Minister. So long as she keeps doing what he wants her to do, he won’t let her get into any trouble,” Harry said.

“That sounds like a house of cards that is bound to topple over eventually,” Fleur said.

“Hopefully sometime soon. Cedric often complained about the Defence Against the Dark Arts class, but I was in Umbridge’s year at Hogwarts. I remember that she failed her Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL,” Mrs Diggory said, “now, she may have self-studied and passed since, but given the quality of her ‘teaching’, I highly doubt that.”

Cedric twitched and they all froze. They watched as his head turned, angled more towards his mother, before going still once again. Mrs Diggory had that same soft, not quite full smile again.

“All this talk of poor teachers must have gotten him excited. I wouldn’t have been surprised if Cedric became a teacher in the end. It’s not what Amos wanted for him, but he would have been good at it I feel,” Mrs Diggory said.

The pair of them bid goodbye to Mrs Diggory not long after.

“There is much that you haven’t said,” Fleur stated as they made their way back through the hospital, “you alluded to a lot in June. Bill tries to hide things but he is not so unreadable

when you get to know him. Over the summer, there was a point where he would become very sad when you came up in conversation.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry reflexively said.

“Unless you have specifically done something to warrant it, do not apologise. It is unbecoming,” Fleur said, “I am not saying this to criticise you. I am merely reminding you that we are comrades in arms. If ever you need something from me, even if it is just to take some of the weight from your shoulders, all you need do is ask.”

“I really appreciate that. There’s a lot that I haven’t said, which I can’t tell you here,” Harry said.

“I guessed as much. Your godfather knows, and those boys of yours?”

“They do.”

“Then I shall not pry further, as I am happy you have somebody you can talk to you about all of this,” she said, “though my point still stands.”

Harry had considered sharing everything with them back before the Beauxbaton and Durmstrang students left in June, but it didn’t feel like the right time. Fleur was dating Bill, who Harry was aware knew about the actions of his family but not much else. Having Fleur and Viktor on his side would only be a good thing, but it would still be a good idea to check in with Sirius to get his view on the matter.

Bill was engaging everyone with a tale of his adventures in Egypt when Harry and Fleur arrived. Arthur was laughing merrily, and his smile widened when he saw them.

“Harry! How good of you to come as well, and you must be Fleur. Bill’s told me all about you.”

“I don’t mean to intrude. I was making sure Harry returned to his friends and family in one piece,” Fleur said.

“Nonsense, you’re not intruding. Any friend of Harry’s is a friend of mine,” Arthur said, “how has Gringotts been treating you?”

“Arthur, we don’t want to disturb the other people on the ward,” Mrs Weasley said, aiming for a pleasant tone, “you need your rest if you want to be discharged on time.”

“I’m *fine* Molly. The bite was a nasty one, and the venom was tricky, but the Healers are confident that I’m recovering nicely otherwise they wouldn’t have agreed to discharge me.”

Before an argument could start, a Healer arrived and very apologetically said that their group was too big. Mrs Weasley used that as an excuse to whisk everyone besides Bill and Fleur away under the pretext of getting back to Grimmauld Place to make lunch. Ron and Ginny grumbled, and Fred and George openly glared at their mother, but she would not be swayed. Arthur managed to calm them down by reminding them he would be discharged in only a couple of days.

The visit to St Mungo's hadn't gone how Harry imagined when they set off, but in a way he preferred it. While the guilt over what happened to Cedric had reared its ugly head once more, and seeing his friend so affected by what happened, learning that he was moving in a positive direction had helped to settle something within Harry. What was done would not be permanent. Cedric would recover, and there would be one less reminder of Voldemort in the world.

There were only two fixed dates in the magical celebration of Yule: the Winter Solstice on the 21st of December, and the start of the New Year on the 1st of January. In between, there were smaller rites and rituals, but these had a flexibility to them. Part of the celebrations was the exchanging of gifts. It was the most 'Christmassy' part of the holiday.

Arthur was discharged from St Mungo's on Christmas Eve as planned and after dinner they all enjoyed a round of eggnog to celebrate. When Harry went up to bed that night, it was to two letters from his boyfriends, accepting his invitations. Needless to say, he fell asleep with high spirits.

Those spirits did not diminish by the time he woke up the next morning. In fact, they only grew as he felt the disk against his chest warm up with messages from Seamus and Dean, each wishing him a Merry Christmas. Sirius met him on the landing and gave him a firm hug.

"Merry Christmas Harry."

Arthur and Mrs Weasley were there when they went downstairs, the latter already hard at work at the stove.

"Good morning and merry Christmas!" Arthur greeted him.

Mrs Weasley swung around from the stove and descended on Harry, giving him a frankly suffocating hug. Harry bore with it long enough to be polite and then moved away, sitting in the seat between Sirius and Arthur. The others all appeared then, and there was a chorus of greetings as they all sat down and breakfast was served. When they'd all eaten, Mrs Weasley shepherded them all into the public drawing room. The floor around the Christmas tree was entirely covered with presents, making it very difficult to move around.

"Ron, Ginny, since you two are closest, start handing out presents," Mrs Weasley said, then she chuckled, "we'd best get a move on if we want to be finished before lunch."

Harry knew that most of his presents weren't here. Sirius told him last night that they'd head up to the private part of the house to open them once this was out of the way. Still, a few parcels were handed to him. He received a brand new knitted jumper from Mrs Weasley with a tin of homemade fudge. Hermione got him a homework planner that made annoying comments every time it was opened. Most surprising was a book from Tonks and Kingsley.

"That's one of the beginner Auror books," Sirius said when he saw it, "there's bound to be some good stuff in there."

The last two presents were from Ron and Ginny. Given their birthday gifts, Harry was slightly dreading them. Ginny gave him another necklace which set off his ring, while Ron gave him a box with a note saying 'open in private'. When Harry glanced over, Ron carefully concealed a grimace behind what was probably meant to be a mischievous expression. Both gifts seemed to be quite expensive, and it showed in the quality of the Weasley's other gifts.

Ron and Ginny both continued searching under the tree, no doubt searching for Harry's gifts to them, but there was nothing left. Harry had sent presents to the people he cared about, which no longer included them. Mrs Weasley looked as though she'd sucked on a lemon when she realised it, and Ron pouted unhappily, but none of them said anything outright.

"Alright then!" Mrs Weasley clapped her hands together, "let's get all the wrapping cleared away!"

Sirius rolled his eyes then waved his wand. All the waste paper rose up into the air and then vanished. Mrs Weasley did not look happy about this, no doubt wanting to use tidying up as a way to keep everyone occupied while she worked on Christmas lunch. Harry and Sirius simply stood and walked past her out of the room. By the sounds of things, Fred and George were quick to follow after.

"What did our dear brother and sister get you?" George asked when the four of them reached the first landing.

"I figured they wouldn't have any money for anything big after you recalled it all," Fred said, "and considering we only got the usual jumpers from Mum, they must have pulled out all the stops."

"I have a feeling we're not going to like it at all," Sirius said, "let's head up to my study and we can see."

Harry caught the way the twins' faces fell slightly. Sirius glanced over the bannister. Nobody else had left the drawing room just yet.

"Follow me. Quickly before they see us."

Sirius grabbed hold of Fred and George and steered them towards the stairs leading up to the second landing. They tried protesting, knowing that they weren't allowed up there, but Harry felt the wards shift. The twins crossed the threshold, eyes screwed shut, only to open them in wonder when nothing happened.

"Your bedroom door is locked, right?" Sirius asked.

"Um, yes," Fred replied.

"And you've got alerts set up in case anyone tries to get in?"

"Why are you asking? You know we do," George said.

"If you feel anyone trying, I want the two of you to apparate back into your room," Sirius said, "the official story is that only family can pass through the wards to this floor, which is

why only Harry and I can get up here. If your mother or Dumbledore figures out that that's not true, then they'll be even more of a pain trying to get up here."

"Harry's told us about the rest of the house but this just seems ... plain," George said, "more of the same."

"There's a lot more than what we're seeing here, but there'll be time for a tour later. We've got some presents to analyse."

Sirius led them into his study. He took the necklace and unopened box from Harry and put them down on his desk.

"I wish Moony was here. He's better at this stuff than me," Sirius grumbled beneath his breath, "but of course Dumbledore had to send him off on some wild goose chase at Christmas."

The necklace reminded Harry of the one Ginny tried giving him for his birthday. It didn't take long for Sirius to finish inspecting it.

"They're not all that creative it seems," he said, "more attraction and lust enhancements tied to Ginny, but there's a trigger added to it. Basically, once you put it on, she could activate the enchantments whenever she wanted and at whatever strength she wanted."

"That's awful," Fred said, "I know Ginny's obsessed with being your wife, but surely she must see that this is absolutely wrong!"

"Clearly she doesn't. She's been led to believe that she will be Lady Potter and Harry isn't playing along. Even worse, he's gay so he'll never be interested in her," George said.

"Which is why I'm slightly worried about whatever Ron tried to give me," Harry said, "whatever it is I'm sure is supposed to somehow endear me to him, but he didn't look happy about it at all."

"He's the backup plan, right? If you can't be made to like Ginny because you're gay, then they'll make you like Ron instead so he can become Consort Potter?" Fred said.

"Let's see what we're working with."

Sirius put on a pair of dragonhide gloves just in case, as none of them knew what it could be. The box was nondescript on the outside. Sirius cast a few diagnostic charms and found nothing untoward, so with a wave of his wand, the tape sealing it shut broke and the box opened. He looked inside and his nose turned up.

"Seriously?"

Harry inched forward. Nestled on a bed of tissue paper was a dildo. 8 inches long and fully erect, Harry had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to say to that. Apparently neither did the twins when they saw it.

“Did- did our homophobic little brother just give a gay boy a realistic looking penis as a sex toy?” George eventually managed to bring himself to say.

“It certainly looks like it. Imagine if you’d opened this in front of everybody,” Fred shuddered.

Sirius cast some more spells. Harry spotted a note inside and Sirius handed it across.

Harry,

I know things have been rough between us recently but I’m hoping we can move past it. I mean, you know that I’ve changed.

I thought you’d like this. I’ve got one myself so I can tell you how great it feels. You should totally give it a try.

Your friend,

Ron

“That is a complete load of bollocks,” Harry said when he finished reading it, “we have never been the sort of friends to talk about this kind of stuff together, not even before.”

“I suppose it *could* be considered him reaching out and showing how much better he is than before, but to just outright give you a sex toy? That’s not the way to go about it,” George said.

“I’m more hung up on the fact that not only does he say that he has one too, but that he really recommends you try it,” Fred said, “it’s not just a normal toy, is it?”

“It mostly is,” Sirius said, “you can buy magical sex toys and they usually come with enchantments to enhance the pleasure. For instance, this one is self-lubricating. The issue is that I found another enchantment that was added on top of it.”

“What would it do?”

“There’s a linking enchantment. Basically and bluntly, given the shape of this toy it was intended for you to receive it inside of you, either your ass or your mouth. The enchantment would then link that to something else so that it could be *accessed* remotely.”

“So if I used this toy on myself, Ron would then be able to use the link to ... fuck me from a distance?” Harry said, anger rising within him.

“And unless you knew what was happening, there would be no way to stop it,” Sirius said.

That was absolutely disgusting, more so than anything else that they’d tried doing to him so far. No wonder Ron looked so disgusted by it, though whether that was because of the actually revolting nature of the action, or if it was because once again he would have to have sex with a man, Harry had no idea, and frankly he didn’t want to.

“I don’t want to be anywhere near him, either of them,” Harry said, “I’m not coming down to the public part of the house any more this holiday.”

“That’s fine. Frankly I’m almost tempted to kick Molly and her two youngest to the curb,” Sirius said, “it goes without saying that they won’t be allowed to stay here when you all go back to Hogwarts.”

“They’re not coming back next summer,” Harry declared, “Voldemort will hopefully no longer be an issue by then, but even if he is, they are not staying here. Ron, Hermione and Ginny are not members of the Order so there’s no need for them to be here full time.”

“That’s easily done.” Sirius closed the lid of the box and pulled Harry into his arms. “It’s alright Harry. We stopped it before they could do anything, and something like this is fairly damning evidence.”

“As soon as Voldemort’s gone, we’re bringing down the hammer,” Harry said.

“I can hardly wait to see their faces,” Sirius said, “but for now, let’s forget about them. It’s Christmas. Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

“And if Molly tries kicking up a fuss about Harry disappearing?” Fred asked.

“She can blow smoke for all I care,” Sirius growled.

“I agree, but you know she will,” George said.

“*If* I decide to go downstairs, and *if* I feel it necessary to even respond to her at all, I will tell her that my godson was quite understandably offended by the utter lack of tact by somebody who is no longer one of his friends,” Sirius said, “if she doesn’t like that answer, tough.”

The door to the study opened. Kreacher’s eyes widened when he saw Fred and George.

“The twin Weasley’s are in Lord Black’s study. Kreacher wonders why.”

“I allowed them here. We can trust them,” Sirius said.

“Hmm,” Kreacher frowned but let it go, “Kreacher has arranged the presents in the drawing room. Will Lord Black be needing anything else while the blood traitor harpy makes a mockery of Kreacher’s kitchen downstairs?”

“Actually, I do,” Sirius said, “we’ll be needing a Christmas lunch made for Harry and I. Fred, George, would you like to join us?”

“As much as we’d love to, it’d be cruel to leave Dad on his own with that lot,” Fred said, “save us some turkey?”

“Kreacher will do that. Kreacher will save full plates for the twin Weasleys and Lord Weasley when that harridan inevitably fails to satisfy them. Yes, yes, Kreacher will show her.”

With that, Kreacher vanished with ominous mumbles about table settings.

“I think you just made his Christmas,” George said.

“I think you’re right.” Sirius turned back to Harry in his arms. “There we are. A nice Christmas dinner, just you and me. Let’s go open some presents and forget about the squatters downstairs.”

So that’s what Harry did. The drawing room was warmer and comfier than the public one downstairs. Parcels and packages were laid out in front of the Christmas tree, but this time it was Sirius who parked himself on the floor beside it, chivvying Harry, Fred and George into squishy armchairs. He handed out the presents, looking for all the world like a giddy ten year old.

These gifts were much nicer and much more appreciated than the others. Harry read through a pile of cards from his various acquaintances, each wishing him a very Merry Christmas. Fred and George gave him a selection of their newest merchandise, along with teasers of what they were currently working on. Neville and his grandmother gave a mokeskin bag with an undetectable extension charm on it, which made Sirius whistle in appreciation. From Andromeda and Ted there was another set of perfectly tailored and styled robes for him to wear.

Sirius and Remus had each gotten him a book. Remus’s was a compendium of practical spells, some for duelling and defence while others were for everyday use. They all seemed very useful, which made Sirius snort.

“Moony always was the sensible one. I think he nearly wet himself laughing the first time he saw me trying to fold laundry without magic,” Sirius said, “after that he got me a very similar book. No doubt he doesn’t want you to stumble into any of those pitfalls.”

The book from Sirius was thicker and looked older. The covers were slightly worn, and when Harry opened it to flick through the pages, he saw many notes littering the margins. It was titled *Animagi: Bridging the Gap*.

“Your father and I both became Animagi, and I thought that maybe you might like to try it as well,” Sirius said, sounding slightly nervous, “it’s not an easy road by any means, but we spent years researching it. We made those notes when we discovered a trick to making the process not quite so difficult. Of course, if you want to, I’ll help you with-”

Harry cut him off with a strong hug, which Sirius returned. No words needed to be said between them, and Harry didn’t even know if he would be able to describe how he felt right now. Sirius had done so much for him, and he continued to do so much more.

The final presents were from his boyfriends. From Seamus he received a practice Snitch and a stone with the rune for luck carved into it. Harry could feel Seamus’s magic woven into the stone, meaning that Seamus must have made this himself. Dean got him a book on spellcrafting, along with a sketch drawing of Hogwarts. It was clearly drawn by Dean himself and it looked absolutely amazing.

The metal disk on his necklace warmed up with messages from his boys, thanking each other for their presents, and Harry took a moment to add his own thanks in as well. Considering

how badly this morning had started, Harry began to enjoy himself the longer he was away from Ron. He and Sirius spent the morning relaxing in the drawing room while the twins came and went. At 12:30, Kreacher appeared and announced that lunch was ready.

The smell that met him when they entered the private dining room was decadent. A turkey, perfectly stuffed and roasted, took centre stage. Platters and bowls of carrots, parsnips, swede, potatoes, stuffing and all manner of other things were set around it, dotted here and there by bowls and small tureens of gravy and cranberry sauce. Kreacher served them both, filling their plates, but it felt like they hadn't even made a dent in it.

"We'll be eating this for weeks to come," Harry said.

Then Harry took a bite and felt that he wouldn't mind. For all her many, many faults, Mrs Weasley was a good cook. Her food did taste nice, but out of necessity she cooked with lower quality ingredients. Kreacher on the other hand only used the absolute best, and he had many more years of experience than her. He also had more reason to care about the quality of his cooking. Kreacher had taken the opportunity to cook an important meal for his masters and ran with it.

The wizarding wireless was on low in the background, filling the air with a variety of songs that Harry had never heard of before. There wasn't any Wham or Mariah Carey in the magical world apparently. Instead, there was Celestina Warbeck singing a crooning number about a cauldron full of love, followed by a very Scottish sounding band called The Nessies. Harry listened to it as he tucked into his roast potatoes.

When they had finished, Kreacher cleared the plates, promising Harry that yes, the leftover food would be used, before he returned with dessert. It wasn't a Christmas pudding only because Kreacher grumbled that it needed a lot longer to make one than the three hours he had. Instead, there was a moist chocolate cake with a toffee sauce. Harry wasn't complaining either way, and when he was pleasantly stuffed afterwards, it was just in time for a Christmas Day snooze in the afternoon. He woke to Sirius attempting to doodle on his face, to which he responded with the liberal use of a stinging hex.

"I'm glad to see some things never change."

Sirius and Harry both looked over to see an exhausted looking Remus standing in the doorway.

"Remus!" Sirius yelled, bolting over and embracing him tightly, "how come you're here? I thought Dumbledore sent you out on a mission?"

"He did but I had to end it early for my own protection," Remus said.

Remus was ushered inside and pushed into a comfy seat. Kreacher took one look at him and reappeared with a cup of tea.

"Where have you been?" Harry asked.

"Dumbledore sent me out to be an envoy of sorts," Remus said.

“To the werewolves?” Harry asked, then rolled his eyes at Sirius and Remus’s dumbfounded expressions, “I’m not stupid you know. It’s obvious that you’re both hiding something about your time at Hogwarts in all the stories you tell. You never stay over around the full moon and Sirius said you’d be angry at Umbridge for her comments about part humans. I am capable of putting two and two together to make four.”

“You’d be surprised at how few people do, especially when they don’t want the answer in the first place,” Sirius said, “it doesn’t bother you?”

“Should it?”

“Werewolves don’t exactly have the best reputation in our world,” Remus said.

“I mean, I can kind of see why they don’t, but when you’re not transformed, you’re just a normal human, right?” Remus nodded. “Then I don’t see why I should have a problem with it. You’re still the best Defence Against the Dark Arts professor I’ve ever had, and you’ve been helping me get stronger and with other stuff as well. You’re really nice. Anyone who thinks badly of you because of your condition is a moron.”

Remus snorted.

“Merlin’s beard, you sounded just like your mother,” Remus said.

“So Dumbledore sent you to meet with other werewolves?” Harry prompted.

“He did. It’s been a goal of his since he reformed the Order. In theory, the principle is sound. Voldemort would be gathering his forces again, so it’s important to remove as much of his power and influence as possible. The werewolves flocked to him last time because he promised them freedom from persecution. Dumbledore wanted me to meet them and try and sway them to our side instead.”

“And did you?”

“No, and that was never my intention,” Remus said, “again, Dumbledore’s theory was sound. Voldemort promised them freedom but then treated them no better than attack dogs. Dumbledore wanted me to promise them what Voldemort wouldn’t give them but in good conscience I couldn’t do it. After all, the treatment of werewolves by the so-called ‘good guys’ is hardly much better than Voldemort. Instead, I asked them to not take any side in the war.”

“And do you think that will work?” Sirius asked.

“It’s hard to say. It took me months to establish good enough relations with the packs to even get to speak with them, let alone try and convince them of anything. I think a few of them could understand what I was trying to say; the older wolves who’d lived through enough and the youngest wolves who were still trying to find their feet with their new condition,” Remus said, “but I had to get out of there. Fenrir Greyback came calling and that man would kill me on sight without hesitation. I’ll make my report to Dumbledore at the next meeting.”

“If he tries sending you back out there immediately, I’ll punch him in the face,” Sirius growled.

“There will be no punching!” Kreacher squawked as he entered the room.

Given their large lunch, the evening meal for Sirius and Harry was turkey sandwiches. Kreacher set a full plate of food in front of Remus and ordered him to eat. Remus tucked in while they filled him in on everything that had happened while he’d been away. There was surprisingly a lot. Remus was unnerved to hear about the attack on Arthur at the Ministry, then relaxed when they said he’d made a full recovery. His ire grew again when they told him about Ron’s attempted ‘gift’.

All in all, despite the rocky start courtesy of a former friend, it was one of the best Christmases Harry could remember. Good food, good company, and the promise of more to come very soon. Harry could hardly wait.

Welcoming the New Year

Chapter Notes

Mature scene ahead.

Starts: "When he stepped back, all he saw..."

Ends: "...but neither Harry nor Dean made any..."

According to Fred and George, Harry's absence was immediately noticed by the others in the house. Mrs Weasley had apparently yelled herself hoarse when he didn't come down for Christmas lunch, calling up the stairs for him to come down while growing more and more furious that she couldn't go up to the second landing. A plate had been set aside for him (but not for Sirius) and conversation had been slightly awkward at first as everyone kept expecting Harry to show up. Arthur quickly got the message, chatting away with the twins while the others became increasingly more irate.

It didn't get any better when Harry didn't come down for the rest of the day, but Harry found that he really didn't care. He enjoyed his afternoon, and from the sounds of it, so did Fred and George as they got to spend time with their dad, showing Arthur all the things they were working on. Harry was happy for them, knowing how little support they received from Mrs Weasley.

Boxing Day was very peaceful, for Harry at least. With no more obligations to spend time in the public part of the house, he suddenly found himself with a lot of free time. What homework he had over the winter holidays was completed, so all he had left to do was relax. He read his new books, he swam in the pool, and he continued to write to his friends.

A couple of days after Christmas, Harry excitedly waited in the walled garden behind Grimmauld Place. There was a knock at the gate, and Dean was there when he opened it, looking bemused.

"That back street is slightly sketchy. It's bizarre to think that there's a fancy house connected to it," Dean said, accepting Harry's kiss easily, "is Seamus already here?"

"He'll be here soon."

No sooner had they entered the private part of the house did the Floo in the receiving room flare into life and Seamus stepped out.

"So what's this surprise for us?" Seamus asked.

"It'd hardly be a surprise if I just told you," Harry said with a grin.

"You told us to pack an overnight bag so I'm guessing we're staying somewhere," Dean said.

Harry kept his mouth shut. They stopped by Sirius's study, where the man was reading through a few sheets of parchment.

"We're heading out," Harry announced.

"Alright. Have fun. Don't hesitate to send for me if you need me, and I know you won't but please don't do anything stupid," Sirius said.

They went into Harry's room. Dean and Seamus both looked confused when Harry told them to wrap up warm. Harry called for Celio, and they each held onto the Elfs hands. With a crack, they appeared elsewhere, the cold winter air buffeting around them. Seamus shivered, and opened his mouth (probably to berate Harry for taking him out of the warmth) but then all he could do was gape as they stared up at the castle on the hill.

Gryffindor Castle was as grand and imposing as it had been the last time Harry came. The gardens were covered in a thick blanket of snow. The path was clear and Harry led them along it. The golden lion head on the castle gates gleamed, splitting open to allow them entrance when they approached. Within the castle walls, the air was warmer. It was still cool, but they weren't freezing like they were outside. Harry led them on into the keep.

"Where on earth are we?" Seamus asked, spinning around to take in the entrance hall.

It was Dean that spotted the tapestry first. He didn't get a chance to say anything before the House Elves Sun and Mun appeared before them.

"Lord Gryffindor," the aged Elf said with a bow.

"May Mun take your cloaks?" Mun asked.

Harry shrugged his cloak off, handing it to the Elf. Seamus and Dean did the same a moment later, slightly stunned.

"I knew you were Lord Gryffindor. I knew it in my head, but for some reason it never clicked until now," Dean said, "is this- is this Gryffindor Castle?"

"It is indeed. I thought this would be a nice treat for just the three of us to get away from everything," Harry said.

"Harry, we could have gone to a rundown old shack on an island in a storm and it'd still be great if I was with you two," Seamus said.

"I've done that before. Believe me, this castle is better," Harry said.

"So Godric Gryffindor actually lived here," Dean said, "and now a thousand years later, you can live here too."

"To think you're essentially using it as a holiday home," Seamus snorted.

"We're all Gryffindors, and besides Godric wouldn't have minded. He and the other founders wanted nothing more than for magical children to be safe," Harry said, "they built Hogwarts

to be a safe haven, somewhere they could pass on their magical knowledge to their students without fear of Muggle reprisals.”

“It’s strange. Hogwarts: A History doesn’t talk about that at all,” Dean said, “I can’t remember it ever talking about Muggle attitudes to magic at that time being in any way a factor.”

“It’s hard to think otherwise when you’ve seen an army across the lake,” Harry said.

“With Dumbledore as headmaster, Hogwarts isn’t much of a safe haven now. I mean, how many times have you almost died in the last four years?” Seamus said.

“Too many, but it’s alright. Dumbledore won’t be there forever, and maybe the school can go back to how it should have always been,” Harry said.

Sun and Mun served them a hearty lunch and afterwards, they decided to make the most of the remaining daylight by heading out into the grounds. It almost felt wrong to disturb the pristine snow drifts, but that’s what they did. They built igloos and snow forts, which naturally led to a massive three way snowball fight. By the time the sun dipped too low and they lost the light, all three of them were rosy cheeked and shivering, absolutely covered in snow.

Harry dried their clothes with a wave of his wand and they warmed themselves up next to a roaring fire, each clutching a mug of hot chocolate with marshmallows.

“Did you ever figure out how you’re related to Godric Gryffindor?” Seamus asked.

“I can’t remember. I think I looked it up at one point, but then there always seemed to be something new to deal with and I forgot,” Harry said.

“I’d say you could look in the books in the library here, but I don’t think any genealogy would be up to date,” Dean said.

“There’s a family tree at Potter Manor so I can look there.”

Outside in the darkness of late afternoon, snow began to fall once again. No doubt any sign of their activities would soon be erased. As Harry watched it, he imagined what it would be like in Godric’s day. Did his students ever go and play in the snow? Would Godric join them, or would he be the stern teacher? Harry thought he would be the former, with somebody having to drag himself inside by the ear, telling him to act his age and be responsible.

Dinner was a rich and tender steak and kidney pie followed by a delicious trifle. They played a few rounds of Exploding Snap before playing Bertie Bott’s roulette, which basically meant going through a box of Every Flavour Beans and trying to find the ones they thought would be gross for the others to eat. Harry grimaced at one which tasted like massively overcooked cabbage, but then got lucky when an off green coloured bean turned out to be banoffee pudding. Dean was decidedly unlucky. His beans were burnt toast and mouthwash flavoured. Harry gave him the rest of his hot chocolate to cleanse his palette. Seamus was almost the

opposite, getting an apple flavoured bean. He wouldn't say what the other one was, only that it was salty and he liked it.

As the evening wore on, Harry led them to the lords tower to get ready for bed. The bedroom was grander than the one at Potter Manor, with luxuriously soft furs on the large bed. Their overnight bags had been brought up here and set to one side. Seamus and Dean retrieved their toothbrushes but Harry took a moment to step out onto the balcony. The night was peaceful. Tucked away here at Gryffindor Castle, it was like nothing was wrong with the world, even though Harry knew that it was. Somewhere out there, Voldemort was on the move, and Dumbledore was ever looming over them all. It would all come to a head soon, and they would need to be ready.

For now though, Harry could enjoy the time he got to spend with his boyfriends.

Seamus and Dean were just finishing up when Harry joined them in the bathroom. He brushed his teeth, catching his boyfriend's eyes in the mirror, and he couldn't help the smile that appeared. Dean came up behind him and rested his head on his shoulder.

"Thank you for inviting us out here," he said.

"It's been my pleasure," Harry said, "I like getting to treat you."

"I'm not complaining, even if sometimes it feels like being spoiled."

"What do you mean?"

"I already get to have you and Shay. It'd be enough for me to somehow squeeze the three of us into a tiny one bed flat. Big manor houses and castles are way beyond anything I could have imagined."

Harry turned around in his hold so he could properly look his boyfriend in the eye.

"These places belong to my family, and that means you too."

Dean closed his eyes, dipping his head so their foreheads were pressed together.

"I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

"I'll be right there with you, because I'm still not entirely used to it either," Harry said, "but I am Lord Potter, so I don't really have much of a choice in the matter."

"If you're Lord Potter, what would that make us?" Dean asked.

Harry's heart raced at the thought.

"You and Seamus would be Lord Consort Potter, or just Consort Potter," Harry said.

"Now that'd definitely take getting used to," Dean said, "what do you think Shay?"

“I don’t know, I kind of like the sound of it,” Seamus said, stepping closer and joining their hug, “what does Lord Potter think about it?”

“You don’t need to call me that.”

“If that is what my lord desires,” Seamus teased, “has Lord Potter had a good day today?”

“He has, very much so.”

“Send for a Healer Lord Consort Potter!” Seamus gasped, “Lord Potter has gone senile. He’s talking about himself in the third person!”

“Oh no, whatever shall we do Lord Consort Potter?” Dean played along.

It may have only been pretend right now, but Harry’s heart was filled with warmth, feeling as though it was expanding within his chest. He held onto his boys tighter, trying to convey how much he loved them without needing to say it. Judging by the way they held him back, his message was received. When he stepped back, all he saw in their eyes was love in return.

And then they were kissing. He wasn’t sure who started it, but lips were pressed against his and Harry eagerly accepted it. The three of them traded kisses between each other, in pairs or even all three together, as their hands wandered. Harry felt the planes of muscle up Seamus’s back while Dean’s hand snuck beneath the waistband of his pants to squeeze his glute.

Without ending their kiss, they inched towards the bedroom, items of clothing being discarded as they went. Harry shivered as his shirt was pulled over his head, and he took the chance while Seamus’s tongue was delving into Dean’s mouth to pull down the sandy blonde’s pants. By the time they reached the bed, all three were completely nude, and they continued to make out with each other atop the furs.

Dean collapsed backwards, bringing Seamus down on top of them but it didn’t break their kiss. It was only when Harry lay alongside him that Dean changed, claiming Harry’s mouth. Seamus peppered kisses down the length of Dean’s body until he reached his achingly hard cock. Dean groaned loudly, the sound captured by Harry, as Seamus lavished it with his tongue. He threw his head backwards, eyes closed and mouth open as he panted, Seamus taking him down to the root.

Harry continued to make out with him, then they parted with a wet smack. He moved down the bed until he was knelt behind Seamus. With careful, gentle hands, Harry spread Seamus’s cheeks apart, revealing the tight, puckered hole. He retrieved his wand and cast a cleaning spell, then he plucked up his courage and went in. Seamus moaned around Dean’s dick as Harry teased his rim with his tongue, probing at the entrance before backing off again. Harry didn’t really know what he was doing, but judging by the sounds he was making, Seamus was enjoying it tremendously.

“Oh god Harry, keep going. More, I want more,” Seamus moaned, unconsciously pushing his hips backwards.

“Do you want to go all the way, Shay?” Dean asked.

Seamus lifted his head up. He and Dean exchanged a meaningful look, then Dean looked past him to look at Harry. The question was obvious, even if it wasn't spoken. Harry's heart hammered, but he found himself agreeing. He wanted this. He wanted to take this next step with his boyfriends.

"Go on," Seamus said, "you can do it. I want to feel you."

It took Harry a moment to realise that Seamus was talking to him. Reaching for his wand with a slightly trembling hand, Harry cast the spell from the book, lubing up both his dick and Seamus's ass, an odd sensation but not unpleasant, and another to prep the other boy. Seamus let out a deep breath, facing away from him as Harry lined up with his entrance, and ever so slowly he began to push inside.

If he thought Seamus's mouth felt good, it was nothing compared to this. The tight heat of Seamus's hole was exquisite, hugging every inch of his length. For a moment Harry worried it would be too much and he'd be tipped over the edge right then and there, the little noises Seamus was making not helping, but then he bottomed out, his hips meeting Seamus's, and he took several deep breaths. After a little while for the two of them to get used to the sensation, Harry tried moving. It was a little thing at first, shifting his position slightly, then he slowly drew out and pushed back in again.

Pleasure flowed through him in waves as he thrust in and out of Seamus. Both of them moaned, lost in the feeling of it. It was beyond anything they'd done together up to this point, but Harry was so glad they waited. This felt great!

A hand on his hip made him slow. Dean knelt beside him, eyes clouded with lust and love. He claimed Harry's mouth in a searing kiss that took his breath away. Then Harry let out a small gasp when he felt a hand creep into his crack and ghost over his hole.

"Can I love?" Dean asked, and all Harry could do was nod.

Harry kept a slow rhythm with Seamus as Dean positioned himself behind him. Feeling those hands on his ass upped the anticipation, to the point that when he felt magic wash over him, he let out an involuntary gasp. It was an odd feeling. His ass relaxed and felt slightly damp, but in the next moment he felt something larger press against his rim. He stilled his movements, eyes drifting closed, and he let out a long drawn out moan as Dean entered him. Even with the preparation, the stretch of it burned, but it didn't hurt. Harry was overcome with the feeling of fullness, only coming back to himself when he felt movement around his dick. Seamus was obviously getting impatient.

His movements were sloppier now. Every time he pulled out of Seamus, Dean pushed into him further. At first they weren't entirely in sync, Dean's thrusts falling out of time with Harry's own. Seamus groaned loudly when their thrusts lined up as Harry plunged into him harder. The air was filled with the sounds of their pleasure; their moans, skin slapping against skin. Harry could barely think from how good it all felt, the stimulation from both ends nearly overwhelming. Judging by what noises his boyfriends were making, they felt just as good. Dean's arms were wrapped around him, his mouth sucking at the crease of Harry's shoulder, and Seamus was struggling to hold himself up beneath the onslaught of pleasure.

Dean hit a point that made Harry's vision go white. Harry adjusted his angle slightly, and Seamus's moans grew louder. It didn't take long after finding that for both Harry and Dean to hit that point relentlessly. The pressure in his gut built until Harry cried out as his release reached him. Seamus's ass clenched around his cock as he too came, and Harry felt something shooting inside him.

They collapsed into a pile on the bed. Harry had just enough awareness in him to roll them onto their sides so they weren't crushing Seamus. That was the most intense orgasm he'd ever had in his life. His entire body felt wrung out and it was a struggle to catch his breath. They were still inside one another but neither Harry nor Dean made any move to remove their cocks.

"That-" Dean panted.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"That was so good," Seamus said, "how about you guys?"

"So good," was all Dean could say, and Harry agreed.

"Is it bad that I want to keep going?" Seamus said, "I want to feel you both inside me, and I want to be inside you both."

"I'd be down for that," Dean said.

"Give me a few minutes," Seamus said.

Harry held onto him before he could move.

"There's no need to rush. We've got all the time in the world," he said, "besides, I don't think I can move much right now."

"You did get it from both ends," Dean said, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck.

Dean moved and a moment later he felt the cool rush of the cleaning spell wash over him and Seamus. Once their bodies and the bedding was cleaned of their activities, Dean cuddled in behind him once more, the furs pulled up over them all.

"Merry Christmas," Dean said.

"Merry Christmas," they both said in return.

The water in the lake felt soothing to his skin, the magic within it seeping into him and smoothing out the lingering aches and pains he felt and filling him with a deep sense of calm. It allowed Harry to peacefully glide from one end to the other in lazy strokes. When he came here to visit the last time, Harry never got a chance to explore the lake beneath the castle but now he had all the time in the world.

When it came time to get out, Harry felt a slight twinge in his ass despite the soothing water. The reminder of last night made him smile, even more so when he considered his boyfriends upstairs. They would likely still be asleep, or at least Seamus would be. He couldn't wait to re-join them. All he'd brought down to the lake with him was his wand, so he cast a drying spell. The warming charm quickly followed to stave off the early morning chill on his bare skin.

The spiral staircase brought him directly to the main quarters of the lords tower. Outside, the sky was still dark though with hints of the rising sun. Harry went upstairs to the bedroom and was surprised to see the bed empty. He couldn't hear the shower running, but then he saw the balcony door slightly ajar.

Dean and Seamus were lounging together on a loveseat, a blanket wrapped around them. Seamus was still asleep, snoozing away against Dean's side, while the other boy rested his head on top of his. It looked very calming. Harry sat down on the arm of the chair, stroking the back of Dean's head, making the boy hum.

"I figured you'd be up, but you managed to get Seamus out of bed too?"

"I wanted to watch the sunrise," Dean said, "Seamus didn't want to be in bed on his own."

"You two look cute together," Harry said.

"M not cute," Seamus mumbled sleepily, "handsome. Hot."

"You are those things too, but right now you're cute," Harry said.

They fell into a comfortable silence as they stared out over the vast landscape. The sky slowly became illuminated, the sun creeping out from behind the nearby mountains to spread its feeble light on the ground below. Long shadows were cast by the snow covered hills and mounds. Watching the world wake up was very beautiful.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Harry asked Dean.

"Just thinking. Remembering last night," Dean said with a smile, "and I remembered something else you said to us."

"Oh?"

"You said something about lordship and magic getting in the way. What did you mean by that?"

Harry slipped off the arm of the chair so he was kneeling in front of them. He met Dean's eyes, and Seamus looked a little more awake now.

"One of my responsibilities as Lord Potter is ensuring that I have an Heir to pass the family magic onto. You probably guessed that bit, but there's more to it. Sirius explained it to me, but I didn't know how best to bring it up," Harry said, "noble families typically don't marry Heirs together because that would lead to the lordship of two families being contained in one person, which can have unforeseen consequences for the family magic."

“You’re Lord Potter, Lord Gryffindor and Lord Slytherin,” Dean said, and Harry nodded.

“The family magic of powerful noble families can be a bit weird about coming together like this. It’s happened before that one or both lines gets significantly diminished or even completely wiped out as both magics try and take precedence over the other.”

“Is that going to happen to you?” Dean asked, suddenly worried.

“No. It takes more than one generation for this to happen. To stop it, the family magics need to be separated again as soon as possible. This means having more than one child, and to ensure there is enough distance to prevent entanglement, those children need to be born from different people.”

Harry reached up to them. Carefully parting the folds of the blankets, he placed a loving hand on each of their bellies.

“It means that one day, if we get to that point, I will need to have a child with each of you; one to be born by you Dean, and the other to be born by Seamus. One to become Heir Potter and one to be Heir Gryffindor. As the head of the family and its protector, I won’t be able to carry them.”

“What about the Slytherin magic?” Dean asked, which was not the question Harry expected.

“I asked Salazar about it in the Ring Realm. He said that the Slytherin magic is more adaptable than most, able to lie dormant for long periods even within the noble families. It was passed down through the Gaunts for centuries without expressing itself, only rising in Voldemort when he claimed the Heirship. He said it would be fine to let it go dormant once again,” Harry said.

Dean’s hand rested on top of Harry’s.

“So Shay and I are going to have your kids one day,” he said, “I guess I’m going to have to get used to taking your dick, aren’t I?”

“That won’t be an issue. It feels really good,” Seamus said, rubbing his hand over where Harry was touching his belly.

Harry’s breath caught in his throat as he involuntarily laughed.

“And you’re really ok with this? Both of you?”

“Harry, we’re guys. The thought of any of us actually having kids is already crazy,” Dean said flatly, “and they won’t just be *your* kids. They’ll be ours, remember? As long as I still get to be inside you like last night, then I’ll be happy on that front.”

“I won’t stop you from doing that again. It’s only for having kids that those roles need to happen a certain way,” Harry said, “any other time, I’m all yours.”

“And I’m yours too,” Dean said, “and Seamus, I want to try you as well.”

“I’m looking forward to it already.”

Harry laughed more freely. They didn’t move from that position for a while, Harry kneeling in front of his two boyfriends, soaking in each other's affection. They only moved when their stomachs gave a loud growl, heading back inside. Seamus and Dean joined Harry in the shower, where their hands and mouths wandered far and wide, before dressing in clean clothes and heading downstairs. Mun had a full breakfast waiting for them.

The rest of their morning at Gryffindor Castle was slow and lazy. There was no great hurry to be anywhere or do anything. It was after lunch when they returned to Grimmauld Place, Celio depositing them in Harry’s bedroom. Sirius poked his head into the drawing room where they’d reconvened, the wireless playing.

“Have a good night?” Sirius asked, a mischievous grin on his face.

“We did,” Harry said. When Sirius opened his mouth to say something, Harry took his wand out of his holster, “make whatever comments you’re about to make and I’ll hex you.”

Sirius held up his hands in surrender.

“Fine. I’ll leave you be. Just checking in to say that all the arrangements for New Year have been made.”

Harry smiled, feeling within him the warmth of the Yule ritual. Very soon, they would complete it, finishing a centuries old tradition Harry wished he could have done sooner.

December 31st arrived very quickly. From what the twins told him, Mrs Weasley was trying to organise a party to celebrate the new year. Harry figured she was trying to create an excuse for Harry and Ron to smooth over their disagreements, move past whatever offence Harry had taken from Ron’s phenomenally disgusting and idiotic Christmas gift. Apparently the arrangements weren’t going well. Most of the other Order members had their own families to celebrate with, and those that didn’t quickly realised that there was a rift between Sirius and the Weasley matriarch and wanted no part in it.

Harry’s own New Year plans were well underway. He arrived in Potter Manor and immediately went upstairs to change into smart robes. The end of Yule was more formal than the start, the New Year welcomed in with propriety and dignity. Celio had a set of robes in the Potter colours waiting for him in his room.

Sirius and Remus arrived not long after. Andromeda and Ted wouldn’t be joining them this time, instead spending the night with their daughter. The Finnegans and the Thomas’s would be having their own New Year parties, but he was assured that Seamus and Dean would join them for the ritual to close out Yule.

They lit the candles in the Yule altar, and Harry felt the magic prime in readiness. There was anticipation in the air. He, Sirius and Remus enjoyed a lovely meal cooked by Letty, and

afterwards broke out the board games. The time seemed to pass by incredibly quickly, and the next thing Harry knew, the clock was nearing midnight.

“Let’s get into position,” Sirius said.

They stood before their Yule altar in a circle. Harry raised his hands, pressing his left palm against Sirius’s right, and his right palm against Remus’s left.

“Close your eyes and feel your magic. We won’t need the clock to tell us when the New Year begins,” Sirius said.

Harry did so, sinking into the magic within him. Just like how he imagined it in the Ring Realm, it was like floating on top of a flat, endless ocean. It was peaceful and calm. At the edge of his senses was the smell of a campfire and something earthen and woodsy, Sirius and Remus’s magic pressed against his. They stood there together, the seconds ticking by, until Harry felt a shift.

The surface of the ocean rippled. Wisps of light rose all around him, faintly wrapping around his form. The warmth of the campfire and the presence of the woods enveloped him, connecting with his own magic. Harry opened his eyes and saw that the clock had struck midnight.

“All that’s left is the final ritual and then Yule will be over,” Sirius said, “hold onto that feeling until then.”

Half an hour later, the fireplace flared green and Seamus appeared. When he hugged Harry, he felt their magic connecting like it had with Sirius and Remus, Harry’s ocean touching Seamus’s fireworks. There was a small pop and Dean appeared, the portkey bracelet Sirius gave him a few days ago returning to its normal, un-glowing state. He joined the hug, and Harry felt Dean’s magic, the calm wind through fields of grass.

Just like at the start of Yule, they went through to the sunroom and changed into their ritual garb. It was cold outside, the heat from the stones on the path not quite doing enough to warm them up. At least it wasn’t actively snowing like last time, though the wind was stronger. Harry, Seamus and Dean huddled closer together as they walked. It was a relief to make it to the ritual circle and step into that eerie warmth. In the centre, the Yule log was still burning, looking as unaffected and whole as though they’d only just lit it.

Harry and Sirius sat in the same place as last time, with Remus taking Andromeda’s spot. Seamus and Dean were moved around so they formed a line bisecting the triangle. They all closed their eyes, calmed their minds, and found the magic within themselves. It eagerly leapt Harry’s call, the ambient magic all around them, channelled and directed by the still lingering ritual easily connecting with his core. The others lit up like bright lights to his senses.

“May the New Year follow the threads of love and bring us warmth and light,” Remus said in a loud, clear voice.

Sirius said the same thing in French, and then Harry followed at the end in Old Norse. The magic in the air rushed and swirled around them. It reached out, brushing against the magic

of the others before it filled the entire ritual circle. It extended beyond, rushing outwards and connecting to the family magic Harry was a part of. Potter, Gryffindor, Slytherin and Black. It reached the school, and Harry felt something reach back. Something ancient, something wise, yet somehow still alive.

Greetings Harry Potter.

His eyes shot open with a gasp. The others in the ritual circle looked much the same, though Harry could tell they didn't experience the same thing as him. The flames engulfing the Yule log grew brighter. The log slowly crumbled to ash, blowing away in a non-existent breeze, and the fire went out.

The walk back to the Manor was silent, everyone deep in thought. They changed back into warm clothes and Celio appeared with mugs of hot chocolate. It was late so they went to bed quickly after. Harry stripped down to his underwear, Seamus and Dean doing the same, and they all crawled in together.

"That was such a rush," Seamus said, "I could feel Mam and my cousins even from so far away. I could even feel Dad. I didn't think I'd be able to since he doesn't have magic, but he was there."

"It's the same with Mum," Dean said, "what about you Harry? Did you feel everyone?"

"I did, though most of the people I care about were in the circle with me."

Seamus leaned over, hand coming up to cup Harry's cheek.

"What's up? You seem a bit ... down. I thought you'd be happier to get to do that?"

"I am. It's just, the ritual gave me a lot to think about," Harry said, "I connected with Hogwarts through the Gryffindor and Slytherin magic. It happened at the beginning of Yule as well, but this time something reached back."

"You don't think ... it wasn't Dumbledore, was it?" Dean asked.

"No. It didn't feel like him. It felt a lot older and a lot more powerful."

"Could it be Hogwarts itself? I mean, the castle seems like it has a mind of its own sometimes," Seamus suggested.

"Maybe."

But that didn't feel right either. It didn't feel like the Hogwarts magic Harry had grown accustomed to feeling when he was at school. It was similar, but not entirely. So what could it possibly be?

Could it be whatever had Voldemort and Dumbledore so interested? Dumbledore was searching the castle for something, and according to Sirius, Voldemort was interested in the castle in a way he hadn't been during the first war. There had to be something there for them

to find. Merlin, Godric and Salazar had all hinted that Hogwarts held a power. What if it was an actual, literal power, and now both of them wanted it?

In the Yule ritual, they asked for the new year to bring them warmth and light. Harry had an unfortunate feeling that he wasn't going to get much of either.

Stalkers and heartbreak

Chapter Notes

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

The winter holidays came to a very quick end and it was time to return to Hogwarts. Given their rather abrupt departure from the school, it was decided that the residents of Grimmauld Place would not travel on the Hogwarts Express with the rest of the students to prevent harassment or gossip. The Weasleys and Hermione would be taking the Knight Bus to Hogsmeade. The plan had been for Harry to join them, but Sirius put his foot down.

“You’d be with Remus and Tonks, but I still wouldn’t put it past them to try something in all the chaos. You know what the Knight Bus is like,” Sirius said.

Harry did know, and he was very glad. Instead, he and Sirius would be flooing to a friend of Sirius’s in Hogsmeade. Harry came spinning out of the fireplace in a rather dingy looking pub. Sirius was right behind him. An aged man with a long beard stood behind the bar, wiping a glass with a rag. Nobody else was there. He grunted at Sirius’s thanks. When they left, Harry saw the sign for the pub, calling it the Hogs Head.

The trek up to the gates was beautiful in the snowy landscape, and easier thanks to Harry shrinking his trunk and putting it in his pocket. Sirius sent off a patronus and a moment later, McGonagall arrived. She pursed her lips, no doubt annoyed that she would have to make two trips to the gates, so Harry said his goodbyes quickly and slipped in before she could start lecturing. The magic of the grounds welcomed him and he breathed a great sigh of relief.

The rest of the school returned later that afternoon and before Harry knew it, they were back to the regular grind of lessons and homework. The routine was familiar and slightly comforting. While he appreciated the free time of the holidays, it sometimes got a little daunting trying to find things to do on his own. At least here he had his friends nearby at all times.

Dumbledore welcomed them all back at the start of term with a cheerful greeting. Like before, he stalwartly refused to meet Harry’s eyes, though it seemed much more deliberate this time. Apparently his reaction to trying to breach Harry’s Occlumency shields had affected him more than he thought, but there was more to it. Dumbledore seemed more tired than usual. The signs of age on his face seemed more pronounced, and even as he maintained his jovial, grandfather-like tone, there was also a hint of hurry to it, like he was going through the motions and wanted this done as soon as possible.

“Do you reckon he’s been searching the castle the entire break?” Dean asked in the shower the next morning.

“No idea. Whatever has him so stressed, I’m guessing it’s not going well,” Harry said, “Voldemort’s been quiet after the attack on Arthur, so maybe he’s planning something and Dumbledore’s trying to figure out what it is.”

Harry checked the Map before he went to bed. Dumbledore was out of his office, pacing back and forth in the girls toilets on the second floor. Was he trying to get into the Chamber of Secrets?

He wasn't the only one acting odd. Malfoy also seemed paler than usual, more withdrawn. He had mostly given up taunting Harry in the face of his unerring politeness, but he still usually mustered up a contemptuous sneer. Nowadays, he barely even looked Harry's way. When Harry looked at the Map, he also saw Malfoy wandering the corridors. The blonde was a prefect so he had an excuse to be out later, but prefects patrolled in pairs and Pansy Parkinson was nowhere to be seen.

"It certainly is a conundrum," Sirius said when Harry told him about this.

"It's like both Dumbledore and Malfoy are trying to find something in the castle, but I have no idea what. Have you heard anything from anyone? I doubt Dumbledore has hinted what he's up to to the Order but has Narcissa heard anything?"

"You're right. Dumbledore hasn't said anything to the Order. In fact, he's been quite quiet in Order meetings lately. Considering most of what we've been doing is guard duty and recruitment, there aren't a lot of updates. The Death Eaters have also gone quiet again, which we're all taking to be a bad sign," Sirius said, "as for Narcissa, she's confirmed that Voldemort is definitely after something in the Department of Mysteries, which we already knew. As for Hogwarts, she sent me a letter. Apparently Lucius gave Draco a task, a very important one."

"What sort of task?"

"That she doesn't know, but given the way she described it, it would apparently make up for Draco's 'disappointing performance of late'. Given the secrecy, I have no doubt that the order actually came from Voldemort. Giving orders through the parents is pretty much always how he got kids to do his bidding."

"That would explain why Draco's doing it then, and why he seems so nervous about it," Harry said, "I can't exactly confront him about this, can I? What do you think I should do?"

"For now, keep an eye on both Dumbledore and Draco. With any luck, whatever it is they're searching for will stay hidden until we can finish dealing with Voldemort, then we can deal with Dumbledore and Draco won't have any more reason to keep looking," Sirius said.

It was about the best they could do given the circumstances. Everything relied on finding the last horcrux. Once that was gone, they could finally end Voldemort once and for all. The Goblins were having no more luck with divining a location through whatever powerful wards were in the way.

Harry tried not to feel too melancholy. Classes were going well for the most part. He resumed his study sessions in the Room of Requirement with his friends. They had to be careful though. Umbridge seemed to be on a mission to further cement her authority in the school, as they discovered one week into the new term.

When he came back to the common room after his morning swim, Harry spotted a new notice on the board. He read it, and a chill went down his spine.

Those wishing to join the Inquisitorial Squad for extra credit can sign up at the High Inquisitors office.

This surely couldn't be good. Harry became lost in his thoughts, going over in his mind all the implications of what this could mean. A student organisation under the authority of Umbridge, likely to do her bidding and be her eyes and ears in the school to enforce her rules. There was no way this could go well. Then again, Harry thought, he wasn't sure who would sign up for it. Umbridge hadn't exactly endeared herself to the student body. Not even the Slytherins liked her.

But Umbridge had a lot of influence in the Ministry. There would probably be some people who would join for that reason alone, especially if Umbridge hand picked them. Like it or not, the Slytherins would probably end up over-represented, if not dominating the members. It would be another show of favouritism, increasing the divide that Harry was trying very hard to mend.

A hand on his shoulder scared the living daylights out of him. He whirled around, seeing Dean standing there, an amused look on his face there.

"I think you've washed yourself pretty thoroughly there. Best get out before you turn into a prune."

"Sorry," Harry rushed to say, "I was lost in thought."

"I figured when you didn't respond to me," Dean said, "big thoughts?"

"Always."

Dean handed him a towel and the pair of them dried off, greeting a sleepy Seamus on their way back into the dormitory. The news of the Inquisitorial Squad spread through the school very quickly. From what Harry could hear, many shared his worries. It was only the fact that the next day when Umbridge descended from the staff table, working her way along the Slytherin table speaking to individual students, that gave Harry some relief. Clearly she hadn't had any takers, and had resorted to asking people personally.

Harry parted ways with his friends for Defence Against the Dark Arts, taking the path to the seventh floor corridor for his own self study course. He was excited to continue the lessons on counter-curses when he felt the hair on the back of his neck stand out. It was the uncomfortable feeling of being watched. Harry tried not to slow down his pace, but he tried to make his steps as quiet as possible. Sure enough, he heard the soft tapping of shoes somewhere behind him. He kept walking, taking a different path that would lead him away from the Room of Requirement.

The footsteps followed. From the corner of his eyes, Harry spotted a figure trailing after him. He reached a corridor, purposefully slowed, then turned around. It was Cassius Warrington. Harry acted startled, as though this was a surprise.

“Warrington,” Harry said politely.

“Potter,” Warrington said, matching his tone.

“Can I help you?”

“Just out for a walk, same as you.”

“Right.”

Harry glanced and saw the silver I badge of the Inquisitorial Squad on Warrington’s chest. He set off again, and sure enough, he heard Warrington continue to follow him. Harry made sure to take a circular path. Once, twice, the third time they reached that same stretch of corridor, Harry whirled around and raised a very unimpressed eyebrow at the older boy.

“I would appreciate it if you would stop following me.”

“Who says I’m following you? It’s a free castle. You don’t have a monopoly on going for a walk.”

“I am trying not to insult your intelligence, Warrington, by pointing out the obvious, so could you please stop insulting mine?”

Warrington snorted.

“Keep talking like that and I’d almost believe you were a pureblood,” Warrington said, “fine, you got me.”

“Is there a reason for you following me?” Harry asked, “and does it have something to do with that badge on your chest?”

“Yes,” Warrington said, not specifying which question he was answering, “but I can’t say more than that. There’s people in high places, if you get my meaning.”

“I understand you perfectly,” Harry said, whirling around and striding away.

As soon as he was around a corner, he pulled his invisibility cloak from his bag and swung it around him. When he looked back at the corridor, Warrington was still there, seemingly counting to himself before walking off in the other direction.

“You reckon Umbridge told him to follow you?”

“Who else could it have been?” Harry said, “straighten your arm a little.”

Neville readjusted his stance a little and tried the Reductor Curse again. The broken chair they were practising shattered under the force of the spell.

“My question is why. Warrington didn’t say?” Seamus asked from where he was helping Dean and Lavender with Charms.

“She’s not exactly happy with me, hasn’t been since I dropped her class. I’m guessing she wants to know where I go to learn so she can try to spy on me,” Harry said, “I don’t think she knows about this room so be sure whenever you guys come here that you’re not followed.”

“You won’t need to worry about that. I mean, this place is way too awesome for a toad like her to know about,” Seamus said.

“And handy too. I needed to touch up my make-up the other day and I was in the area, so I thought why not give it a try,” Parvati said, “it gave me a full dressing room, complete with all the products I could need! Some of them looked partly used or near empty but still!”

“So that spa day we keep saying we need? It sounds like it’s actually possible,” Lavender said.

“I agree that we’ll need to be careful, but something tells me that it’ll be a bit easier than that,” Dean said, “her Inquisitorial Squad isn’t that big, so they won’t be able to constantly have somebody tailing Harry, and they definitely don’t have enough to keep a watch on all her persons of interest, whoever they may be.”

That was true. Of all the Hogwarts students, Umbridge had managed to maybe recruit twenty at most. It was hardly the army of enforcers she had hoped for. Malfoy had joined, but Harry noticed he didn’t seem all that enthused by it. By the looks of it, he was using it as an excuse to search more of the school. Each day that passed when he didn’t find what he was looking for, he looked more and more unnerved.

The six of them continued practising with each other, Harry even leading them through a few duels for more hands-on training with defensive magic. This naturally led to each of them trying to beat him. He didn’t have many chances to duel over the winter holidays so it felt good to get back into the rhythm of dodging and casting. The others gave it their best shot but Harry’s training with Sirius and Remus gave him the edge. At least it looked like they learned something from it.

When they finished, none of them were in a hurry to go back to the Gryffindor common room. Hermione had only become more frenetic about studying, and she seemed to have given up trying to force Ron to study with her as often. This meant the redhead had a lot more free time than before. While he didn’t outright pester them, it was noticeable that he would be nearby when he wasn’t off somewhere with Colin.

“I get that the common room is the Gryffindor space, but I feel like there should be somewhere in the castle that’s just for relaxing, you know? As nice as the common room is, there’s always someone studying there and I always feel bad for disturbing them,” Lavender said.

“What about the dormitory?”

“You guys are lucky Ron’s so lazy. Hermione studies every waking moment. Even if we wanted to chill in our dormitory, there’s always a worry she’ll snap at us,” Parvati said.

“Yeah, Hogwarts doesn’t really have many leisure activities. There’s Quidditch and the Gobstones club, but everything else is academic,” Seamus said, then to Neville he asked, “is there anything your Gran can do?”

“I’m not sure. Hogwarts is a school so it can be hard to justify putting on things that aren’t school related,” Neville said, “Quidditch is so established it’s basically baked into the school at this point, and the Gobstones club was set up about a hundred and fifty years ago. Apparently some wealthy benefactor sponsored it in the beginning, and now it gets its operating budget from the British Gobstones Association.”

“I get that it’s a school but it’s also basically our home for most of the year,” Parvati said, “I’d love to learn to play the piano. Mum can play and it always sounds so beautiful to listen to. Can you imagine if they had music lessons here?”

“Or art,” Seamus said, “you’d like that Dean.”

Dean hummed.

“I mean, I can ask Gran if there’s any way to get those things, but I’m not sure what she can do. She’s got a lot of influence but she’s only one of the twelve governors.”

“Shall we pack up and head back? It’s getting late and we don’t want to miss curfew,” Harry said.

There were a few groans but they all collected their things.

“Do we need to clean up our mess?” Neville asked, eyeing the pile of rubble that used to be furniture, “where did the room even get this stuff from?”

“It probably made it. Conjuring furniture isn’t that difficult,” Seamus said.

“But if we needed targets to destroy, why old furniture? And when Parvati needed make-up, why give her stuff that was partially used? It doesn’t make sense if it was conjuring it itself. It must be getting it from somewhere else.”

Harry frowned. The Room of Requirement was clearly capable of making things itself, but Neville was right. It didn’t make sense to give them old furniture when they needed to destroy stuff, unless the Room already had these things and felt it was alright to get rid of them in this way.

“Do you reckon this place could be used to store things?” Parvati asked.

“There’s one way to find out,” Harry said.

After checking the Map, they all left the Room. Harry paced back and forth three times, concentrating on needing a place to store something.

When the door reappeared, they all entered and had to take a moment to stare. Before them could only be described as a large, stone cavern, almost like a warehouse, absolutely filled with junk. Towering piles of old sofas and chairs with faded upholstery and stuffing leaking out, mountains of dusty clothes of various sizes and styles, mixed in with books and quills and parchments and many other odds and ends. Paths had been made between the piles, forming something almost like a maze. On what looked like an old headboard propped up near the door, Harry saw somebody had carved something.

The Room of Hidden Things

“Looks like you were right, Parvati,” Dean said.

“How much stuff is in here?” Seamus said, “it’s like a giant lost property bin.”

“Over the years, students must have come here to hide things they didn’t want other people to find and just not come back to get them,” Harry said, gesturing to the sign, “anything else that was lost in the school, or when things like furniture got replaced, probably ended up in here.”

“Can you imagine trying to go through everything? It’d take ages, but you’d probably end up finding some good stuff,” Seamus said.

“As fun as that would be,” Parvati said, “we do need to get back.”

Harry caught her eyeing the general dustiness with an upturned nose, even as she glanced towards several piles of clothes.

“We can come back another time to have a look through it all,” Harry said.

The common room was its usual level of activity when they got back. From the desk in the corner she’d claimed, Harry caught Hermione giving him a very suspicious look.

“I’m going to head up to the dormitory,” Harry said.

He’d had enough of looking over his shoulder. He didn’t want to put up with it here.

“Would you like some company?” Seamus asked.

“That depends. What kind of company are you offering?”

“Any kind you want,” Seamus wiggled his eyebrows.

“Oh god they’re flirting,” Parvati said.

“Down boys. You’re in public,” Lavender said.

Harry shook his head good-naturedly.

“I’ve got a book to read for Arithmancy so I was going to do that in peace and quiet.”

“That’s fine. I’ve got an essay for Sinistra to finish,” Seamus said, “Dean, would you like to join us?”

“In a bit. I need to pick Neville’s brain about Herbology.”

The pair of them went upstairs. It was a very peaceful evening. Harry read his book while Seamus lay on the bed next to him. The only sound was the turning of the page or the occasional scratching of a quill. When it came time for bed, he and Seamus got changed and climbed in together. Dean dropped by to give them a goodnight kiss before going to his own bed.

Yes, more nights like this please.

It could perhaps be considered paranoid, but now that Harry knew Umbridge was having him followed, he became more vigilant with making sure he wasn’t. Whenever he went off to do his correspondence course studying, he always checked the Marauders Map to make sure he was alone. He took circuitous routes through the castle so no-one could track him, and if anyone tried, he used the invisibility cloak to get past them.

It was slightly annoying having to tiptoe around like this but it was a lot better than Umbridge finding out any of his secrets. Her attempts to dose him with Veritaserum had failed, putting her under more scrutiny, but no doubt she would try again. Harry hadn’t ended up in detention with her since, and his message to the others to be on their best behaviour meant they hadn’t either.

Still, occasionally he would hear something about Umbridge. Whispers when people thought nobody could hear them that were quickly silenced. It was nothing more than the ghost of a rumour, something which Parvati and Lavender hadn’t heard more about, but a pit formed in Harry’s stomach whenever he considered it.

Harry heard footsteps rapidly approaching him from behind, faster than any of his usual followers. He had only just separated from the others. He loosened his wand in his holster, ready to be drawn at any moment, only to find Hermione stalking up to him.

“You’ll be late for class,” Harry said immediately.

“I’ve still got plenty of time,” Hermione huffed, “you need to be more careful.”

“About?”

“Don’t act dumb Harry. I’ve seen you and the others sneaking off. You’re all studying together, aren’t you? That’s against the rules.”

“Says the girl who wanted me to lead a study group,” Harry said, “why is what we do any of your business, and why do you even care? I thought you hated Umbridge’s rules.”

“I do but apparently you’ve forgotten the sort of backing she has. If she catches you, she’ll have all the ammunition she needs to punish you harshly,” Hermione said, “your recent

behaviour notwithstanding, you're very important, more than you realise. It would be so dangerous if Umbridge managed to get information out of you, or if she kicked you out of Hogwarts on some trumped up charge."

"Again, why is it any of your business?"

"I'm trying to look out for you!" Hermione snapped.

"It really doesn't feel like it, not when you ask me to break rules in one breath and then chastise me for allegedly breaking them in the next. I've already made my opinions on this clear and I don't care to repeat myself," Harry said, "now you'd best get going. Class starts soon."

Hermione screwed up her face in irritation then stormed off.

It was difficult to concentrate during Professor Okura's lecture but Harry managed to get his brain in gear. It helped that he could go back and listen to sections of the recording again. It didn't stop his brain from trying to wander to what Hermione said.

From any other person, her warning could be seen as benevolent. Umbridge's decrees banned meetings of more than three students for any reason without prior approval. Their group of fifth years was six people, and they most certainly did not ask for permission. It was why they were careful when they met up outside the dormitory so nobody would get in trouble, and why Harry was being so diligent with not being followed. With Umbridge also in charge of punishments, he dreaded to think what she'd do if she caught him.

However, it was Hermione telling him this. Hermione, who not even two months ago, asked him to run a secret study group for Defence Against the Dark Arts right under Umbridge's nose. What game was she playing? What was her angle? Was it that she actually didn't want him to get in trouble, or was she worried that whatever plans were in the works would be scuppered if he was?

He left the Room of Requirement, intending to go back to the dormitory and take a nap before starting on his homework. Maybe one of his boyfriends would want to cuddle? Or both? Both would be good. He checked the Map to make sure he was being followed, only to find Ron on a path leading straight to him. A quick glance showed Colin not too far away, taking a different route but undoubtedly heading in this direction.

Oh god no. Harry did not want to get stuck in the middle of their secret rendezvous. There were no convenient secret passageways he could slip into, so he turned tail and power walked down the corridor. With any luck he could get around the corner without Ron spotting him. It wouldn't be so bad to walk past Colin.

Unfortunately, he wasn't so lucky. Ron must have been walking faster than he thought, because Harry wasn't even halfway down the corridor when he heard his voice call out to him.

"Harry? Mate, it's so good to see you!"

That casual, friendly tone ground Harry to a halt. He had to shove down the anger that rose up within him at the sound of it. Keeping his expression flat, he turned around to face Ron. Ron had one hand hooked into his waistband, his hips slightly cocked. If this was another attempt to look sexy, then it was failing miserably, but that might be entirely due to the anger coursing through Harry's veins right now.

"What do you want, Weasley?"

"I just-" Ron started. His position shifted, shoulders dropping, and his expression could have been contrite. "I just wanted to apologise for what happened at Christmas. In hindsight, it was a really stupid gift."

"You think? My homophobic former friend decided to get me a realistic dildo for Christmas. How the hell was I supposed to take that?"

"It wasn't supposed to be like that!" Ron said, "And I'm not homophobic, not any more. I've tried talking to you about it, to show you how much I've changed so we can go back to how things were before, but you never let me. I didn't know how else to get through to you."

"Maybe you should have just left it alone. Not everything can be fixed. Not everything can be put right just by saying sorry," Harry said, "I don't want anything to do with you, not after what you've done."

"Please don't say that," Ron said, "I've- I've had a lot of time to think since we've been apart. Those days after the second task really messed my head up. Feelings and stuff aren't really my strong suit." Harry scoffed. "But I tried really hard to think about it more; about how I feel about myself; about, well, us."

Harry rolled his eyes. Knowing that Colin was coming from the other way, Harry made to walk past Ron. He whirled around when Ron tried touching his arm, and then batted the hand that tried cupping his cheek away, taking a step back.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm not good at words so I was trying to show you with my actions," Ron said, "I really like you Harry."

"You've got an idiotic way of showing it," Harry snapped.

"I know. I was an idiot, but I swear that I've changed. Please Harry, give me another chance and I swear I'll make it up to you," Ron said, "you're really c-cute. Any guy would be lucky to have you. I was so stupid to push you away like that."

"You called me a freak and a pervert," Harry said flatly.

"And that was wrong of me. You're not either of those things, or if you are then so am I," Ron said. A small, almost coy smile appeared on his face, his posture returning to the attempted sexy pose from before. "So what do you say? Do you think we could give this a go between us?"

Harry stared at him in disbelief. On the one hand he was slightly impressed. Ginny had been clumsily flirting with him for ages without ever being this direct, and yet here was Ron, likely hating every minute of it but still doing what he thought would get Harry to accept him as a partner. Yet on the other hand, he was furious. Just who did Ron think he was! Did he really think Harry would come crawling back to him because he made it seem like he was so different? Even worse, did he think Harry would skip straight from forgiveness to *dating*?

“Why are you so hung up on me?”

“Because you’re the only guy I’ve ever liked in this way, and I know you’ve noticed me too.”

“Only because you purposefully slept naked and left your hangings open for me to see.”

“I don’t blame you if you took a peek. I mean, I’ve done it too when we’ve been getting dressed in the mornings.”

Harry didn’t believe that for one minute.

“Like I said, I think you’re cute, e-easily one of the most attractive guys I’ve ever met. I think we could be really happy together.”

“Don’t you already have a boyfriend you can be happy with?”

“Colin? He’s nice I suppose. He’s got a tight ass and gives surprisingly good head, but he’s not you. He could never be you.”

“So you dated Colin to what? Show off how different you were? Show how you and I could work in a relationship because now you’re alright with gay people?” Harry scoffed.

“I mean, I wouldn’t put it quite like that, but if that doesn’t show you how serious I am about changing for the better than I don’t know what will.”

“Is that true?”

Ron froze at the sound of the new voice, as did Harry. Hidden behind Ron’s larger frame was Colin, having arrived at some point during the conversation, Harry didn’t know when. His eyes were wide and glassy, staring up at Ron in disbelief.

“Were you only dating me to make Harry like you?” Colin asked.

“Colin, I- that’s not- it’s not what it-” Ron sputtered.

Colin ran off before Ron could finish. Harry watched him go, then turned a steely glare on Ron.

“This, among many, many other reasons, is why we’re no longer friends, and why I would never even consider going out with you. You don’t *care* about people, only what they can do for you. You pester Hermione to do all your schoolwork for you. You strung Colin along for cheap pleasure, and I shouldn’t need to repeat how you’ve treated me,” Harry said, “I want

nothing to do with you. Stay the hell away from me, and don't even think about going near Colin again."

He stalked off, leaving a stunned Ron alone in the corridor.

It didn't take long to find Colin. Harry opened the door to the boys bathroom on the seventh floor and found him hunched over one of the sinks, his breath hitching as he splashed water on his face.

"Colin?"

The boy jumped, whipping around to face him.

"I'm so sorry about that Colin. I swear I didn't know anything about it.

"It's alright Harry, don't apologise. You didn't do anything wrong," Colin said wetly, "it was- it was all- all him."

He was doing an admirable job of holding himself together, but he hung his head and a few tears ran down his cheeks. Harry slowly approached, staying aware of any sign of rejection, and pulled Colin into a hug. Colin immediately clung onto him, and Harry felt him shaking as he sobbed into his chest.

"Let it out Colin. That's it. You're alright."

"I just feel so stupid!" Colin said, wiping his eyes, "I don't- it wasn't- it wasn't what I wanted out of a relationship."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, "he didn't hurt you, did he? At least, not until now?"

"No, but I should have known something like this would happen. We never really went on dates or anything. It was always just meeting up in different places around the castle to fool around. At first it felt good, you know, but Ron was always the one deciding what we did. I didn't mind it so much, but I would have liked something different," Colin hung his head again, "I just wanted to be romanced, for somebody to sweep me off my feet and make me feel special. There's a Hogsmeade visit coming up near Valentine's day, and I wanted Ron to take me, but I don't think he would have. No, now I know he wouldn't."

Colin's breath hitched again.

"I don't understand how he could do that. He- he was really sweet at first but it was all a lie!"

He broke down in tears again and Harry pulled him into another hug.

"It'll be alright Colin. I'm so sorry this happened to you," Harry said. Then he remembered what Ron said about his relationship with Colin, particularly about Colin having a tight ass, and a horrible thought occurred to him. "Colin, I'm sorry if this is really insensitive, but when you said you met up to fool around, what exactly did you do? He didn't make you do anything you didn't want to or didn't think you were ready for, did he?"

Colin shook his head.

“It was mostly kissing at first. We gave each other handjobs. I-” Colin looked down, as though ashamed, “I sucked him off a few times.”

“And did you go further?”

“Once, just before the Christmas holidays. I thought he was being really romantic. We went out onto the grounds when it was really snowy and there was a blanket in the trees set up with warming charms, but he just wanted to have sex.” A small, rueful smile appeared on Colin’s face. “It was alright. Not as good as Martin.”

“He- he didn’t use any toys on you at all?” Harry asked.

“No. It was just him.”

“That’s good,” Harry said, relief flooding through him.

The note in Ron’s stupid Christmas present to him said that he had one of those dildos himself and enjoyed using it, so for one horrible moment Harry worried he’d used it on Colin and now would have access to his ass whenever he wanted it. He was so glad that wasn’t the case.

“Do you want to head back up to Gryffindor Tower now?” Harry asked.

Colin still looked absolutely miserable. Tears kept leaking out no matter how many times he wiped them away.

“It was so dumb. Why did I ever think it was a good idea? Of course he wouldn’t change so quickly,” Colin said, “why did I let myself believe him?”

“It’s no use thinking like that Colin. You’re young and you made a mistake. It happens. Now you know better so you won’t make the same mistake again,” Harry said, “I know it’s not great advice and it probably doesn’t make you feel better, but things *will* get better. One day you’ll find somebody just right for you and you’ll never be happier.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because it’s what happened to me.”

Colin looked at him with wide eyes. Then his face crumpled as another round of tears hit him.

“You should have been the Gryffindor prefect,” he mumbled.

“I’m not sure I’d be very good at it.”

“You’d be much better than *him*. You- you care about people.”

“Well if he knows what’s good for him, he’ll stay away from you.”

Together they headed back to the Gryffindor common room, Colin still sniffing with tear-stained cheeks. More than one person looked over in concern, and a few tried coming over to check on them, but Harry waved them off. Ron was sitting in the corner of the room at Hermione’s table. If he was affected at all by his breakup with Colin, or Harry’s subsequent declaration, it didn’t show on his face. He didn’t even look up from his essay to see Harry’s venomous glare, but the others did and the pieces of the puzzle were put together.

They parted at the dormitories, Colin slipping inside the fourth-year room and Harry continuing up to the fifth-years. To think that he had been intending to take a nap before doing homework but now he felt too wired up to do either. Just when he thought Ron’s behaviour could sink no lower, he went and did something like this. It was pathetic, and it was downright cruel. It almost made him want to abandon the plan and have Ron and the others face the consequences of their actions, but no. This was always a long game. He wouldn’t have gotten this far if he ran off half-cocked at every new atrocity and revelation. Patience was the key, and victory and justice would be his in the end.

Unfortunately, those thoughts did very little to temper the fire raging away in his heart.

Chapter End Notes

The breakup between Ron and Colin was the first scene I thought of when it came to their relationship. Do I feel bad for essentially setting Colin up to be hurt in the end? Slightly, but now he's free to find himself someone who'll love him for real, and like Harry said, he'll never be happier.

Eavesdropping on an interview

What Ron had done to Colin became known to the residents of Gryffindor Tower very quickly. The only people Harry explicitly told were Seamus and Dean. He and Dean had to physically hold Seamus down, such was the force of his outrage. Seamus stormed off into the bathroom and they heard the shower running. Five minutes later, he emerged in a towel, shivering from what must have been a cold shower to cool off, and demanded cuddles. Many rude things were said about the redhead that evening as Seamus vented, and Harry did nothing to stop him. Dean was quieter, but it was clear just how angry he was.

By the next morning, the Hogwarts rumour mill, terrifying entity that it was, had gotten hold of the story and suddenly everybody knew what had happened. Ron very quickly became a social pariah. He hadn't been all that popular to begin with; no longer riding on Harry's coattails, his own poor attitude hadn't exactly endeared him to many of his classmates, but knowing that he was capable of stringing someone along in such an intimate way was a new low for him to sink to in their eyes.

At breakfast, Colin was surrounded by his friends. His eyes were red and puffy, but Harry was proud to see him putting on a brave face, smiling and laughing along with the people around him.

"And he did all that just to get to you? That's even worse!" Parvati said, "I know the three of you aren't super open with your relationship in public, even if you're also not hiding it, but nobody would be stupid enough to try something so underhanded like that and expect it to work!"

"I know! It's horrible! So unromantic! Nobody deserves to have their heart broken like that!" Lavender said.

Harry should have expected Parvati and Lavender to be annoyed by it. They loved gossip and they loved love stories. Ron had basically trampled over their ideal of romance so when they'd gone to the Room of Requirement, supposedly to work on their homework, the pair of them had spent all of the time so far going on an impassioned rant. It was only Dean practically holding Seamus in his lap that prevented him from joining them.

"Well, now Colin can find himself a proper man, one who'll treat him like the prince he is," Parvati said snootily, "he's way too good for Ron."

"Yeah, one day Ron will look back and realise what he's missing out on," Lavender said.

They both nodded decisively and they were finally able to get to work. It was a bit odd how in sync the pair of them could be sometimes, but Harry had come to accept it.

When they arrived back in the common room, it was to what was quickly becoming a normal sight. Hermione in the corner, slaving over her books, with Ron sitting next to her. What wasn't normal though was the way Hermione was completely ignoring him. Ron was looking

overwhelmed by what he was trying to write, but whenever he looked up to get Hermione's attention, she purposefully looked the other way.

"What's going on there do you reckon?" Harry asked.

"Do you actually want to know the answer?" Dean asked in response.

"Probably not, but it is a change."

"You missed a glorious sight," Fred said, dropping into a seat beside Neville, "those two had another argument and now Hermione is refusing to help Ron with his work. OWL year suddenly got so much harder for ickle Ronnikins."

"It looks like I've got five sickles coming my way," Harry said, nudging Seamus.

"There's still a chance they'll make up and be friends by the end of the year, and you'll need to cough up ten sickles," Seamus said, nudging Harry back.

"You two and your ridiculous bets," Dean shook his head fondly.

From across the room, George waved for Fred, who stood and left them alone. The six of them chatted amongst themselves, making plans to continue studying. Their OWL exams suddenly seemed so much closer this side of Christmas. Harry was in that bizarre state of not being worried about them, while also being worried. It was difficult to put into words.

Harry and the other boys bid the girls goodnight and headed up to their dormitory. On the way up the stairs, they quite literally bumped into Seth.

"Oh, um, I was asked to give you this note, but I didn't know where you were," the younger boy said, handing him a folded up piece of parchment.

"Thanks?" Harry said.

It was a short note. Harry didn't recognise the handwriting, but he had a couple of guesses who it was from.

I wanted you to know how much I have always liked you, but I never felt able to tell you how I truly felt until now. You're the best person I have ever met and I would love to be able to get to know you more.

Meet me in the empty classroom on the fourth floor by the old tapestry of Archie the Anguished tonight at 9pm. You won't be disappointed.

An admirer

"Seth?" Harry asked, making the boy jump and turn around, "who gave you this note?"

"I- I don't know her name, but she had long red hair?"

Harry thanked the boy and sent him off. As soon as he got to the dormitory, he pulled out the Marauders Map. Sure enough, in the specified classroom was Ginny.

“Looks like the plan is still on,” Harry showed the other boys.

“That’s-” Dean said, “she moves fast.”

“Until now they were still hedging their bets of which one they could get me to like, but now that Ron has royally cocked it up on his end, Ginny’s trying to make her move,” Harry tore up the note.

As soon as he was done, Seamus glommed onto him, squeezing him tightly.

“Shay?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why this is affecting me so much. It’s not like I didn’t know what Ron and Ginny were trying to do.”

“I get it,” Dean said. He came up behind Seamus and sandwiched him against Harry. “We’ve only really heard about it second hand from Harry. We’ve never witnessed it ourselves, not now that we’re together.”

“Doesn’t it bother you?” Seamus asked.

“Of course it does,” Dean said, “it really, really does. I guess I just don’t show it as much as you do. How easily you show your emotions is one of the things I like about you.”

“Me too,” Harry said.

“I feel like such a possessive prat, but you’re mine Harry. You’re mine. You’re Deans. You’re ours and we’re yours. They’re not going to get their grubby hands anywhere near you,” Seamus said hotly.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Harry said easily.

They gave Seamus one last squeeze between them and then parted. Neville, who had kindly not commented throughout their little moment, spoke up.

“You should probably tell your godfather about what’s happened. That way he can keep an eye out for any retaliation on his end.”

So that was what they did. They all piled into Harry’s bed, three of them sitting against the headboard and Seamus in Dean’s lap. Sirius answered the mirror quickly, the image fading into a view of one of the lounges in Grimmauld Place.

“Harry!” Sirius said brightly, though Harry caught the edge of tension in the corners of his eyes, “how’ve you been?”

“I’m alright, but you need to hear this.”

Between the four of them, they filled Sirius in on what Ron tried to do, and then the consequences that followed. They finished with Ginny's attempt at a secret rendezvous.

"Obviously it wasn't good for him to try this, but at the very least it has even more firmly put a wedge between you and him. Everybody, really. It also significantly limits the influence he and Hermione can have in your house, even if they're prefects."

"Not that they really do a whole lot for that anyway," Harry said, "they do their patrols but that's about it. Hermione tried threatening me with it once but other than that, neither of them have thrown their weight around with it."

"If anyone needs something from the fifth-years, they pretty much come straight to us," Neville said.

"Harry's even picked up a few ducklings," Seamus teased.

"I have not!"

"You kind of have," Dean said, then to Sirius, "we occasionally help the first-years with their homework, and the three boys look up to Harry quite a lot."

"You can't even argue this Harry. It's always you they go to first for help. The jumpy one, Seth, he barely even speaks to any of us but he will to you," Seamus said.

"It's good that you're helping others, even if officially none of you have that responsibility," Sirius said, "they're not fanboys, are they?"

"No," they all said.

"Good. James had a few of those when he got to about your age. It didn't exactly help his bighead, and it was always quite annoying for the rest of us when they'd come and fawn over him when he did something admittedly cool. Luckily James knew what they were and didn't ditch us for their empty validation. That's not something anyone needs. How's Colin doing?"

"About as well as you can do when you find out that your boyfriend was only dating you to appeal to a different boy," Harry said.

"I'm not sure if I'd call that relationship boyfriends," Neville said.

"Fuck buddies is closer, but that would imply they were friends," Seamus grumbled.

"*Anyway,*" Harry interjected, "he's putting on a brave face and not hiding away at least."

"I'm glad to hear that. You're all at that age where heartbreak tends to happen as you all figure yourselves and each other out, though admittedly not usually to that level," Sirius said.

The man sighed.

"What's wrong Sirius?" Harry said, cutting right to the heart of it.

“There’s been attacks on Muggles,” Sirius said, his tone heavy, “no Dark Marks but Kingsley and Moody are pretty sure it’s the Death Eaters.”

“W-where-” Dean asked, and Sirius smiled.

“Your mother’s fine. The attacks weren’t anywhere near London. That would be too close to the Ministry for comfort when they’re still laying low, but the fact that they’ve started escalating is worrying. They’ve grown comfortable enough with the smokescreen the Ministry’s provided to more openly attack. It’s only a matter of time before there’s a confrontation between us and them.”

“Wouldn’t that be a good thing though?” Neville asked, then hurried to say, “not that I want you guys to get hurt, but surely it would be a lot harder to deny.”

“You’d think so, but Voldemort has Death Eaters in high places, most notably Lucius Malfoy. The right words in the right ears could easily have the blame reversed and we’d be the ones facing punishment. The Order of the Phoenix can only claim any kind of legitimacy if there’s the threat of Voldemort. Otherwise we’re just a band of vigilantes under Dumbledore’s leadership.”

“What do you need us to do?” Harry asked.

“Prepare. I don’t know what Voldemort is planning. The small bits of information I can get from Narcissa aren’t enough to paint a complete picture, but we know he’s after something at Hogwarts. I want you to prepare. Remember what Remus and I taught you Harry. If you can do so safely, teach your friends as well. That way we’ll all be better defended and I can sleep a bit easier at night,” Sirius said.

They ended the call not long after. Harry sagged against the headboard, the feeling of despondency settling over him as he once again wished that there was more that he could do. A part of him knew that he still had plenty of things to worry about. He had whatever retaliation would come from the mess with Ron, trying to figure out what Voldemort and Dumbledore were after in Hogwarts, and try and shake off his Umbridge approved stalkers.

It was all a bit much sometimes, but luckily he had such great friends at his side.

January gave way to February. The cold weather gave no sign of easing, as Harry knew well from his morning swims. He had never been so glad that he had developed such a good mastery of the Warming Charm. Braich the Giant Squid swam close to him whenever he was in the water, occasionally reaching out to press an arm to his stomach as though checking he wasn’t too cold. It was kind of sweet, and just what Harry would have expected from the Guardian Spirit of Helga Hufflepuff.

Their lessons ramped up, the material getting harder. Hermione showed no signs of easing up her boundaries and Ron was clearly floundering. He consistently performed at the bottom of the class, only beating Crabbe and Goyle when they shared classes with the Slytherins. God knows what would happen come the exams.

As for Harry, he was busy as ever. On top of schoolwork, he did extra studying with the other fifth-years, dodging around the Inquisitorial Squad who continued to try and follow him. He had started teaching the others how to duel properly, putting into practise the spells they'd learned from Harry's correspondence course, and he was quite pleased with how they were taking to it. Neville in particular seemed very determined to do well in this. No doubt he was thinking about the escaped Death Eaters.

The post owls arrived one morning, bringing with them the usual flurry of letters and scattering raindrops as they battled their way through the downpour outside. Dean accepted his copy of the Daily Prophet. There was nothing very interesting on the front page, but just as Harry was finishing his bacon, Dean rapidly tapped his arm.

"Look at this," he said, showing him a story.

ANTI-SOCIAL MAGICAL BEHAVIOUR STRIKES MUGGLE TOWN

At 10:52pm last night, a group of witches and wizards descended on the Muggle town of Wooler to engage in several destructive and illegal displays of magic. Members of the Auror Office arrived on the scene quickly, along with representatives from the Obliviation Department to ensure there were no breaches of the Statute of Secrecy, only to find all culprits had fled the scene. According to reports, there was damage to property from what appeared to be many unauthorised duels. Thankfully, no injuries have been documented from this incident.

A representative from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement released a statement, stating "the hoodlums who so brazenly violated the law shall be brought to justice. An investigation is underway and it is only a matter of time before they are caught. If anyone has any information about this incident, they are urged to share it."

"Do you reckon this was the Order?" Dean whispered.

"Probably."

Up at the top table, Dumbledore had a grave air to him. Beside him, McGonagall's lips were thin. Umbridge didn't seem to care. Her eyes roamed the hall for misbehaving students as they usually did.

"An incident like this should be more important news than page ten," Seamus commented, "people openly using magic to duel one another in a Muggle town? That's a potentially major breach of the Statute of Secrecy right there. This smells like a cover up."

"Fudge has been leaning on the Daily Prophet to insist all is well. He probably couldn't stop them reporting it, but he could at least have it buried within the paper where people would be less likely to read it," Neville said, "it's the sort of thing that would make people nervous and start to question the official narrative."

"The truth is easy. Lies are hard. That's what my mum likes to say when she talks about students making up stories to get out of trouble," Dean said, "lies always make you dig deeper. Looks like Fudge is finding that out right now."

Harry was more worried about Sirius. If this was a skirmish between the Order and the Death Eaters, then it was likely they didn't come out of it unscathed. As soon as class was over for the day, he rushed up to the dormitory, shutting the hangings and calling him with the mirror. The relief he felt when he saw Sirius uninjured was immense.

"We got wind of another planned attack on the Muggles. I wasn't there, but Remus was. It was him, Tonks, Emmeline, Dedalus and Hestia against three Death Eaters. They were all wearing masks so we don't know who they were, and they also weren't bothered about throwing around curses. Emmeline and Hestia both came away with some bruises, and Dedalus is still a bit woozy, but other than that they're all fine. Tonks managed to get a good Bone Breaker Curse on one of the Death Eaters' legs before the three of them retreated."

"So they stopped them from hurting the Muggles?"

"They did, and we managed to avoid too much heat from the press. If Tonks hadn't been there, we likely wouldn't have known that the Aurors were about to arrive, giving us a chance to get out of there before they could all be identified," Sirius said, "for a first clash, it could have been a lot worse."

Indeed it could. All five of them could have been killed. If Voldemort had been there, they likely would have been. Or they could have been seen and outed in the press.

They finished the conversation and while it was good seeing Sirius was fine and hearing that the others were ok, Harry wasn't sure how much happier he was with that news. He was vaguely aware of Seamus and Dean joining him, Seamus slipping into the space behind him. He let out a low hum when he felt Seamus rubbing his shoulders.

"You're all tense," Seamus said, "is everything alright?"

Harry relayed what Sirius had told him.

"So I was right," Dean said grimly.

Seamus hugged him.

"It's going to be fine Harry."

"Is it? It feels like things are getting worse."

"I know, but we have to believe that they will get better," Seamus said, "otherwise there's no point in even fighting."

Dean shuffled closer, leaning in and kissing Harry. Harry's eyes closed as he accepted the kiss.

"When this is all over, you can let go for a while. You won't need to carry the weight any more. We'll take it for you. You can just relax," he said.

That sounded really nice. Getting away from it all, just the three of them. No expectations. No burdens. No homicidal maniacs or old control freaks trying to meddle with his life.

“I know a way you can relax,” Seamus said, rubbing Harry’s chest and pressing in closer.

“I appreciate the offer, but I don’t think I’m in the mood for that,” Harry said, “sorry.”

“What about that ritual Godric taught you? Maybe that would help?” Dean said, “you told us it needs you to be calm and relaxed to work, right?”

“Maybe. It’s always a bit of a gamble what I see with that, but I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to try,” Harry said, “after lights out when everyone’s asleep, come back here and we can do it.”

“You want us to do the ritual with you?” Seamus asked.

“Of course. Unless you don’t want to, I just thought it’d be something fun to do together.”

Seamus kissed his cheek.

“Then it’s a date.”

The rest of the evening was uneventful. It passed by in a blur of homework and studying and before he knew it, Harry was back in the dormitory getting ready for bed. He caught the eyes of his boys, nodding to show the plan was still on. He pulled his hangings shut, the focus stone on the bed beside him, and waited. While Neville likely wouldn’t have issue with seeing the other two coming into his bed, they still wanted to be careful with Ron. The grumpiness had started to settle in and they could all pretty much guess how he would react.

Eventually, the lights in the dorm went out. Ron came up to bed, changed, and shut his hangings. Only then did the hangings around Harry’s four-poster shift as Dean and Seamus slipped inside.

“I know we’re doing this to help you relax, but I’m still quite excited to try it,” Dean said, “getting to actually see events happening in history. Do you know how revolutionary that is? We could go the sites of the actual events and witness what happened with our own eyes instead of relying on stories and documents passed down.”

“Don’t get your hopes up too much. One time I tried this I only saw what happened a few days ago. It all depends on what magic wants to show us,” Harry said.

“So how does this ritual work?” Seamus asked, “what do we need to do for it?”

“We need to calm our minds and focus on our magic like we did for the Yule ritual. I’ve got my focus stone which should help us tap into the natural magic all around us, and hopefully I’ll be able to help guide you two since I’ve done this a few times before,” Harry said, “we also need to be in a state of nature to be more receptive to the natural magic.”

“You mean we need to be naked,” Dean said.

“Or just underwear works too. Whatever you’re comfortable with,” Harry said.

Seamus was already stripping out of his pyjamas. When he was done, he looked at the others expectantly.

“We’ve had sex. There’s no way we could still be harbouring any kind of anxiety around nudity with each other.”

Harry rolled his eyes at the bluntness but he and Dean dutifully stripped as well. When that was done, they arranged themselves in bed. Ideally they’d lie next to one another but these beds, while they could more or less comfortably fit two people, weren’t big enough for three shoulder to shoulder. In the end, they topped and tailed, with Harry lying between them, his head by their feet. It was still a bit of a squeeze, but at least none of them were in danger of falling out.

“Alright. We need to close our eyes. Focus on the magic within and let the natural magic wash over us. Don’t try to do anything with it. Just let it flow through you.”

It was easy for Harry to do this after so many times doing this same ritual. He sank into his own magic, feeling the movement of the natural magic as though it was a river flowing through his body. He didn’t touch it, nor try to impede it in any way. He simply left it to its course.

The air was filled with the sound of slow and steady breathing as Dean and Seamus got into the right frame of mind. They didn’t have the same level of practice, but they were able to latch onto the feeling from the Yule ritual and use that to orient themselves. Harry felt it when they managed it. He gently drew their magic closer to his own, allowing it to entwine with his own. The flow of natural magic shifted, the door of the Ritual of Remembrance forming before him. Harry led them all through it.

When he opened his eyes, he was outside, lying between two thick trees. Snow drifted lazily from the sky in fluffy flakes, settling into thick layers on the ground, but Harry did not feel the cold. His eyes could see clearly, but he also knew that it was night time. Either side of him were Seamus and Dean, and they all sat up at the same time.

“This is-” Seamus said, inspecting his surroundings then his body, “we’re naked!”

“That’s how it is in this ritual,” Harry said.

“But nobody can see us?”

“This is a magical memory. It plays out exactly as it did before. No, they can’t see us.”

Dean stood up, swaying a little on his feet.

“I feel strangely light.”

“You get used to the feeling.”

“Where are we?”

“Somewhere in Hogwarts. It’s strange,” Harry said, “usually when I use this ritual, I enter the memory from the same place my body is in. I thought we’d be in Gryffindor Tower, not out in the forest.”

“Maybe because there’s three of us, it was thrown off?” Dean suggested.

Harry shrugged.

“So what did we come here to see?” Seamus asked.

“No idea. Let’s go explore.”

They set off through the woods and eventually reached an open field. They were on the wide, sloping lawns leading down from the castle to the lake. The Quidditch pitch was off in the distance, and closer to them was Hagrid’s hut. Whatever memory they were in was from sometime in the last fifty years.

“This is so cool,” Seamus said, “we’re not even sinking into the snow.”

The snow drifts behind them were pristine and untouched, the three of them moving across their surface like mere ghosts.

“If you think that’s cool, watch this.”

Harry disconnected himself from gravity and rose up into the air. Seamus and Dean gawked at him.

“We’re not bound by the same rules as the things in the memory. We can travel based on thought alone, so think that you want to fly.”

It didn’t take long for his boys to join him in the air. They rose up, flying amongst the towers and parapets of Hogwarts Castle, the air ringing with their joyous laughter. There were still some lights on in the windows, indicating that while it was night time, it wasn’t so late that everyone was asleep. Harry should have suggested this to them before now. Flying was always incredibly freeing, but to fly like this, and with them? There was nothing like it. They came to rest on the roof of the Great Hall, Harry tucking himself against Dean and revelling in his solid warmth.

“So is this what you usually do when you go into a magical memory? You just explore until you find whatever it is you’re supposed to see?” Dean asked.

“Not exactly. There’s a little tugging sensation in my chest guiding me to whatever it is in the memory that magic wants me to see. Can either of you feel it?”

“Kind of,” Seamus said, “it’s less of a tugging and more of a nudge. What do you reckon it is?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

They sank down into the empty Great Hall then through the oak doors. Wandering the school at night was always a bizarre experience. They came across a couple of students, but once they left the routes leading from the Library to the common rooms, there was no one. They followed the tugging sensation until they came to a very familiar gryphon statue.

“Dumbledore’s office?” Harry said.

“Is this about whatever he’s planning?” Seamus asked.

Harry said nothing. He led them through the statue and up the spiralling staircase. It took a moment to steal his nerve, reminding himself that the people in the memory couldn’t see him, before he passed through the office door.

Dumbledore’s office was practically identical to how it was in the present. Strange silver devices sat on spindly legged tables, the portraits of the previous headmasters and headmistresses lined the walls, and Fawkes stood on his perch, looking a little shabby but not quite to the point of burning. Harry, Seamus and Dean nervously shuffled around the perimeter of the room, his boys trying to cover themselves up, but Harry’s eyes were fixed on the other people. Dumbledore was at his desk, speaking to somebody sitting across from him. It was a man, oddly familiar, who might have been described as handsome but his features seemed oddly twisted, as though somebody had tried to make a person who looked handsome but hadn’t quite got it right. It was slightly unsettling.

“I have travelled far and wide, Professor. My breadth of magical knowledge has become immense, and I truly believe that I would be able to pass this along to the students of this fine school. Please, allow me the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.”

The man’s soft, almost hissing voice sent a chill down Harry’s spine. The strange familiarity made sense almost immediately.

“I’m sure it has Tom. I have heard many tales of your exploits,” Dumbledore said.

This was Tom Riddle. This was Voldemort. Harry missed part of the conversation from the revelation. He had to shake himself to pay attention again.

“And what of Travers, Mulciber, Carrow and Lestrangle? If I were to go down to the Hog’s Head, surely I wouldn’t find them there?”

“You are as well informed as usual, Dumbledore.”

Dumbledore hummed.

“It is a bit odd that so many people would come along with you for something as simple as a job interview. What will happen to them if you get it?”

“They are my friends. Friends support one another. If I get the job here, then I suppose they will have to find their own way in the world. Each of them are more than capable of doing so.” Something in Voldemort’s expression twisted. “I take it from your tone that I will not be getting the job.”

“I am incredibly happy to hear you consider them your friends. Others may have used the term followers,” Dumbledore said, “and I’m afraid that no, I shall not be giving you the position.”

Voldemort stood.

“Then we have nothing more to say to one another.”

Dumbledore tried to engage Voldemort with some more pleasant small talk but the man was already striding out of the room. When the door snapped shut behind him, Dumbledore let out a big sigh. Harry thought that something else would happen, maybe Dumbledore would reveal something, but the tugging in his chest was leading him away. He grabbed Seamus and Dean’s arms, snapping them out of their revelry, and they left Dumbledore to his paperwork in silence.

“Was that ... him? Was that V-Voldemort?” Seamus asked, face going pale.

“It was. Come on, we need to follow him.”

Neither of them looked particularly happy about that, and when they caught up to Voldemort, Harry didn’t blame them. Voldemort’s face was a mask but behind the eyes was a blazing rage. He stormed through the corridors, only slowing down when he reached the seventh floor. Harry frowned. Why wasn’t he heading downstairs to leave? Voldemort surreptitiously looked around, then moved silently towards the blank stretch of wall beside the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy.

“He’s going into the Room of Requirement!” Dean said just as the door appeared.

They followed Voldemort inside. The Room of Hidden Things spread out all around them. It was hard to imagine that nearly fifty years had passed between this memory and the present. The piles of lost and forgotten items towered just as high, the maze just as windy. Voldemort moved through it with confidence. He stopped at a mound of armchairs, bookcases and chests, loose fabric and pocket chains filling in the rest of the space. With a wave of his wand, the mound stabilised and Voldemort picked a path to the top with sure footing.

Another wave of his wand had the items at the top rearranging themselves, forming an alcove. Voldemort seemed very pleased with himself. From his pocket, he withdrew and unshrunk a bust of a young woman. They could clearly see the almost perverse glee Voldemort was taking as he unshrunk a briefcase. Carefully he set it down and unclasped it. Inside was padded with soft velvet, a cushion for a shining silver tiara with a large, deep blue sapphire embedded in it.

Voldemort took the tiara from the case with steady hands, setting it on the busts head with diligent care. Once he was done, the case went back into his pocket and he left the mound. From the bottom, the bust and the tiara didn’t stand out in the little alcove, yet somehow it was still in pride of place.

Harry caught Seamus and Dean’s eye. All three of them were speechless as they rose up and up, and their eyes opened in the waking world. They sat up and stared at each other, unable to form words. It was still dark, but a quick check of the time showed them it was close to when Harry would normally get up to go swimming.

“Voldemort tried to get a job at Hogwarts!” Seamus said, aghast, “can you imagine!”

“That’s not important right now,” Dean said, “Harry, you said there was only one horcrux left.”

Harry nodded.

“We’re pretty sure it’s Ravenclaw’s diadem, but we can’t find it because it’s behind powerful wards. We didn’t even consider it might be at Hogwarts because we had no idea Voldemort even came here after he left school, but if he came back to try and get a job-” Harry trailed off.

All this time, the horcrux had been at Hogwarts, almost literally right under their noses. Harry and the others had been in the Room of Requirement loads of times before and they never realised. They’d even been in the Room of Hidden Things!

But they hadn’t explored. That vast room full of the detritus of students and staff long past had daunted them. No doubt it would do the same to others. Even if somebody were to explore it, what were the chances they’d find that exact mound of stuff, and happen to notice the bust and tiara perched at the top. Of course, this was even assuming that any students even found the Room to begin with. Like Fred and George, they might have stumbled across it one time and never found it again, assuming it was just one of the quirks of the castle.

Dumbledore had to know, or at least he had to suspect something. Surely he wouldn’t have allowed Voldemort onto the grounds just to hear a job application.

“What are we going to do?” Seamus asked, “we need to go and get it.”

“And we will, but we need to be careful. We didn’t see the end of the magical memory. Voldemort may have left other traps and protections in place, so we need to do this properly,” Harry said.

They were in a bit of a daze when they left Harry’s bed, the revelation that the final horcrux was at Hogwarts slowly processing. For Harry, it caused a great surge of determination. This was the last one. After it was destroyed, Voldemort would be mortal.

Throughout the day, Harry asked the others to meet him, so after dinner, the group met up outside the Room of Requirement. More so than usual, Harry made sure none of them were followed. His boys were there, along with Neville, Parvati and Lavender, as well as the twins. The only new person was somebody Harry had personally asked. Luna stood with them, not at all phased by the slightly suspicious looks the twins were giving her.

“Um, Harry-”

“Luna deserves to be here. If there’s anyone in the castle who deserves it, it’s her,” Harry said.

They entered the Room of Hidden Things before anyone could accidentally stumble across them.

“We know what the final horcrux is. It’s Ravenclaw’s diadem,” Harry said once the door closed.

“Her lost diadem?” Luna said, then she looked about, “I can feel it somewhere.”

“That's why I asked you to come. Voldemort hid the diadem somewhere in here. With your connection to Ravenclaw, you might be able to find it, just like I found the locket through the Slytherin magic,” Harry said, “if we can't, then we need to spread out and search for it. He hid it at the top of one of the mounds of rubbish but it might have been knocked off or moved since then. We're looking for a silver tiara with sapphires in it but *do not* touch it. Call me over if you find it.”

The others nodded and they spread out into the Room. The maze of passages between piles of junk was twisty and confusing. Harry tried to follow the path he remembered Voldemort taking, but the things he could see in the piles weren't the same, as though somebody in the intervening years had come along and reorganised everything. Luna and his boys followed him.

“It should be about here,” he said, turning to Luna, “can you feel anything?”

“Only deep sadness. It is here somewhere, but where I cannot say,” Luna said, hugging herself.

Seamus carefully climbed up the tower of junk, peering back and shaking his head when he reached the top.

“It's not up here,” he called down, “and I can't see the little alcove that he made for it.”

“Harry!” came the distant shout from Lavender.

Harry rushed towards her. She, Parvati and Neville were standing at the bottom of a smaller mound made up of what primarily looked like cases of jewellery.

“Somebody has obviously been by to organise things since clothes are kept together more often than not, so we figured the jewellery would be the same,” Lavender said, “is that it?”

She pointed to the top of the pile. There was a bust of a witch, atop which sat a very familiar silver tiara. Harry was sure it was the diadem, but he turned to Luna to confirm.

“Is that the diadem?” he asked, but Luna was already staring at it.

Her large eyes were wide and glistening with unshed tears.

“For a thousand years she has been lost. My lords family have searched for it for generations, and as their stewards so has mine. To see Ravenclaw's diadem with my own eyes,” her face crumpled slightly, “what has he done to it? Why would he do such a thing?”

“I wish I knew, but this should be the last. The Goblins will do what they can to save it, but there is a possibility that it might need to be destroyed.”

This news caused a few tears to run down her cheeks. A moment later, she pulled herself together again.

“If that is what must be done, my lord will understand. One will come again who can recreate Lady Rowena's work. Wit beyond measure was her greatest treasure, carried by all those who wear the blue and bronze of her house,” Luna said, “I leave it to you Lord Potter.”

Harry climbed up towards the bust. From his bag, he pulled out a pair of dragonhide gloves and a box he had Kreacher bring him from Grimmauld Place. As carefully as he could, he picked up the diadem. Through the gloves, he couldn't feel the metal, but something in Harry felt as though it was warm to the touch. He placed the diadem in the box and closed the lid, sealing it with a spell.

“Kreacher,” Harry said when he returned to the ground, and the Elf appeared, “take this to Sirius. Tell him that we found the last one and he needs to take it to the goblins.”

“Master Harry has found the last of those cursed things?” Kreacher said, then he pulled himself up to his full height, “Kreacher shall do this.”

He took the box and disappeared with a loud crack. None of them moved, still staring at the spot Kreacher used to be.

“So is that it? Voldemort can be killed now?” Dean asked.

“Yes. There shouldn't be any more horcruxes. This is the last one,” Harry said.

A wave of relief passed through the group. Lavender and Parvati gave each other hugs, even pulling in a bemused Luna. Fred and George looked pleased, as did the other fifth-year boys, but Harry just felt lighter. They had severed Voldemort's tethers to life, and now the bastard was just as mortal as anyone else. There would come a time very soon when he would figure that out, and when it happened there would be no coming back from it.

Voldemort would die, and Harry would be free.

Escalating bad news

Chapter Notes

Mature scene ahead.

Starts: "Seamus and Dean were both lounging..."

Ends: "Sleep came easily to them that night..."

The wait to hear back from Sirius was worse than just about anything Harry had experienced before. He considered himself a pretty patient person all things considered but never before had something quite so important happened. Once it was confirmed that the horcrux was destroyed, all they needed to do was find Voldemort and kill him. While that was no easy task, it was a hell of a lot better than contending with immortality.

He had to keep himself from glancing up at the staff table at meals, convinced that somehow there would be some indication of what happened up there, but there wasn't. Dumbledore didn't show up for any meals, but that was becoming a more and more common occurrence. The other teachers didn't look any different, and Umbridge was still scheming.

It was only later that day when they were all getting ready for bed that he heard Sirius's voice through the mirror. He hastily grabbed it, answering it as soon as it was in his hand.

"Is it done?" Harry asked in lieu of a greeting.

"The horcrux in Ravenclaw's diadem has been destroyed. The Goblins did what they could to cleanse it without also destroying the diadem itself, but Heir Ravenclaw will likely need to 'reactivate' the magic so to speak, just like Neville did with Hufflepuff's cup."

"That's great!" Harry said, only for his elation to fall at the look on Sirius's face, "it is good, isn't it?"

"There's no easy way to say this so I'll just come right out with it. The diadem wasn't the last horcrux," Sirius said gravely, "the goblins double checked. After they destroyed the piece of soul in the diadem, they could still detect one more. The soul fragment must be tiny, its presence concealed by the larger fragments remaining."

"No," Harry said, unable to keep the horror out of his voice, "but- surely he couldn't make any more!"

"Remember Harry that nobody has ever made this many horcruxes before. Voldemort has likely pushed the extent of his soul as far as it could go to make seven horcruxes."

"Seven is a powerfully magical number," Harry said numbly, "was he always trying to make seven?"

"I wish I knew. My theory is that he intended to make six for a seven part soul, magically powerful as you said. He must have made five before he came to kill you, probably wanting to use your death as the catalyst for his final horcrux, only it went wrong and he instead turned you into one."

"But he didn't know that, so he thought that he was still missing one and so he made another after he came back," Harry said, "you seem really sure of this."

"It's just an idea, but it makes sense. I also have a pretty good idea of what the last horcrux is," Sirius said, "Narcissa has had the pleasure of being in Voldemort's company several times recently. She told me that Voldemort seems remarkably drawn towards his pet snake Nagini. Apparently he speaks to it as though it was his precious child, and he seems to have a remarkable level of control over it, even for a Parselmouth. He also seems to be able to know what the snake knows, as though he has a connection to its mind."

"He made the snake a horcrux!" Harry said, understanding what Sirius was getting at, "that seems like it'd be really dangerous."

"It is. An object can be strengthened, reinforced, hidden away in a dusty vault for centuries without issue, but a living thing needs food and water. It has a normal lifespan, and when it dies the soul fragment will also die," Sirius said, "in other words, the final horcrux is both easier and harder to deal with."

"I thought this would all be over."

"I know you did," Sirius said consolingly, "but I firmly believe we're on the home stretch now. You've been so strong Harry. I'm so proud of you."

The kind words did little to make him feel better. His dreams that night were plagued by shadowy snakes kept just out of reach, high cruel laughter whenever he tried and failed to chase after them. It felt like he barely slept at all when his alarm went off the next morning, and it was only the itch of routine that allowed him to pull himself out of bed. The swim helped a bit, but Harry still pulled Dean into the shower stall with him as soon as he'd taken his clothes off.

"Not that I'm complaining, but is everything alright?" Dean asked when Harry hugged him tightly.

Harry took a deep breath and explained when Sirius had told him. Dean hissed out a curse and held Harry just as fiercely. The others took the news just as poorly. Harry hated to see how their faces fell at the news that Voldemort still refused to die.

"I get the feeling that it'll all come down to one battle," Harry said, his voice slightly muffled into Seamus just as he was sandwiched between his boyfriends, "we kill the snake at the same time we kill Voldemort."

"I know what you mean," Seamus said, "we'll be right there with you when it happens."

"No! I can't- it'll be too dangerous. I don't know what I would do if either of you got hurt."

“And you don't think we feel the same way about you?” Dean said, “we'll fight to keep you safe, just as you'll fight to keep us safe. We'll come out on top in the end.”

Harry snuggled into his boys, trying to absorb the optimism they both seemed to be exuding right now. It was a hope and a dream that they would come out of this unscathed, but it was one that Harry would gladly cling to.

Despite the bad news, life had to carry on. For Harry, this meant the second Gryffindor Quidditch match of the season against Hufflepuff. The grounds were clear of snow but the air was bracingly cold, viciously biting at any exposed skin it could find. Harry was happy with his warming charm, but everyone else looked miserable.

The cold got even worse during the game itself. Flying at speeds made the wind whip around them. Harry's hands were numb where they gripped the handle of his Firebolt as tightly as he could.

The new Hufflepuff team put on a good showing, particularly their Beaters and Keeper, but the Seeker wasn't up to Cedric's standards. The game lasted half an hour, ending as soon as Harry caught a glimpse of the Golden Snitch. He shot after it, snagging it from the air as cheers erupted from the Gryffindor stands.

The party afterwards in the common room was its usual raucous affair. Fred and George appeared with food and drinks from the kitchens, and the atmosphere was full of warmth and happiness. Even Hermione sulking in the corner wasn't enough to dampen everyone's spirit. For Harry though, the best part came later.

He slipped up to the dormitory later on as everything was winding down, intending to have a quick shower before bed. When he came back into the dormitory, towel around his waist, nobody else was there, but the hangings around his four poster had been moved. Harry carefully approached them, but he needn't have bothered. As he reached out, the curtains opened and Harry nearly choked on his breath.

Seamus and Dean were both lounging in his bed, and both of them were completely naked.

“Did you miss us?” Seamus said with a flirtatious smirk.

“We figured you deserved a reward for your victory today,” Dean said, “you can have us however you want us.”

And Harry did. Towel abandoned on the floor, hangings closed and warded for privacy, Harry descended upon them, claiming their lips and touching whatever parts of their bodies he could reach. They returned the favour just as eagerly. The three of them were a tangle of limbs; tongues, mouths and hands wandering whenever they could. It was a blissful haze of pleasure that had all three of them completely enraptured.

“I didn't realise how hot this looked,” Seamus said as Harry slowly pushed inside of Dean.

The darker skinned boy was on his back, his legs wrapped around Harry's hips. Both of them could see Harry's cock easing into his ass, the tight rim giving way. Harry bit back a groan at the sensation of Dean's walls hugging him, right up until he bottomed out and he leaned forward to claim Dean's lips with a sloppy kiss.

After that he moved, becoming lost in the rhythm of pleasure with each thrust. Seamus joined in at some point, lying alongside Dean so he could make out with the boy, his hand furiously pumping his own cock. Harry picked up the pace, taking hold of his boyfriends dicks with a hand each and working them in time. It turned both of them into moaning messes. It didn't take much longer for them to reach their climaxes, and they all came hard.

"You're right Shay. That does feel great," Dean said as he caught his breath, coming down from his high.

"You doubted me?" Seamus teased, "so was Harry's dick better than his ass?"

"Both. Both are good."

Harry leaned over them, pinning Dean with a deep kiss.

"Both of yours are good too," he said.

Sleep came easily to them that night, even if they were all squeezed into the same bed together.

As the days continued to pass, Harry grew increasingly more cautious. The Inquisitorial Squad had upped their game in trying to follow him. It felt like not a second of the day went by without somebody dogging his heels. It meant their group study sessions had to be put on hold. While none of them reported being stalked, Harry didn't want to risk Umbridge's attention falling on them if she felt they were who he was meeting. He had ways to get around his stalkers. His friends didn't.

"Tell me Bletchley, is there such a thing as a restraining order in the magical world? Because I really feel like I need to get one," Harry said, arms crossed looking unimpressed as he stared down today's follower.

"I have just about as much choice in this as you do Potter," Bletchley said, "we've been given clear instructions to figure out where you go during your free time."

"And has Madam Umbridge told you why she wants this information so badly?"

"I never said it was Umbridge," Bletchley said.

Harry simply raised his eyebrow, as though trying to convey just how little he was convinced by that.

"It is a failing of magical law I'm afraid," Justin Finch-Fletchley said in Herbology one day. None of his other friends knew if there was anything legal he could do about the issue, but he knew Justin liked to study the law, so on a whim he'd asked him. "Harassment is a concept in magical law, but stalking isn't. I know the latter usually can be classed as the former, but it

can be difficult to definitely tie the two together unless stalking is specifically defined as a form of harassment to be taken seriously. Why the sudden interest?"

"No reason. Just felt it would be something useful to know," Harry said.

"For someone of your status, I can completely see why," Justin said, accepting his answer.

The increased attention from Umbridge was very annoying. Harry couldn't help feeling antsy. He and his friends could only study in the common room, but that meant they couldn't really do anything practical, and definitely no duelling practice. With Voldemort still out there, they needed to be as good as they could be. Why couldn't Umbridge just leave him alone?

"We'll see if we can get away tonight," Neville said, "if we go straight after dinner, we'll be followed, but later in the evening should work."

"I suppose," Harry said.

He idly waved his wand, the cushion he was supposed to be banishing soaring across the room gracefully to land in the designated box. From somewhere behind him, Hermione huffed, her own cushion landing neatly on top of his.

"We've got an essay for McGonagall and Snape, a rune translation for Babbling, and we need to read two chapters for Sprout," Seamus said, "anything else they'd like to dump on us?"

"Do not even say that. Are you trying to jinx it?" Harry said, "I've also got an essay for Professor Vector and an assignment for History of Magic."

"Then we'd best get a head start when we get back up to the common room," Dean said, "let's start with Potions since Snape is always looking for us to mess everything up."

After dinner, the four boys and two girls set up their books at the tables in the common room and got to work. Across the common room, Fred and George were peddling their wares. This time it was hats that turned your head invisible when worn. It was an incredible piece of magic, one that even got Hermione interested for a second before she remembered to be disapproving. The rest of the common room fell into its usual level of noise. Those in fourth-year and below generally knew to try to keep the noise down to a somewhat reasonable degree. The upper years might not be to Hermione's level, but even they had put the fear of god into those who disturbed their work too much.

"Any luck?" Seamus asked.

"None," Harry said, tucking the Marauders Map back into his bag.

There were still plenty of people wandering about the corridors, all members of the Inquisitorial Squad. Even with the invisibility cloak it would be hard to sneak around them all, to the point that it wasn't worth it to even try.

"Never mind. We can finish our homework just as well here," Neville said.

“It’s a shame. I think I was really getting the hang of the Shield Charm,” Parvati said.

Harry finished his Potions essay, then looked inside his bag, intending to make a start on Arithmancy, when he realised he couldn’t find the book he needed. A quick dash up to the dormitory proved it wasn’t there. Had he not gotten it out of the library at the start of the week? Apparently not.

“I’ll be back in a bit. I need to get something from the library,” Harry said.

“Do you want one of us to come with you?” Dean asked.

“I should be fine. Going to the library isn’t against the rules yet.”

Leaving his bag behind, Harry left the common room. There was still an hour before the library shut for the evening, so he had plenty of time. The corridors were sparse, most people having returned to their common rooms, but when Harry entered the library, he found plenty of people there working. He knew the book he needed, so he beelined for the Arithmancy section, found a copy and pulled it out. Madam Pince gave him the same suspicious look she gave everyone attempting to remove one of her precious books from its sacred space, but eventually she relented.

Two flights of stairs up, Harry heard muffled talking. Seth, Eric and Euan were having a deep debate as they wandered the halls, heading from the direction of the History of Magic corridor.

“I’m telling you that’s not right. The Gargoyles were doing well in their strike and it was because of the war in the Muggle world that their efforts were derailed. Professor Binns literally said this in class!” Eric said.

“But the Gargoyle strike was in 1911, and the war in the Muggle world didn’t start until 1914, so it couldn’t be what caused the negotiations to be derailed,” Euan countered.

“Are you sure we can’t just ask Professor Binns? He might be in the staffroom?” Seth asked.

“No!” the other boys said at the same time.

That was when they spotted Harry.

“Harry!” Eric said, “could you settle a debate for us please?”

“About the Gargoyle Strike of 1911?” Harry said, “sorry, I don’t really remember that topic. All I can remember is that Euan is right and the First World War wasn’t what caused the negotiations to go awry.”

“Told you!”

“But then what was it?” Seth asked.

“I’m not sure. I think it had something to do with a group of sandstone gargoyles in Dorset, but I might be wrong,” Harry said.

“Oh,” Eric said, “that sounds really boring.”

“A lot of what Professor Binns teaches sounds boring, but most of it is actually really interesting,” Harry said.

“That’s like a lot of our classes. Professor Sprout is good, even if plants are so dull,” Euan said.

“It’s not dull,” Seth piped up.

“But it’s so dirty! How can you like it?”

“Now now, it’s alright to like different things,” Harry said calmly.

“Yeah, like you like Defence Against the Dark Arts even though Professor Umbridge is a terrible teacher!” Eric said cheerily, “do you think you could give us any advice for that class?”

“Only if you want to!” Seth hurried to say, “you’re probably really busy, and you’ve got really important exams coming up soon.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry,” Eric said, “I didn’t mean to take up so much of your time.”

“It’s alright. I don’t mind helping you out,” Harry said, “come on, let’s head back up to the common room. It’s chilly out here.”

They headed off to the seventh floor.

“So you’ll really help us?” Seth asked.

“I can’t promise to teach you or anything, but I can at least point you in the right direction,” Harry said, “I’m helping my friends prepare for their exams too, so it’d be no bother really.”

“A-ha!”

The high-pitched noise of triumph had Harry immediately tensing. Turning around, he saw Umbridge striding towards him. Her smile was vicious and smug, and far too gleeful for Harry’s liking.

“Caught in the act, Mr Potter. How disappointing,” Umbridge tutted.

“Professor?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. You know exactly what you’re doing. I think the four of you should come with me for a little chat,” Umbridge said.

Harry glanced at the three first-years, who all looked terrified, so he led the way in following Umbridge. To his surprise, she didn’t take them to her office. Instead, she led them to the gargoyle standing guard outside Professor Dumbledore’s office. With a barked order, the gargoyle moved aside, revealing the spiralling staircase. This only made the first-years even

more scared. Why was she taking them to Dumbledore? But then he remembered that Umbridge had control over all punishments. A small trickle of fear went down his spine, one he refused to show on his face.

Dumbledore's office was fairly busy already when Harry and the three first-years entered. Dumbledore sat at his desk, which was expected. What was not expected was Fudge, flanked by Kingsley and another Auror, staring him down. Percy Weasley was also there, quill and parchment at the ready. Standing at the side of the room, both looking thoroughly unimpressed with the whole situation, were McGonagall and Lady Longbottom.

"Here he is Minister," Umbridge said, "Harry Potter, whom I caught in the act of violating a Ministry decree as I told you he would."

"Indeed you did, Dolores. Very good," Fudge said.

There was nothing of the jovial man who'd allowed Harry to stay in the Leaky Cauldron alone before third-year. The man standing in front of Harry now was all politician, one who clearly thought he'd struck gold with something.

"Do you have any idea why you've been brought here this evening?" Fudge asked.

"No sir," Harry said as calmly as he could.

From the corner of his eye, he saw one of the former headmasters rush out of his portrait.

"Really? You have no idea about any Educational Decrees you may have violated? No idea at all?"

"No sir," Harry repeated.

"I find that very hard to believe," Fudge chuckled.

"Stop with this pointless grandstanding Minister and get to the point," Lady Longbottom barked, "why have you dragged Mr Potter and these three first-years to the headmasters office so late in the day?"

"Perhaps I should explain, since clearly the accused insists on playing innocent," Umbridge said sweetly.

"By all means," Fudge said, standing aside with a wave of his hand, as though giving the floor to Umbridge.

"As I have reported to you Minister, Mr Potter has chosen to circumvent the Ministry's wishes, electing to take an unapproved course of study in a very crucial subject. Despite my best efforts to convince him otherwise, he has not changed his mind on this. I have also received several reports that Mr Potter is using this so called 'correspondence course' as a cover to flout the Ministry's rules," Umbridge said, "as stated in Educational Decree Number 24, the High Inquisitor has authority over all student groups, defined as a meeting of more than three students for a specified educational or extra-curricular purpose. This includes study groups."

Umbridge's smile turned icy and sharp.

"I have long suspected that Potter has been meeting with a group of students so they could all learn spells the Ministry has deemed inappropriate for their age, but he has proven to be suspiciously slippery. Even tasking the Inquisitorial Squad with investigating yielded nothing. I worried that nothing would come of this, until I received a rather promising tip," she said, "one of the Gryffindor prefects let slip that she had overheard Potter discussing with his friends a meeting later in the evening. I oversaw the patrols of the corridors personally and lo and behold, I caught him red handed. There Potter was, making plans in a group of four students to study inappropriate material and admitting to doing so with others."

She ended with a tone of finality, as though she had just presented some ground-breaking evidence. Inside Harry was torn between reeling from the ridiculousness of it all and a small amount of fear of what was coming next. Fudge lit up, clearly very pleased with what he'd just heard.

"I see. That is a very damning accusation," Fudge said.

"It is completely ridiculous," Lady Longbottom snapped, "the Ministry has no right to micro-manage the lives of students at Hogwarts!"

"I hate to contradict you Lady Longbottom," Umbridge said in a tone which made clear how much she did not, in fact, hate it, "but as High Inquisitor, I have exactly that right."

"Only because you went over the heads of the Wizengamot in pushing through those decrees. I have half a mind to call an emergency session to have every single one of them overturned!"

"Regardless," Fudge said, speaking forcefully over her, "we need to decide what is going to happen with these boys. After all, they have broken the rules. Potter, how do you plead?"

"Plead? This is not a criminal trial!" McGonagall said, then much more kindly, "Potter, why don't you explain to the Minister and Professor Umbridge what actually happened this evening?"

"I wasn't meeting anyone anywhere. I went down to the library to pick up a book for my Arithmancy homework and on my way back to the common room, I happened to bump into Seth, Eric and Euan. We were just talking and they asked if I could give them any help with their Defence Against the Dark Arts homework, and I agreed. That's all that happened."

"Really?" Umbridge said in a smug, sneering tone, "so you didn't agree to show these boys spells beyond their ability and judgement level?"

"No!"

Umbridge hummed disbelievingly, before leaning down, eyes fixed on Seth. Seth paled, trembling beneath her imperious gaze.

“Mr Richardson, did Mr Potter say he would teach you things that are not covered in my classes?”

Her tone was soft and aching sweet, yet laced with sharpness like a hidden knife. Seth’s shaking grew worse. Umbridge remained entirely focused on him. Harry drew him away, attempting to shield the three first-years behind him.

“I would ask you not to intimidate my students Dolores,” Dumbledore said, speaking up for the first time.

“Intimidate? She was merely asking a question!” Fudge said incredulously.

“This is a complete farce, Minister! You have no evidence of any of these accusations!” Lady Longbottom said, “Potter has given his version of events, which honestly I found a lot more credible than the conspiracy theory you have concocted.”

“Conspiracy?” Umbridge’s nostrils flared, “Potter has been evading detection for weeks now. He is learning unapproved magic and teaching this to others. He even admitted this evening that he has been meeting with his friends in secret!”

“To do homework!” Harry cut in, exasperated, “we do our homework together in the common room!”

“And how many of you are there in this group?” Umbridge asked.

“You do not need to answer that Potter,” McGonagall said, “the common room is a private space. Only the Head of House and the headmaster have authority over what happens there.”

“But it still subject to the rules and if Potter has been meeting with a group of more than three people, he-”

“Then you’d better be prepared to punish the entire school!” McGonagall shot back, “are you going to give detention to everyone who studies in their common room if more than two other people are doing the same? What about in their dormitories? The library? This rule of yours is too broad and open to abuse!”

“It is necessary! I have read what is in that course Potter is following and it concerns me greatly,” Umbridge said.

“I agree and I am quite convinced,” Fudge said, “Potter is clearly in violation of Educational Decree Number 24. Dolores, what are the suitable punishments?”

Harry was astounded. He knew Fudge was growing paranoid, installing Umbridge here to curtail the ability of the students to defend themselves so they couldn’t organise against him, but to so brazenly wield the power of his office to target one person in particular was ridiculous. Worse, he had granted his subordinate the authority to do whatever she wanted with that power, and now it was staring him in the face with a smug smile.

“There will be no punishments,” Dumbledore said.

“Oh really? Because I think there will be,” Fudge said.

“There is no evidence of any violations!” Lady Longbottom said.

“I quite agree, Augusta. Cornelius and Dolores have no evidence of any meetings that Potter has taken part in to teach other students defensive magic,” Dumbledore said.

Harry frowned.

“But we do have evidence! Potter met with these three boys tonight and admitted to meeting with others!” Umbridge spat.

“Circumstantial evidence of a coincidental meeting in the corridors, which I believe is not against the rules,” Dumbledore said, “as for the rest of it, had this actually been a criminal court, it would be thrown out immediately.”

“But this is not a criminal court, and I have the authority as High Inquisitor to handle any and all punishments in this school in accordance with Educational Decree Number 25!” Umbridge said.

“Exactly! High Inquisitor Umbridge and I are convinced that there has been a violation of the decree, which is all that is required!” Fudge said.

Dumbledore sighed wearily.

“Then I guess the jig is up,” he said.

“Jig?” Fudge said.

“I had asked Harry to meet with some people to discuss potentially learning proper defensive magic. After all, he and many others have very important exams coming in June that they need to prepare for and as the governors have made abundantly clear since September, I am concerned about the quality of the teaching in this subject,” Dumbledore said, “it is unfortunate that it had to come to this. I have expressed my concerns to you Cornelius about the rules you have imposed on Hogwarts, among many other things.”

“You? You were behind Potter's secret meetings?” Fudge said, his voice slightly shaky.

“That’s not- I wasn’t-” Harry tried to say, but then he caught Kingsley’s eye.

Kingsley very subtly shook his head, then winked at him, before turning impassively back to Fudge and Dumbledore.

“I had asked Harry to meet with some people, but alas, it appears he didn't get around to it. As I said, it is a busy year for him so there are many things requiring his attention. Nevertheless, I stand by my actions. It is of the utmost importance that the students learn how to defend themselves properly against potential threats.”

“There is no threat!” Fudge hissed, leaning over the table at Dumbledore, “he is not back!”

“I was not merely referring to Lord Voldemort. There are other threats they may face, such as the escaped Death Eaters the Ministry has yet to recapture,” Dumbledore said calmly, “I apologise for going behind your back, but it was necessary.”

Fudge’s face went red with anger.

“Then you have confessed to conspiracy and sedition against the Ministry. Dawlish, Shacklebolt, relieve Dumbledore of his wand and escort him to Azkaban to await trial!” Fudge said.

Dumbledore’s face gave a minute twitch of anger. Harry barely saw him move, but there was a bright flash and a loud bang as he swished his wand. Harry spun and gathered the first-years, shielding them as best he could from the sudden rush of wind. When he looked back, Fudge, Umbridge, Kingsley and the Auror Dawlish were all out cold and Dumbledore stood there, staring at them impassively.

“We don’t have much time. They will awaken soon.” Dumbledore rounded the desk. “Minerva, I leave Hogwarts to you. I trust you’ll do your best to curtail the ... influence of certain individuals.”

“What will you do Albus?”

“I had hoped to remain here but it seems I must do what I can out in the wider world. Cornelius will not see reason until clear evidence is presented to him so we cannot count on him being reasonable. As always, I must do what I must.”

Dumbledore met Harry’s eye. Immediately, Harry felt the pressure against his mind and he raised his Occlumency shield in response. Dumbledore’s breath caught in his throat, and he stifled a choking noise as his mental self was dragged into the underwater caves by the Grindylow. With a great heaving effort, Dumbledore wrenched his mind out from Harry’s grasp and back into his own head. All of this took place in a split second, and Harry saw a glimmer of fear in place of the old man’s usual twinkle.

“Harry, be careful. There are forces at play that you do not know.”

With that, Dumbledore threw some powder into the fire and vanished in a flare of green flames. Fawkes gave a mournful note, fluttering over to where Harry was still ducked protectively over the three first-years. Just as the fire turned back to its normal colour, the unconscious adults began to stir. Fudge barked out orders, Dawlish raced for the stairs as though hoping to catch up to a fleeing Dumbledore, and Lady Longbottom was yelling up a storm at Fudge and Umbridge.

“Come along. Let’s get you four back to Gryffindor Tower,” McGonagall said.

Seth, Eric and Euan all looked incredibly shaken as Harry and McGonagall led them away from Dumbledore’s office. Harry was left completely astounded at what just happened. It all seemed to escalate so quickly. One minute Umbridge was trying to pin a specious charge on him, and the next Dumbledore was fleeing Hogwarts.

Dumbledore had left the school. As much as Harry didn't want the man in charge, it was undeniable that his presence was a deterrent, the only reason Voldemort left the school alone in the last war. The school also helped to somewhat constrain his actions and movements. Now he was out there somewhere, free to do and act as he pleased, and the school was open and undefended. The fear of false consequences Harry felt in Dumbledore's office now turned into genuine fear of what was to come.

All eyes would turn to Hogwarts with this shift in power. Harry just hoped the castle would stay standing when it was all over.

Tearing

The news of Dumbledore's flight from the castle spread through Hogwarts like wildfire. It was all anyone could talk about, not helped by the fact that the story itself was so confusing. All anyone could be sure of was that Harry was accused of breaking one of the Educational Decrees and so Umbridge hauled him in front of the Headmaster with the Minister present. How that led to Dumbledore being accused of conspiracy and sedition, nobody knew, and honestly, Harry didn't know either.

He played the interaction over and over in his head and Harry still wasn't sure how things had gotten so bad. It was clear that Fudge wanted to flex his power over Dumbledore, and Umbridge did so by trying to punish Harry in some way. The charges against him were ridiculously trumped up and everyone could see that. It hadn't been going their way at all, and the only reason they could have done anything is because it was the Minister and the High Inquisitor, but then why had Dumbledore made up a story about being behind Harry's actions? He obviously didn't want to leave the school, but he did so anyway. What was his plan?

"He called an emergency Order meeting last night," Sirius said when he called him, "the story he gave was embellished to make it seem like a noble sacrifice to protect you, but I don't think that's what it was."

"Then what was it?"

"Reading between the lines of what he said at the meeting, and what you told me he said before he left, I think I might have an idea of why he decided to leave," Sirius said, "up till now, he's been content with letting Fudge do and say whatever he wanted because it didn't interfere with his plans and ultimately didn't amount to much. Fudge doesn't believe Voldemort is back, but Dumbledore can still manoeuvre things around regardless, all while searching for whatever it is he wants at Hogwarts. However, now that Fudge has moved so openly against him like this, I think he realised that Fudge not believing him about Voldemort is doing more harm than good."

"So he's going to more actively oppose Voldemort and find conclusive evidence, all so that Fudge backs off?"

"Something like that. If Fudge and the Ministry are convinced that Voldemort is back, then there's no reason for Dumbledore to stay away from Hogwarts. He'll be free to return as Headmaster and everything will go back to how they've been up till now," Sirius said, "having Dumbledore away from Hogwarts could be good against Voldemort, but it does mean you're unprotected."

"Unless- maybe?" Harry mused to himself.

"You've figured something out?"

“It’s just an idea, but at Hogwarts I’m contained and my ability to act is limited by lessons and teachers and general supervision,” Harry said, “keeping me at Hogwarts means knowing where I am and roughly what I’m doing, which he wouldn’t know if Umbridge had managed to kick me out or do something else like that to me. It doesn’t matter if he leaves, because as you said, he can come back eventually.”

“Once again, you’re a pawn in his game,” Sirius said grimly.

“I don’t like it. I don’t like being a weapon in the little tug of war between Dumbledore and Fudge,” Harry said.

“I know you don’t. Rest assured that I’ll I can to make sure Umbridge backs off of you about this. Getting rid of Dumbledore instead will be like losing a knut but finding a galleon, but even then I can’t promise too much,” Sirius said, “the pieces are moving now. I’m sure it won’t be long before it all comes tumbling down.”

The first piece to move into its new position came as soon as breakfast the next day. As the students tucked into their food, Harry was sure he heard a tiny cough coming from somewhere. He ignored it in favour of his porridge, only for the ringing of glass to echo through the room. All eyes turned to the staff table. Sitting in Dumbledore’s throne-like seat was Umbridge, looking distinctly pleased with herself.

“Now that I have your attention, I have a very important announcement to make,” she said, soft and simpering, “as of this morning, by order of the Minister, I have been named the new Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

This caused an immediate uproar from the students, but Umbridge tapped her fork to her goblet once again, the ringing silencing everyone.

“There will be no talking,” Umbridge said, “while I am talking. That’s better. There are changes that need to be made, some big and some small, and while I am sure some of you will be scared, I assure you dear children that I make these changes with your best interests in mind.”

Her smile was in no way reassuring. A notice appeared by the end of the day announcing a new educational decree.

All students must attend their classes as provided by the employed member of staff.

“Who do you reckon she had in mind when she drew that one up?” Harry said.

“This completely sucks,” Seamus said, “we’ll still be using your correspondence course materials, right?”

“Of course. This decree doesn’t say we can’t use additional material. I’ll just need to put up with the actual lessons.”

For the first time in months, Harry trudged into the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom with the rest of the Gryffindors, taking the free seat beside Neville. Umbridge stood at her

desk, smirking victoriously at him, but Harry refused to give her any satisfaction by reacting.

“Since your exams are coming up so soon, I thought that today we would do a little quiz to see how well you have learned the course material.” Umbridge waved her wand and sheets of parchment spread out across the room. “You will have 45 minutes to complete this, after which we shall spend the rest of the lesson going through it.”

The questions were clearly based on the material in Defensive Magical Theory, meaning the answers she wanted were in line with the opinions in that book. Harry answered as best he could based on what he’d been learning, but as soon as his quiz was handed in, he knew exactly what Umbridge was doing with this.

“Oh dear me. It seems that *some* of you really haven’t understood the material at all,” she cooed, “perhaps they should have paid more attention in class.”

Every single time she said this, she stared at Harry but Harry remained silent and didn’t react. He just met her eyes with a calm, blank expression even as she basically insinuated he would fail his OWL without mentioning him by name. The other Gryffindors looked furious at her, but following Harry’s lead, they didn’t say anything.

“I cannot believe her! She’s an awful teacher! Even if she didn’t specifically say it was you, she still singled you out over your performance in her ridiculously biased quiz. That’s not how a teacher is supposed to act!” Dean fumed when they got back to the common room at the end of the day. “There has to be something we can do about this!”

“The only thing we can do is go to the Governors, but she’s headmistress now *and* High Inquisitor *and* has the Ministers favour,” Harry said, “there’s probably nothing that even they can do.”

“Gran’s really angry about how everything went down,” Neville said, “she’s rallying the other Governors to vote to have her removed from all her positions at the school, but that won’t stop her from being High Inquisitor since that’s a Ministry appointed position. She’ll need to go through the Wizengamot to do that.”

“She’ll have Sirius’s support, but I’m not sure who else,” Harry said.

“I did try and warn you that you needed to be careful,” said the rather unwelcome voice of Hermione as she crossed the common room near them, arms laden with books.

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” Harry said.

“It means that I tried to warn you that you needed to be careful because Umbridge would try and pin something on you, and now she has, and now it’s your fault that Dumbledore’s been forced out of the school,” Hermione huffed.

“No, Hermione, it’s your fault,” Harry said wearily.

Those closest to them stopped what they were doing to listen in. The other fifth-years all looked confused.

“How on earth do you think it’s *my* fault?” Hermione said indignantly.

“A female Gryffindor prefect was the one who told Umbridge what I was alleged to be doing, and it was on that information that she personally stalked the halls that night to ‘catch’ me in the act.” Harry glanced over to the aghast expression on Alicia, who was the seventh-year prefect. “The only time I ever talked about anything close to those actions where somebody else could hear me was in Charms, where you sit behind me. Since I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Alicia, and I only ever see the sixth-year female prefect in the common room, the only other person it could have been who told Umbridge is you.”

The common room was completely silent, all eyes on Hermione.

“Well? Was it you who told her? Or did you perhaps talk about it loudly somewhere that she could conveniently hear you?” Harry pointedly asked.

“These accusations are baseless!” Hermione protested, “they’re completely ridiculous!”

“They have more evidence to back them than what I was accused of,” Harry shot back, “and you thought everything was my fault because of it. If I’m at fault, then so are you. More of the blame lies on you.”

Harry returned to his rune translation, completely ignoring Hermione as she tried to counter his accusations, but the damage had already been done. The rest of the Gryffindors were looking at her with varying levels of suspicion. When nobody listened to her pleas of innocence, she huffed and sat down in her usual seat. Ron patted her consolingly on the back, and she accepted it instead of giving him the cold shoulder.

“Do you really think it was Hermione?” Seamus asked later that evening as they lay in bed together.

“There’s no-one else it could have been,” Harry said, “Umbridge wasn’t getting anywhere with having me followed, but she said that she was specifically tipped off by one of the female prefects who overheard me. The only one who did was Hermione.”

“It sucks, but it means their grave is a few inches deeper,” Seamus said, “and it pushed her and Ron to make up. I’m looking forward to those ten sickles already.”

“It’s not exam season yet. There’s still time for a horrible meltdown. Don’t count your chickens yet.”

“I will count my chickens. I’ll count them like I count those sickles. One, two, thre-”

How sad that Seamus was cut off by a pillow to the face.

The fallout from Umbridge’s rise to Headmistress continued. When Harry lined up with the others to go to Hogsmeade, Filch took particular pleasure in telling him that his Hogsmeade privileges had been revoked “by order of Headmistress Umbridge”. He was particularly incensed when he returned to Gryffindor Tower and found the three first-year boys looking

very downtrodden. Seth in particular looked devastated. Angelina and Alicia were comforting them, and Katie took them to one side.

“Umbridge has given them a lifetime ban on playing Quidditch,” she said.

“What! But they’re only first-years. None of them are even on the team!”

“I know. It’s probably a roundabout punishment for that mess in Dumbledore’s office.”

Harry could only apologise profusely to all three of them. Guilt clawed at him, since it was likely only Sirius that kept Umbridge from doing the same to Harry, knowing that being banned from playing Quidditch would definitely get back to him.

Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons continued to get worse. Umbridge wasn’t satisfied with just having Harry back under her thumb. She took great joy in watching as he forced himself to read through Slinkhard’s awful book, and during the occasional times she held a class discussion, kept controlled with her tight grip, she always made sure to call on him for his opinions. Harry parroted the book dully and without emotion, adding nothing of his own thoughts to it whatsoever.

At least in History of Magic, he could ignore Binns and work on his own course.

The entire castle seemed on edge. People looked over their shoulders when they talked in open spaces as though worried somebody was listening in. The members of the Inquisitorial Squad were given wide berths. Some revelled in this perceived authority, while others, like Warrington and Bletchley, seemed annoyed by it. Umbridge carried on as though nothing had changed. She continued to wield her power as High Inquisitor freely. Several people had their detentions changed to be served with her instead, and they ran on a lot longer than detentions were supposed to last.

The only spark of joy in all of this was that Umbridge had been refused entry to the Headmasters office. It wasn’t even Harry’s doing. Hogwarts itself was barring her, which was quite amusing to think about.

The Daily Prophet did not bring any good news. Now they were running regular stories on the search for Dumbledore with equal prominence as the escaped Death Eaters. It was oddly like the stories he remembered from when Sirius escaped from Azkaban. Tucked away anywhere after page 7 were the occasional snippets of darker events brewing in the background. There had been more instances of ‘anti-social magical behaviour’ in Muggle neighbourhoods, more skirmishes between the Order and the Death Eaters. Every single time he saw one of those stories, Harry called Sirius at the earliest possibility.

“We were outnumbered this time but when it’s Moody, Kingsley and Tonks against seven Death Eaters, that’s a pretty even match,” Sirius said, “they’re fine. Tonks had a few scrapes and Moody’s wooden leg was smashed, but no injuries beyond that.”

“It sounds like things are getting worse out there,” Harry said.

“They are. With Dumbledore out of Hogwarts, both sides are gearing up for open war. The Ministry has built up a house of cards of denial which cannot be sustained, and we’re all going to suffer the consequences.”

“Any word on what either of them are planning?” Harry asked.

“None. Dumbledore’s being as evasive as ever with his plans and Voldemort doesn’t care to share until he needs something done,” Sirius said.

The frustration that Harry felt about being trapped at Hogwarts while everything went on around him reared its ugly head once again. At least now he could turn his sights to the immediate problems in the castle. In particular, making sure Umbridge didn’t completely tear the school apart. She had already informed everybody that students must remain at their house tables during mealtimes in an effort to stop people from mixing. As the options remaining to meet people in different houses grew fewer and fewer, Harry foresaw the old divisions rising once again.

“There isn’t a whole lot we can do about it either,” Neville said when they were safely up in their dormitory, “we can’t mix at meals, clubs and extracurriculars are limited, and you know that Umbridge is just waiting for the opportunity to clamp down on it even more. All that’s left is our behaviour.”

“I suppose,” Harry replied, “sometimes I really hate the long game. The waiting around for things to move into just the right position for the maximum effect. I know why it’s necessary, but sometimes I just wish we could do something now. I mean, we’re wizards. Why can’t we just wave a magic wand and make our problems go away?”

“If only it really was that simple,” Dean said, “but then the other side would just do the same thing.”

“We’ll get there in the end. It just means we need to do the best we can at the moment,” Neville said, “which means studying. We’ve only got a few months until exams.”

“I’d say you sound like Hermione but I don’t want to insult you like that,” Seamus said, “do I have to?”

“Come on Shay. It’s not the end of the world,” Harry said, “if you can manage a couple of hours, then tonight-”

He whispered something into Seamus’s ear, too quietly for the others to hear. Seamus’s eyebrows rose higher and higher.

“Is that a promise?”

“That depends on you,” Harry said cheekily.

Seamus was very productive for the next two hours, and both of them enjoyed themselves that night very much.

The room shook and Harry shot up in bed, hands scrambling for his wand and his glasses. There was movement in the dormitory, and when Harry opened his hangings, he saw the others were getting up too. Everything was still dark, a quick check of the time showed that it was early in the morning, well before any of them would have normally gotten up.

Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. Harry could feel the magic of Hogwarts. It was unsettled and on edge, building and growing and wanting to move. Harry had only felt it like this once before, and even then not to this extent. It was like whenever the Dementors had tried entering the grounds back in third year, only much much stronger. Something was trying to get in. He rubbed his chest as the feeling built.

“You can feel it too,” Neville said.

“Oh my god.”

Dean was at the window, staring out with wide eyes. Seamus joined him and swore. The night sky was illuminated by what looked like a large tear. It was long and thin, the edges bright white against the darkness, stretching from near the ground to high in the sky. The gap in the tear was visible by a faint, milky white film.

Somebody had tried to break through the wards!

“Quickly Neville. We need to reinforce the wards!”

Harry held up his hands and Neville pressed his palms against his. Together they channelled their magic, allowing the family magic of Gryffindor and Slytherin and of Hufflepuff to flow from them and into the castle. Hogwarts hummed in response. Wind whistled around them, joined by the musical cry of Fawkes swooping down into the grounds in the direction of the tear. It was a great rush, then the edges of the tear shone brighter.

Thin strands of light wove back and forth across the gap in the tear like stitches. They pulled tight, and the tear began to close, but Harry realised just the two of them wasn't enough. Together they only had three of the four founder's lines. They needed Luna as well to fully repair the wards. At least this would prevent any more damage, reinforcing them enough until the three of them could get together.

Then Harry felt something pressing at the Hogwarts magic. It was a small thing, but it was familiar to him. It touched the magic as though asking, no demanding access, rather than just forcing its way in. Harry pushed his senses, connected through Hogwarts, as far as they would go. He didn't sense much except for something dark and malevolent.

Harry gasped. He and Neville fell apart from each other, Seamus and Dean catching them, panting heavily. It had been a long time since Harry had used that much magic, but it was the revelation more than anything else that robbed him of breath.

“He was here. Voldemort was here,” Harry said, “he's the one who did that.”

There was a collective intake of breath from the others.

“How- how do you know?”

“I’ve never felt anyone else like that but there’s more,” Harry said, “he was trying to gain access to the wards through his connection to the Slytherin magic.”

“The wards must have initially rebuked him, then he tried breaking in with force, then when that didn’t work, he tried pushing through with Family Magic,” Neville said.

“No, it’s more like he tried barging through with his Family Magic first, and kept forcing it when it wouldn’t yield to him,” Harry said, “but we need to be careful. They’re fragile right now. If he tries again, he might break through.”

They could hear footsteps from above and below them. The shockwave from the impact on the wards must have woken up the entire castle.

“Let’s go see if we can help before people start freaking out,” Dean said.

Confused and anxious faces poked out of dormitory doors. Harry heard the sixth and seventh year prefects working their way downstairs, so he went ahead of them. This really should be Ron’s job, but given that the redhead was somehow still asleep, he and the other fifth-years would have to pick up the slack. Neville hung back to talk to the third-years. Dean and Seamus were accosted by the second-years, so Harry rolled his eyes at Seamus’s teasing and continued down to the first-year dormitory.

When he opened the door, there was a distinct feeling of déjà vu. For a moment, Harry thought he was back in the magical memory, seeing Kamran, Jon and the younger students worrying about an army across the lake. Instead, it was Seth, Eric and Euan, but their worries were no less real. Harry was met with three fearful faces when he joined them at the window.

“What’s going on? What was that noise? Why did the castle shake?” Eric asked, slightly frantically.

It was only pure luck that the first-year dormitory faced away from where the tear in the wards was, otherwise Harry figured they’d be a lot more freaked out right now.

“I’m not sure,” Harry said carefully, “but it’s over now.”

“It felt like an earthquake,” Euan said, “is it going to happen again?”

“I hope not. If it does, you three won’t need to worry. It will be handled,” Harry said, keeping his tone calm and kind, “are you guys alright? I’m sure it was a bit of a shock.”

“It was really scary. The whole room shook and it woke us up,” Eric said.

“I know. It woke me up too.”

Movement in the door had Harry looking over. Seamus was leaning against the frame.

“Everything alright here?” he asked.

“Just a bit spooked. How were the second-years?”

“One of them accidentally knocked over a water jug, so there’s water and broken glass all over the floor. Dean’s sorting it out now.”

“That’s good,” Harry said, then to the first-years, “let’s get you guys back to bed, yeah? Everything’ll be a lot clearer in the morning.”

Between Harry and Seamus, they managed to chivvy the first-years away from the window and back into their beds. Euan settled down the easiest. Eric needed a bit more encouragement but eventually he lay down again. Seth was the hardest. Harry knew he was the most anxious of the three, and he was trembling slightly as he sat on his bed, staring at the window taking several deep breaths. A hand knitted blanket lay strewn on the floor beside him, so Harry picked it up and wrapped it snugly around him.

He closed the hangings on the side facing the window, cutting off Seth’s view of it. That seemed to help him calm down enough so he could lie down. He didn’t resist as Harry tucked the covers more securely around him.

“Do you think you’ll be alright now?” Harry asked.

Seth nodded, snuggling down even further until only a tuft of hair was visible. Seamus snorted softly. Harry joined him at the door.

“So you went for the blanket burrito technique. A classic.”

“Sure, I guess.”

“You’d probably be a lot better at handling some of my cousins than me. You’re way more patient.”

They softly closed the door to the dormitory at the same time that Maxwell Barham and Ed Owen, the seventh- and sixth-year prefects came down the stairs.

“Where’s Weasley?” Maxwell asked.

“Still asleep,” Harry said.

“Right, of course. Thank you guys for helping out with the lower years. Could one of you come down to the common room with us?”

Seamus pushed Harry forward.

“Cheers Shay.”

“My pleasure,” Seamus grinned.

“Finnegan, you head back up to your dormitory. Potter, with us.”

The three of them went down to the common room. The three prefects for girls were already there. Hermione stood apart from Alicia and Carol Felton, the sixth-year prefect, and she frowned when she saw Harry. The portrait swung open and McGonagall entered the room, her tartan dressing gown pulled tightly around her as her hair hung loose.

“How is everything here?” she asked, her tone concerned.

“All good on the girls side Professor,” Alicia said, “there were a few tears but we sorted those out quickly.”

“That’s good to hear, and what of the boys Mr Barham, Mr Owen, Mr-” for the first time, McGonagall realised who she was speaking to, “Mr Potter, what are you doing here? Where’s Mr Weasley?”

“The last I saw him, he was still asleep. Whatever that was didn’t wake him up,” Harry explained, “so we all decided to help anyway.”

McGonagall’s lips thinned, then she shook her head.

“Anyway, how are the boys?”

“Mostly alright. There were tons of questions we didn’t have answers to but we managed to get them settled again,” Maxwell said, “by the time Ed and I got out of our dormitories, the fifth-years were already on it. I’m not sure if it’s the right time for this Professor, but honestly, they did a hell of a lot better than Weasley would have done.”

Hermione pursed her lips but didn’t say anything.

“I shall take that under advisement. I’m just glad that there were no issues and that everyone is going back to sleep,” McGonagall said.

“They’re back in their beds. I wouldn’t go as far as to say they’re going back to sleep,” Ed said.

“Professor, can you tell us what happened?” Carol asked.

McGonagall took a deep breath. She glanced at the staircases leading up to the dormitories. Maxwell and Alicia both exchanged a look then went to check before putting privacy wards up.

“You mustn’t tell anyone this. We don’t want to cause a panic, but somebody tried to breach the schools defences,” McGonagall said.

The six of them all froze.

“Who?” Alicia asked.

“We don’t know. Rest assured, the staff are doing all they can to rectify this situation. Professor Umbridge has sent an emergency message to the Ministry. It is likely that

tomorrow morning's lessons, at least, will be cancelled while we review our security. If that happens, I would like you all to make sure everyone stays in the Tower," McGonagall said.

With that, she sent them all back up to bed. The others were all still up when Harry reached the fifth-year dormitory. All of them looked extremely worried. Harry pulled his boys into a tight hug. He quickly filled them in on what McGonagall said.

"As soon as we're able to, we need to find Luna and fully repair and reinforce the wards," Harry said.

"You know what else you need to do," Neville said, "you need to cut Voldemort off from the Slytherin magic. If you don't, he'll always be able to get at least part of the way in, and for a wizard that strong that's all he'll need."

Harry nodded.

"Then it looks like I'll need to make a trip."

The four of them separated, each heading to their own beds. Harry didn't think that any of them would be getting much more sleep that night, but there was no use hanging around getting anxious for no reason. As the final curtains closed, the fifth set of hangings slid open, and Ron's sleepy, bleary voice called out.

"Wha- what's going on? What's all this noise?"

Nobody answered him.

Just as McGonagall predicted, morning class was cancelled. All students were to remain in their house common rooms until notified otherwise. Breakfast was served to them in Gryffindor Tower, where the atmosphere was tense and uneasy. Nobody really knew what to say. The thing that everyone wanted to talk about was also the thing causing the anxiety. Even Fred and George were quiet.

In the light of day it was harder to see, but the partially repaired tear was still visible. Harry watched on the Marauders Map as unfamiliar names walked up from the front gate, felt their magic as they tried to repair it, but such damage would take a long time to fix without the founders magic.

He and Neville needed to get to Luna as soon as possible.

At lunch time, the students were let out with instructions to head down to the Great Hall. They sat at their house tables and watched as Umbridge stood at the staff table.

"I am speaking to you now about the incident that occurred last night in hopes to quell any unfortunate rumours that may be spread by unscrupulous individuals," she said, "at 2:43am, persons unknown attempted to gain entry to this castle through force. In doing so, they have caused damage to the school wards. In collaboration with the Ministry, we are in the process

of repairing the damage done, as well as strengthening them so this does not happen again. School security has also undergone a very thorough review.”

She gestured to the side of the hall where three people in red robes stood.

“Aurors Dawlish, Lipton and Tonks have been stationed here as additional protection. Students will be expected to comply with any and all security instructions that they give you, along with any new rules that are introduced in the coming days. Remember children, this is all for your own good.”

Harry exchanged looks with his boys. This didn’t bode well.

Class resumed in the afternoon, though most students were very distracted. Whenever a class was held on the side of the castle where the tear could be seen, the curtains were always conspicuously closed. The teachers did an admirable job of attempting to carry on as normal, but the tension each of them carried was obvious.

At the earliest possible opportunity, Harry and Neville slipped away. They likely wouldn’t have long before they were noticed, and given Umbridge’s desire to see him punished, they didn’t want her catching wind of this. With the Marauders Map, they tracked down Luna. She seemed to be waiting for them in a seldom used corridor on the sixth floor. The large windows looked out across the grounds, the tear a very prominent mark on the sky.

“Will you be able to help us fix this?” Harry asked.

“I will. As steward, I am able to act in my lords place in matters such as this. There should not be an issue with the Ravenclaw magic,” she said, “I could feel you last night attempting to repair it.”

“It wasn’t enough, We need all four founders lines,” Harry said.

“I’m just glad Voldemort didn’t try and force his way in while the defences were down,” Neville said.

“He did, but the Guardian Spirits were mobilised. I saw Fawkes flying for the tear. The Ravenclaw Guardian Spirit was there first.”

“What even is the Ravenclaw Guardian Spirit,” Harry asked, “we know what the others are but not that one.”

“He’s currently making sure Umbridge is distracted and doesn’t interfere,” Luna said, “quickly now. There’s a hole that needs filling.”

The three of them stood in a circle, palms pressed together. Their magic swelled together. Harry felt the Gryffindor and Slytherin magic pooling alongside the Hufflepuff magic from Neville just like last night. From Luna came a more controlled stream, one of crystal clear water, cool and refreshing. The Ravenclaw magic slotted into place perfectly, and with barely more than a thought it flooded outwards. It seeped into every corner of the grounds, and just

for a moment one could almost be convinced that everything seemed that much more alive for a second.

There was a rumbling noise as more cords of magic spread across the tear, pulling it closed with much more strength than last night. There was a flash as the sides of the tear slowly came together, fusing until they vanished. It took only a few minutes, but they didn't stop until the tear was completely gone, as though it had never been there at all.

The magic continued to swirl. It flowed into the ground, deeper and deeper, sinking into the very deepest parts of the dungeons and then deeper still. Past the Chamber of Secrets, Harry didn't think Hogwarts even went this deep, until it finally reached something. In the darkness of his mind's eye, he saw through the shadows as a tree hung over him, illuminated by the faintly red glow of a perfectly round stone. Their magic touched it, and something touched them back.

Greetings. It's nice to finally meet you, Harry Potter.

Harry leapt backwards, the others doing the same thing, and he was very glad to see his look of shock mirrored on Neville and Luna's faces.

"What the hell was that?" Neville said.

"I have no idea. Luna?"

"It spoke to us. It- I don't know what that was," she said, "my lord never said anything about that."

"Neither did Godric or Salazar in the Ring Realm."

Whatever it was, it felt both familiar and unknowing, and Harry wasn't sure how to even begin interpreting it. What was said in the Ring Realm and the Ritual of Remembrance, the thing Dumbledore and Voldemort both desired; there was a power within Hogwarts, and that power just spoke to them.

To see you again

Repairing the tear in the wards did little to ease the tension in the castle. While Umbridge tried to take credit for it, the Aurors remained on guard. Nobody really had any idea what was going on, and the whispers and rumours that abounded did little to calm people's fears. The post owls arrived the next morning, bringing a flurry of mail from concerned parents, along with several copies of the Daily Prophet, each bearing the same headline.

ESCAPED DEATH EATERS ATTACK HOGWARTS

The Ministry was blaming the incident on the 14 escaped Death Eaters. Harry and Seamus crowded around Dean, reading the story over his shoulder. The incident was reported as a failed attempt by the Death Eaters to rile up the country into a state of fear and terror, but since they hadn't been able to get through the schools defences, their efforts were ineffective. Fudge was quoted as saying there was nothing to worry about, that the security review of the school would ensure nothing like this would happen again, and that the Aurors had doubled their efforts to bring the convicts to justice.

It was a pretty statement, but from what Harry could see, it didn't seem to be having the effect Fudge wanted, at least not among those at Hogwarts. More than one student complained about the continued attempts to pretend that nothing was wrong. What were the Dementors doing in all of this, another student asked, why had they not been sent to defend the school? They had been sent here two years ago on the off chance that Sirius Black would come here, but now that the school had been attacked, there was no sign of them.

Sprinkled amongst these whispers, Harry heard people contemplating that there was more at play than the Ministry was telling them. Rumours about "You-Know-Who" abounded. Harry maintained his story about what happened in the graveyard, which didn't seem to help people's nerves.

"Could- could it be possible that he found a way to come back anyway?" a nervous Ernie Macmillan asked as they walked to Herbology.

"I don't know. It's possible, but I can't say for certain," Harry said.

Harry received an urgent call from Sirius. His godfather looked relieved when Harry answered, his hangings shut and warded for privacy.

"Thank Merlin," he said, "I knew you were alright, but I had to see you to make sure."

The mirror shifted so Remus could see him as well.

"The Ministry's saying it was the escaped Death Eaters but I don't believe that's the full story," Sirius said, "what happened on your end?"

"It was Voldemort. He tried getting through the wards and he used his connection to the Slytherin magic to cause some damage. Neville and I were able to patch it up so he couldn't

get any further, and then Luna joined us so we could repair them,” Harry said.

“He was there?” Sirius said, aghast.

“The Order was just as shocked as everyone else. Nobody expected such a bold move,” Remus said, “to think that Voldemort himself acted so brazenly. It has to be because Dumbledore is no longer at the school. He must have felt it worth the risk to get whatever it is he wants there, and if he can claim that seat of power for himself, it would be a crippling blow to the country.”

“Is he still after something in the Department of Mysteries?” Harry asked.

“As far as we can tell,” Sirius said, “after the attack on Arthur, the Ministry upgraded its own security, which has put a hamper on their efforts to get in. I’d say this latest attack would raise some doubts but Fudge had a convenient scapegoat to blame.”

“People are starting to question it but they don’t dare say anything in the open in case Umbridge hears them,” Harry said.

“I heard from Lady Longbottom about her efforts to remove her from Hogwarts entirely, but I wouldn’t count on it happening any time soon. The wheels of government move slowly, especially when there’s a crisis and Fudge has a vested interest in keeping her exactly where she is,” Sirius said, “there’s an emergency Order meeting tonight. I should have more news for you then.”

“I have a plan as well, but I’ll need your help to carry it out,” Harry said.

He explained what he wanted to do to Sirius and Remus.

“Ok. That should be possible. Getting around Umbridge will be the tricky part but I can come up with something, don’t you worry.”

In her speech following the attack, Umbridge mentioned that new rules may be added. The students found out exactly what this meant soon after. An owl arrived bearing a letter from Mrs Finnegan. The envelope looked slightly rumpled, and it bore a stamp on the front stating ‘reviewed and approved by the Hogwarts High Inquisitor’.

“Has she- has she read my letter?” Seamus asked.

He wasn’t the only one. The news quickly spread that Umbridge was now checking people’s mail. Apparently she justified it as making sure nobody inside the school was aiding the people behind the attack, but the invasion of privacy caused a wave of discontent amongst the students. A wave of detentions quickly followed, putting an end to the uproar. Harry didn’t like how quickly it died down, but all anyone said was that Umbridge had them doing lines for hours.

Hogsmeade visits were also cancelled for the foreseeable future, and Harry spotted one of the Aurors lingering in the stands during every Quidditch practise. Filch stalked through the corridors, bearing down on anyone he felt was being disloyal to the headmistress. The

atmosphere in the castle grew stifling. Harry could only watch as Umbridge gazed across the students in the Great Hall during meals, utterly oblivious to the way she sat alone on her high backed chair. The other teachers never spoke to her, and none of the students wanted to draw her attention. It was like she was the queen of her own little kingdom, and with the power she was exerting, that comparison was not too far off. Something would have to give.

Harry had just sat down for lunch when he saw Professor Sprout descend from the staff table. She walked along the Ravenclaw bench and leaned in close to Cho. Cho smothered a gasp, quickly grabbing her stuff and leaving the Great Hall. Harry wasn't sure what was going on, especially when Sprout then came over to him.

"Mr Potter, could you please come with me?" she said quietly, "I have news regarding Cedric."

Cho was waiting for them in the Entrance Hall and the pair followed Sprout to her office.

"Is something wrong?" Cho asked as soon as the door was closed.

"No. On the contrary, I have good news," Sprout said, "I received word from Mrs Diggory. Cedric has woken up."

Harry completely froze. He wanted to say something but the words wouldn't come.

"He's- he's awake?" Cho asked, her voice barely louder than a breath.

"He is. Mrs Diggory has sent for the pair of you. I have permission to take you both from Hogwarts to visit him," Sprout said.

They needed no further encouragement. Using the Floo in Sprout's office, they travelled directly to St Mungo's. The public receiving room was a lot busier than the one in the Edith Tanhill ward, but the main lobby wasn't quite as crowded as it was at Christmas. The witch at the reception desk still looked bored as she directed people with various ailments to where they needed to be.

Cedric was in the same room as before. Mr and Mrs Diggory were at his bedside, both looking teary but happy. It wasn't anything grand or dramatic, but Harry could clearly see Cedric's eyes were open.

"Cedric?" Cho said wetly.

The boy turned his head towards the door. A sleepy smile appeared on his face when he saw her. Cho choked out a sob and rushed to his bedside, grabbing his free hand. Harry joined her as she cried, even as she smiled widely.

"I'm so happy you're awake!"

"Hey," Cedric whispered.

He still looked absolutely exhausted, in danger of dropping off again any minute, but there was life in his eyes as he turned to Harry.

“You ... made it out.”

“I did. I- I got us both out of there,” Harry said, “I’m sorry you got so hurt.”

“Not your fault.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I want ... the longest bath in the world.”

Mr and Mrs Diggory both chuckled at that.

“When you’re feeling better, I’ll ask the Healers about helping you have a bath,” Mrs Diggory said.

“No. Not them. Embarrassing,” Cedric mumble-groaned, “sleepy.”

“That’s alright. You sleep sweetheart. We’ll all be here when you wake up again,” Mrs Diggory said, brushing some of his hair out of his face.

Cedric’s eyes drooped lower and lower until they closed. His breathing softened and evened out. It wasn’t for very long but hearing Cedric’s voice again lifted something within Harry while at the same time it felt like he’d been hit by a sledgehammer. He didn’t realise how much he was shaking until Sprout helped ease him into a chair beside Cho.

“He’s out of the magical coma. Now it’s just plain exhaustion,” Mr Diggory said, “he’s been waking up for a few minutes every hour or so before going back to sleep. The Healers said this is perfectly natural and it will get better as his body starts to physically recover from the coma, but it didn’t stop it scaring us half to death.”

“I’m just so glad to see he’s making good progress,” Sprout said.

“Thank you all for coming. Cedric needs his friends so he’s not alone right now,” Mrs Diggory said, “I also sent word to Ms Delacour and Mr Krum, though I believe Mr Krum is out of the country?”

“He’s playing in the European Quidditch League at the moment,” Harry said.

“I also told Lord Black, just so you know in case he drops in.”

Just as they were told, it was nearly an hour later that Cedric woke up again. He seemed to relax when he saw them all still there. Harry and Cho chatted with him, filling him in on what had been happening. They kept it light, the little things and the happier times. Neither of them said anything about Umbridge or the way things at Hogwarts had been deteriorating. Cedric soaked it in with rapt attention, not paying any attention to his parents. Mr and Mrs Diggory didn’t seem to mind. They’d likely been talking to him since he woke up, and over the moon as they were, they were probably just happy to have him back.

He stayed awake for nearly ten minutes before succumbing to exhaustion again. There was a knock at the door. Sirius poked his head in.

“Lord and Lady Diggory,” he said, inclining his head to them, “I’m so happy about the good news.”

“Thank you Lord Black,” Mr Diggory said.

“I won’t stay for long but I thought I might share a proposal,” Sirius said, “why don’t Harry and Ms Chang spend the night at my home tonight and head back to Hogwarts in the morning?” He directed this question more so to Sprout than to the Diggory’s. “That way they can spend as much time as possible with Cedric without having to rush, and they’ll have a chance to freshen up a bit before heading back to the lion’s den that Hogwarts can be.”

Sprout frowned, thinking it over.

“I’m not sure. I’d need to get permission from the Headmistress,” she said, though it was clear she was trying to keep her tone neutral when mentioning Umbridge.

“Allow me,” Mr Diggory said, “if the kids want to spend more time with Ced, then let me handle her.”

Mr Diggory didn’t even bother keeping the disdain from his voice.

“I’ll back you up,” Sirius said.

Sprout looked at Harry and Cho, then she sighed.

“Alright then. If Harry and Cho agree, then I don’t see the issue,” she said, “I’ll go and send word to the school.”

She, Mr Diggory and Sirius all left to go send the necessary letters, while Harry and Cho remained with Mrs Diggory at Cedric’s bedside. It was a bit odd, almost like the conversation had been put on hold for a moment. Neither of them said anything, not wanting Cedric to wake up halfway through and feel like he was missing out.

The door to the ward opened again and Fleur walked in, looking slightly harried. Her expression turned distraught when she saw Cedric asleep, and Harry hurried to reassure her. Right on cue, Cedric stirred again.

“Fleur,” he said, “so glad you’re alright.”

“*I’m* alright? I should be saying that about you, silly boy.”

“Cut me some slack. Last time I saw you, you were still in the maze.”

The mood in the room dropped slightly. Cedric, noticing the shift or not, continued, asking her about what she’d been doing in the meantime. Fleur mumbled something about silly boys beneath her breath before taking Mr Diggory’s free chair, filling them all in on her job at Gringotts and how it was going. Like before, Cedric listened with rapt attention.

“Is Viktor ... gonna appear next? Where ... is he?”

“He’s in Europe for the Quidditch League,” Harry said, “not sure where exactly he is at the moment but your mum said he was told.”

“Good. That’s good.”

A tear leaked out and ran down Cedric’s cheek.

“Cedric?” Cho said.

“Sorry. Stupid of me.”

“What’s wrong sweetheart?” Mrs Diggory asked.

“Nothing.”

“Clearly something’s upset you,” Cho said, “is it- is it hearing about what happened since you’ve been asleep?”

Cedric’s breath shuddered.

“Shouldn’t. Not your fault,” Cedric whispered tiredly, “it’s nearly a year since the maze. I shouldn’t- should’ve ... and you all ... so much time. I missed so much.”

“Cedric, please listen to me,” Cho said, leaning in closer to card her fingers through his hair, drawing his attention, “you survived. You went through something horrible and you survived, and now you’re recovering. Everything you think you missed is still there, waiting for you. Every one of us here has been waiting for this day and we are so glad to see you again.”

She pressed a kiss to his forehead.

“It’s alright to feel this way sweetheart,” Mrs Diggory said, “we’ve got you. You’ve come back to us now. We can work everything else out together.”

Between Cho and Mrs Diggory, they held Cedric as close as his exhausted body would allow him to move. He didn’t cry so much as he trembled, tears rolling down his cheeks. All Harry could do was put a hand on his leg, trying his best to convey his presence and support. Across from him, Fleur did the same.

It was much later in the day that Sirius returned, along with a Healer who apologetically told them that visiting hours were over. Cedric was awake for this, and while he was sad they had to go, he said goodbye without issue after they promised to be back as soon as they could the next morning.

“Will you be alright getting back home?” Sirius asked Fleur.

“I’ll be alright. I will try and visit him again after work tomorrow.”

“Professor Sprout will come by the hospital to bring Harry and Cho back to Hogwarts,” Sirius informed them.

When they apparated to Grimmauld Place, Harry worried that there would be Order members around. Sirius subtly wove the secret into the conversation, allowing Cho to see and enter Number 12. The house was quiet as they entered, the only sound was the small crack as Kreacher appeared to take their cloaks.

“Kreacher has prepared dinner for Lord Black, Master Harry and his guest. It is waiting for you in the dining room.”

“Thank you Kreacher. Let’s have something to eat, then I can show Ms Chang where she’ll be staying tonight. Professor Sprout had the Hogwarts Elves bring a change of clothes for you,” Sirius said.

“Thank you for letting me stay. I’m not sure I could have gone back to school right now.”

“That’s why I offered. After dinner, we’ll all head upstairs for an early night. You both need it after a good but rough day.”

Sirius caught Harry’s eye with a meaningful glance and Harry nodded. They ate relatively quickly, the meal filling but not overly heavy, and after that it was to bed. Cho was shown to what had been Hermione and Ginny’s room for the summer, and he and Sirius went upstairs. Harry followed his godfather into his study.

“I thought there’d be someone from the Order around,” Harry said.

“There’s no Order meeting tonight, and since it’s not the holidays, Molly doesn’t live here full time. Kingsley, Tonks and Moody are usually the ones who drop by in between, along with Remus, but I made sure we’d be alone tonight,” Sirius said, “I don’t think you’ll get a better opportunity than this.”

Harry agreed.

“Celio.”

The Elf appeared.

“Yes Lord Potter?”

“I need you to take me to Dun Slytherin.”

The wind whipped past them, chilling them as Harry and Sirius appeared on the Irish coast. The night sky was clear and the moon was bright, illuminating the castle atop the nearby hill. Dun Slytherin was not as large as Gryffindor Castle. From the outside it didn’t look like anything special, but Harry knew there was more than that. All around him he could feel the Slytherin magic. It settled within him, welcoming him to the home of Salazar Slytherin.

“Is there anyone else here?” Sirius asked.

“No, it’s just us,” Harry said, setting off towards the gate.

The portcullis raised and the thick wooden doors swung open as they approached and entered the courtyard. There was a crack and Tilly the House Elf appeared, bowing low to them.

“Lord Potter, Tilly welcomes you to Dun Slytherin.”

“Thank you Tilly. How are things here?”

“It has been slow my lord. This castle has been empty for centuries. Tilly has been working hard to make it habitable for you. Everything above ground and the first two of the lower levels are ready. Only the final two lower levels remain.”

“I can send Celio to help you,” Harry said, “I need to use the ritual circle. Can you show me where it is?”

Tilly led them into the keep. The grey stone walls were thick, yet while it wasn’t warm per se, it wasn’t cold inside. The decorations were definitely more utilitarian than Gryffindor Castle, ornate sconces and chandeliers holding candles and torches to light the way but little else.

“Has there been anyone else here?” Harry asked.

“No my lord. Tilly received your message that the Dark Lord had returned but there has been no sign of him near here.”

“This would have been the perfect place for him to come. It could easily have been the seat of his power,” Sirius said, “unless of course he didn’t know about it. For all that he likes to claim a noble heritage, Voldemort really doesn’t seem to know anything about his past.”

“Doesn’t know or doesn’t care beyond what it can do for him,” Harry said, “but after today, he won’t have it any more.”

There were only two stories to the Keep which were above ground. Harry would describe them as the public part of Dun Slytherin, probably where Salazar entertained guests. There were four additional levels below ground, built into the cliff. Tilly led them to a room which Harry could only describe as a cave. The floor, walls and ceiling were hewn from the rock, flattened so that they could walk without issue. The wall opposite the door was made of water, the rock completely cut away, exposing the sea beyond, prevented from entering by powerful wards.

“This is the ritual room my lord, or rather it is the entrance to it,” Tilly said, “shall I prepare rooms for Lord Potter and Lord Black?”

“I’m afraid we won’t be staying, Tilly,” Harry said, “I’ve got something really important I need to do.”

“Then Tilly shall return to her work.”

The House Elf bowed and vanished with a crack. Harry approached the wall of water.

“You know what you need to do.” Harry nodded. “This ritual isn’t used very often. It’s very much seen as the last resort for the noble families, usually only used when somebody has done something entirely unforgivable. Casting somebody out of the family isn’t to be done lightly. The loss of Family Magic can do a lot of damage.”

“I know, but it is important,” Harry said, “so long as Voldemort has access to the Slytherin magic, he’s a threat to Hogwarts.”

“If you do this, he’ll know that someone is interfering with his magic,” Sirius said, “there’s no way he won’t. You need to be certain you can remove his connection otherwise he’ll know it was you.”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t do it?”

“No. I agree that this needs to happen. Whatever happens next as a result, we’ll handle it.”

Sirius pulled him into a firm hug.

“I’ll let you get on with it. I’m proud of you.”

With that, Sirius left him in the ritual room. Once he was alone, Harry stripped out of his clothes and approached the wall of water, taking with him only the supplies he needed. The flattened stones formed more of a path as he got closer but the wall of water seemed just as impassable as it had before. Harry reached out and touched it. The water shifted, a tunnel forming through the water that Harry entered. The floor was covered in a bizarre algae-moss hybrid. It was soft beneath his feet, lighting up the path with each step he took. The tunnel through the water continued to form, always about five metres ahead of him and closing up five metres behind him, as Harry went deeper and deeper.

Through the dim and slightly murky water, Harry could see a disturbance. The tunnel connected with a large pocket of air. This was the ritual circle. A ring of thirteen standing stones formed the perimeter of the circle. Seven smaller stones were arranged within, each one the centre of a circular ring. At first Harry thought these rings were a solid line, but upon closer inspection he saw it was actually 5 concentric circles nestled closely together. Detailed runes filled the gaps between them. Like the Potter ritual circle, three smooth stones were arranged in a triangle in the middle.

Taking a deep breath, Harry got to work. He placed a silver bowl in the middle of the circle and knelt before it. The ritual knife came from the Slytherin vault. Any other such knife could work, but Harry felt it appropriate to use it. The blade gleamed in the eerie glow of the algae-moss, still just as sharp as when it was forged. Harry gripped the dragon-bone handle tightly. He pricked the tip of his left forefinger and allowed a single drop of blood to fall into the bowl. The small cut healed instantly, and Harry knelt.

“I call upon the Ancient Magic of the House of Slytherin.”

Immediately he felt the shift. The stones of the ritual circle began to glow. Magic moved over him like many hands. The drop of blood in the bowl bubbled and grew, filling the entirety of it and threatening to spill over.

“The power of our line is being held by one who is unworthy. I name you, Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

The world outside the circle grew darker until all there was was Harry and the glowing rings on the floor. Then stars began to glitter about him, the points of light of the Slytherins past filling the void with their constellations. One of these stars descended, growing in size and brightness. Harry stood as it entered the circle. It expanded, took shape, until Harry was face to face with the form of Tom Riddle. Lord Voldemort sneered.

“Harry Potter,” he spat.

That cold, high voice sent a chill down Harry’s spine but he held his resolve. Voldemort wouldn’t know it was Harry unless he failed here. If he succeeded, all Voldemort would know was that his magic was affected.

“I, Harry James Potter, do hereby banish you from the family.”

He pushed. There was a wave of pressure and Voldemort stumbled, taking a few steps backwards.

“By what right do you have to touch my magic? You filthy little halfblood boy! I am Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin. My blood will always be stronger than yours!”

Voldemort pushed back and Harry felt the wave of pressure. It was immense as Voldemort leveraged the full might of his considerable magic. It forced Harry backwards until Harry rallied, resisting it. The force of their magic clashed, each trying to best the other. Harry didn’t allow himself to think, even for a moment, that he couldn’t win. Belief was important for magic. He believed this would work, and so it would.

“You cannot beat me. Not here in a test of magical might and when I meet you at last in the physical world, I shall beat you there. There won’t be any mudbloods to take your place this time,” Voldemort said, “the prophecy will then finally be fulfilled.”

Harry didn’t rise to the taunts. Instead he concentrated, allowing his magic to pool within him as he remembered all that he had. He had the love and support of his godfather, the closest thing to family he’d ever known. He had friends now, true friendships that would last a lifetime. Even more though, he had the love of Seamus and Dean, the boys that Harry wished to build a future and family with. Compared to that, what did Voldemort have? Absolutely nothing.

The stars in the void began to move. They drifted around them, moving closer to Harry and away from Voldemort. The pressure of Voldemort’s magic lessened, and Voldemort’s eyes widened as he saw what was happening.

“You attacked the place of safety for magical children that Salazar Slytherin swore to defend. You defile and desecrate the magical traditions that uphold our society. You pervert the name of Slytherin for your own ends. You are unworthy of our family!” Harry said.

A cold hand landed on his shoulder. A form of smoke and vapour appeared, Salazar standing at his side. Around him were other such apparitions, and while Harry didn't recognise them, he knew they were the previous Lords Slytherin. He turned back to Voldemort and stepped forward confidently. The pressure of Voldemort's magic was barely more than a breeze now.

"I now take from you the Slytherin Magic. In the name of Salazar, and all those who have held the magic before me, I, Harry Lord Slytherin, cast you out!"

With one final push, Voldemort was blasted backwards. He screamed as he flew out of the circle, fading off into the void but no star appeared. All that was left were the echo of his cries but even those faded to nothingness.

Harry's eyes opened with a gasp and he hunched forward, catching himself before he fell over as his breaths came in heavy pants. He was back in the air pocket beneath the sea, the ritual circle dark and dormant. The silver bowl was completely empty and clean. Harry hurried to catch his breath, then focused on the magic within himself, sinking into the Family Magic of the Slytherin line. The void of stars appeared around him, but unlike the previous times he'd done this, no string appeared from his form, connecting him to any others.

Voldemort was no longer there. He had done it. He had cast him out of the Slytherin family, removed him from Family Magic entirely. Now all he had left to him was his own magic and skill, both still considerable but now no longer with the might of Slytherin backing him.

Sirius was waiting for him as when he shakily returned to Dun Slytherin. Seeing the state he was in, he helped him dress and then sit on a nearby rock.

"It's done," Harry said.

"Good. Now one of Voldemort's most dangerous advantages has been removed," Sirius said, "he's not going to take this lying down. Whatever plans he had in motion, I wouldn't be surprised if he accelerated them. He may even find out his horcruxes are missing."

"But he can't make any more, right?"

"Not as far as we can tell. His soul's already so unstable, making any more will likely kill him, but we can't be certain."

"Then we'll just have to adapt and overcome. However this plays out, Voldemort will be defeated for good this time."

They returned to Grimmauld Place swiftly afterwards. There weren't any long conversations as the events of the day caught up to him and Harry immediately went to bed. He would have gladly slept for a long time but then his eyes opened to the endless ocean of the Ring Realm. James, Godric and Salazar were all there, with the latter looking a complicated mixture of proud and sad.

"You expelled my foolish descendant from the family," he said.

“I did.”

“Good. That monster is a blight on the Slytherin name,” Salazar said.

“To think that one of our descendants would try to attack the school,” Godric said, “I could never have imagined it when I was alive. All of my children knew what Hogwarts meant to me, even if they didn’t go on to aid in sustaining the wards themselves.”

“By removing him from the family, you have removed his greatest ability to break through the wards, but that doesn’t mean you’ve definitely kept him out. No defence is infallible, not even Hogwarts,” Salazar said, “if he tried once, then he will try again.”

“He wants something at Hogwarts. Both Voldemort and Dumbledore are after something within the castle, some power they think it possesses,” Harry said, then paused, “I’ve connected to the castle twice. Once at Yule, and again when we repaired the wards. Both times, my magic sank deep within it, and something called back to me. It spoke to me.”

“Hogwarts did that?” Godric asked.

“No. Something within Hogwarts did. It felt much older than Hogwarts,” Harry said, “Merlin said that there was a power in the castle that people would go to war over. What did he mean?”

“I’m not sure. In our time, he was talking about the consolidation of magical learning. Bringing together magical children from all walks of life, noble families and not, to live and to learn magic alongside each other so that all could start from the same place, was completely unheard of. We asked for no servitude or fealty, and given the breadth of our knowledge and experience, the education we provided was far superior to anything the tutors of the noble houses could offer. Many feared what changes our school would bring,” Godric said, “however, there was nothing so ancient in the castle when we were alive.”

“But we died. We died and our legacy passed on to our children and our students. Clearly something happened, some power came to Hogwarts and has remained there ever since, and now two powerful wizards have learned of its existence and are fighting over it,” Salazar said.

“So you don’t know what it could be?” Harry asked.

“I’m not sure. I have a theory, but it has been a thousand years so I cannot say anything with certainty. For all that we knew, we did not know everything.”

“But you have the means of finding at least some of the answers you seek,” Godric said, “the Ritual of Remembrance that I taught you. You have used it beautifully to learn of the location of two of Voldemort’s horcruxes. Magic may not always show you the memories you wish to see, but it may help light up this shadowed path you follow.”

Harry hoped so. James came up to him and hugged him tightly.

“It’s nearly finished, Harry. Soon you’ll be free to live a normal, happy life, where you won’t need to worry about homicidal maniacs trying to kill you or manipulative old men trying to control you.”

Harry hugged him back.

“I felt your presence, I think,” he said, “in the Yule ritual. I think I felt you and Mum.”

James stepped back, a wistful smile on his face.

“Lily had only just found out she was pregnant. We considered not doing the Yule ritual since we weren’t sure how it would affect it, but Lily wanted to do it anyway. It was our hope that through the magic you would be protected somehow, that the war would come to an end and you’d be able to live in peace. Then you were born and Dumbledore had us go into hiding. I suppose in a way the war did end and you did live in peace, though it was not the way either of us wanted,” James said, “or maybe neither of those things have happened yet, and they’re still on their way.”

“The future is always an uncertain thing. Even those with the gift of Sight can only see one possible outcome, one path. All we can do is trust the path that we are on and believe that it is right,” Godric said, “we cannot reach the end of the journey if we do not take a step forward.”

That was what Harry had been trying to do. Hold onto the hope of the future, and even if the way forward was clear, keep moving towards that future. Each step, each inch, each small amount of progress would lead to the end, a world where Voldemort could no longer threaten the stability of the magical world, where Dumbledore could no longer meddle in the lives of others unopposed, and where Harry could live freely with the people that he loved.

A step too far

Chapter Notes

Mature scene ahead.

Starts: "In the left hand stall..."

Ends: "All three of the came down..."

The news of Cedric's awakening was all over the school by the time Harry and Cho returned after lunch the next day. It was only the afternoon lessons that kept people from swarming all over them. Harry assured people that Cedric still needed to fully recover but at least he was no longer in a magical coma. It was a bright spot in an otherwise dreary year. Harry certainly thought so at least. Even Umbridge's pointed glares at dinner didn't diminish his mood.

But then he caught the way Malfoy sat slightly hunched at the Slytherin table, his face paler than usual with what looked like the start of bags beneath his eyes, and Harry was reminded of the other major development. As cautiously and carefully as he could, he let all his friends know about what he had done.

"So You-Know-Who's no longer a Slytherin. Surely he'll know what happened though?" Dean asked.

"He will have felt the Slytherin magic being removed from him, but as far as I can tell from the ritual descriptions, he won't know who actually did it. Most of the time that ritual gets used, people know who the Lord is, but Voldemort doesn't know. It'll almost be like the magic left him out of the blue," Harry explained.

"Wouldn't it be great if that made him reconsider his position? I mean, he's done awful things and then all of a sudden he loses a chunk of magic. Some would consider that a sign to stop," Seamus said.

"But this is Voldemort we're talking about," Harry said, "if he could change his mind like that, he would have done it by now."

"Do you think he'll do anything in response?" Neville asked.

"Sirius thinks he will. All we can do is prepare as best we can."

Over the next few days, Harry scanned the Daily Prophet looking for any signs of Voldemort's retaliation. When he never found it, the more worried he became. Whenever Voldemort had gone quiet before, something big had followed. Sirius agreed when he contacted him by the mirror. The only sign that anything had changed was that Malfoy looked even more tired at meals. He didn't even give token insults any more, and Harry

caught him wandering the halls late at night on the Marauders Map. He even stopped playing Quidditch, citing the coming OWLs.

Umbridge continued to be a thorn in his side. In response to Harry missing the equivalent of a day of lessons without her prior approval, she made several thinly veiled comments during class. She also introduced a new rule stating that all students must receive explicit consent from the Headmistress to leave school for any reason. It was clearly in response to Harry, not Cho. More students had been brought in for questioning about suspected rule breaking, and several suffered through long detentions.

Harry and the rest of the Quidditch team finished their practise, ignoring the Auror present in the stands as they normally did. It had been raining off and on throughout, and the ground was wet and muddy as they trudged back up to the castle.

“We’ve got a solid chance of winning the cup this year. Slytherin’s out of the running with Malfoy not playing. Depending on the outcome of the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw match, we just need to beat Ravenclaw by a certain point margin and then we win,” Angelina said.

“If Ravenclaw beat Hufflepuff that is,” McLaggen said, “the Puffs might take the news about Cedric as a second wind. We’ll have a much harder time if Hufflepuff win.”

“True, but I’d say the Ravenclaw team is stronger this year. Chang can outfly their Seeker and their Chasers have the edge over Hufflepuff.”

It was amusing listening to McLaggen and Angelina debate Quidditch. It had taken nearly half a year, but McLaggen had finally gotten the message and stopped trying to backseat-captain the team. While he had observations about the game, and he definitely had opinions about the other positions, once he stopped sharing them all the time, he was a decent enough teammate. Talking point strategies and margins was usually a safe conversation to have, since making sure the other team didn’t score was McLaggen’s responsibility, one that he took very seriously.

On their way up to Gryffindor Tower, Harry paused. He was sure he heard something. It was probably nothing, but Harry still inched towards it, wand at the ready just in case. Fred and George spotted him breaking away from them and made excuses to the others, following Harry.

Further down the corridor, tucked away beside a suit of armour, was Luna and a younger Ravenclaw girl. The girl was leaning against Luna’s side, her eyes red and puffy, her cheeks streaked with tears. Luna was talking to her in a calm, quiet voice. Both looked up when Harry and the twins draw near. The girl held her hands against her chest protectively.

“It’s alright. These are friends of mine,” Luna said kindly.

“Sorry, we didn’t mean to frighten you. We’re just checking that everything’s alright,” Harry said, and Fred and George nodded.

“I think everything will be fine,” Luna said, “Tabitha just had a detention with Professor Umbridge. She’s never had a detention before, so she’s a bit upset. We’re calming down for a

bit before heading back to the common room.”

“Are you sure? Is there anything you need?”

“No, thank you,” Tabitha said.

Harry didn’t like the way her eyes were pinched, as though she was in pain. Judging by the intense look Luna gave him, she could see it too. With nothing else to do, Harry left her to it.

A detention with a teacher surely wouldn’t make somebody that upset, right? Everyone who Harry asked said they were just doing lines, which was dull and annoying. She was keeping them at it for hours, which from experience would lead to horrible aches, but the pain in Tabitha’s eyes seemed more than that. Harry didn’t like the direction his thoughts were going in. He didn’t like it one bit.

With socialising limited, the common room was as bustling and busy as it had ever been. There were people dotted about doing homework or simply reading, a few playing games. Others were talking, but Harry spotted several who looked quite bored. Not being able to go outside the common room for fear of being in too big of a group was stifling. Harry was glad he still had Quidditch, but hated that Umbridge was making it harder for everyone to enjoy their time at school.

He bypassed the common room, heading straight for the dormitory. Neville and the girls were busy doing work, and Ron was clearly trying to force his brain to engage with his essays, so he figured he wouldn’t be disturbed if he wanted a very long shower to clean up and unwind. The dormitory was empty but when he opened the door, he was met by the sound of running water and the faint sound of moaning.

In the left hand stall, standing beneath the spray of the shower, were Seamus and Dean. Seamus was braced against the wall with Dean behind him. Harry’s breath caught in his throat as he watched Dean plunging into Seamus’s ass with low, slow thrusts. Both them had their eyes closed, their breaths heavy. Blood rushed south, his erection straining against his pants, and almost as though in a trance, Harry undressed.

He was completely mesmerised as he stood there in front of his boyfriends, working his cock as Dean picked up the pace. Seamus gasped and groaned, his body trembling. Dean snapped his hips forward, then his eyes opened and he spotted Harry. He didn’t say anything, only smirked as he held eye contact with Harry. He ground into Seamus’s ass, pulling the sandy blonde up and leaning around so he could kiss him deeply and passionately. The kiss was sloppy and utterly vulgar, and it sent another rush of blood to Harry’s already aching hard dick.

Watching his boyfriends have sex was so erotic and Harry found himself getting closer and closer to the edge, even though neither of them were doing anything to him at all. He pumped his cock in time with Dean’s thrusts. Part of him wanted to join in, while the rest was more than happy to enjoy the show.

“I’m close, Shay,” Dean whispered.

“Do it,” Seamus panted.

Dean reached around, grasping Seamus’s dick. It didn’t take long before both boys were cumming, and Harry joined them a moment later. Seamus trembled, his arms not quite able to hold him up against the wall. Dean pulled out and steadied him. All three of them came down from their climaxes.

“You could have joined in, you know,” Dean said, addressing Harry.

Seamus hummed, then jolted when he spotted him.

“You looked like you were having more than enough fun,” Harry said, “it looked-”

He couldn’t quite put it into words how it had felt other than ‘amazing’, but that didn’t seem expressive enough.

“It’s why I joined in that night at Gryffindor Castle,” Dean said, “I wasn’t 100% sure I was ready to go all the way, but then I saw you two together and I couldn’t keep to myself.”

“I’m glad you did. I’m glad we get to have this,” Seamus said, holding his arms out to Harry and dragging him under the spray with them, “I love you guys.”

They cleaned themselves up, and Harry enjoyed the time he got to spend with them like this. It wasn’t always easy juggling their other friends, studying and any other commitments they might have, but Harry was glad every single time. Nowadays his thoughts were often dominated by things that were way too big, but everything always seemed so simple when he was with them. It was like he could do no wrong, or rather, if he did wrong then they’d figure it out together. It was a feeling Harry very much appreciated, and he cherished every moment of it when it happened.

February ended and March began, with the Easter holidays looming on the horizon. For most of the school this meant the end of year exams were approaching, but for Harry and the other fifth-years, there was only one thing on their mind.

OWLS

The teachers once again upped the difficulty level. Assignments in class were tricky, designed to test them on everything they’d learned in preparation for the exams, and the homework rounded out these concepts and demanded they apply them efficiently and effectively. Harry buckled down with the rest of his friends, doing his absolute best to keep on top of everything. Even Fred and George toned down their weekly product showcases to focus on studying for their NEWTs.

It helped that a few of the younger years seemed determined to be helpful. For instance, Colin and Dennis Creevey were more than happy to nip down to the library to fetch a book somebody urgently needed. It was only the fifth- and sixth-years who took advantage of this. The seventh-year material was too advanced for them to want to leave it in the hands of

anyone else, though the thought was definitely appreciated. The only ones to not take advantage of these offers were Ron and Hermione.

As the exams grew closer and closer, Hermione's hair grew messier and messier. Her face was never more than a few inches above some essay she was writing or book she was reading. Even at meals she had a book open. From what Harry heard, she had basically given up her prefect duties in favour of studying. The essays grew longer and longer as she tried to cram absolutely everything in, which only made her more frantic as she had less and less time to complete each one. McGonagall, Sprout *and* Vector all pulled her aside at the end of class to urge her to be more concise, and that they would have to start deducting marks if she went too far over the length limit.

As for Ron, nobody offered to help him. Hermione was too wrapped up in her own work to notice him struggling, or perhaps she didn't care at this point. He would sit beside her attempting to scratch a few lines for each of his essays. Harry occasionally caught him glancing over to where he and the other fifth-years were sitting, though whether he wanted to join them to study or to attempt to goof off, he had no idea. Whenever Colin offered to fetch books, he straight up ignored Ron. It wasn't looking good for the redhead come exam season.

They weren't the only ones feeling the pressure.

"Is it just me, or does Malfoy look ill?" Harry asked when they sat down to breakfast.

Over at the Slytherin table, Malfoy was pushing cereal around his bowl. The bags beneath his eyes were undeniable now, and he ignored the people around him when they tried to talk to him. Crabbe and Goyle sat imposingly either side of him.

"You-Know-Who gave him a job, right? Maybe it's not going well, or he's asked something else, something harder?" Neville suggested.

The post owls arrived, and the Great Hall erupted into gasps as people read the front page of the Daily Prophet.

BREAK IN AT THE MINISTRY. FORMER DEATH EATERS ATTEMPT TO ENTER RESTRICTED AREA

Dean immediately flattened the paper against the table so they could all read it.

At 11:37pm last night, alarms went off at the Ministry of Magic, alerting security to a major breach. Aurors were quick to respond, discovering 5 of the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban in October attempting to gain access to a restricted, high security section of the Ministry.

The high profile escape of 14 Death Eaters shocked the British Magical community, coming so swiftly on the heels of the revelations that Lord Bartemius Crouch Senior, then head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, former head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and once a well regarded member of society, had successfully conspired to smuggle his convicted son, Bartemius Junior, out of the very same prison. Among the other escapees were some of You-Know-Who's most loyal followers, charged with

some of the most heinous and damaging crimes imaginable. Many worried that they would engage in a campaign of terror not seen since the downfall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in October 1981.

It would appear that those worries were not unfounded. Aurors engaged the five Death Eaters, attempting to re-arrest them. While none of the Aurors suffered injuries, they were unsuccessful at apprehending the criminals.

So far the Ministry has yet to provide any details about how the Death Eaters gained access to the Ministry, nor indeed what it was they were trying to accomplish. Sources within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement have confirmed that one of the Death Eaters present was Augustus Rookwood, former employee of the Ministry of Magic, leading to some speculation that he was able to provide the means of entry.

“This situation is still very active and unfolding. More information will be released in due course when we are able to,” said Madam Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in a statement to the Daily Prophet. “At present, I can confirm that these criminals failed in what they tried to do, and they would be foolish to try again. The Auror Office is doing everything it can to bring them to justice.”

When asked about this incident, Minister Fudge assured the Daily Prophet that all was well.

“While it is true that these hoodlums got further than expected, our security mechanisms worked as they should and as Madam Bones said, they failed. I am sure this was a one off incident, but I swear that the Ministry will be doing a full scale review to strengthen our protocols for such an event.”

When asked about the potential leaking of information by Augustus Rookwood, Minister Fudge said, “it has been fourteen years since Rookwood worked for the Ministry. Just about everything has changed since then!”

Many in the magical community are not happy with the Minister’s stance on this issue, claiming that it is more ineffectual grandstanding attempting to deflect against very serious concerns about events going on in the country.

“First, Minister Fudge is unconcerned with the fact that an escaped Death Eater interfered with an international event last year. Then Death Eaters have escaped from Azkaban, there’ve been incidents in Muggle villages up and down the country, and now the Ministry itself has been broken into,” says Lord Sirius Black. “All the while, Minister Fudge continues to insist that all is well, when all is clearly not well. He’d rather install a puppet to hamstring the education and wellbeing of students at Hogwarts than actually do anything useful.”

In September, Senior Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge was appointed to the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts. She was later made the first High Inquisitor and most recently the Headmistress following Dumbledore’s charge of conspiracy and sedition. The latter appointments have been met with mixed support, some praising the decision for oversight of the school while others have condemned the action as Ministerial overreach.

The Daily Prophet will continue to bring you updates as the situation unfolds.

The Great Hall was silent as everyone finished reading. Nobody had any idea how they were supposed to react. More than one person looked scared, and that was when the whispers started up. The staff table looked particularly grave, McGonagall catching Snape's eye. Umbridge was glaring, but surprisingly not at the article. She was staring out at the students talking, and Harry just knew she would be running damage control.

Faster than it ever had, discussions about the attack on the Ministry was forced into the underground of the gossip mill as Umbridge liberally handed out detentions. It didn't stop people looking up at the post owls the next morning, eager for any new information or developments.

Except among the countless owls that arrived to deliver mail, not a single one brought the Daily Prophet. The day after was the same, and the day after that. The weekend arrived with no news at all. Harry exchanged glances with Neville and his boys. After classes ended, they all piled onto Harry's bed and called Sirius via the mirror.

"I figured you'd call sooner rather than later," Sirius said in lieu of a greeting, "it's been utter madness here."

"What's been happening?" Harry asked, "all we saw was the first Daily Prophet article about the attack and nothing since."

"Nothing?" Sirius frowned. "Even with Fudge's influence, it's all the Daily Prophet's been talking about."

"None of us have been getting the paper. Umbridge has given herself permission to search our mail and apparently she's decided to block the news from getting to us," Neville said.

"Has she been blocking any other mail?" Sirius asked.

"Sirius-"

"We'll get to the Ministry in a second but has she been interfering with your mail in any other way?"

"Not that I'm aware of. She's definitely been reading it but I've not heard anybody say that anything's gone missing or been altered."

"So not great, but not as bad as it could have been," Sirius said, "I'll try and bring it up but the Ministry is understandably in chaos right now."

"Voldemort attacked the Ministry," Harry prompted and Sirius nodded.

"He sent in a task force of five Death Eaters led by Rookwood. Rookwood used to be an Unspeakable, someone who works for the Department of Mysteries, and that was where they tried getting into. Thankfully they failed. Kingsley and Moody were both on site and they led the defence," Sirius said.

"What's even in the Department of Mysteries that they would want so badly?" Dean asked.

“There’s quite a lot, which unfortunately doesn’t narrow it down. Voldemort clearly didn’t take the loss of the Slytherin magic very well. Obviously there’s something in the Department of Mysteries he thinks he needs and he’s desperate enough to act so boldly to get it, though not desperate enough to reveal himself yet,” Sirius said, “the Order thinks it’s a weapon, but Dumbledore is still being vague about the details.”

“What’s Dumbledore planning to do after this?” Harry asked.

“Moody wants to launch a counter-raid, break into a Death Eater property to rout them and gather conclusive proof of Voldemort’s return. The only suitable candidate I can think of that would work in that regard would be the Malfoy’s, but that is far easier said than done,” Sirius said, “Dumbledore says he’s been chasing down leads to try and unravel Voldemort’s power base. I can’t be certain, but I think he might be looking for the horcruxes.”

“But they’re all destroyed. Besides the snake, there’s none left.”

“Meaning he’s on a wild goose chase, one that will keep him busy since Voldemort had them well hidden.” Sirius looked grave. “This shadow war is reaching the breaking point. It won’t be long now before Voldemort moves out into the open. The entire country is slowly being overcome with fear, not helped by the Ministry’s refusal to admit to anything.”

“I saw your statement in the Daily Prophet. Nice one.”

“Thanks. A reporter managed to catch me on my way in and I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. Naturally I didn’t support Dumbledore’s story but I tried to push the Ministry to actually take this seriously and not try to sweep it under the rug like they’ve done everything else,” Sirius said.

“Like Umbridge is trying to do,” Harry said.

“If she goes too far, come straight to me. I don’t care what mess the Ministry’s up to its neck in, I will bring this down on them like hellfire. Though if it’s particularly serious, go straight to Amelia Bones. Amy’s just about the best person in the Ministry right now, especially when it comes to justice. I trust that she would take it as seriously as it needs to be taken,” Sirius said, “look after each other. Keep yourselves safe. I’ll talk to you as soon as I can if I have more news.”

The mirror faded back into their reflections. The dark mood that the initial Daily Prophet story brought settled over them even heavier than before. Harry didn’t know what else to do besides grab hold of his boys and hold them close. Even Neville didn’t escape his grasp. The spectre of war loomed ever closer, and their enemies were on the move.

The tension in the air was undeniable. The corridors hadn’t been this quiet while still full of students since second year. The Daily Prophet started arriving once again, and along with everyone else, Harry frantically scanned through it. There wasn’t much more than what Sirius had told them but after a whole week with no contact, it was like a breath of fresh air getting to see the outside world again.

Harry kept himself busy with his schoolwork, but his thoughts were dragged in another direction entirely. Voldemort had been bold enough, or desperate enough, to outright attack the Ministry in the hopes of getting what he wanted. He'd been fixated on the Ministry ever since he had returned to his body, but he had also been fixated on something else.

Voldemort had also had his eyes on Hogwarts.

Just as with the Ministry, one very important question was raised. What exactly did he want at Hogwarts? The obvious answer was Harry, but that didn't feel quite right. There was something hidden in the castle, something that Voldemort had tasked Draco with trying to find to no success. If he would attack the Ministry, would he also attack Hogwarts? When he shared these thoughts with the others, they agreed.

"We need to try and find out what they could possibly want," Neville said, "they're both after it. If we can find it first, we might be able to increase the protections on it."

"You're talking about trying to get ahead of two of the most powerful wizards of the century," Lavender reminded them.

"We have to do something! I don't much fancy Hogwarts becoming a battleground," Seamus said.

"There are some things we can do, things that neither of them would be able to," Parvati said quietly, "Dumbledore will have been through the entire library in his time as Headmaster, but he's not a founders Heir. Neville could search to see if there's anything that only someone of their family lines can access."

She took a deep breath.

"The future is still too murky. I've tried to peer through it but maybe that's the wrong thing to do. Instead of trying to pierce the veil, I should be trying to understand the glimpses of whatever can make it through." She looked at Harry. "If either of those don't work, you've got that Ritual. Maybe you can see something in the past that will help us."

It was a very good idea, and having a plan certainly helped to focus the mind and keep them from spiralling into despair. Harry went up to the dormitory with Seamus and Dean, retrieving the focus stone from his trunk.

"Do you want us to come with you, or would you rather be alone?" Dean asked.

"More eyes are probably better for this," Harry said.

The three of them climbed into Harry's bed. Harry shut the hangings, warded them for privacy, then they all stripped off their clothes, taking their positions from the last time they did this.

"There's over a thousand years of Hogwarts history, countless magical memories. The chances that we actually see something useful is very slim," Harry reminded them.

“It’s been pretty good so far. Magic must want this knowledge to be known,” Seamus said, “we’ll never know until we try.”

They closed their eyes, breathing deeply, letting the natural magic flow about them and within them. The door appeared and Harry guided Seamus and Dean through it.

When they opened their eyes, they were still in the Gryffindor dormitory. At first Harry thought perhaps they were seeing something recent, but there were only four beds instead of five and they didn’t have any hangings.

“How far back do you reckon we’re seeing?” Seamus asked.

“Let’s see if we can figure that out,” Harry said.

“Oh god. Look at this.”

Dean had wandered over to the window and was looking outside. The sloping front lawns were pitted with craters, and lines had been scorched into the grass that were still burning brightly with fire.

“What happened?” Seamus asked.

“I have no idea. Come on.”

Harry led them out of the dormitory and they headed down to the common room. There they found a very tense room filled with students, Seamus and Dean instinctively covering up despite not being visible. They didn’t wear the uniform of Harry’s time, instead opting for regular clothes. The only sign that there was a uniform at all were the scarlet neckerchiefs they all wore.

“That’s what I saw the students wearing in the founders time,” Harry said, “so we’re back at the beginning, or close enough to it.”

He didn’t see Kamran or Jon, nor any of the three younger students all grown up. This must be later than that.

A group of older students stood close to where the portrait hole usually was, only now there was a blank stretch of wall. Everyone else was further back, the youngest clustered around the fireplace.

“It sounds like it’s stopped.”

“Did they win?”

“I can’t see any fighting,” somebody near the window said.

“So there was some kind of battle here,” Dean put together from the whispers, “somebody must have attacked Hogwarts.”

They approached the wall where the portrait hole should be. Taking a deep breath, unnecessarily, Harry stepped through the wall and out into the corridor, his boys following behind him. Harry felt the tug in his chest, the magical memory guiding them to what it wanted them to see.

It took them down several floors. Despite the damage outside, it didn't appear as though the fighting had spread to inside the castle, which was a good thing in Harry's mind. Clearly the defences had been strong enough to keep the attackers out, even if they had made it into the grounds.

They reached the Hospital Wing, and Harry steeled himself for what they might see inside. The Hospital Wing was very similar to the present day, with a row of beds along each wall. There were no curtains separating them, giving Harry, Seamus and Dean a clear view of the activity surrounding one bed in particular. Salazar, much older than he appeared in the Ring Realm, stood at the foot of the bed. His eyes were closed and he murmured beneath his breath. At the bedside was a shorter woman with silvery grey hair, but it was the beds occupant that made Harry gasp.

In his mind, Godric Gryffindor was youthful and full of life. To see him lying there, unmoving and ... *old* was deeply unnerving. His hair was no longer auburn, now fully grey, along with his beard. His body was still strong, but there was an uncharacteristic frailty to it that Harry struggled to reconcile.

"He will live," Salazar said.

"I know he will, but it was a close thing," the woman said, "had you not had your locket on hand-"

"There's no use in speaking of possibilities Helga. We have done what we can. Now the locket will do the rest."

Godric wore a very familiar silver locket. The emerald inlaid in the front glittered and shone, the metal seeming to be brighter somehow as though giving off a dull light.

The doors to the Hospital Wing opened. Harry turned to see a young man, possibly late teens or early twenties, wearing pale blue robes enter, his staff thudding against the floor with every other step.

"Master Merlin," Helga greeted him with a curtsy, as did Salazar with a small bow.

"Lady Hufflepuff, Lord Slytherin," the man said back, inclining his head.

"That's Merlin?" Dean and Seamus said together, completely aghast. "I thought you said he was an old man!"

"He was," Harry said, "he was older than Godric, but that must have been years ago."

Everyone else was older, but both Helga Hufflepuff and Salazar Slytherin had acknowledged this man as Merlin. Now that Harry was looking, he did look kind of familiar. The

resemblance to the old man Harry had previously seen was definitely there.

Merlin approached the bed, his face grave when he took in Godric.

“I heard about what happened. I apologise that I could not get here sooner. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“The oaf will live. The locket will remove the curse that Lord Malum managed to hit him with. All that remains is to repair the rest of the damage to the school,” Salazar said.

“I believe Lady Ravenclaw has made a start on that.”

“Then I shall go and help her,” Helga said, then to Salazar, “we will need to let the students know all is well, though I doubt Godric’s lot will be pleased.”

“Of course they won’t. Once we’ve informed our own houses, we can tackle the lions together,” Salazar said.

Helga nodded, curtsied once more to Merlin, then left the Hospital Wing.

“The wards feel unsettled,” Merlin commented.

“They held off the bombardment of spells, but in doing so they could not prevent Lord Malum’s forces from gaining entry,” Salazar said, “the four of us will need to re-energise them.”

After one final check of Godric’s condition, the pair of them left the Hospital Wing, walking through the twisting corridors of the school.

“Will Godric even be able to? It will take time for him to recover.”

“The three of us should be sufficient until he is better. It would be best if I start on it now,” Salazar said.

“I agree, but I am concerned,” Merlin said, “I have shared these with the four of you before. What you have built here at Hogwarts is unlike anything the world has ever seen, and clearly there are some who view it as a threat.”

“We shall protect our students.”

“And when the four of you are gone? It has hardly escaped notice that you are not as young as you once were.”

“We can’t all have your gifts,” Salazar said, causing Merlin to scoff lightly.

“Lord Malum is a powerful wizard but there is no way he would have been able to land such a curse on Godric in his prime. The same can be said of all of you,” Merlin continued, “you have not bound your family lines to the wards as you have done your homes.”

“We chose to teach. We would not make that choice for our children,” Salazar said.

“Then when the four of you are gone, the wards will steadily deteriorate, the defences weakening. Even if the current Headmaster bonds with the wards, it won’t be enough compared to you four. This place of safety will become vulnerable, and those with vested interests in keeping magical power for themselves will take advantage.”

They stopped in a seemingly nondescript corridor. Harry, Seamus and Dean stopped as well, looking around but there were only a few suits of armour and what looked like the Hogwarts crest lightly chiselled into the stone. Salazar bowed his head.

“You are right. Of course you are,” he said, ashamed, “it’s a truth none of us want to consider, least of all Godric. He seems determined that he will live forever so that he may keep these children safe.”

“He is mortal.”

“And as is so common in mortality, he doesn’t like to think about how limited his time is,” Salazar said.

He reached out and pressed a hand to the Hogwarts crest. There was a rumbling and the wall split open into a door, a dark passage extending beyond.

“What would you suggest we do?” Salazar asked, stepping through the door.

Merlin paused on the threshold. He turned his head, peering behind him, and he looked straight into Harry’s eyes. Harry knew that this was a magical memory. Everything he was seeing was exactly what happened in the past. The people in the memories could not see him since he wasn’t really here, but then the corner of Merlin’s lip curled up into a small smile. Could- could Merlin see him?

He didn’t have any time to wrap his brain around that. Merlin passed through the door and the magical memory faded away. Harry shot up in bed, trying to will his heart to stop racing. Even when people in the magical memories had been looking at him, it had never felt like that. Dean and Seamus both sat up, looking worried.

“I’ve never seen a passage like that in Hogwarts,” Seamus said, “do you reckon that’s what Dumbledore’s been trying to find?”

“Probably,” Harry said.

“Are you alright Harry? You look really shaken,” Dean said.

“I just got the feeling at the end there that Merlin could see me. It was ... it was really unnerving.”

Dean beckoned him forward and Harry settled in between the two, sandwiched between their bodies.

“I don’t actually know if he could, but I got the feeling he was looking right at me, like he knew I was there.”

“Then he’d better have kept his eyes up,” Seamus said, “I’m not having some strange man oggling my boyfriends when they’re naked, even if they are a legendary wizard.”

“He was so much younger than the last time I saw him,” Harry said, “I don’t get how that works.”

“I don’t remember anything about Merlin looking younger, but then again, he’s kind of like the four founders; a legendary figure who lived so long ago and was said to have done so many different things, it’s nearly impossible to tell what’s real and what’s fictional,” Seamus said, “the currently accepted theory is that Merlin was the best student Hogwarts ever produced, but according to you he was the one to teach Godric Gryffindor. Who knows what other facts about him have been distorted in time?”

That was entirely true. One thing that was also true was the confirmation that there was a door in Hogwarts that led ... somewhere, likely somewhere important.

It took all of his restraint to not immediately go off searching for the hidden room. It was only a reminder from Dean that they didn’t want to draw attention to themselves that kept him calm and focused. The last thing he wanted was to tip Umbridge off about what he was trying to do. Not only would she punish him for it, she may decide to stick her nose in further. They waited until after dinner, leaving the common room and heading in the direction of the library. When they were sure they weren’t being followed, Harry threw the invisibility cloak over them.

They reached the Hospital Wing. Harry intended to then follow the same route that Salazar and Merlin had taken but he realised that he had been so focused on what they were saying that he couldn’t remember where they’d gone. Dean rolled his eyes from where he was holding the cloak and whispered directions. The corridors seemed to be in the same places as before, and eventually they reached the suits of armour where they’d stopped.

The wall was entirely blank. There was no Hogwarts crest chiselled into the stone, not even any faded marks as Seamus found when he inspected it more closely. It was entirely nondescript and ordinary.

“Are we sure this is the right place?” Seamus asked.

“I’m pretty sure,” Dean said, “can you feel anything Harry?”

Harry tried reaching out with his magic, but nothing specifically reached back. He pressed his hand to the same spot on the wall that Salazar did, even tried pushing in some Gryffindor and Slytherin magic, but nothing happened. He shook his head.

“The castle does like to move and rearrange itself. Maybe the door was moved to a different part of the castle?” Seamus said, “or maybe it’s never in the same place two days in a row? It would explain why Dumbledore hasn’t found it despite searching for it.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, lacking anything else to say.

In hindsight, it had been a longshot that they would find whatever was hidden in Hogwarts so easily. It didn't stop the disappointment they all felt, even if they tried hiding it.

They returned to a small commotion in Gryffindor common room. A group of people were clumped around the puffy chairs by the fire, while everyone else looked on with varying levels of concern. Eric turned and spotted Harry, eyes wide and frantic, and he ran over.

"Please, we need help!"

Before Harry could respond, Eric grabbed his arm and dragged him over to the chairs. The group parted to let him through, and Harry saw Neville. His concern continued to grow when he saw what was going on. Seth was hunched over in one of the chairs, hands clutched against his chest. His breaths kept hitching and tears flowed freely down his cheeks. He barely made a sound except an occasional whine. Euan sat beside him looking incredibly lost and scared, nervously rubbing Seth's back. Eric dropped down on his free side.

"I brought Harry," he said to Seth, then to Harry, "please, help him!"

Harry pushed aside his worry, allowing a sense of calm to wash over him as he knelt down in front of Seth. The first-year inclined his head upwards slightly, meeting Harry's eyes. Harry did his best to exude an aura of calm and stability.

"Are you alright, Seth? Can you tell me what's wrong?"

Seth hitched another few breaths, choking down sobs.

"It hurts," he breathed out.

"What hurts?" Harry asked, eyes flicking downwards, "is it your hands?"

Seth inched them forward so he could look at them too. Now that he was closer, Harry saw that he wasn't clutching them. Seth's left hand was pressed firmly over the back of his right. The red smears that Harry could see between his fingers looked very fresh, the blood not dry.

"Can I see?" Harry asked. Seth tensed up, which brought another little whine as whatever it was no doubt twinged with pain again. "It's alright. I just want to see so I can help. It'll be alright Seth."

Very, very slowly, Seth removed his left hand. It was like the air in the room had been sucked out. The group around the sofas went silent, and that silence spread through the entire room. It was all Harry could do to release the air in his lungs in one calm, measured breath, but it was so hard.

On the back of Seth's right hand, so freshly cut they were still bleeding sluggishly, were the words *I must remember my place*.

The truth

I must remember my place.

It was sickening seeing those words cut into the back of an eleven year olds hand. Harry took several deep breaths, tamping down the anger that was bubbling in his gut. Whoever did this was going to pay dearly. He held Seth's hand, meeting his eyes again with a kind smile.

"It's all going to be alright now Seth," Harry said, "can you tell me who did this to you?"

Seth froze, practically radiating fear.

"I won't let them get away with this, I promise," Harry assured him.

"Pro-pro-" Seth swallowed, "Professor Umbridge."

The bubbling anger inside him began to boil but none of it showed on his face.

"Can you tell me why?"

"Seth had detention with her," Euan said, "we were walking back from the Library after trying to do her homework, and Eric was saying how confused he was because the Defensive Magical Theory book we've been reading in her class says different things to all the other books out there. We didn't know how we were supposed to do it right and she overheard us. Seth asked if she could help explain it better but she said no."

"He tried asking her questions but she kept brushing him off, saying-" Eric looked about then leaned in close to whisper, "she said a mudblood could hardly be expected to understand anything in this school. I don't know what that word means but it sounded very bad."

Those around who heard hissed, looking various levels of angry. Seth curled in on himself and that alone nearly caused his anger to overflow.

"Seth seemed to think so too and he told her that wasn't very nice. He said-" Euan said, hesitating slightly, "he said that she should be more like you when you help us with our homework, and that's when she gave him detention. She had him with her for hours."

Harry turned his attention back to Seth, who had been quietly crying the entire time.

"I'm so sorry she said that to you. It absolutely wasn't right, but you did the right thing. You stood up for yourself and your friends. Not many people would be able to do that, especially not against a teacher," Harry said, "you've been so brave. I've only got one more question for you Seth, then we'll sort everything out. Is that alright?"

Seth nodded.

"What happened in your detention with Umbridge?"

It took a little while for Seth to calm down enough to speak, but when he did, Harry's heart broke.

"She made me write lines with a- with a special quill she had. It didn't have any ink but I thought it was just like a pen. She made me write *that* over and over again, but when I did, it scratched into my hand," Seth broke down into sobs, "it really, really hurt but she made me keep writing! It hurt and it was bleeding but she wouldn't let me stop! She said that a mudblood should remember my place and not question the people be-better than me. It hurts Harry!"

Harry pulled Seth into a hug, mindful of his cut hand. He could hear his heart hammering in his chest, pounding in his ears. That ... that monster. That evil, *evil* woman. How dare she do something so despicable? Did she not have any empathy whatsoever? Did she derive some sick, twisted pleasure from inflicting pain and suffering on another person? This was the person that Fudge trusted, the one he gave endless amounts of power to. He installed a psychopath at Hogwarts all out of his ridiculous paranoia about Dumbledore and Voldemort.

The common room fire flared, growing bigger and brighter and hotter even as the raging anger within him turned icy cold. A hand touched on his shoulder and Harry felt the push of familiar magic. It was Hufflepuff magic, and he suddenly realised how close to the surface his own magic was. Taking a deep breath, he brought himself back under control, settling his fury. The fire returned to normal. He glanced behind him and nodded his thanks to Neville.

Only then a sudden thought hit him like a wrecking ball. Seth wasn't the only one to be given detention by Umbridge that lasted hours. There had been others, detentions that nobody talked about except that they were writing lines. Had they- Harry sincerely hoped there was no-one else, but he had to make sure. He looked around him at the assembled crowd of Gryffindors.

"Has she done this to anyone else? Has anyone else been forced to write lines using that quill?"

There was no point in trying to hide what he meant. They'd all heard what Seth said. Nobody moved at first, and for a second Harry thought his fears were unfounded, but then one person stepped forward, followed by another and then another. Two third-years and a sixth-year. His fury rose again but this time Harry was in control. He reached out and the magic of Hogwarts answered his call. His instructions were simple.

Umbridge does not get away.

The magic eagerly moved through the castle, homing in on Umbridge in her office. Harry had no idea what she was doing. All he knew was that she was alone as he felt the Floo connection in her fireplace cutting off, the office door and window sealing themselves shut. There was no way for her to get out, no way for her to escape and slip away.

"Want Milly," Seth hiccupped into his chest, his sobs subsiding.

"Alright. We can do that," Harry said, "Neville, could you please go down to the Hufflepuff common room and collect Milly Richardson. She's a sixth-year. Tell her her brother needs

her.”

Neville nodded and ran out through the portrait hole. Harry turned Alicia and Maxwell, the seventh-year prefects.

“Could you go and get Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey please? Tell them there’s an emergency and they are urgently needed.”

Even though he wasn’t a prefect, the authority in Harry’s voice was strong. Both of them rushed out of the room without questioning it.

“Everyone else besides those affected, please go up to your dormitories and stay there until this has been resolved,” Harry said, “and do not try to listen in.”

He made significant eye contact with the sixth-year prefects, Fred and George and the other fifth-years. They all clearly got the message. While the rest of the Gryffindors looked like they wanted to protest, they didn’t resist as they were shepherded to the spiral staircases. The only one who said anything was Hermione.

“This really isn’t appropriate. Harry, you shouldn’t be-”

“Not another word, Granger.”

His voice was soft, each word spoken carefully, but it carried a weight to it that brought Hermione up short. She opened and closed her mouth, whatever complaints she wanted to make going unsaid, and Angelina and Katie ushered her upstairs to the girls dormitories. She was lucky. If Harry had been alone, she would have felt the full force of Harry’s fury, but shouting wouldn’t help the situation. It would only make Seth even more scared, and Harry couldn’t have that.

Seamus and Dean lingered for a moment.

“Are you going to be alright?” Dean asked quietly.

“I’ll be fine,” was all Harry said.

“We’ll be waiting for you upstairs,” Seamus said, “don’t do anything stupid.”

“As if I’d ever do something like that.”

Eric and Euan both looked as though they weren’t going to leave, but with some gentle encouragement from Harry, they left with Seamus and Dean. It was just Harry, Seth, and the three others in the common room. A few questions confirmed their stories were similar to Seth’s.

The portrait hole swung open and Neville returned. Milly Richardson followed behind him. She glanced about at the Gryffindor common room with curiosity but her eyes quickly landed on Seth. She beelined for him and held him close.

“Shh, it’s alright. It’s alright. I’m here now,” she whispered to him as Seth’s sobs renewed. She fixed Harry with an imperious look that brooked no dissent. “What happened?”

Harry opened his mouth to answer but the portrait hole opened again and in came McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey. Harry stood to address the two.

“What’s happened?” McGonagall asked, directing her question to the room at large even as she faced Harry.

“Dolores Umbridge has used some kind of quill to force students to carve words into their hands during detentions with her,” Harry said. His voice was still soft, but there was a firmness to it. “These four have all been through it but I doubt they’re the only ones. Seth’s injuries occurred tonight and require immediate treatment.”

Madam Pomfrey bustled forward but Harry held out an arm to stop her.

“You will document the injuries before you treat them,” he said.

“I don’t need you to tell me how to do my job,” Madam Pomfrey said frostily.

“Document, then treat,” Harry insisted.

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips but whatever she was about to say she let it go, moving past Harry to kneel in front of Seth. Harry heard her speaking softly to him as he turned his attention back to McGonagall. McGonagall’s lips were thin, a clear sign of her anger.

“I will go alert the Aurors now,” McGonagall said, “she won’t get away with this.”

“No, she won’t, because you are going to go directly to Madam Amelia Bones about this,” Harry said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Two out of the three Aurors on site are in Umbridge’s pocket. She’s here at the behest of the Minister himself. The usual process won’t be enough to stop her, and she *will* be stopped. The only one with the authority to actually punish her is the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Anyone else and she’ll get off scot free.”

“Do you think I don’t know that? Even so, there is a procedure that-”

“Professor McGonagall, I have a lot of respect for you, which is the only reason why I am still able to speak to you so civilly right now. If I was alone with any other teacher, I likely wouldn’t be so calm,” Harry said, “I was not making a request. You will go and get Madam Bones and bring her here so that monster can be brought to justice, or I will.”

Harry met McGonagall’s eyes without faltering. He was being completely serious. Sirius told him to go straight to Madam Bones if Umbridge did anything serious, and carving up children’s hands definitely counted. It shouldn’t be his job to seek justice for it, not when a professor was right in front of him, but if she didn’t realise the gravity of the situation and act accordingly, then he would do it himself.

It looked as though McGonagall wanted to argue, either about the proper procedure or about his tone, but Harry didn't back down, *wouldn't* back down. McGonagall seemed to realise this. Her posture grew slightly looser and she looked away first.

"Very well."

She went over to the fireplace. With a tap of her wand, a small box on the mantelpiece opened and she took a pinch of black powder from it, tossing it into the fire. It roared emerald green, and McGonagall vanished into the flames.

Madam Pomfrey was running her wand over the cuts on Seth's hand. A small roll of parchment was on the floor beside her. As she worked, she asked him and the others about what Umbridge had done to them. Seeing her do her job smothered part of the righteous fury still coursing through him, and shame filled in the gap.

"I'm sorry," Harry said to her, "I shouldn't have spoken to you like that."

"You were correctly concerned for your housemates in a difficult situation. Believe me, it was nowhere near the worst thing I've heard from students. I think given the circumstances I can let you off the hook," Madam Pomfrey said, then she waved her wand at him, "though only this once. It's hard to make potions taste better without compromising their effectiveness but it is very easy to make them taste worse."

Harry nodded quickly, threat received and understood.

The fire flared green again. Madam Bones stepped out of it, followed by Kingsley and McGonagall.

"We have to stop meeting like this Heir Potter," Madam Bones said, then her eyes passed over the people in the common room, "what's the situation here?"

Harry explained what had happened as concisely as he could without diminishing the seriousness of what Umbridge did. Madam Bones remained stone faced, giving nothing away.

"I would like to speak to each of you in turn," Madam Bones said to the four students, "rest assured, I will take what you say seriously. Nobody is above the law, not even high ranking members of the Ministry."

One by one she led the students to the corner of the room with Kingsley, putting up a privacy ward as they spoke. Seth remained glued to Milly's side when it was his turn. It was silent in the common room as Harry waited for the interviews to be over, his mind racing. Eventually Madam Bones finished, reading through the reports that Madam Pomfrey had made for each of the students. Her expression became much more fixed and stern.

"Professor McGonagall, if you could please escort me to Madam Umbridge's office so that I may bring her in."

"You'll need me to unseal the room," Harry said.

“You sealed it?” Madam Bones asked.

“I didn’t want to risk her getting away, not after what she’s done.”

Madam Bones raised an eyebrow at him.

“Very well. You will come with Professor McGonagall but you will stay out of the way. This is not like the last time you assisted the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

Harry nodded to show his agreement, and the four of them left the Gryffindor common room. As they got closer to Umbridge’s office, his fury returned to him with each step he took. He was about to confront the monster, even if he would do nothing more than unlock the door. He was going to see her when she was arrested. The anticipated satisfaction curled within him. When they reached the correct floor, they bumped into Tonks. She looked between them, thoroughly confused.

“Madam Bones?”

Madam Bones exchanged a look with Kingsley, who nodded.

“With me Auror Tonks. I need your assistance with an arrest of a high priority target.

Tonks still looked confused but she fell into step on Madam Bones’s side.

There were bangs coming from Umbridge’s office door, followed by her screeching shout. Light came through the keyhole, clearly as she tried to unlock it with magic.

“Heir Potter, if you could unseal the door and stay behind Professor McGonagall,” Madam Bones said.

There was a click before the door was wrenched open and Umbridge stormed out. Harry had never seen her so angry. Her wand was clenched in her fist as she glared about. She probably thought a student had locked her in her office as a prank and she was out for blood. Her temper barely dimmed when she saw the group of people.

“Madam Bones? What on earth are you doing here?”

“Dolores Umbridge, I am arresting you on multiple counts of assault and grievous bodily harm of a minor,” Madam Bones said dispassionately, “it would be in your best interests to come quietly.”

“This is utterly ridiculous!” Umbridge scoffed, “I don’t have time for this.”

She made to stalk away down the corridor.

“Aurors, relieve Ms Umbridge of her wand and bring her into custody,” Madam Bones said, causing Umbridge to whirl around.

“Don’t any of you take even a single step! Do you have any idea who I am? I am Senior Undersecretary Dolores Jane Umbridge, and I demand you tell me who authorised this!”

That was when she spotted Harry.

“Potter!” Umbridge spat. “How dare you tell such horrific lies? First you try to destabilise the entire country because of your delusions of grandeur, but now when somebody has taken a firm stance against you, you lie to someone as important as Madam Bones, wasting her and the Ministry’s time, all to attempt to have me arrested!”

She pulled herself up to her full, short height, sneering down her nose at him.

“Aurors, I command you arrest Mr Potter for conspiracy and sedition!”

She raised her wand.

“You have your instructions from me,” Madam Bones, “use all necessary force.”

Harry barely saw Kingsley and Tonks move. In two flashes of light, Umbridge’s wand was soaring through the air, and Umbridge was stunned, falling to the floor in a slump. Kingsley walked forward and put a pair of handcuffs on her, then had her body float up off the ground.

“Shacklebolt, guard her. Tonks, with me to search her office,” Madam Bones said, “Professor McGonagall, that will be all. Please take Heir Potter back to his common room.”

He thought it would feel better than this. Umbridge was arrested. They would search her office and find the quill she used on Seth and the others. They had the testimony, and would probably find more if they went looking. Umbridge was beaten. Harry should feel the satisfaction he was anticipating, so why didn’t he feel any better? There was an energy coursing through him, a fire in his veins, and Harry could feel himself shaking.

Why wasn’t he satisfied with this outcome?

Because it didn’t feel like it was enough.

He didn’t realise he’d come a halt until McGonagall put her hands on his shoulders, leaning down to look him in the eye.

“Tell me what you’re feeling right now Potter,” she said.

“I’m ... so ... angry.”

His whole body shook but McGonagall stood there, looking as though she was unaffected by what just happened.

“What are you angry at?”

“Everything!” Harry snapped. “I’m angry at that monster for doing such a horrible thing to *children* ; Fudge for enabling his psychopathic little toadie at every turn; Dumbledore for being so incompetent he hasn’t been able to keep a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher for more than a year; you for not doing more to protect us from her; *me* for not noticing sooner! I am furious!”

McGonagall glanced about, though at what Harry couldn't tell.

"Ok. That's all ok. You've got plenty to be angry at. You've had enough people who've failed you in the past, but *you* have not failed. What happened tonight happened because of you. Remember that," McGonagall said, infuriatingly calmly, "there's nothing wrong with anger, but this anger is like a too hot cup of tea. You need to blow on it so it cools before you can do anything with it. Can you do that Harry? Can you blow on the tea?"

Harry took in a deep breath then blew out long and slowly. Under McGonagall's careful coaching, he kept doing it. The raging fury within him did not go away, but very slowly it simmered down. He stopped shaking, and that was when he noticed the small cracks in the stone around him. Shame replaced the anger.

"I'm sorry Professor."

Her grip on his shoulders tightened slightly.

"For letting your magic get away from you a little? Even the best of us lose control every now and again when emotions run high. For speaking to me like you did in the common room? There was a crisis and you were handling it as best you could, and I wasn't moving fast enough," McGonagall said, "if you're apologising for the other things you have done tonight, do not even bother. You were protecting your housemates, and likely the entire school as well, from a clear and present danger. You stepped up when you were needed most, and I could not be prouder of you for it."

Harry ducked his head, not quite able to meet her eye any more.

"Do you think you can return to the common room now, or do you need some more time to calm down?"

"No. I can go."

The only person in the common room when they got there was Madam Pomfrey, clearly waiting for McGonagall to return. Harry was dismissed and went back up to the fifth-year dormitory. The other boys were waiting for him and they immediately rushed over to him. Harry didn't say anything. He held onto Seamus and Dean tightly, burying his face in their shoulders as the last vestiges of his anger seeped away from him.

"It's alright. We've got you," Seamus said.

None of them pushed him for any answers, which Harry was very glad about. The hangings around Ron's bed were shut, so he didn't even have to deal with him. Eventually, once Harry had fully calmed down, he pulled back so he could see everyone while still holding onto them.

"It's done. Umbridge was arrested by Madam Bones."

"Merlin's beard," Seamus let out.

"That's good, right?" Dean asked.

“She’s the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She’s probably the only person who could go over Fudge’s head like this,” Neville said, “so yes. It’s very good.”

“Good riddance,” Seamus said.

“But are you alright Harry?” Dean asked, “you felt- I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so angry before.”

“I’m-” Harry struggled to put exactly how he was feeling into words, “-better.”

He was still a bit angry, but also sad and ashamed and elated and a million other things all at once. His boys seemed to understand. Though it was still early, the three of them bade goodnight to Neville and tucked themselves into Harry’s bed, squishing together. Harry was grateful for it. It was an ever present reminder that he wasn’t alone.

He wasn’t entirely sure what happened next, his brain still processing everything that took place. He came back to awareness stripped down to his underwear, sandwiched between his boyfriends who were likewise dressed the same. The lights in the dormitory were off and both Seamus and Dean were breathing softly with sleep.

Harry felt himself trembling. It wasn’t one particular emotion, but a whole surge of all of them crashing down on him all at once. He let out a shaky breath, tucking himself more securely against Seamus’s strong chest. In response, two sets of arms wrapped themselves around him tighter. The warm and safe embrace was enough to settle him, and he was able to drift off to sleep after a very eventful day.

It wasn’t the first time that Umbridge hadn’t appeared at breakfast so nobody was quite sure what to make of it when she wasn’t in her now usual place at the staff table. A few whispers started up but they were quiet, contained, followed by nervous, cautious glances about. Even if Umbridge wasn’t there, there was still the risk that anything said would get back to her and a detention would follow. Once everyone arrived, McGonagall stood and announced that classes were cancelled for the day due to an investigation by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

The four heads of houses gathered their students in their common rooms and explained what a Blood Quill was. They asked if anyone had ever had one used on them without their consent to please go and see Madam Pomfrey. This was when the rumours started, rumours about one of the Gryffindor first-years being forced to use a Blood Quill. People put two and two together and figured that it was Umbridge who’d done it. The whispers turned to Umbridge being arrested, with no small amount of hope that it was true. The fact that the school governors were seen arriving at the school certainly helped fan those flames.

Even so, it took until the next day for everyone to finally believe it. It was hard not to when they saw the headline.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE CHARGED WITH MULTIPLE COUNTS OF ASSAULT

The story didn't give many details, but the ones it did give were unequivocal and clear. Umbridge was being held by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement pending a full criminal trial. The evidence was clear, even if the Daily Prophet didn't state what the evidence was. Reading it, Harry didn't know if Fudge had tried to intervene or not. He supposed it didn't really matter, because at least a third of the story was devoted to statements from witches and wizards, prominent nobility and not, excoriating Fudge for giving so much power to someone clearly so inept and unsuitable for her positions. Fudge would be too busy trying to save his own skin to do anything to protect Umbridge.

The news of the arrest took a minute to settle in, but then a great cheer erupted throughout the Great Hall. None of the teachers did anything to stop it. In fact, they looked just as pleased as the students. Harry was sure he saw Professor Flitwick do a small fist pump. Eventually, McGonagall stood, tapping her spoon to her goblet. The ringing sound carried across the Great Hall and slowly but surely people quietened to hear what she had to say.

"In light of Madam Umbridge's arrest two days ago, the governors called an emergency meeting with the Heads of Houses to discuss what will happen. I have been named interim Headmistress until at least the end of the school year," McGonagall said, "this likely will not have a large impact on you as students. What I can say is that effective immediately, Dolores Umbridge has been stripped of any and all positions she held here at Hogwarts by the authority of the school governors and the Wizengamot. The Inquisitorial Squad is officially disbanded, and any new rules she introduced through her position as High Inquisitor have been revoked."

This caused another round of cheers. McGonagall allowed it for a moment before calling for order once again.

"As for the cause of her arrest," McGonagall's voice turned very serious, "I can confirm that Dolores Umbridge has been charged due to her use of Blood Quills on students. We have already urged those affected to seek treatment from Madam Pomfrey. I would like to take a moment now to remind everyone else to not pester those students for details. They have every right to their privacy." She bowed her head slightly. "I would also like to apologise on behalf of myself and the other teachers. Hogwarts is a school but for most of the year it is also your home. You should feel safe in your home. For some of you, that safety was torn apart by that vile woman, and we as your teachers should have done more to protect you. We shall all strive to do better, and together, we will!"

There were many questions left unanswered following McGonagall's speech. Chief among them was what was going to happen with Defence Against the Dark Arts. Harry still had his correspondence course material, but he was just as curious and nervous as the rest of the school.

When Harry and the other fifth-year Gryffindors trooped to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, they found a sign on the door directing them to the second floor instead. All of them were confused, but they did as they were instructed. Whether by chance or design, Harry ended up at the front of the group, and as such was the first one to enter. His face split with a wide grin.

"Remus!"

“I think you’ll find it’s Professor Lupin at school,” Remus said, giving Harry a kind smile, “come in everyone. Take your seats. We’ve got a lot to do.”

They all shuffled to their desks, excitement building within them as Remus finished getting his things together at the teacher’s desk.

“To try and head off the questions I’m sure you all have, Professor McGonagall reached out to me to see if I was available to step in as an emergency teacher, given that you managed to lose yours already. Luckily I was, and that is why I have come back,” Remus said, “as for why we’re in this room in particular, there has always been a rumour that the Defence Against the Dark Arts job is cursed as nobody has lasted longer than a single year. It’s likely superstition born from coincidence, but given that no teacher in the last fifty years has worked this post for more than a year, the Headmistress has called in a couple of experts to see if they can find the truth one way or the other. I suspect your usual classroom is currently being torn apart as we speak.”

Remus reached for something on his desk and picked up a copy of Defensive Magical Theory.

“Now then, am I right in thinking that this is the textbook you’ve been ‘learning’ from?”

“Yes, and it’s the worst book I’ve ever had to read!” Hermione rushed to say. “It doesn’t give any accurate information at all but Umbridge wouldn’t listen to anything any of us had to say. I really hope-”

“That’s more than enough Hermione,” Remus said. It was his usual kind tone, but Harry saw the way his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I hate to remind you all, but the exams are two and a half months away. We have a lot of ground to cover in that time, so I will work you very hard. It will be difficult, but I know that with a bit of effort you will all be capable of handling it and succeeding.”

There was no time for questions. In the first hour of the lesson, Remus gave them a detailed overview of what they should have covered before starting with the theory of counter-curses Harry had learned in his correspondence course. The pace of the lesson was fast, but not too fast for them to follow, and Remus kept them engaged with several insightful and challenging questions. In the second hour, the desks were pushed to the side of the room and they had their first practical Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson of the year.

Remus had been correct when he said he would push them hard. It was much more difficult than when he taught them in third year, both in terms of the material and the expectations he had for them, but Harry completely understood why. He had a year's worth of material to cover in a quarter of the time. They left the lesson with a sizable essay to write, but nobody was complaining. Compared to Umbridge, Remus was the best teacher in the world.

“Harry, I was told to give you this,” Remus said to him subtly as everyone filed out.

It was a note from McGonagall, asking to meet with him after classes ended for the day.

“Potter?”

Harry turned as he was heading down to lunch after Ancient Runes. It was Milly Richardson. He and Seamus stopped in the corridor, allowing the uncharacteristically nervous looking girl to get closer.

“I just wanted to say thank you. Thank you so much for what you did for Seth.”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“No but I really do.” Milly sighed. “Seth’s always been really shy. He’s never done well in new places. I don’t think he said a word for the first three weeks of primary school. I thought it would be alright when he came here because he’d be in Hufflepuff with me, but then he was sorted into Gryffindor and I was terrified. I was so worried about how well he’d settle in and if he’d be alright being on his own like that.”

A small smile crossed her face.

“But you know what? When I asked him how he was managing, he said he was doing great. He told me that you helped him find his classroom on the first day of school. You’ve helped him with homework and generally gave him support when he needed it, and when somebody hurt him, you stepped in to make sure they faced the consequences. When I first met up with him after the school year started, I expected tears, but he smiled. He was happy,” Milly said, “I don’t need to worry as much about my brother because I know he’s got someone he trusts looking out for him, so *thank you* Harry Potter. You might say you don’t need my thanks, but please accept them anyway.”

Harry was stunned by the sincerity of her words.

“Of course,” he said, because what else could he say?

He hadn’t forgotten about the meeting with McGonagall. Despite being the interim headmistress, she was still in her usual office. She looked up from some paperwork when he entered, bidding him sit in one of the chairs in front of her desk.

“We’re just waiting for one other person to arrive,” she said.

Harry frowned, then there was a knock and the door opened. Sirius walked into the room.

“Sirius?”

“Surprise!”

Harry hugged his godfather tightly.

“What are you doing here?”

“Lord Black is helping to coordinate the investigation into the possible curse on the Defence Against the Dark Arts position, as well as assisting me and the governors with righting the wrongs that Umbridge caused,” McGonagall explained.

“You’ll be seeing more of me for a little while. That toad did a lot of things and people are justifiably upset about it,” Sirius said, “all of the victims of the Blood Quill were either Muggle-born or half-blood from families with low status. In other words, nobody with the ability to fight back. Minerva and I have been meeting with the families to discuss next steps.”

“Will they be pulled from Hogwarts?”

“Some of them considered it but all of them agreed to stay. I think the fact that Umbridge was actually arrested and is likely to be punished for her crimes helped with that,” Sirius said.

“And do you really think there’s a curse on the Defence Against the Dark Arts position?” Harry asked.

“No idea, but if there’s anyone who could find out, it’s a Gringotts cursebreaker. Bill and Fleur will be here until they finish their job.”

Harry lit up at that news.

“Regardless, that is not why I asked you to come here today Mr Potter,” McGonagall said, drawing their attention back to her, “there are a few things I would like to go over to clarify the events of two nights ago.”

“Ok. What do you want to know?”

He wasn’t sure what there was to explain. Everything he did was fairly self explanatory.

“How did you seal Umbridge’s office door?” McGonagall asked, “you never said that you left the common room to do it, meaning you sealed it from a distance. The only way you could have done that was if you had access to the castle wards but even then it would be impossible.”

Harry tried very hard to not freeze or show any of what he was feeling right now. Using the magic of Hogwarts to seal Umbridge made sense at the time but he never considered that somebody would actually think about it further and question him about it, especially not somebody as sharp as McGonagall. He tried catching Sirius’s eye but his godfather was staring at McGonagall impassively as she waited for an answer from him.

“There is clearly a lot you are keeping from us, but given the current climate I believe that the time for secrecy is over,” she said.

“That entirely depends on you,” Sirius said, “secrets are often secret for a reason.”

“And I am one of those reasons?” McGonagall said, an eyebrow raised.

“Not necessarily,” Sirius said.

“But you have reason to be suspicious of me,” McGonagall said, “then perhaps I should do what I can to alleviate those suspicions by telling you my observations thus far.”

“I have been a teacher for many years, teaching many hundreds of students. I have seen a lot in my time. I saw you, Mr Potter, come to Hogwarts and become thick as thieves with Mr Weasley and Ms Granger. It was a very firm friendship, one that had been through many trials and tribulations. Then at some point in your third year, that changed. You pulled away from them. It was well hidden, I’ll grant you, but you weren’t as quick to laugh along with Mr Weasley, and you didn’t acquiesce quite so quickly to Ms Granger trying to steamroll over you. In class, your performance began to improve, both in terms of your written grades and your practical work.”

“People can grow apart,” Harry said.

“Indeed they can, but something else that people can have is a magical inheritance. Frankly, I was expecting it to happen at some point. I remember James’s inheritance being quite noticeable, yet there seemed to be nothing from you. I didn’t think much of it, but then Madam Bones called you Heir Potter,” McGonagall said, “you had your magical inheritance, but for some reason you kept it secret from everybody, and at the same time you pull away from friends you had been so close to before hand. I don’t know what happened when you inherited, but I suspect it has something to do with why you are able to tap into the magic of Hogwarts to seal Umbridge in her office. Am I wrong?”

Harry was torn. He wanted to be able to trust McGonagall. She was his Head of House, and she was one of the best teachers in Hogwarts. She was strict but fair, and when Harry had been on the verge of losing control she had helped calm him down, showing that she cared.

But she was also Dumbledore’s right hand woman at Hogwarts. His deputy. Harry had no idea how loyal she was to Dumbledore, nor how much she had willingly contributed to his plans. Sirius seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

“Why did you make Ron Weasley the fifth-year prefect?” Sirius asked.

McGonagall was taken aback by the seemingly out of nowhere question. She glanced at Harry for a moment before answering.

“I didn’t. I had wanted to make Mr Potter or Mr Thomas the prefect, though apologies Potter but I was erring more towards Mr Thomas,” McGonagall said, “Mr Weasley was only given the position after Albus said it would be good to give him the opportunity for some real responsibility.”

“Even though he’s a lazy git?” Harry couldn’t help saying.

McGonagall pursed her lips.

“I had expressed some ... *concerns*, though not with that sort of language, but Professor Dumbledore insisted that he should be given the chance; that he would rise to the occasion. Clearly he was wrong.”

“Did you tell Dumbledore about Harry’s correspondence courses?” Sirius asked.

“No, why would I have done?” McGonagall said, “that decision is only for the student and the Head of House to make.”

She looked between them shrewdly.

“It’s not me you’re trying to keep secrets from. It’s Professor Dumbledore, isn’t it?”

Harry and Sirius exchanged a look.

“Minerva, we can tell you what’s going on but you will need to swear yourself to the utmost secrecy, a binding magical vow that nobody will learn of it from you in any way,” Sirius said, “do you understand how serious this is?”

“Of course. I swear that should I reveal the secrets you divulge to me then all the secrets may be taken from me. May magic make it so,” she said firmly. Harry felt the shift of the natural magic as it settled over them. “Now I will forget everything about this if I breathe a word of it to anyone who doesn’t already know.”

And so with a deep breath, Harry told her everything. He started with waking up to his magical inheritance at the Leaky Cauldron, to everything he’d learned at Gringotts, and then everything that happened after that. McGonagall listened with an impassive, non-judgemental face, though Harry caught the way her hands trembled where she was clutching them tightly atop her desk. When Harry finished, her eyes were glistening with unshed tears.

“I- I’m not sure I even know what to say. I am- I am so sorry you had to go through all of that. James and Lily- Albus-”

“Now you can see why we kept this secret. If Dumbledore found out that I was free, he would have resorted to stronger measures to get me back under his control, and I refuse to be a pawn in his game any longer,” Harry said, “he’s had way too much power and influence for too long. Who knows the full extent of the damage he’s done?”

“I quite agree,” McGonagall said shakily, “and it certainly explains the change in your behaviour. There’s not many who would have had the guts to act as patiently as you. Some would have rushed to seek justice immediately.”

“There’s been times I wanted to, but if I want anything to stick on Dumbledore, it needs to be brought at the right moment.”

McGonagall sighed, then a small look of pride appeared on her face.

“To think I would have the pleasure of seeing the Lord of my house come through the school. No wonder you have a connection to the school wards, Lord Gryffindor.”

“Please don’t treat me any differently. We’re so close to the end now, I don’t want to mess anything up,” Harry said.

“Of course.” McGonagall then drew herself up to her full height. “What is next that needs doing?”

“Voldemort is getting bolder. We don’t know when his next move will be but we can be certain it’ll be soon. Dumbledore’s out and about somewhere doing who knows what. I think he’s trying to track down Voldemort's horcruxes,” Sirius said.

“But you’ve destroyed all but one of them?”

“We have, but Dumbledore doesn’t know that. There’s a distinct possibility that now that Umbridge has been deposed, he might come back to the school to continue his search for whatever it is he believes is here,” Sirius said, “Minerva, you can’t let him come back.”

“Rest assured that neither he nor V-Voldemort will enter this castle if I can help it,” McGonagall said firmly, “the Ministry is still of the opinion that Dumbledore is a wanted criminal so I doubt he would just show up out of the blue.

“The Order is trying to get a solid lead for a suitable place to raid to get incontrovertible evidence of Voldemort's return. When that happens, all hell will break loose.”

“Then we shall stand ready for it. It’s been far too long since Hogwarts has been a united force but I believe that now is the time,” McGonagall said, “the armies on our gates will be sorely mistaken if they think this castle will fall to them so easily. Whether it’s a bigoted maniac or an old fool, freedom will prevail. Of that, I am certain.”

Darkness approaches

Chapter Notes

Mature scene ahead.

Starts: "Harry reached up but Seamus..."

Ends: "When he came to..."

The Easter holidays arrived with a blur of activity. Despite everything that was happening in the wider world, life in Hogwarts carried on as normally as it could. There was only a month and a half to go before the exams, which the teachers not so subtly reminded them whenever they could. For some (namely Hermione), this was cause for great concern and copious amounts of stress. For Harry, he was feeling surprisingly confident. Now that Umbridge was gone, he and his friends had resumed their studying in the Room of Requirement, and all of them were improving in leaps and bounds as they all supported each other.

Defence Against the Dark Arts went from being one of the worst subjects to one of the best. Remus once again showed off his skills as a teacher, guiding them through the material that they should have covered with clarity and a steady hand. It also became one of the most difficult subjects as Remus worked the fifth years hard to get them up to speed for their exams. Roughly two thirds of their class time was spent being drilled on practical work. Harry found himself being drafted to help out during class to assist. At first some of the others were a bit hesitant, but after Harry demonstrated his skill, those complaints died away.

It felt a bit odd to focus so much on regular schoolwork, but as Harry was often reminded, it was still important. If he dropped everything to worry about the events happening outside of Hogwarts, and thus outside of his control, then he would be left unable to do anything at all. It was hard to do, but at least he got to see Sirius regularly. His godfather was working alongside Bill and Fleur to look for any reason why the Defence Against the Dark Arts position would be cursed.

"After going through Grimmauld Place to make it habitable, I've gotten pretty good at looking for curses. I had to inspect each and every artefact in that bloody house after all," Sirius said.

"Have you found anything?" Harry asked.

"Nothing yet, but there are definitely traces of *something* there. Whether it's enough to cause all this hassle is yet to be seen since we have no idea what it is."

There was one thing which took up a lot of Harry's time in the last few days before the Easter holidays, and that was the final Quidditch match of the season. Ravenclaw had managed to beat Hufflepuff, meaning that if Gryffindor beat them by more than 200 points, they would

win the Quidditch Cup. It was a bright spot in an otherwise dark period. Angelina pushed them all hard during training. McLaggen barely made any of his usual comments in the run up to the match, the pressure of it all weighing down on him.

The day of the match was bright and sunny. A few big, fluffy white clouds rolled lazily across the sky as Harry went down to breakfast in the morning. The usual pre-match jitters were starting to settle in, but he managed to nibble his way through a couple of slices of buttered toast.

“Harry,” Seamus said, pointing across the Great Hall.

Malfoy was sitting hunched in his seat. Crabbe and Goyle were in the seats on either side of them. They had always been physically larger than the blonde, but now they seemed to dwarf him. Malfoy was speaking to them in very hushed tones but unlike before when they would meekly accept whatever was directed at them, now they seemed to be arguing back, and Malfoy was losing the argument. It was so bizarre, almost like the tables had turned.

“It’s like the bodyguards have become somebody else’s enforcers,” Seamus said, “what do you reckon?”

“Could be. Keep an eye on them if you can. See if they head down to the Quidditch pitch with everyone else.”

“Oh god, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to spring that on you when you should be focusing on the match!” Seamus said.

“It’s alright Shay. I needed a little distraction,” Harry said. He saw Angelina get up from further down the table. “Wish me luck?”

“Always,” Seamus said.

“We’ll have your prize waiting for you when you win,” Dean said.

“When? And if we lose?”

“You won’t lose,” Dean said simply.

The Gryffindor team headed down to the Quidditch pitch. They all changed into their scarlet and gold robes in silence. Angelina came out of the Captains office.

“Gather around. Come on. On your feet.”

They all gathered around her. Angelina slung her arms over Fred and Katie’s shoulders, and after some very serious gestures with her eyes, they all joined together in a circle.

“We’ve got this,” Angelina declared, “this is a damn good team. We’ve got three incredible Chasers, two phenomenal Beaters, one fantastic Keeper, and an unrivalled Seeker. Any professional team would be lucky to have us.”

“I believe that’s the closest you’ve ever come to saying you like me,” McLaggen said.

“Keep the Quaffle out of our hoops today and I might even say it directly,” Angelina said without missing a beat. “Let’s get out there and show everyone what Quidditch is supposed to look like!”

The seven of them marched out onto the pitch with their heads held high. There was a cascade of cheers from the stands as they met the Ravenclaw team. The captains shook hands and they all took to the sky. Madam Hooch blew her whistle and the game began.

From the very beginning it was a furious match. The Quaffle changed hands so often Lee Jordan struggled to keep up with the commentary. Fred and George swung their bats as hard as they could, sending Bludgers flying in every direction while trying to protect the Chasers and disrupt the other team. McLaggen had a laser-like focus. Gryffindor scored, then Ravenclaw, then Gryffindor again. They kept trading points with no end in sight.

Harry flew above it all, eyes scanning the pitch for the golden glint of the Snitch. Nearby, Cho was doing the same thing. This would come down to the two of them. If Cho caught the Snitch, Gryffindor would lose. If Harry caught the Snitch if there was less than a 60 point lead, Gryffindor would lose. Harry just needed to find it first.

“Davies shoots and oh! McLaggen of Gryffindor manages to save it. He passes it to Johnson, to Spinnet, back to Johnson. They’re tearing up the pitch towards the Ravenclaw goals. Spinnet passes to Katie Bell, but Bradley intercepts! Bradley- no, a Bludger from Weasley made him drop it! Johnson catches it, dodges a Bludger, dodges Chambers. She’s heading right for the goal, and- is she- scores! Katie Bell appeared out of nowhere to receive a last minute pass from Angelina Johnson to score. That’s 260-200 to Gryffindor!”

There! Harry caught sight of gold. The Snitch was hovering near the teachers box. It suddenly zoomed outwards into the pitch and Harry darted towards it. From the corner of his eye, he saw Cho after it as well. This Snitch was energetic, quickly changing directions and leading them on a merry chase through the entire stadium. The audience had realised what was happening, gasping with each sharp turn.

High above the ground, the Snitch dived, and Harry and Cho, neck and neck, dived after it. The ground rapidly grew closer and closer, but then the Snitch suddenly veered off, heading directly towards the stands. The two Seekers were not deterred. They charged straight for it, arms outstretched. Harry felt cold metal touch his palm and he grasped it tightly, feeling fingers scrabbling at the back of his glove.

The pair of them pulled up at the last minute, barely avoiding crashing into the stands. When they levelled off, Harry held his hand up high, and the cheer that erupted from the crowds was nearly deafening. Cho hovered beside him, both of them panting from exertion.

“I think that was the best chase we’ve ever had together,” she said.

“You’re probably right.” Harry reached over and gave her a side hug. “Good game Cho.”

“Well done Harry.”

Cho moved off, just in time to avoid the mass of scarlet and gold that crashed into Harry. Angelina was openly sobbing, and Fred and George were yelling, and it was all a mess of celebrations and congratulations. The mass of bodies landed, and things moved in a blur. A teary eyed McGonagall handed Angelina the Quidditch Cup. In the stands, Sirius was waving about two large foam fingers, generally making a massive fool of himself in support of Harry while Remus watched on much more calmly. Bill and Fleur were also there, cheering just as loudly.

Naturally, the party began in earnest in the Gryffindor common room. Bottles of butterbeer were raised in a toast to this year's Quidditch Champions. Angelina went up to each member of the team and gave them a hug, profusely thanking them for their time and effort. Even McLaggen, who looked slightly awkward at such genuine praise.

"Thank you so much Harry. These last five years have been amazing, easily some of the best Quidditch I've ever played," Angelina said, "I don't think I could have asked for a better Seeker."

"You were a great Chaser Angelina, and a fantastic Captain," Harry said.

"Wood left some big shoes to fill, and now I leave them to you."

"What?"

"The outgoing Captain gets to nominate who they'd like to take over for them when they leave," Angelina said, "and I picked you."

"But- But Katie-"

"She doesn't want it. She loves Quidditch and would be more than happy to play, but she doesn't think she'd be the right fit to be Captain. You, on the other hand, have all the makings of a strong leader, and you have almost the same amount of experience as she does," Angelina said, "I would like you to be the next Quidditch Captain for Gryffindor. You don't have to say yes, but I'm really hoping you will."

Harry- Harry was stunned, and incredibly touched. This wouldn't be the first responsibility he'd been given, but unlike all those other times, he actually had a choice in the matter. Angelina was *asking* him, not *telling* him, and that made all the difference in the world.

"Yes," he said, "I'll do it."

Angelina beamed and gave him another tight hug.

The party ran until very late. Harry felt like he'd spoken to just about everybody in Gryffindor at one point or another. Colin Creevey babbled about all the great photos he'd taken; Seth, Eric and Euan gushed about the game and said they'd definitely be trying out for the team next year; Neville and the girls said it was one of the best games yet. Sirius even dropped by. At first the atmosphere dimmed as everyone thought the unfamiliar adult was here to tell them to calm down, but Sirius still had his foam fingers on and he proceeded to scoop Harry up in a bear hug, grinning like a madman.

Seamus and Dean approached him. Uncaring who was watching, Seamus lunged forward and pulled Harry into a tight hug. Harry melted, turning into a puddle of happy goo. Dean was pulled into the hug too and they held onto one another. He was vaguely aware of the audience around him, but nobody said anything. There were a few wolf whistles, but they laughed them off. In the corner of the room stood Ron and Hermione. Hermione looked aghast while Ron's ears were bright red. On the other side of the room, Ginny looked absolutely furious.

Harry did not care about any of them.

Eventually, things began to wind down. Fred, George, Angelina and Alicia went to have one last fly around the Quidditch pitch before the exams sucked them in too deeply. Everyone else drifted off towards their dormitories to turn in for the night. Harry followed his boyfriends up to the fifth-year dormitory. They were the only ones there, and Harry hoped to take full advantage of their lonesome.

They showered together, enjoying the feeling of the water as it cascaded over them. When they were clean and dried, towels around their waists, they returned to the dormitory and slipped into Harry's bed, the hangings pulled shut and warded. Harry took a moment to just *be* with his boyfriends, take in the way they looked and remind himself that these beautiful boys were his, and he was theirs.

It didn't take much for each of them to discard their towels, and then they were kissing. Their bodies pressed together, mouths exploring one another as their hands wandered. Feeling both Seamus and Dean pressed so close to him, their skin against his as all three of them were exposed completely, sent a rush of electricity through Harry's body. It was a feeling Harry would never grow used to, and one that he hoped he never got used to it. They collapsed onto the bed, Seamus and Dean either side of him as they made out with each other. Harry held them both as close as he could.

"This is your reward Harry. You're the Champion," Seamus said, straddling his hips, "how do you want us?"

"I don't care. I just want you both."

Harry reached up but Seamus held both of his wrists and pinned him down. They kissed deeply, Seamus's tongue twining with his, when he felt the cool feeling of cleaning and lubrication spells being used on him. Seamus pulled back, and Harry could only stare at a glorious sight. Dean was lining Harry's dick up and Seamus slowly lowered himself onto it. Harry's length slowly disappeared inside of Seamus. Both of them were breathing heavily, trying to collect themselves.

When he'd grown used to the sensation, Seamus moved and they both groaned. Pleasure coursed through Harry's veins. He tried angling his hips upwards to plunge even deeper inside Seamus's ass, but his options were limited. It still felt great though, and judging by the noises Seamus was making, he felt the same.

Dean was doing something behind Seamus where Harry couldn't see. The cool feeling appeared again, this time on his ass. Through the haze of pleasure, Harry was confused, but then Seamus stopped at Dean's touch. Harry's legs were lifted up, and something pressed

against his now exposed entrance. Dean rested his head on Seamus's shoulder, his smile entrancing as Harry hissed at the stretch as he took in Dean's cock.

It was just like that first time. The feelings and sensations coming from both ends were overwhelming, but now all Harry could do was take it. He had no leverage to do anything with Seamus pressing from the front and Dean from behind. When Dean moved, it passed straight through him into Seamus like he was inside both of them. All Harry could do was lie there and see the way both his boyfriends slowly came undone in their pleasure, and it felt good!

He reached up, pulling Seamus down so he could kiss him some more. It took a bit of folding but he managed to kiss Dean as well, not wanting his boyfriend to be left out.

Harry had no idea how long they kept going but eventually they reached their limits. He felt the coiling in his gut grow stronger and stronger. Dean had found his sweet spot ages ago, and in the face of such intense pleasure, Harry's vision went white. His back arched and his release came, shooting deep within Seamus. His climax was merely the first, and he was vaguely aware of Dean and Seamus cumming in quick succession.

When he came to, they were all cleaned up. Seamus was at his side, and Dean was leaning over them both, breathing heavily.

"Come here," Harry said.

He pulled him down so Dean was lying flush on top of him. Dean propped himself up on his elbows.

"I have been spoiled tonight," Harry said, "thank you."

"I think we got just as much out of that as you did," Dean said.

He pressed a chaste and loving kiss to Harry's lips.

"We'll have to find other special occasions to do this again, or maybe we don't need an occasion," Seamus said, "I certainly don't need a reason."

"Me neither," Harry said, "what's the fancy way of saying sex? Making love?"

"Do you want to make love with us again?" Dean asked.

"I love you, and I'll show you however you want me to. I'm just so glad that I get to have it," Harry said, "it's more than I could have ever dreamed of growing up."

"I can't believe it either. My life changed completely ever since the day I got my Hogwarts letter, and I wouldn't want it any other way," Dean said.

"I'll say. You boys are the best," Seamus said, "but I will be taking you up on that offer. You two have both had me. I want to have you two as well."

“You can have me whenever you want,” Harry said, “when this is all over, we should go somewhere, just the three of us. Get away from everything and just do whatever we want.”

“I like the sound of that,” Seamus said.

“Where would we go?” Dean asked.

“Where would you want to go?”

Dean thought for a moment.

“I’ve always wanted to see the northern lights. We could stay in a cabin somewhere in Norway. A nice fire crackling away in the hearth as we cuddle up together and watch the snow falling outside,” he said.

“That sounds really nice,” Harry said, “Seamus?”

“I’d love to go to Italy. Mum and Dad went there on their honeymoon and they said it was an amazing place. I heard that the Colosseum is still one of the most popular magical theatres in the world. It’d be great to see it someday.”

Harry wanted to see it too. He wanted to see the world with his boys, to get to experience what life had to offer. It was like a balm on his heart to talk like this. Making plans for the future with Seamus and Dean was a reminder that there would be a future for him to have, and Harry could not wait to see what it would entail.

Needless to say, Easter at Hogwarts wasn’t nearly as enjoyable as Christmas. It was filled with a lot more studying and stress but for the fifth and seventh-years it was even worse. When all their other classes had a two week break, Remus kept Defence Against the Dark Arts going.

“I realise you’d all like a break, but we really don’t have time. Please bear with me. It’ll all be worth it in the end,” he said to them when this was announced.

It was indeed worth it. The entire school appreciated actually having a competent teacher again. With Remus’s patient and thorough teaching combined with his correspondence course material, Harry felt very confident about the upcoming exams.

Two days into the holidays, the post owls arrived bearing news. The front page of the Daily Prophet was emblazoned with the headline *UMBRIDGE FOUND GUILTY*. The article beneath it described the nature of the charges and some of the evidence brought forward at trial. By a unanimous vote, she was sentenced to fifteen years in Azkaban. An emergency session of the Wizengamot also abolished the role of High Inquisitor and all educational decrees associated with it.

It wasn’t the end of the ordeal for Fudge. He was still in serious hot water for not only allowing a member of his senior staff to get away with such heinous acts, but for actively aiding and abetting her by supplying her with Veritaserum, signing off on new decrees at her

behest without consultation or oversight, and generally approving of everything she was doing. There were calls for a vote of no confidence to get the Minister sacked. Harry had very little sympathy for him.

“There isn’t much he can do to stop it either,” Neville said, “he did do all those things after all. If this had been a few years ago, he might have tried asking Dumbledore for advice but he’s burned that bridge quite thoroughly. There isn’t any other major event he can use to try and positively curry favour. All there is is the threat of Voldemort, but that’s hardly going to endear him to the public after how far he’s gone to quash that story.”

“I just hope whoever takes over as Minister does a better job of it,” Seamus said, “though it’s hard to imagine how they could be worse than Fudge.”

With the potential for Fudge being ousted in the near future, whispers and rumours naturally started to emerge about who would take over as Minister for Magic. Harry didn’t recognise most of the names, except for Amelia Bones, but then he heard Lucius Malfoy being brought up. Apparently he’d thrown his two knuts into the ring, releasing a statement condemning Fudge’s deplorable actions of allowing someone so unsuitable into a school full of children. He used his own experience as school governor to back up his position. Harry could only hope that his history of offering advice to Fudge would hold him back.

Lucius Malfoy’s political manoeuvres drew his attention back to Draco Malfoy. Malfoy was never seen without Crabbe and Goyle at his sides, only now they didn’t feel so much like the goons and henchmen that they had previously. They seemed to follow him everywhere, not giving him a single moment alone, and judging by the growing bags under his eyes, the pressure of it was clearly weighing on him. Harry took these concerns to Sirius. Sirius frowned, pulling a letter from his pocket.

“I received this from Narcissa yesterday. She thinks Voldemort is on the move and she wants me to get Draco out now.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“We have no idea what it is, and if we don’t act carefully we could be putting a lot of people in danger,” Sirius said, “I’ve been trying to find a way to talk to Draco alone but with those two dogging his heels at every waking moment, I’ve not been able to. I’m not a teacher so I have no reason to be close to him, and they’d report it back to their parents immediately.”

“Why don’t I do it then?” Harry said, “I could say that a teacher wanted to speak with him about one of his assignments.”

Clearly Sirius didn’t like that idea, but he sighed and agreed.

“Be careful. You might have made some inroads with the Slytherins, but if Crabbe and Goyle are acting on their parents’ instructions, we have no idea how they’ll react to you.”

Harry was concerned. The fact that Voldemort hadn’t done anything as bold after attacking the Ministry was making him paranoid. Having Sirius and Remus so close at hand helped.

Harry planned to speak to Malfoy as soon as possible, intending to follow after him after lunch, but when he looked across at the Slytherin table, he wasn't there. Neither were Crabbe and Goyle. Something felt ... off.

"You can feel that too," Neville said.

They made eye contact with Luna, who nodded.

"Neville, I need you to go to Sirius and tell him about this," Harry said, "I need to find Malfoy."

He raced up to the Gryffindor common room, Seamus and Dean on his heels. The bell signalling the end of lunch rang as Harry scoured the Marauders Map for Malfoy's name. If he could find it before the rush of students spread out through the castle, it would be so much easier.

"There!" Dean said, pointing to a part of the Map on the seventh floor.

Harry's eyes snapped over to it. Malfoy was there with Crabbe and Goyle, and then Harry's heart clenched. It was only a brief flash before they seemed to vanish through a wall, but with them was a most unwelcome name.

Peter Pettigrew.

Pettigrew was here in Hogwarts!

Harry launched himself out of the dormitory, raced down the spiral staircase and through the portrait hole, making a beeline for where he'd last seen Pettigrew. His boys were close behind him. It felt like he wasn't moving fast enough, but before long he came skidding to a halt. Peering around the corner, he saw Crabbe and Goyle lingering outside the blank stretch of wall next to the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy.

"Pettigrew's in the Room of Requirement with Malfoy," he hissed to Seamus and Dean, "you need to go and get Sirius or any of the Aurors now."

"And leave you here on your own? Not a chance," Seamus said.

"What was that?"

They all froze.

"Whoever's there, come on out. We know you're there!" Crabbe's voice called.

Harry mouthed "stay here" to his boys, then stepped out into the corridor. Crabbe and Goyle were facing him, broad shouldered and imposing. There was a lot more purpose in their expressions than there usually was.

"Potter," Crabbe spat, "what are you doing here?"

“My common room is nearby. I could ask you the same thing.” Harry made a show of looking around. “Where’s Malfoy? You three never usually go anywhere without each other.”

“As if we’d tell you that,” Goyle said.

“I meant nothing by it. I was just curious if you three had grown apart. It is a stressful time of year after all.”

“Don’t try and play nice with us Potter!” Crabbe said, “we know the game you’re playing. You think we’re so stupid we’ll just tell you everything if you say some pretty sounding words!”

“Of course not. I was just being polite.”

“Yeah right,” Crabbe scoffed, “you’re just a filthy halfblood traitor pretending to be something he’s not!”

“Well that was just rude,” Harry said coolly.

“You think I care about manners when talking to you! When the Dark Lord takes his rightful place, you’ll be dead!”

“Yeah, along with all the mudblood scum!” Goyle added.

“You mean Voldemort? But he’s dead?”

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

“You’re clearly the dumb one. He’s come back and he’s after your head!”

“Maybe he’ll give us a reward if we bring Potter to him?” Goyle said, “then we’ll finally be above that blond little wimp.”

“Can you imagine the look on Draco’s face when he has to bow at *our* feet?” Crabbe said, “it’ll be so worth it.”

Harry subtly crossed his arms, hand within reach of his wand holster when he saw Crabbe and Goyle slip their wands out of their pockets.

The door to the Room of Requirement appeared on the wall, opening as a small group of people appeared. At the front was a dishevelled Malfoy, Pettigrew holding tightly to the scruff of his robes. There were about six others, including Alecto and Amycus Carrow who had escaped from Azkaban. Pettigrew spotted Harry, and for a moment shrunk away in fear before a sneer crossed his face.

“Potter!”

“I can’t believe you actually managed to do your job properly for once Wormtail,” Amycus Carrow said, “not only did you get us into Hogwarts, you even delivered Potter right to us.”

“Hey! We got him first!” Goyle yelled.

“Sure,” Alecto said, “but we don’t have time for all of us to play with Potter.” She stepped forward, drawing her wand. “Why don’t you boys give me a hand while my dear brother finishes the job?”

Harry reacted as the first spell was fired, dodging to the side to avoid the curse sent by Alecto and throwing up a shield to block Crabbe’s stunning spell. Harry responded with his own spells. Jets of light shot between them, the corridor filled with bangs and crashes as they missed or were reflected off shields and hit walls and windows. Alecto was a slippery opponent, watching him with wide eyed glee as they duelled.

A stunning spell whipped past Harry and hit Crabbe squarely in the chest. From the corner of his eye, Harry became aware of Seamus and Dean, his boys joining him in the fight.

“That one’s a mudblood!” Goyle snarled, aiming his wand at Dean, “Crucio!”

“Protego!”

The curse smashed into Dean’s shield. Harry responded with a quick flurry of curses and jinxes, overwhelming Goyle. The other boy’s wand was ripped from his hand by a disarming charm and then he was thrown harshly down the corridor. Alecto’s wand moved in a blur, countering their spells and responding with her own vicious curses.

“Wormtail, get over here you coward!”

Pettigrew threw Malfoy to the floor and stepped forward, wand raised. He barely made it two steps before he was disarmed, stunned and, just for good measure, put in the full body-bind curse.

“Useless!”

The intensity of the duel turned up and Harry increased his power to match it. Alecto fought with a ferocity Harry hadn’t encountered in his training with Sirius and Remus but he gave as good as he got, and he was so proud that his boys were keeping up too. The corridor was pitted with small craters from where their spells had missed. Harry pushed Seamus aside as a jet of green light narrowly missed him. Alecto aimed her wand at Dean.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Dean threw himself to the floor, the Killing Curse inches from hitting him.

“Reducto!” Seamus cried, but Alecto deflected it with a slash of her wand, blowing out a section of wall.

Harry advanced, so enraged that she had tried to kill both of his boyfriends right in front of him. His wand flashed and jabbed. Alecto was pushed back by the force of it, so focused on protecting herself that she couldn’t avoid it when the glass in the windows all shattered and flew at her like knives. Most of the cuts were shallow, but one shard lodged into her arm,

weakening her grip on her wand which was then wrenched from her. There was nothing to protect her from Harry's following curse and she dropped to the ground defeated.

"Are you two alright?" Harry said, whirling around to his boys.

"Fine."

"No damage."

He pulled them both into a hug. The other Death Eaters had vanished, disappearing somewhere into the castle, leaving behind the Alecto, Pettigrew, Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy was shaking where he was huddled against the wall.

The castle shook and Harry could feel it. Something powerful was peppering against the wards. Through the hole they'd punched in the wall, he could see outside, see spells raining down on them only to be repelled. It wasn't enough though. He could feel the presence of other people, dark and foreboding, crossing over on the opposite sides. They flew over the lake, and there was pressure at the gates. All Harry could do was push his magic into the wards. The magic of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw joined his, and Harry also reached into the Family Magic, hoping Sirius could feel him reaching out for help.

"All students are to return to their house dormitories at once. I repeat, all students to their house dormitories immediately!"

Professor McGonagall's voice rang out through the corridor, echoing all throughout the school. Harry met Seamus and Dean's eye, his grave expression mirrored on their faces. The Hogwarts gates gave way to a surge of overwhelming power.

Voldemort had arrived.

The Battle of Hogwarts

A loud, trilling cry drew his attention away from the chaos outside. Fawkes came swooping down the corridor, his plumage vibrant and shining, and for a bird the size of a swan, he landed feather light on Harry's shoulder. He was staring intently out of the hole in the wall.

“Go Fawkes. Protect the castle!” Harry commanded.

Fawkes cried out, taking off and soaring out of the hole and into the skies. He banked, swooping around the castle to the sloping lawns where Death Eaters were advancing. He descended on them like an arrow of flame, fire coating his body as he scorched deep tracks into the ground. The Death Eaters scattered before him, separating and spreading out as the Aurors and members of the Order fired spells at them from the stone steps before the front door. Beyond them, the lake was roiling. Death Eaters on brooms were snatched from the air by long, grasping arms, and those who tried to fly higher were shot down by powerful jets of water from below. None who entered the lake emerged again.

Harry advanced on Malfoy. The blonde looked a mess, nothing like his usual composed self.

“Malfoy,” Harry said, Malfoys attention snapping to him, “what was the plan? What does Voldemort want?”

“I don't- I never- I'm so- he- he-”

Malfoys breathing picked up, coming in breathy pants that didn't seem to satisfy his need for oxygen. His eyes were wide and filled with fear. Harry cursed beneath his breath, unsure how to handle the panic attack when they were so pressed for time. Then Malfoy seemed to calm down. Beside him, Seamus was waving his wand, muttering beneath his breath.

“Low level calming charm. I know, not ideal, but it's the best I could think of that would help us.”

“Malfoy, I need you to tell me what Voldemort's plan is. What does he hope to gain by attacking the castle?” Harry said, “I just want to help you.”

“Why?” Malfoy demanded, “you hate me!”

“No, I dislike you because you're a git. I don't *hate* you,” Harry said, “you clearly don't want to be doing what you're doing right now, but it won't stop until Voldemort is beaten, so I need you to tell me what his plan is.”

Harry tried not to be too insistent but he really needed an answer quickly. Malfoy took a deep, steadying breath.

“Father told me I needed to find something at Hogwarts, a secret room that nobody had ever found before. I didn't know what he meant, but then when I went home at Christmas, *he* was there.” Malfoy suppressed a whimper. “I tried to find it but I had no idea what I was looking

for. Then I got a letter. Father told me that the Dark Lord was displeased with my failure and that the plan had changed. I needed to help Wormtail secure a way for the Dark Lord's forces to get into Hogwarts. There's a Vanishing Cabinet in the Room that links to one in Borgin & Burkes. Wormtail made me help him repair it. Crabbe and Goyle were to make sure that I complied. I wasn't told anything more than that."

Malfoy shrunk down in shame.

"I didn't mean for this to happen. He's gonna kill me. He's gonna kill Mother and El-" Malfoy fixed Harry with a desperate look. "Please, Heir Potter, please stop him!"

"I will." Harry put a firm hand on his shoulder. "Go back to your dormitory. If it's not safe there, find some place to hide so that they won't find you. Do not help them."

Malfoy nodded and ran off. Somebody like Moody would have excoriated him for letting a potential enemy go scot free, but Harry knew what fear looked like. Malfoy was steeped in it. He said he didn't want to do what he'd done, and Harry believed him. Time would tell if that belief was warranted, but for now Harry would trust his judgement.

Once he was gone, Harry turned his attention to the Room of Requirement. All it took was a desire to find the Vanishing Cabinet and it appeared before him, looking freshly maintained. With a quick Incendio, the Cabinet was burnt to ashes.

"What are you going to do now?" Dean asked once he was done, the Room closing behind him.

"Make sure all the students get back to their common rooms safely. Then go face madman number one I guess," Harry said. "You two should head back to Gryffindor Tower."

"Like hell we're gonna do that!" Seamus said.

"This isn't up for debate. You need to go!"

"Then it's a good thing we're not debating," Seamus shot back.

"We've got your back Harry. Let us help you," Dean said.

"You can't!"

"Why not? We've helped you before."

"Because this isn't figuring out a golden egg or finding a tiara in a pile of junk. This is Voldemort. This is fighting for our lives. This is a madman who wants nothing more than to kill me and everybody I love and I can't lose you!" Harry said, his voice echoing in the hall, "he's already taken Mum and Dad from me. Dumbledore took the rest. I've finally gotten some of it back and I can't- I can't lose- I can't-"

He didn't know what he would do if anything happened to either of them.

Seamus hugged him tightly, and Dean hugged him too.

“You think we don't feel the same way? You think it wouldn't hurt us just as much if you were to get hurt out there when we could do something to help?” Seamus said.

“Voldemort works alone, fights alone, and will ultimately die alone. You will not. You fight together with your friends and together we will win,” Dean said.

The castle shook again.

“Come on. We've got students to get to safety” Dean said.

Before they could leave, Harry kissed each of them deeply.

“I love you.”

They ran down the corridors. Harry wished for Hogwarts to provide safe passages for the students but he had no way of knowing if the castle would even be able to provide. They headed downstairs. The sound of fighting was faint, but it grew louder the further down they went. Harry led the way, bursting through a tapestry and immediately throwing up a shield. A masked Death Eater was throwing spells around seemingly without care, the curses and hexes bouncing and ricocheting off walls and floors. Down the corridor, Bill and Fleur were firing back, a huddle of students cowering behind them. The arrival of the three Gryffindors was surprising enough to make the Death Eater falter, that hesitation more than enough for Fleur to take advantage. Her jinx slipped through and the Death Eater fell.

“Harry?” Bill said.

“Are there any other students?” Harry asked.

“I'm not sure,” Bill said, “I think these might be the last of the Ravenclaws.”

“Good. I'm going to look for more.”

“Be careful Harry,” Fleur said to him.

They made it down another flight of stairs when they encountered another Death Eater. The three of them overwhelmed him.

“Lord Gryffindor!”

That brought Harry to a halt as Peeves came pelting down the corridor towards him.

“All of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw have returned to their common rooms. The Slytherins have reached the dungeons, which I've sealed behind them. Lord Hufflepuff and Lady Steward are with a group of Hufflepuffs near the library. Death Eaters are closing in!”

“Can you hold them off until we get there?”

“Of course Lord Gryffindor. That is the duty Lady Ravenclaw gave me. Dear little Peevsie, bringer of all the fun and games to the kiddies-” the poltergeist reached into his pockets, and instead of pulling out supplies for causing mischief and mayhem, he pulled out a set of

knives which he juggled over his head, “-and the worst nightmare of any who dare intruding in these halls.”

He zipped away with a menacing cackle as Harry, Seamus and Dean ran for the library. Harry mentally took stock of everything he had available, all the resources at his disposal. In his haste to get to Pettigrew, he'd stupidly left the Map in his dormitory, but he had the invisibility cloak stuffed into the inside pocket of his robes. Slytherin's locket bounced with each step in a different pocket, though Harry very much hoped he wouldn't need to use it. Sirius and Remus were in the castle, along with Tonks, Bill and Fleur. The members of the Order of the Phoenix were doing battle against the Death Eaters. Harry grit his teeth and barrelled onwards.

The sounds of fighting reached their ears as they rounded a corner. Neville and Luna stood in front of the Library entrance exchanging spells with two masked Death Eaters. Madam Pince was at their backs, engaging a third with a look of utter fury on her face. Harry fired a stunning spell at the Death Eaters back, freeing Madam Pince to reinforce Neville and Luna. The sudden arrival of more fighters made the Death Eaters fall back, retreating out of sight. Harry joined Neville at the front.

“We got pinned down here,” Neville said, “I think the Death Eaters have realised the defences inside the castle are too strong. There used to be four of that lot, but they all pulled back.”

“There probably aren't enough of them inside to attack in force,” Harry said.

“Cowards who would attack children are just the sort to engage in hit and run tactics,” Madam Pince snarled, “to think they came so close to threatening my precious books! Unforgivable!”

Just inside the library was a group of six Hufflepuffs, third-years or lower by the looks of them. Luna spoke to them softly, trying to keep them calm.

“We need to get them back to their common room. They'll be safer there,” Harry said.

“And the Death Eaters?” Neville asked.

“We'll deal with them, or Peeves will.”

They moved off as a group, heading for the Hufflepuff common room. They quickly came upon the fruits of Peeves' labour, a Death Eater groaning on the floor with a knife embedded in his shoulder and thigh. Harry stunned him and bound him for good measure. The castle shook and they could hear the battle raging on the front lawns. It was getting closer and closer as they headed ever downwards.

A burst of light appeared in Harry's peripheral vision and on instinct he flicked his wand. The spell clattered off his hasty shield. The two Death Eaters from before bore down on them, firing off curses indiscriminately. Harry and Seamus fired back, blocking or deflecting the Death Eaters' attacks and responding with their own. There was a cry from the group of students and the sound of more spell fire. Harry glanced behind him and saw Neville, Dean

and Luna fighting another group of Death Eaters. There was a loud explosion as a chunk of wall was destroyed. Two more Death Eaters flew in on brooms.

“Go! Help them! I've got these two!” Harry yelled at Seamus.

Seamus almost looked reluctant but he did as he was told. Harry turned his full attention to the pair of Death Eaters in front of him. They were vicious with their curses, forcing Harry on the defensive to prevent those behind him from being hit. Harry waited for the right moment, watching his opponents for any sign of weakness. The left hand Death Eater had incredibly poor footwork. It wouldn't take much to keep him off balance. All it would take was one opportunity.

The left Death Eater fired a bright orange curse that Harry conjured a solid block of concrete to take the hit for, but the Death Eater overextended, stumbling over his feet. Harry pounced. He shielded an attack from the right Death Eater and snuck in a stunning spell at the left Death Eater. The left Death Eater scrambled to deflect it. Harry advanced, bearing down on the pair of them. Jets of light shot from his wand like an unrelenting stream. The left Death Eater struggled to maintain his defence with his poor footing. He fired one last curse that Harry swatted upwards. It exploded with a loud bang, showering them all in dust, and Harry snuck in another stunner to finish him.

Now alone, the right Death Eater howled and launched another strong offensive, but Harry met him easily. A quick disarming charm fired between bouts tore the Death Eaters wand from his grip, and Harry knocked him to the ground. He lunged out of the way of Harry's follow up stunner, grabbing his fallen ally's wand and fired a curse at Harry. Harry ducked to the side and the curse hit the ceiling. Large cracks spread out before it collapsed, blocking off the corridor. Harry dealt with the Death Eater before running to the rubble. There was no way to shift it. He was cut off from his friends.

“Get them to safety,” he said into his necklace, knowing that Seamus and Dean would get his message, “don't worry about me. I'll find you.”

A sudden fear gripped his chest, terrible scenarios flashing across his mind now that his boys weren't in sight, and Harry knew this would be what they would have felt if they had agreed to go back to Gryffindor Tower without him. Even so, a part of him still wished he had tried harder to make them go.

Harry ran, hoping to make a loop around and meet back up with them. There was a loud crash from what sounded like the Entrance Hall. Had the Death Eaters pushed them back that far? He raced through a secret passageway, bursting through a tapestry, only to come face to face with another Death Eater. This one also wore a mask and hood, though unlike the others he stood tall and proud. He walked at a leisurely pace towards Harry, uncaring at his sudden appearance. A black cane tapped the ground with every other step, held in his single, gloved hand.

“Potter,” he said.

Though Harry couldn't see it, he could tell the Death Eater was sneering.

“How fortuitous. The Dark Lord will be pleased,” he said, “I don't suppose you've seen my son? I hear he didn't completely fail his mission, though the insult of needing *Wormtail* to help him is one I cannot abide by.”

Before Harry could respond, the Death Eaters wand appeared in his hand and suddenly they were duelling. Harry quickly adapted, though the Death Eater was slippery. Taking a leaf out of Sirius's book, he aimed a few spells at the Death Eater's feet, but the cane seemed to have some kind of minor shield property. It blocked the attacks, allowing the Death Eater to continue his slow march towards him. Harry's foot caught on a piece of rubble, and he fell backwards. The Death Eater lunged, but Harry had already raised his wand. A powerful gale of wind burst from the end, and though the Death Eater braced, he still skidded backwards down the hall.

It gave Harry enough time to get to his feet. When he did, he saw that the Death Eaters hood and mask had been blown off, revealing long, silvery blonde hair. Harry met the grey eyes of Lucius Malfoy. Now he could see the sneer.

“I suppose this could be considered payback for the humiliation you gave me back in the graveyard,” Lucius hissed.

“That was you?”

“Who else would have the resources to assist the Dark Lord in his return, or the political acumen to do so while remaining completely undetected?” Lucius said, “did you think Barty Crouch recruited any old Death Eater? No, foolish boy. He may have thought himself the leader of that particular operation but I was the one pulling the strings.”

“Maybe that's why you failed,” Harry taunted, earning a snarl from Lucius.

“The failure was Barty's for not sending you to that graveyard alone! *He* prevented the Dark Lord from regaining his body as he intended but I still succeeded. After months of torture and mind control, Bertha Jorkins definitely counted as an enemy, and I, the ever faithful servant, was more than willing to sacrifice for my lords goal.” Lucius raised up his gloved hand. “A sacrifice for which I was handsomely rewarded.”

With a wave of his wand, the glove vanished, revealing a hand made of solid silver. Harry took the distraction to fire a barrage of spells, but Lucius had been more alert than he'd thought, blocking and shielding them all.

“Did you really think allowing me to speak would be enough to catch me off guard?”

“Well I can remember quite clearly how our last duel went.”

“True, but back then I faced you as a mere wizard. My mistake, but one I shall not make again.”

Harry tensed, feeling the way magic seemed to swell and grow within Lucius.

“You are a pathetic child, led along with delusions of your greatness. Did you really think you could stop the Dark Lord? Or even me? You are nothing but an ordinary wizard, one who now faces the full might of Lord Malfoy, the Family Magic of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy at my call.”

The jet of red light Lucius shot at him was a lot stronger than any spell he'd used so far. Harry dived out of the way. The next stunner nearly shattered Harry's shield charm. Lucius gave him a contemptuously superior look, but Harry was not afraid. If he wanted to match might with Family Magic, then so be it. Harry reached within him and felt the Potter magic easily responding to him. He fired a disarming charm at the same time Lucius cast a curse. The two spells met in the middle, exploding outwards with a powerful shockwave.

Lucius's eyes were wide with surprise but Harry gave him no time to compose himself. Drawing on all the experience he'd gained from his training with Sirius and Remus, Harry bore down on Lucius, forcing the Death Eater back. Lucius tried to rally, calling on more of the Malfoy magic to aid him in overpowering Harry, but Harry didn't care about a contest of strength. The glass on the floor rose up like snakes to strike at Lucius, who blasted them away with goutts of fire. Harry blew the fire back at him and Lucius doused it, covering the floor with water that Harry quickly froze. This time when Harry cast the wind charm, Lucius slipped and slid back along the floor until he slammed into the base of a suit of armour.

Lucius rose to his feet and reared back his wand, a curse on his lips as he glared at Harry with molten anger, only it never came. A gloved hand grabbed Lucius's wrist and held it tight. Lucius barely had time to look at what happened before the suit of armour grabbed his other arm as well, pinning him in place. Harry's wand moved in a flash, two disarming charms shooting out and ridding Lucius of both his wand and his cane. Then the armour seemed to twist and morph, opening up to draw the squirming and struggling Lucius inside.

“What sort of restraint is this! Let me out! Let me out this instant!”

“Or what, your father will hear about this?” Harry mocked.

He kicked Lucius's wand and cane aside. The only sign that Lucius was now stuck in the suit of armour was the bits of fabric from his robes sticking out between the sheets of metal. Harry tapped the helmet, earning another slew of raving from the trapped man.

“Somebody will probably let you out eventually,” Harry said, then the armour he said, “if any Death Eater tries, attack them without mercy.”

The armour nodded, and Lucius continued ranting as he was forced to do so as well.

With that issue dealt with, Harry needed to get back to the others. He ran down corridors, following his own mental map of Hogwarts to try and pick up where they would have gone to get down to the Hufflepuff common room. Impacts caused deep rumbles that were felt all over the school. Even trying to use the wards to find them wasn't enough, as they were already so overloaded with the bombardment and all the fighting taking place inside

Something slipping around a corner caught Harry's eye, bringing him to a halt. He was in the Charms corridor. Though the fighting didn't seem to have spread here, there were the

unmistakable signs of a large group of people moving through at a quick pace. The nooks that used to contain suits of armour were all gone, and the portraits on the walls were all empty. Harry heard something moving. It was a sliding, rubbing sort of sound. The door to Professor Flitwick's classroom was slightly open, and Harry was about to investigate inside when it opened even further as a long, powerful snake slithered out from inside.

Harry took a step back and the snake's head whipped around to face him. Tongue flashing out, it opened its mouth and bared razor sharp fangs at him, hissing menacingly. It reared back to strike.

"*Stop!*" Harry said on instinct.

The snake paused, then cocked its head to one side.

"*A Speaker?*"

"*Yes, I am a Speaker,*" Harry hurried to say.

"*Nagini did not think she would meet another Speaker in her lifetime. Her former Speaker no longer Speaks.*"

"*You mean Voldemort?*"

"*The Less Than Man calls himself that. He could Speak once but no longer for some reason,*" Nagini said, "*yet he speaks his thoughts into Nagini's mind. The Less Than Man's thoughts become Nagini's thoughts. You smell of the one he wishes to eat, so I wish to eat you too.*"

"*What do you mean he speaks his thoughts into your mind? He did something to you, didn't he?*"

Nagini coiled and uncoiled, all while her head remained fixed in place and staring at Harry as though she were agitated.

"*The Less Than Man was weak, but he was a Speaker. He offered me fresh meat and warmth if I served him. Then the Less Than Man gained a body, and Nagini thought that was what he meant, but then he did something to Nagini. He did something that hurt, something dark and terrible. Nagini is cold, Speaker. Nagini is cold and never feels alone any more. The Less Than Man's eyes are always watching. Nagini wants to feel warm, Speaker.*"

That had to be the horcrux. The pain and the cold of having another soul forcefully bound inside. The control Voldemort had over his snake was less now because of Parseltongue and more by exerting his influence via the soul fragment inside her. It must be a terrible life to live.

"*If I could remove the darkness from you, would you let me?*" Harry asked.

"*Is the Speaker able to?*"

“ I’m not sure.” The castle shook once more. “ I’ve done it for the other dark things Voldemort has made. If I can get you to the goblins, they can-”

Nagini hissed harshly.

“ Undergrounders! They are cold and dirty! They would not make Nagini warm!”

“ But they can remove the darkness from you!”

“ Nagini will not go to Undergrounders!”

Harry was torn. The final horcrux was right here. All he needed to do was kill it and then Voldemort would be mortal, but could he do it? Nagini had no more choice to become a horcrux than he did. Some could have argued that Harry needed to die as well, and they would have done it the second they found out he was a horcrux. Nagini was clearly miserable living with the piece of Voldemort’s soul inside her, but the only way Harry could think to save her was to get her to the goblins. If she didn’t want to go, then that left killing her as the sole option remaining.

Nagini reared back, baring her fangs again.

“ The Less Than Man sees you through me, Speaker. He seeks you. He seeks the Heart. He will have both, and Nagini is commanded to assist. His thoughts are to bite you, so Nagini’s thoughts are to bite you.”

The snake struck, clanging against Harry’s hasty shield charm. She coiled and struck out again. Harry leapt back out of her range and she surged forward. He cast a stunning spell at the same time as her next lunge. His spell almost seemed to melt around her. She was so close he could see the venom beading up on her fangs.

“Flipendo!”

A blast of light shot passed him, slamming into the snake. It flew backwards down the hall in a great mass of coils. Harry turned and saw Dean and Seamus running towards him, their wands trained on the snake. Nagini hissed at them both, before disappearing around a corner. Harry ran after her, only to find she’d escaped down a staircase.

He grabbed Seamus and Dean and hugged them both tightly.

“Are you both-” Harry’s voice trailed off when he saw the cut on Dean’s forehead.

“It’s just a scratch. You should see the other guy,” Dean said.

“We got them back to their common room. Madam Pince wanted us to go in with them even though we’re not Hufflepuffs but none of us wanted that,” Seamus said, “Neville went off with Luna, and we came to find you. Was that Voldemort’s snake?”

“It was. Voldemort can’t speak Parseltongue any more but he can control his snake by implanting thoughts via the soul fragment inside her,” Harry said, “it’s a terrible life. I offered to take her to the goblins so they could cleanse her but she wouldn’t go.”

“As much as I want to admire your heart, now probably isn’t the time to try and save one of Voldemort’s horcruxes!” Seamus said.

“I know. The only thing left to do is kill her,” Harry said.

“It’ll be hard to do. I’m pretty sure she’s no ordinary snake,” Dean said, “I saw the way your spell had no effect on her at all.”

“If only we had one of those suits of armour nearby,” Seamus said, looking around at the empty hallway, “a sword would very much come in handy right now.”

But Harry did have a sword. It came to him when he needed it most in second year, and as far as he knew it was in the Headmasters office.

“Follow me.”

Harry raced back up the stairs. The castle shook, more violently than before, and Harry felt the Hogwarts magic tremor and pulse as several passageways and corridors sealed themselves, as though trying to isolate the ground floor from everything else. It was as good an indication as any as to how the battle was going. Seamus and Dean ran with him, not questioning where they were going until they reached Dumbledore’s office.

“Harry, what-” Seamus said, but Harry waved him off.

The stone gargoyle guarding the entrance leapt aside without prompting, revealing the spiralling staircase leading upwards to the office door. Harry burst through it. It was almost bizarre how untouched Dumbledore’s office was. One could almost have believed it was just an ordinary school day, and that the Headmaster would be back any minute. There was no sign of Dumbledore’s flight from the school. The strange silver instruments were still chugging away on their spindly legged tables, a few loose papers still littered the desk. The various portraits of the former Headmasters and Headmistresses still lined the walls, though the occupants that remained all looked anxious and alert.

When they saw Harry, a few of them asked what was happening, but Harry ignored them. His eyes were fixed on the glass case containing the sword of Godric Gryffindor. He was strongly tempted to just take it, but remembering whose office this had been, he resisted, casting the diagnostic charms he’d seen Sirius use when inspecting items at Grimmauld Place. There were silent alarms woven into the case but as far as Harry could tell there was nothing that would affect him.

“Finestra.”

The glass front of the case shattered. Harry reached in and grabbed the hilt of the sword, bringing it out of the case. The magic of Gryffindor within him reached out and connected with it. The ruby in the pommel burned bright, the blade edge taking on a fiery orange hue as a line of runes ran down the length of the blade. With barely a thought, the entire sword shone white, melting into light before reforming as a bracelet around his right wrist.

“Did you know it could do that?” Dean asked.

“No, but I’m not complaining,” Harry said.

The view from Dumbledore’s office showed them the damage done to the grounds. It was so much like the magical memory the three of them had viewed, and Harry hated it. He hated how the place of safety that Godric, Salazar and the other founders had given their lives to create had been attacked by somebody who should have known better. How had the story become so perverted? How was it that nobody knew the truth about why Hogwarts was created? It had been twisted to make Salazar seem like a cast out for beliefs he didn’t have, ones which conveniently gave those from powerful magic families the right to do what they liked with those deemed lesser.

Then Harry forced himself to remember that Voldemort didn’t care about the past outside of what he could gain from it. He didn’t care about Salazar’s original vision for Hogwarts, nor any views he may have held. All he cared about was the power behind the name and the magic that came with it. It allowed him to accrue a set of followers, stringing them along with promises of grandeur, but truthfully he didn’t care about them either. How many Death Eaters had died at Voldemort’s hand? How many pureblood families had been wiped out because they displeased him?

It wasn’t right, and it needed to end, and Harry would see to it that it ended right here, today. This would be the day that Voldemort fell for good. He was sure of it, he believed it, and he would make it so.

The Dark Lord

With Gryffindor's sword acquired, Harry ran back through the castle, his boys at his side. Adrenaline coursed through his body, filling him with energy as his brain felt like it was working a mile a minute. Thoughts, strategies, priorities all came to the fore of his mind, ready to be sorted through as Harry considered what needed to happen.

He needed to find Nagini and kill her. She was the final horcrux, the only thing tethering Voldemort to the mortal plane, and without which he could be killed for good. While Harry might not be able to save her from the soul fragment, he could at least give her a quick and relatively painless death if he had the chance to.

He needed to find Sirius and the others. He needed to know that everyone was ok. He needed to know if he still had a family.

He needed to find Voldemort. Once Nagini was dead, anyone could kill him, but even without the Slytherin magic, Voldemort was still a powerful and deadly wizard. Very few could stand against him and survive, let alone win, and they *would* win.

The halls were quieter and quieter as they went lower into the castle. Had the fighting stopped? They burst through a door onto the main staircase, and for a moment Harry was confused to see a solid brick wall at the very bottom. He was pretty sure that wasn't supposed to be there, but then he remembered feeling Hogwarts sealing off the ground floor. Clustered just up the stairs from the wall was a small group of people, and Harry's heart leapt when he recognised them.

"Sirius!"

Sirius looked up as he ran towards him. His godfather's robes had several slashes in them but as far as Harry could tell he was unhurt. He certainly didn't hesitate to catch Harry in a hug when he got close enough. Tonks was with him, along with Remus and Professor Flitwick. All looked similarly roughed up but no more worse for wear.

"It's good to see you in one piece," Sirius said, "but what the hell are you doing here?"

"Never mind that, what's the situation?" Harry asked impatiently.

"The Death Eaters attacked in force. They bombarded the wards with spells to draw the power away and then forced their way through the front gates. It was an uphill battle to keep them away from the castle. Fawkes certainly helped with that," Sirius said.

"Unfortunately we're significantly outnumbered, and they had a small attack force who outflanked us, forcing us to split our attention between the Death Eaters in the grounds and those in the castle," Remus said, "they've managed to breach the Entrance Hall and claimed the ground floor when it was sealed off. No doubt they're regrouping for another push as we speak."

He looked grim.

“Voldemort is with them.”

“I know,” Harry said.

“We should regroup as well. I managed to send a message to the Ministry and to the Order. With any luck, one of them will have gotten through and reinforcements will be on the way,” Tonks said.

“Mr Potter, Mr Finnegan, Mr Thomas, you three need to head back to your house common room this instant,” Flitwick said, “if you see anyone else, take them with you. This is far too dangerous for you to be-”

“I’m sorry Professor but there isn’t time for that now,” Harry said, turning to face Sirius, “it’s here. The snake’s here. The final horcrux.”

Sirius’s eyes widened.

“You’ve seen it? Where?”

“I think Voldemort set it loose in the castle to find whatever it is he’s after here,” Harry said, “I tried convincing her to let me take her to the goblins to be cleansed but she refused to go and slipped away. We need to find her.”

“And if it's gone crawling back to Voldemort?”

“Then we kill two birds with one stone,” Harry said.

“Lord Black, you can’t seriously be condoning this,” Flitwick said.

It was clear that Sirius was torn. He knew what was at stake here much more than Flitwick did, but at the same time, Harry knew that he didn’t want Harry to be put in danger. If Sirius had had his way, this confrontation would have happened far away from Hogwarts, far away from ever affecting Harry. It should be the adults of the world getting their hands dirty to keep the kids safe, but Voldemort had taken that choice away from them. A look of distinct displeasure appeared on his face.

“Start at the second floor and work your way upwards. Find the snake and kill it. We’ll try and hold the Death Eaters on the first floor,” Sirius said.

“Sirius!” Tonks said, at the same time that Flitwick gasped, “Lord Black!”

Sirius ignored them all, putting his hands firmly on Harry’s shoulders.

“Be careful, and whatever you do, don’t be stupid. There’s still Death Eaters roaming about in the upper floors but I trust that you can handle them. The time for holding back is over. Show them what you can do.” He looked past Harry to Seamus and Dean, giving the three of them significant looks. “Stick together. Watch each other's backs.”

“We will,” Seamus and Dean said, and Harry nodded.

Harry hugged his godfather, and Sirius hugged him right back. There was so much they could say to one another, but there wasn't enough time and words didn't seem like enough. They parted, Harry and his boys heading for the second floor while Sirius and the others disappeared into the first.

With a task laid out before him, Harry's mind focused. The three of them scoured the halls for Nagini but there was no sign of the snake. They came across a few more Death Eaters bleeding from knife wounds, and every one of them were summarily stunned and trussed up. After such a fierce battle before, the quiet they were in now was eerie. What was Voldemort up to? Surely a few walls wouldn't be enough to stop him?

They went up to the third floor. Several walls had been smashed, deep cracks running through them. The wind blew in from the outside from one particularly large hole. They kept going, kept searching, until they rounded a corner and saw Neville and Luna. Neville was leaning against the wall, breathing heavily. The sleeve of his left arm was torn away, the skin there red and raw as the arm spasmed and tremored. Neville's face was pinched as Luna waved her wand in slow rhythmic motions up and down the length of his arm.

“Neville,” Harry called out.

“Am I glad to see you three. I thought the worst when we split up,” Neville said, “I'm glad we locked Madam Pince in with the Hufflepuffs. She'd definitely disapprove of where we are right now.”

“What happened?” Harry couldn't help asking.

“Death Eater curse. My shield took most of it. This is just the rest that managed to slip through. It looks worse than it is.”

“Is that true?” Harry asked Luna, trusting the one doing the healing slightly more than the one being healed.

“Mostly. The damage to his arm is cosmetic at this point and should heal fully without much effort,” she said, “though I'm sure Lord Hufflepuff could only say that as I have done most of the healing, and now the pain is a lot better now than it was.”

Neville opened his mouth to argue, but then another pass of his wand made his face relax a bit more and he closed it again. Instead, he looked around the otherwise empty corridor.

“It's too quiet,” he said.

Harry filled the two of them in on what Sirius told them.

“And we need to find the snake if we want to-”

“Harry,” Seamus cut him off, pointing out of the window.

They all looked out across the grounds, past the pitted and cratered lawns to the Forbidden Forest and beyond. Ominous dark clouds rolled in from afar, bearing down on them. As they approached, the land beneath them seemed to become muted, as though the colour was leeches out of it. It reached the boundary of the castle wards and Harry felt the mass of something dark and evil crossing it. It was such an overwhelming feeling that Harry pressed a hand to his chest to try and stave off the rush of cold that came with it. He didn't need to see them to know what they were, nor did he need to wait as the first broke through the line of trees.

Dementors.

A horde of Dementors glided out from the Forbidden Forest, moving faster than Harry had ever seen Dementors move. They were heading towards the school, and Harry now realised what Voldemort's plan was. He didn't need to break through the barricades himself. He'd forced the defenders of the castle back, trapped them behind walls, and now he was sending the Dementors in to finish the job. Even with patronuses, there were too many to handle, and with all the holes blasted through the walls, it would be impossible to keep them out.

"Neville, Luna, quickly! We need to reinforce the wards!" Harry said.

Just like when they fixed the hole, the three of them stood in a circle, arms held up and hands pressed together. Harry felt the Gryffindor and Slytherin magic rise within him, and beside him he felt the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw magic join it. The magic of Hogwarts was straining, pushed more to defend the castle now than it had had to in centuries. Harry, Neville and Luna let their magic connect to and reinforce it. The Dementors were easy to see within the grounds, the wards trying to stop them but unable to with how overwhelmed they were.

It didn't take much extra help for there to be an effect. Harry was reminded quite strongly of Godric's and Salazar's opinions on Dementors when the horde suddenly stopped moving. The Dementors were writhing and cringing as the wards bore down on them, a great pressure forcing them to their metaphorical knees. Some tried fleeing, but they didn't get far before they were held in place. Harry kept going. He didn't want these monsters anywhere near the school. The magic of Hogwarts, reinforced by the four founders magic, corralled the Dementors into a single mass of twisting, pulsating cloaks.

"Fawkes!"

The phoenix swooped down from an upper rampart. His body wreathed in flame as he skimmed low to the ground, circling around and around the mass of Dementors. The grass caught; a ring of fire forming around them which grew and grew and grew. The fire built until all of a sudden there was an almighty blaze. The Dementors were engulfed by it and the grounds rang with an awful screeching.

And then the fire was quenched and the Dementors were gone. All that was left in their place was a glittering constellation of lights, slowly floating upwards into the sky where they faded away.

They didn't have long to revel in this small victory. Harry stepped back from the circle, feeling the Gryffindor and Slytherin magic returning to him, but no sooner had he regained his bearings when there was an enormous bang, followed by several smaller but no less impactful crashes. The ground beneath them heaved, and they heard what sounded like walls collapsing in the floors below them.

Voldemort had broken through the barricades.

"He drew power away from the wards with a heavy bombardment so he could force his way through the main gate, and he's done the same thing now. With us focused on stopping the Dementors, the barricades were weaker," Neville said with a grimace.

The sounds of fighting had started up again. Harry took a deep breath.

"Come on. We need to find the snake."

The five of them ran, searching as thoroughly and as quickly as they could. It felt like searching for a needle in a haystack. It was only the pure luck of Luna asking a nearby portrait, one of the few that still had their occupants, whether or not they'd seen the snake that put them in the right direction.

"I saw something large and slithery up on the fourth floor," said the 12th century monk, "not sure if it's the snake you're after but I hope that helps."

They reached the fourth floor, only to come face to face with a group of Death Eaters led by Amycus Carrow. The man grinned cruelly at them.

"Well look here lads. Some kiddies got a bit lost." He spotted Harry amongst them. "Potter! Get him!"

Seamus cast the first spell, and suddenly the hallway was alight with magic as curses and jinxes flew back and forth between them. There wasn't enough room for them all to effectively fight, no space to dodge spells that couldn't be blocked. Harry fired a knockback jinx at one of the Death Eaters, then shoved open the nearest classroom door.

"In!" Then at the Death Eaters, "Incendio!"

As fire filled the corridor, he and the others darted into the room. Dean shut the door behind him, but it was quickly blown off its hinges. A Death Eater tried entering but was hit by stunners from Luna and Seamus.

"Don't bother. Little Potty's got himself trapped like a rat!" Amycus drawled, "it'll certainly make it easier for the Dark Lord to deal with him once he's done with the riff raff downstairs."

"But wouldn't it be better if we dealt with Potter ourselves? Surely the Dark Lord would reward us if we handed Potter over to him rather than make him come to us?"

"And have them do to us what they just did to Runcorn? Are you an idiot?"

“They’re only kids. Hardly a threat to us,” another Death Eater said.

“A cornered animal can be dangerous no matter its size,” said a third Death Eater.

Their voices drifted in through the open door. Harry strained his ears, moving slowly along the wall to try and pinpoint where they were.

“Better to try and flush them out.”

Harry gestured for the others.

“Do you really think we’ll let you do that?” Seamus said, “you guys must really be idiots.”

“It all depends on what you would rather do,” Amycus mocked, “would you rather fight like a man, or piss yourself like a coward in a classroom?”

“And yet you’re the ones who won’t come in to get us. From where I’m standing, you’re the cowards,” Seamus mocked right back.

“We’ve got all the time in the world out here! Why should we rush? It’s not like things are gonna get any better for you. The Dark Lord’s basically already won!”

Harry nodded to himself. It didn’t sound like the Death Eaters on the other side of the wall were moving. He waved his wand, the desks moving away to clear a space by the wall. Dean’s eyes widened as he realised what Harry was about to do. Harry aimed his wand at the now clear section of wall.

“The Longbottom brat might be spared, same with the Lovegood girl, since it’d be a waste of pure blood. The halfblood and the mudblood might get a quick death, though I can’t guarantee it. Maybe we’ll hand the mudblood over to Wormtail. We all know how that wimp likes to have his fu-”

“Bombarda!”

The wall exploded, cutting off Amycus’s taunts as the man was slammed by the rubble. The other three Death Eaters barely escaped the blast, their wands turning to the large hole in the wall, only for a herd of desks to come galloping out of it. They barrelled over one Death Eater, trampling him beneath them, and bore down on the other two before they pulled themselves together enough to start firing spells. They blasted or vanished the desks, but then Harry and the others burst from the room. Harry stunned Amycus and the downed Death Eater while Dean, Neville and Luna overwhelmed the final two.

Seamus leaned against the doorframe, face pale.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked him.

“I was just shit talking someone who wanted to kill me. It hasn’t really sunk in yet,” he said, before walking over and hugging Dean, “that pervert gets nowhere near you.”

Dean said nothing but returned the hug.

They continued on their search for Nagini. Footsteps rapidly approached them. For a moment Harry thought it might be their friends but then the hooded figure of a Death Eater appeared. He was quickly stunned but they heard more people approaching. They ran, disappearing down a corridor and hiding in a passageway hidden behind a tapestry.

“I think they’re onto us,” Seamus said.

“Sirius said they’re outnumbered. If the main battle is down on the first floor, then they must be going after anyone they can hear fighting in the upper floors,” Dean said.

“Meaning we need to split up to divide their attention,” Neville said, “it’ll also increase our chances of finding the snake.”

It would also make each group weaker. So far the Death Eaters had been manageable, but if they were to take them by surprise, that could change very quickly. More than that, if other Death Eaters had access to powerful family magic like the Malfoys, then the danger would increase that much more.

“I don’t like it, but I don’t know what else we can do,” Harry said, “let’s finish this floor together, then Neville, you and Luna head up to the seventh floor and work your way down while we work our way up.”

They nodded, leaving the passageway. Unfortunately they didn’t get very far before they were stopped by a deep, guttural laugh.

“Would you look at that McNair? It looks like the little Longbottom brat’s all grown up.”

Sauntering towards them were two Death Eaters. Both were masked, but then one reached up and took his off. He was tall and thin, with thick black hair and a square chin. Harry recognised him, both from the wanted posters and from the memory he’d seen in Dumbledore’s pensieve. Beside him, the air seemed to crackle as Neville glared at him.

“Rabastan LeStrange,” Neville growled.

“Bella will be disappointed. She wanted to have a crack at you, see if she could complete the set,” Rabastan said, seemingly unfazed by the animosity directed at him, “but last I saw she was having fun downstairs. I guess I’ll just have to make do.”

Harry reached out to grab Neville but he was too slow, or Neville was too fast, stepping forward and whipping his wand out. A bolt of condensed light shot at Rabastan, who ducked aside.

“Crucio!”

That was the wrong thing to do. Neville batted the curse aside, punching a crater into the floor from the resultant impact, then responded with his own volley of attacks. McNair stepped forward, but Neville’s advance was too overwhelming. Just like Harry in the graveyard, Neville fired a stunner, the bolt of red far larger and brighter than it usually was,

and it smashed straight through McNair's shield. Rabastan ran off and Neville chased after him, all while continuing to fire spells at him.

"Neville, don't!" Harry yelled after him.

"Go, Lord Potter. Go and finish your task. I'll keep Lord Hufflepuff safe," Luna said, giving them no time to argue as she went after Neville.

Harry grimaced. The situation had just gotten worse. If Rabastan retreated to the other Death Eaters, Neville would be running straight into a trap. In the moment, seeing one of the people responsible for what happened to his parents had completely blinded him with anger. Harry just had to hope Luna could snap some sense into him.

The three of them finished their search of the fourth floor and found nothing. Harry led them to the stairwell up to the fifth, when he suddenly stopped in his tracks. Halfway up the stairs was Nagini, slithering her way up. Like Harry, she also froze, clearly having sensed them. Her body began to bunch up into coils, the muscles tensing as she readied herself to strike.

"Wait," Harry said.

"There is no more time to wait, Speaker. The Less Than Man thinks of finding the Heart, so I think of finding it too. Nagini does not wish to harm a Speaker or his mates, but the Less Than Man does, so Nagini will."

"I have a way to remove the darkness from you."

Nagini stopped her preparation, though she remained facing away from them.

"Nagini will not go to the Undergrounders. Nagini does not know a lot of magic, but Nagini knows that removing the darkness is not easy. It cannot simply be done during a hunt. The Speaker has come to kill Nagini."

"Yes," Harry said gravely, *"I'm sorry. I don't want it to be like this."*

Nagini remained still. Harry thought that would be it, that she would turn around and strike at him. Instead, she kept her head held above the ground at waist height, still not looking at him.

"Nagini is cold, Speaker. Nagini wants to be warm and alone."

"I know."

"Nagini won't look so the Less Than Man won't see."

The bracelet on his wrist shone, the sword of Gryffindor reforming in his hand as Harry walked up the steps to stand beside Nagini. Using a sword felt so much more personal than using a wand, but maybe that was why some magical people felt it was so easy to do harm. All they were doing was pointing the wand and saying the words. Devastation followed but there was a layer of separation between it and them. Would Voldemort have done all those horrible things if instead of a wand it was a sword in his hand?

“ The Less Than Man hunts for the Heart,” Nagini whispered, “ he hunts for it as though it was the best of prey. He thinks that attacking like this will force it to reveal itself. Nagini is not sure, but the Less Than Man thinks it so Nagini thinks it.”

“ Thank you,” Harry said, “ are you ready?”

“ Nagini is ready.”

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Harry brought the sword down. It sliced cleanly through Nagini's neck. A cloud of black smoke erupted from her body, a faint face visible in it that was wracked with pain and screaming, but then the smoke vanished, never to be seen again.

“Is that it?” Seamus asked, “are they all gone?”

“Yes,” Harry said confidently, “that was the last one. There are no more horcruxes.”

All that was left was Voldemort.

The closer they got to the battle, the more Harry questioned what he was going to do. His only thought was to somehow let Sirius know that the horcrux was gone, the snake was dead, and they should try and move on Voldemort, but even then there wasn't much of a plan to it. As far as he knew, he was walking right into a bloodbath, the same kind of trap that he'd worried Neville would fall into.

The first floor was utter chaos, full of devastation and destruction. The fighting seemed to have been relatively contained to the stairwells leading up from the ground floor, but that just made it fiercer. Spells continued to fire in brutal exchanges. He saw McGonagall duelling with two Death Eaters, her wand a blur as she glared at her opponents. Nearby was Flitwick, showcasing his tremendous skill as a professional duellist, as he battered Avery with an onslaught of hexes and jinxes. Remus was covering Tonks as she conjured bandages to bind Professor Sprout's broken leg.

Harry ran down the main staircase, Seamus and Dean flanking him, occasionally firing off spells when he thought he had a clear shot. There was no sign of Sirius, which both relieved and terrified him at the same time. They continued down until they reached the entrance hall.

A loud bang echoed from a nearby landing. Neville was peppering Rabastan with spells, the Death Eater finally fighting back. Luna was at his side, waiting for the right moments to sneak in spells. It was a fierce duel, but Neville had Rabastan on the backfoot. A well timed Petrificus Totalus made him the victor. That was when the steam that had fuelled him till now left him, a moment too late as the sound of cackling echoed through the entrance hall. Harry couldn't see exactly what happened, but Neville and Luna were both thrown back as another Death Eater appeared.

This one did not bother with a hood or a mask, meaning the mad gleam in Bellatrix Lestrange's eyes were clearly visible. Her wand flashed and blurred, firing off a series of

spells so fast Harry could barely keep up with them. It forced Neville and Luna onto the defensive as Bellatrix continued to cackle.

“We should have killed you first. Maybe then dear old mummy and daddy would have squealed! Or maybe we should have made you scream, though I doubt a baby would have been able to last very long at all!”

Neville’s anger rose again, but it was clear that Bellatrix was a much more experienced combatant than Rabastan was. Even as Neville lost control, the family magic of Longbottom and Hufflepuff leaking through, Bellatrix slipped around his attacks and responded with vicious curses of her own. In the chaos of sound and light, ropes leapt from nowhere and bound Neville and Luna’s arms. Bellatrix wasted no time, aiming her wand at Neville.

“Crucio!”

Neville’s scream tore right through Harry, so much so that he changed cause, mentally plotting the route that would take him to that landing. Dean fired off a few spells but in the rush his aim was off and they missed. Bellatrix was laughing with glee, right up until several large spears of ice shot at her, forcing her to back off.

“That’s enough Bella!”

And there was Sirius. He stormed into view, standing between Bellatrix and the kids.

“This will be the end of your madness.”

Sirius gave Bellatrix no time to speak as he engaged her. Harry could feel the Black magic awakening, ready and waiting in its Lord for when it would be needed. It was all Harry could focus on, which was a mistake.

“Watch out!”

Harry whipped around and something hit him like a punch to the gut, throwing him down the stairs. When he reached the bottom, he managed to pick himself up, feeling several new bruises forming. Back at the top of the stairs, Seamus and Dean were locked in battle with Barty Crouch Junior. Crouch looked no less mad than he did when he was revealed back at the end of the Triwizard Tournament, his eyes alight with mania as he countered his boys attacks and threw them back at them. Harry made to run to them, to help them, but the hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood on end. He threw himself to the side just in time as a bolt of white light streaked past and hit the base of the stairs, exploding them in a shower of rubble.

“Harry Potter,” said a high, soft voice.

It cut through the din like a knife. Harry stood and turned to face the open front doors. Standing in the light of the afternoon sun, wearing long robes of deepest black, was Lord Voldemort. Emerald eyes met blood red as Harry saw Voldemort in the flesh for the first time since he was a baby. His skin was very pale, his face twisted with little more than animalistic slits for nostrils. Voldemort slunk into the Entrance Hall, barely making a sound.

“I have been looking forward to this meeting,” he said.

“I haven’t,” Harry said in response. His heart was racing but nothing showed on his face. “I’d hoped the rumours weren’t true.”

“Then once again, you will be disappointed. To think that Dumbledore did not even think to inform you of my return, even just to prepare his little weapon to better fight me, yet here you stand: trembling in the hall of this beloved school as you face your doom.”

“Maybe you need glasses because I am not trembling.”

They circled around one another. Harry knew the battle would start eventually and as subtly as he could he glanced about. All of his allies were busy with their own opponents. Unfortunately, Voldemort caught his eye and sneered.

“I’m afraid there will be no one to step in to take my curse for you this time Potter. Today, we and we alone shall duel, and I shall finally be victorious,” Voldemort said, “the prophecy will be fulfilled and I will be free to claim my prize.”

Voldemort made a wide, sweeping movement with his wand. A dome of golden light formed around them, taking up most of the space in the Entrance Hall. This seemed to get the attention of most of the combatants, but Sirius did not dare ignore Bellatrix, and Seamus and Dean were still locked in their fight with Crouch.

“Because I am a good sportsman, even I shall not be tempted to call for aid. As I said, it will just be you and me.”

Voldemort was enjoying this. He truly thought he was winning, but Harry caught something else. His skin was pale, but now that he was closer it almost seemed translucent. He also seemed incredibly thin, dangerously so, more than was typical. The magic Harry could feel bubbling within him was shaky and unstable. The losses of his horcruxes combined with the removal of the Slytherin magic must have had an effect, but whether Voldemort acknowledged it was irrelevant.

“Of course at school, one must observe the niceties. You have been taught to duel, yes? First, we must bow to one another.” Voldemort gave a very short, theatrical bow.

Harry barely inclined his head.

“Come now Harry, I would have thought your manners would be better than that.” He flicked his wand at Harry. “Imperio.”

The dullness of the Imperius curse barely washed over him before Harry snapped his defences shut and responded with his own spell.

“Diffindo!”

Voldemort batted away his Severing Charm, his face a snarl.

As Harry suspected, even with the loss of the Slytherin magic, Voldemort was still a force to be reckoned with. His wand moved in a blur, firing spells at Harry almost ceaselessly. It took all of Harry's lessons with Sirius, all of the experience he'd gained with duelling, to be able to block or dodge them. The golden dome rippled as stray spells hit it. Harry fired back when he could, his wand moving just as much. He rolled and sent a gout of fire at Voldemort, who transfigured it into a snake to attack Harry. Harry turned the floor into mud to drown the snake, diving out of the way of a hail of swords. He slashed three times with his wand, burning blades flying towards Voldemort, who conjured a shining silver shield to take the hit with a resounding clang.

"Not bad, boy. Perhaps Dumbledore taught you something after all, but it won't be enough. You are nothing more than a child. Once upon a time your family may have been great, but I have already uprooted them, and once I kill you, the Potters will be no more, and nobody will even dare to stand against me!" Voldemort's voice was a harsh hiss as he spat the words at him. "I am Lord Voldemort, descendant of Salazar Slytherin. Compared to me, you are nothing!"

"You may be a descendant, but you don't have the right to be called Lord," Harry said.

He followed it up with another volley of hexes but Voldemort moved his shield in front of him again, and they bounced harmlessly off them.

"What would a halfblood raised by Muggles know of anything!"

"Apparently a lot more than a halfblood raised in an orphanage. I know better than to challenge somebody as the Heir of Slytherin and lose."

"But I never-" Voldemort said, his expression shifting to show a small amount of confusion.

"You didn't, but the piece of you you left in your diary did," Harry said, "he challenged me as the Heir of Slytherin and I beat him. The Heirship you're so proud of passed to me. I am the Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin."

"You lie!"

"Your magic feels a little shaky today. Did something happen to it? Did you perhaps get cast out of the Slytherin family and lose access to the family magic?" Harry asked, "you defiled yourself Tom Riddle, and you're trying to destroy the very thing that Salazar spent his life building. I was glad to kick you out."

Voldemort yelled wordlessly. He slashed viciously downwards with his wand and Harry leapt aside. The rush of magic was more powerful than anything he'd used so far, slicing through the air and carving through the ground. It smashed into the dome, which held, but the shockwave of it carried through and the entire castle shook. Voldemort slashed again, horizontally this time, and Harry ducked, feeling as though some hairs on the back of his head were cut.

"You filthy halfblood! How dare you steal what is rightfully mine! How dare you steal from Lord Voldemort!"

His next spell felt like an explosion, throwing Harry backwards. He hit the golden dome, and Harry winced. Touching it felt like burning.

“It doesn’t matter though. Even stealing my birth right from me will not be enough, and when I kill you today I shall get it all back and more. Do not think that I came here today only for you Harry Potter,” Voldemort said, “I have learned there are far greater treasures held within this castle, ones that will allow me to stand unchallenged by even the strongest of Family Magics.”

He gestured to the battles raging around them.

“Did you think I would go to all this effort just to kill you? No, you and I were always destined to clash. It would come when it did, whether we like it or not. Today, I came with a different goal in mind, your presence here is just a lucky bonus.”

“You seem very certain you’ll get whatever it is,” Harry said.

“Of course. How else do you bring out the full power of a place if not to attack?”

“Assuming you don’t die in the process,” Harry said.

“I will not die,” Voldemort said with certainty, “not to anything, and certainly not to you. Once I get the Heart, I will fully be freed from the shackles of death forever.”

“Are you sure about that?” Harry said.

The confidence in his voice made Voldemort pause.

“I didn’t just beat the shade in your diary, I destroyed it,” Harry said, “and your diary isn’t the only thing I destroyed.”

“What do I care what you’ve destroyed!”

Though Voldemort’s tone was just as scathing, Harry caught the flash of something more in his blazing red eyes.

“It wasn’t just a diary. It was a locket too, and a cup, and a diadem.”

With each one Harry mentioned, Voldemort’s eyes grew wider. Harry looked up properly, making eye contact with Voldemort, and felt the press as Voldemort attempted to penetrate his mind. For the first time since they started duelling, Harry allowed him access. The images of what he knew about the horcruxes passed through his mind, each one thrown into stark relief to show how each one was destroyed or cleansed. The final one was of Nagini, head unbent and resolute as she allowed Harry to execute her. Voldemort’s expression was unmistakable. He was afraid, and that was when Harry raised his defences around him.

The inside of Harry’s mind flooded. The grindylows swarmed around Voldemort, dragging him deeper. When Voldemort resisted, the Giant Squid appeared, the powerful suckers covering its arms holding him in place. In real life, Voldemort gasped and choked, the sensation of drowning overwhelming even as he could breathe normally. Harry held onto his

mind, not letting it return. He cast several spells in quick succession. Even with his mind divided, Voldemort blocked most of them, but he was forced to move as Harry aimed for his feet.

Harry caused a whirlwind to erupt around them, snagging Voldemort's billowing robes and throwing them in his face. As Voldemort cancelled the wind, Harry's next spell caused his robes to grow in size such that when he was forced to move again he nearly tripped over them. Harry kept up his assault, not giving Voldemort the chance to fight back. He acted instinctively, not thinking about what spell to use next and just doing it instead.

Then he heard a scream from behind him. Harry turned and it was like everything went slow. Crouch had cast a spell like shadowy darkness. It had slipped beneath Seamus's guard, hitting the boy squarely in the chest. The scream of pain came from him as he was thrown over the bannister, hitting the wall and sliding down to the floor. Dean yelled out for him, but quickly had to defend himself as Crouch turned his full attention on him.

It was like his entire world focused on Seamus, lying on the ground twitching, Dean up at the top of the stairs fighting for his life, and Harry trapped inside the golden dome of magic. The fight against Voldemort did not matter any more. The one he needed to deal with now was Crouch for daring to hurt someone he loved.

The air around him grew thick and heavy. The ground beneath his feet groaned as though a great weight was pressing down on it, cracks forming as it couldn't stand up to it. Harry's breathing came faster, adrenaline pumped through his veins courtesy of his pounding heart, and all the magic at his disposal rose within him. Potter, Gryffindor and Slytherin, it was like a raging fire demanding to be unleashed, but it was nothing in comparison to Harry's own fury. He needed to get to Dean, he needed to get to *Seamus*. He needed to make Crouch pay!

"Such is the weakness of love. It makes you turn your back!"

Behind him, Voldemort raised his wand. Harry smoothly turned, stepping around a bolt of vivid green magic, and cast a spell of his own, and all of the magic came rushing out at once. The blast was condensed, shining far brighter than this spell ever had before or ever would again. Voldemort moved his shield to block it, but Harry's spell tore right through it, hitting the Dark Lord squarely in the chest. There were several loud cracks and Voldemort was smashed backwards, flying through the air to slam spread-eagle against his own golden dome. The last thing Harry saw was Voldemort's dumbfounded face before the dome shattered and Voldemort carried on, disappearing out the front door.

All went still. The other combatants stopped in the face of Harry's fury. Barty Crouch Junior barely had a moment to regret his actions before he was hit with a disarming spell that barely registered his shield charm, vaporised his wand and very nearly tore his arm clean off.

The battle was over. The Death Eaters seemed to realise their defeat and some tried to flee. Harry ignored them. There was one last thing in this fight he had to do. He had already lost so much. Like hell was he going to lose anything more.

One down

Hogsmeade Village was normally a very peaceful place. It had been centuries since the last outbreak of violence, but that had all changed. Now the villagers cowered in their homes as dark witches and wizards roamed the streets, most of their comrades having already gone to storm the castle. The Death Eaters were content to spread some chaos, only the chaos came for them as many people suddenly appeared in the centre of the village, all bedecked in the red robes of the Auror Office.

“Secure the village!” Madam Bones commanded, her voice booming.

The Aurors quickly moved to do so. The Death Eaters tried fighting back, but taken off guard by the sudden arrival of the Aurors they were quickly overwhelmed, and those that weren’t captured fled.

“Village secured ma’am,” one Auror said.

“With me!”

Kingsley fell into step beside her, Moody on her other side, as the hastily assembled squad of Aurors ran for the castle. Already they could see signs of battle as smoke rose up into the sky. He glanced around, seeing members of the Order appearing to help clear the village. It all seemed to happen so fast. Tonks’s message had been short but sent a rush of fear through him that he hadn’t experienced before.

Voldemort is attacking Hogwarts.

It was the worst case scenario, one Moody had warned Dumbledore about several times, but the old Headmaster had assured them all that Voldemort wouldn’t be so foolish as to attack the school. Alas, he had. Kingsley had burst into Madam Bones’s office, interrupting what looked like an urgent meeting with the Minister to deliver the news. Madam Bones promptly ignored Fudge and declared a red alert, ordering all Aurors on site to drop what they were doing and prepare for immediate conflict.

Now here they were, charging through the broken and twisted iron gates and across the heavily damaged grounds. A force of Death Eaters were there, standing around as though waiting for some sign. It was almost comical the way they startled at the sight of the Aurors, but the next thing Kingsley knew, he was duelling. He fell into the rhythm of the combat; he, Moody and Madam Bones formed the head of the spear that drove straight into the heart of the enemy formation, if it could even be called that.

These guys had to be the rear-guard, Kingsley thought as he stunned one Death Eater and bound another, reinforcements for those currently fighting in the school, waiting in the wings to sweep in when the defenders were exhausted to secure victory. They hadn’t been paying attention to their surroundings, clearly never having been taught by Alastor Moody. The Auror attack took them completely off guard, and like the cowards they were, they tried to flee.

“Do not let them escape!” yelled Madam Bones’s booming voice.

There was little the Death Eaters could do. They couldn’t apparate and the Aurors were between them and the gates. Some managed to snag brooms from somewhere and took off. A phoenix swooped in from high above, its cry surprisingly chilling as it went for those who flew for the forest, meeting them with fire. Those who instead made for the lake didn’t get much further as the long tentacles of the Giant Squid snatched them out of the air. In the chaos of the grounds, Peeves flitted about, knives in his hands that he liberally threw at any Death Eater close enough, and more often than not finding his mark.

For a moment, it looked like the Death Eaters might rally, but then there was a loud crash, followed by the sound of glass breaking, and a body came flying out through the front doors. It landed roughly, rolling to a stop in between the Aurors and Death Eaters. It was a man in black robes. Several sharp shards of golden energy had pierced through his body, and it looked as though his chest had caved in. There was a wet, sputtering sound as the pale, almost skeletal looking man tried to draw in a breath. Blood trickled out of his mouth. The red eyes, once so full of malice, reflected only fear, before turning glassy and lifeless. It didn’t take one of the Death Eaters dropping to his knees, immediately surrendering, for Kingsley to understand what this meant.

“Moody? Is that-” Madam Bones said.

“You-Know-Who, back in a flesh and blood body, yes it is,” Moody said, “it’s a very *dead* body.”

“No!”

“It can’t be!”

“How could this have happened to our lord!”

The Death Eaters were in complete disarray as they took in their defeated master. The Aurors swept through them, detaining them all but there was very little fight left in them.

“Moody, Shacklebolt, with me,” Madam Bones said, “we need to secure the castle.”

The three of them led a squad of Aurors through the front doors. Up on the landings, fighting was still ongoing. Kingsley saw McGonagall transfigure a mask-less Yaxley’s robes into stone, effectively freezing him in place. There was an anguished cry from a different landing. Kingsley saw the flash of light as Bellatrix Lestrange came tumbling over the edge, landing none too gently. Sirius leaned over the bannister, then caught eyes with Madam Bones and the other Aurors.

“Anyone in Death Eater robes is to be detained immediately! Use all necessary force!” Madam Bones ordered.

The Aurors rushed forward, moving over the Death Eaters already defeated by the defenders. At the top of the stairs, Tonks held onto a tall, dark skinned boy who was trying to come down. The boy struggled and fought hard, screaming for her to let him go. That was when

Kingsley's eyes followed where the boy was looking, and he saw what Moody had already seen, the aged ex-Auror stomping over to where Harry Potter knelt, hunched over a body.

Voldemort was gone. Harry had thrown him out of Hogwarts and he wouldn't be coming back, and though the battle was over, he hadn't won yet. He slid to a halt at Seamus's side. Seamus's skin was damp with sweat, his breaths coming quickly and painfully as his body twitched and writhed with pain.

"It's ok. It's ok now Shay. I'm here. I'm here," Harry said, unable to keep the terror from his voice.

From his pocket, he pulled out Slytherin's locket and without hesitation, put it around Seamus's neck, the silver gleaming as it lay on his chest. For a heart stopping moment, Harry was terrified that nothing would happen. Was there an incantation or spell he needed to use to activate the locket? He should have spoken to Salazar more about how the locket worked. Why hadn't he done that? Now he would have to sit and watch as the curse Seamus was hit with slowly ki-

Then the moment passed. The tiny emerald inlaid on the front of the locket shone with light, illuminating a circle of runes around it. Seamus's breathing slowed enough that he could actually take full breaths, and the tremors wracking his body eased slightly. Harry breathed out a heavy breath, brushing the sweat slicked hair from Seamus's face and putting a hand on his belly.

"You're gonna be alright. I'm here."

It was clear Seamus was still in pain. Harry trusted the locket to help, but it still hurt him to listen to his boyfriend suffering. His magic, still so close to the surface, reached out and Seamus's reached back. It was weak, most of it contained within, struggling to fight against the curse Crouch had used. Harry could feel the way the curse fought back, only halted by the locket. He wanted- no, he *needed* to do more.

There were other people around him but Harry ignored them. His attention was entirely on Seamus. His magic began to move, responding to Harry's wish to heal Seamus of the curse. What direction it was following, Harry didn't know. Now wasn't the time to question it. Much like the curse did, his magic sunk into Seamus's body, accepted and guided by Seamus's own magic. He felt the dark stickiness of the curse, the way it continued to try and wreak havoc. The locket was working to draw it out, to pull it towards itself so it could be contained and dispelled. Harry gave his magic a nudge.

The curse began to lift, rising up from where it had managed to sink into Seamus. Its struggles were ineffective in the face of Harry's overwhelming desire. Seamus gritted his teeth, stifling a pained groan. His body went rigid beneath Harry's hands, but he kept going. It was as though darkness pooled on top of Seamus, and then it moved towards the locket like it was sucked through a straw. Only when Harry no longer felt the curse did he stop.

Harry slumped forward, feeling completely wrung out. Seamus was lax and Harry's breath caught in his throat. A hand touched his shoulder. Harry whipped around, scrambling for his wand until he saw who it was. Sirius was kneeling at his side, looking roughed up with a black eye, but undoubtedly alive.

"That's it Harry. Everything's fine. It's over now."

"Sirius, he-"

"Seamus is alive. He's just sleeping," Sirius said, his voice effortlessly calm somehow, "let's get you both to the Hospital Wing. You'll get a lot more peace there."

The Entrance Hall was busier than Harry remembered. Lots of people in red robes were walking about, levitating people in cuffs out onto the grounds. Harry spotted Madam Bones speaking very quickly, directing people here and there. Had the Aurors come to help them? That was good. They needed all the help they could get.

He heard Sirius's voice speaking to him again, but Harry could barely hear it. The world lost focus as Harry passed out, the adrenaline handing his body over to exhaustion.

Everything was soft when Harry woke up. This in and of itself was not odd. In the two years that Harry had been free of the Dursleys, he'd grown used to his beds being a pleasant place to sleep, with soft sheets and comfy pillows, all nice and warm and cosy. In the last year, his bed had even started to be joined by other people. Most nights of the week Harry shared with either Seamus or Dean, but he still slept alone so it wasn't too weird that he was alone right now.

Only there was something he was missing. Something very important. While everything was soft, Harry's body felt heavy. It usually only felt like that after a vigorous Quidditch training session, but the Quidditch season was over now. It also wouldn't explain the feeling that he was missing something. Whatever it was was hovering just out of reach in the darkness. Maybe he should try making light with his wand? His wand, where was his wand? He needed his wand! If he didn't have his wand then they'd lose the-

The fight - the fight with Voldemort - the fight where Seamus got hurt!

Harry's eyes shot open, consciousness rushing back to him in one sudden wave. Even the familiar surroundings of the Hospital Wing did very little to soothe his fears as he sat up in the bed somebody had placed him in. The Hospital Wing was busier than he'd ever seen it, and he was immediately noticed. An unfamiliar Healer came over to him, which made Harry's hackles raise. His wand was on the bedside table, and he grabbed it.

"You don't need to do that," said a familiar voice.

Andromeda appeared, shooing away the other Healer.

"Andromeda?" Harry asked, very confused.

What was she doing here? She-

The reason why Harry had woken up came back to him again and he frantically looked around. Andromeda got his attention, pointing to the bed next to him. Seamus was lying in it, eyes closed and sleeping soundly without pain. He still wore Slytherin's locket. Dean was in a chair between the two beds, slumped slightly to one side as he held Seamus's hand, and he too was asleep. The cut on his forehead had been healed and the blood cleaned away. Seeing them both settled something within Harry, but he still needed to ask.

"Are they-

"They're both fine. Given what the three of you went through, it's something of a miracle," Andromeda said, "Dean had a few cuts and bruises that were easily healed. You were similar. Your back and sides were heavily bruised and you were verging on magical exhaustion. As for Seamus-" she sighed, "-he was very lucky. Madam Pomfrey wanted to take the locket off but Sirius explained what it was doing. The curse he was hit with could have killed him with enough time, but since you were able to get the locket on him almost immediately, the curse was drawn out before too much damage could be done, especially since you were able to help move it along. I suspect it'll take about a week for him to recover, but he *will* recover."

With that enormous reassurance, Harry was able to look around the Hospital Wing with more calmness than before. Neville and Luna were there, snoozing in beds across from him. Both of them looked fine, and Andromeda assured him they were. Neville had to take a potion regimen to overcome the lingering effects of the Cruciatus Curse but that was more precaution than anything given what happened to his parents. Professor Sprout was nearby, her left leg bound in bandages. In the bed next to her was Tonks, Madam Pomfrey frowning as she traced her wand over several slashes in her back. The other two Aurors stationed at the school were also there, their beds behind curtains for privacy.

It was hard to tell how good or bad their side had fared against the Death Eaters, and Harry wasn't sure how best to ask.

The doors to the Hospital Wing burst open and Sirius came marching in, looking tired and scruffy yet alive and healthy. He saw Harry awake and rushed over, sweeping his godson into a tight hug.

"I really want to scold you for getting involved in that fight but I'm more glad that you're alive and well."

"I didn't have a lot of choice."

"I know." Sirius leaned back, hands on Harry's shoulders, and he beamed. "You did it Harry. You beat him. I'm so proud of you."

"I beat him," Harry said dully, the knowledge not quite sinking in.

He'd done it. He'd beaten Voldemort. The worst dark wizard of the century, one who had terrorised Magical Britain for decades, was now officially gone. No more would he threaten

people's lives. No longer would people live in fear of the mere mention of his name. Voldemort was now dead and gone, because of Harry.

"It's madness out there right now. Tonks's message got through to Kingsley who told Madam Bones who then mobilised nearly the entire Auror Office to come help us. They arrived pretty much as soon as you'd won your duel, and secured Hogsmeade and the school grounds to make sure the Death Eaters couldn't escape. From what I hear, the Ministry holding cells are going to be very full for a while. Amy is determined to do things properly. No stone is going to be left unturned, and all claims of the Imperius defence are going to be fully vetted, regardless of the societal status of the people claiming it," Sirius said, "they found Lucius Malfoy bound in a suit of armour upstairs, raving bloody murder. Was that your doing?"

Harry nodded.

"Not bad at all. The armour was quite happy to march Lucius all the way down to the Entrance Hall before letting him go, dropping him right in front of Amy and Moody. Needless to say, he wasn't able to flex his power over them like he might have done any other Auror."

Sirius glanced back towards the door. Harry followed his gaze.

"What's going to happen now?" Harry asked.

"I'm not sure. There's a lot that needs doing. Amy's handling some of it, and I left Remus in charge of some of the rest." He sighed. "Fudge showed up not too long ago, and I just came from a meeting with him, McGonagall and Amy. He was doing his usual thing, blustering all over the place about not being consulted for a major operation, but Amy put him in his place. He mostly seemed sympathetic to what happened until he asked who the culprit was and we all said it was Voldemort. He got quite mad about that, but Amy was having none of it. She showed him the body and then went off to continue coordinating the response. The last I saw, he was muttering to himself about hoaxes and conspiracies, looking absolutely overwhelmed. I guess even with the truth right in front of him, he didn't want to believe it."

Once upon a time, Harry may have felt sorry for the man. He understood why he might not have wanted to believe that Voldemort was back, but his repeated and increasingly forceful denials, backed by the might of the Ministry, had been just as damaging as Voldemort. It was because of him that Umbridge had been installed at the school. Any sympathy Harry could have had for the man had long since been worn out.

Sirius continued to fill him in on what was happening in the wider school. With the exception of those in the Hospital Wing and Malfoy, all the students had made it back to their common rooms, which had all sealed themselves in the face of the attack. The students inside were scared, but more importantly, they were safe. McGonagall and Flitwick had already gone to the Gryffindor's and Ravenclaw's to tell them that all was now well, that the attack was over.

When Harry asked about Snape, Sirius's expression turned gloating. Snape had been in the dungeons when the attack started. Once all of the Slytherins had returned, the dungeons had sealed themselves, trapping Snape down there with them, preventing him from coming to aid either side. He was apparently very disgruntled when he was finally let out, only to then be

completely taken aback to learn that Voldemort had been defeated. According to Sirius, he had to submit himself to questioning at the Ministry to determine the true nature of his allegiances before any further decisions would be taken.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen the git look so shocked, not that I entirely blame him. I think we all were worrying that it was a losing battle,” Sirius said, “if I could have helped you against Voldemort, then I would have done.”

“Voldemort wouldn’t have let you. He wanted it to be just the two of us.”

At Sirius’s prompting, Harry explained what happened from the very beginning. How he’d gone to make sure that everyone made it to the safety of the common rooms when the attack started. How he’d ended up separated from the others and ended up duelling Lucius Malfoy and encountering Nagini, leading him to retrieve the sword of Gryffindor. Sirius was interested that Nagini had willingly allowed herself to be executed. When it came to Harry’s duel with Voldemort, Sirius held him tighter.

“I said it before but I’ll say it again as many times as I need to, I am so *so* proud of you,” Sirius said, “and I know that James and Lily would be proud too.”

Harry certainly hoped so. The man who killed them was now gone. Their deaths had been avenged. While Harry didn’t think his parents were the sort to linger over such business, he still liked to think that their spirits, wherever they were, could rest a little easier knowing their son was no longer in danger because of him.

Sirius eased him back down onto the bed, encouraging him to rest some more. Harry acquiesced, but though he felt tired, sleep wouldn’t come to him. He lay on his bed, staring up at the ceiling, deep in thought. He wasn’t sure how long had passed before the doors opened again. Sirius entered the Hospital Wing, one hand on a hunched and scared looking Malfoy’s shoulder as he guided him to one of the beds. He whispered something to Madam Pomfrey, and then curtains were drawn around the bed blocking Harry’s view.

The light from outside darkened, the lamps in the Hospital Wing lit and then eventually extinguished one by one. Harry barely noticed it. He came back to awareness, eyes opening, when he felt a hand curled around his. Dean was awake, his chair moved to be closer to Harry’s bed, and he was the one holding his hand. Harry squeezed back, and Dean gasped.

“Harry,” he breathed.

In the dim light of the Hospital Wing, Harry could just make out the glistening in his boyfriend's eyes. He sat up and held his arms open, and Dean eagerly embraced him, burying his face in Harry’s shoulder. Harry held him firmly as he trembled, uncaring about the damp spot he could feel.

“You were fighting *him*, and Shay and I couldn’t help you, and then Shay got hurt and there was nothing I could do. God Harry, I was so scared I was going to lose both of you!”

Harry wanted to apologise for putting him in that position. It wasn’t fair, but he knew it wasn’t what Dean needed to hear right now. Instead, he just held him closer and did his best

to comfort him. He tugged back his blankets and pulled Dean to lie down next to him. The bed was definitely only meant for one person, but Harry was not going to leave his boyfriend to try to sleep on his own in a chair. They were pressed together, Dean taking low, slow breaths to calm down. Harry cupped his cheek and their eyes met.

“It scared me too. I saw Seamus get hit and I went mad. I barely realised what was happening until it was over,” he whispered, “but we made it through. We’re all still here, just like we promised.”

They settled in as best they could in the bed. The days to come were sure to be hectic and they would need to be ready to face it, but Harry was surprisingly not as worried as he thought he might be. It was because he still had his boys. In a hospital bed and scared they may be, but he still had them. All three of them were alive. They would recover, which meant that whatever may come next, they would be able to face it together.

Seamus woke up the next morning. Madam Pomfrey examined him and assured them all that there was no more trace of curse. All that was left was to heal the small amount of damage the curse had managed to do before it was extracted. Seamus swallowed a few potions, his entire body feeling like one big ache according to him. Harry was just glad to see him awake. He was propped up on pillows as Harry and Dean sat on chairs either side of him. The Daily Prophet had arrived earlier, the headline practically blaring at them on the front cover.

YOU-KNOW-WHO ATTACKS HOGWARTS, DEFEATED BY BOY WHO LIVED.

The article was long, continuing over at least five pages as it tried to report on everything that happened. Madam Bones had given various statements on behalf of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement with regards to the attack itself and the Ministry’s response, as well as those who had been arrested in connection. There were also quotes from Sirius and McGonagall, as they were both present inside the castle during the defence.

Harry and the other students' involvement had been minimised as much as possible, making it seem like they had been cut off from the evacuating students and had wound up being attacked by Death Eaters, but there was one thing they couldn’t keep quiet. Even if the Hogwarts staff and members of the Order of the Phoenix wouldn’t say anything, anyone else present in the Entrance Hall would have witnessed his duel with Voldemort. With Voldemort defeated, there was only one person it could be.

It was why Sirius had released a statement on Harry’s behalf. The statement itself was fairly simple. Sirius said that he was pleased that his godson would no longer be targeted by the madman, that he wished those in power had acted sooner so that a fifteen year old hadn’t been forced to handle an adult’s burden. It was as much a commendation of Harry as it was a condemnation of those who *should* have done more. It ended with a call for calm and civility so that society could rebuild without fear of Voldemort, and a reminder of Harry’s right to privacy, with Sirius hinting at what he would do to those who tried to harass him.

Though Harry hadn’t seen Sirius’s statement before it was printed, he didn’t have any issue with it. The Daily Prophet published it completely without edits, and it was given almost as

much focus as the other details of the story. The final page of the article was devoted to the two issues raised by the incident.

Fudge had been completely silent. Though many people had tried to get a statement from him, by all accounts the Minister's office was on lockdown. It didn't stop the uproar that the revelation that Voldemort had indeed returned caused. The paper reported that the Minister had been inundated with Howlers from concerned citizens demanding to know why Fudge had been so lazy about a potential threat, especially when there had been plenty of evidence that *something* was out there. Harry winced in sympathy for the poor mailroom staff who had to deal with all those letters.

The second issue was more complicated. While Dumbledore had clearly been vindicated in his insistence that Voldemort had returned, why had he not shown up to defend Hogwarts, his former main seat of influence, from attack? Questions were raised about where Dumbledore was and what he was doing. He escaped from the Ministry so easily the first time, so surely it couldn't be the arrest warrant in his name keeping him away. Many believed that he had fled from Hogwarts so he could fight against Voldemort in the shadows, but if that was the case, then where was he? How come there was no warning about the attack at all?

If there was one good thing about Fudge's attacks on Dumbledore's character over this last year, it was that it had laid the foundation quite nicely for people to question his actions now. Where was Dumbledore? What was he going to do now that Voldemort had been defeated without his involvement whatsoever.

"Is it bad that I'm glad to be stuck here?" Seamus said, "I'd hate to have to go out into the rest of the school right now."

"Sirius said it's completely mad. Apparently everyone's torn between freaking out that Voldemort attacked Hogwarts and celebrating that he was beaten," Harry said.

"It's probably not bad, but it is delaying the inevitable," Dean said.

"At least we won't be the focus," said Neville, sitting on the end of Seamus's bed, "that'll be all Harry."

Harry groaned.

"If I'm going down, you're all coming with me."

Luna hovered nearby.

"Everything alright Luna?" Harry asked.

"For now," she said, "this wasn't the help I was supposed to offer you."

"It wasn't?"

"No. I believe it will be coming soon, I think."

"Then why did you help?" Seamus asked.

“Because I chose to,” Luna said, “as Steward of Ravenclaw, my responsibility is to act in my Lord's place and uphold the honour of my Lord's house. More than that though, my school, my home, and all of my friends were in danger. The choice to act was simple, and the choice was mine alone.”

She smiled at them. It was a small thing, but incredibly genuine, and Harry couldn't help smiling back. Dean offered her his chair, budging Seamus over so he could sit on the bed. The five of them chatted away about the other things in the article until Sirius came back. He took a moment to lean against the closed door to the Hospital Wing and take a deep breath, before making his way to them.

“That's another round of letters from parents with a response. Minerva thinks that's the last of the bulk and she should be able to handle the rest of them herself. Nobody's very happy, but mostly people just want to know that their children are safe.”

“Any word from Crabbe and Goyle's parents?” Harry asked.

“They've been brought in for questioning by the Aurors. While their kids were the only ones directly involved that we can find, I wouldn't be surprised if those two squeal and throw everyone else under the bus now that Lucius Malfoy isn't around to protect them,” Sirius said.

“And Draco?”

“He and Narcissa have both also been questioned,” Sirius said, “I vouched that Narcissa has been passing information along to me for months now, and it was easy enough to show that Draco was acting under duress. The only punishment they'll receive will be the hit to the Malfoy reputation from Lucius's actions. Did you know that silver hand of his has a mind of its own?”

“No?” Harry said, “he seemed really proud of it when he showed it off.”

“Apparently it nearly strangled one of the Aurors and then Lucius himself. It had to be cut off and sealed away before Lucius could be questioned.”

Sirius checked his watch.

“Right, before everyone else gets here, we need to decide what our next move is,” Sirius said to Harry, putting a privacy ward around them all, “Voldemort's out of the way and people are questioning Dumbledore's lack of involvement. Now would be the perfect time to bring the evidence we have to get him arrested for the actual crimes he's committed, rather than the trumped up charges Fudge laid on him.”

“Will that even work? I mean, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's surely going to be a madhouse right now,” Harry said.

“Even if it is, we need to act before he has a chance to start leveraging everyone's good will to smooth things over,” Sirius said, “it's not any paltry charges either. Binding Neville's and your magical core so tightly constitutes grievous bodily harm. The potions and spells placed

on you two are classed as assault of a minor, which in your case Harry also adds a child abuse charge on top since he was acting as your magical guardian. For the same reason, we can also get him for child neglect for putting you with the Dursleys and not checking with you. There's also all the financial crimes for illegally taking money from your accounts, as well as the attempted line theft for both betrothal contracts he tried setting up. He *needs* to be held accountable for all of this."

"I know he does! I *know* Dumbledore needs to be brought to justice," Harry said, taking a deep breath.

He tried to quickly think through the scenarios in his head. If they waited until the Aurors finished with the Death Eaters, there was every possibility that Dumbledore could swoop in and start sprinkling the right words in the right ears, working the political game to put himself into a favourable light again. He could make it seem like he was doing incredibly important work in the background that kept him far away from Hogwarts, and by the time he found out about the attack, it was too late to stop it. Tragic, but understandable, excusable even.

If they brought the charges now, it could get caught up in the trials and go under the radar, in which case Dumbledore would still be free to act and build back his reputation. It could even be buried and forgotten altogether in the chaos, much like how Sirius's lack of trial was buried and forgotten.

Then again, if they did it now, it would put the world on notice. Dumbledore wouldn't be able to waltz back into society as though nothing had ever happened, easily slotting back into his roles with a handshake and an apology for not believing him. Sirius wouldn't let the case be forgotten. The goblins wouldn't let the case be forgotten. Honestly, Harry trusted them a lot more than he trusted the system to do its job.

"How should we do this?" Harry said, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

Sirius picked up on it and put a grounding hand on his shoulder, a proud look on his face.

"Firstly, I'll meet with Ironclaw to make sure all of our evidence is compiled. Then he will send out summons for a representative from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to discuss evidence of criminal actions they have uncovered. Given who you are, it'll likely be Amy who goes. The reports will then be filed. I will be at that meeting as your guardian, and trust me when I say that I will make sure whoever comes takes it seriously."

"So Dumbledore will become a fugitive for real?"

"Yes, he will," Sirius said, "I can't promise you that the process will be smooth but you are not alone in this. I will be with you every step of the way."

"We will too!" Seamus said.

"And me. Just give the word and Gran can file charges separately. You know what she's like. She'll not let this go," Neville said.

“In bringing these charges, it will mean that everyone implicated will be brought in for questioning. That means Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Molly as well,” Sirius said, “you will also probably need to give a statement.”

“Whatever needs to be done. We’ve been working towards this for the last three years. I’m not going to let it fail now when we’re so close to the end,” Harry said.

Sirius pulled him in for a hug.

“I won’t let it fail either.”

He then glanced at his watch again.

“It should go without saying that none of this gets shared with anyone,” Sirius said, bearing his gaze down on Luna, who merely blinked at the attention.

“I swear on my honour as the Steward of Ravenclaw that nothing discussed here will be shared by me,” Luna said, “though as a journalist, I’m sure Daddy would have loved first dibs on the story.”

“I’m sure he would,” Sirius said, “now then, Neville, Seamus, you might want to brace yourselves.”

Both boys looked at Sirius with confusion, but then the doors to the Hospital Wing burst open and it was like a storm suddenly raged through the room as Mrs Finnegan descended on her son. She cursed up a storm as she fussed over him, simultaneously berating him for getting caught up in everything and praising him for ‘giving those bastards what they deserved’. Even with her occasional forays into less than appropriate language, the worry she had for her son practically radiated from her. Seamus bore with it with as much grace as a teenage boy could when suffering his mothers fussing. When she had confirmed to her satisfaction that Seamus was, in fact, alright and going to make a full recovery, she wrapped him in an almost suffocating embrace.

“If I find any grey hairs because of this, there’ll be hell to pay,” she grumbled.

“Never mind the Death Eaters, you’ll be the death of me,” Seamus said.

“Shush you. This is from both me and Dad.” She reached out and pulled Dean into her arms as well, trapping him alongside Seamus. “This is for Jill since she couldn’t be here either.”

In the wake of Mrs Finnegan’s whirlwind arrival, the only one to notice the other person who came with her was Neville. He leapt to his feet as Lady Longbottom walked towards him. It was as though she was a moving statue, her expression stony and unreadable. Neville quaked before her, stammering out apologies, but then she reached him. Despite Neville being taller than her, she somehow managed to gather him into her arms, completely cutting him off.

“I’d rather stand at your side when you go into battle than hear about it after the fact,” she said, “I cannot fault you for your bravery, nor will I question the fortune that brought you back to me.”

“I wasn’t that brave. I saw Rabastan Lestrangle and I lost it. I beat him but then Bellatrix-”

“And when you beat him, did you kill him?”

“No,” Neville said, dipping his head.

“Then you are a much better person than me. The things I would have done to those monsters would have earned me a cell in Azkaban for a sentence longer than all of them combined,” Lady Longbottom said, “you showed your mother’s heart in helping your friends, and your father’s honour in your restraint to your enemies.” She tapped Neville’s forehead. “All that’s left is to help this catch up with them.”

Her smile was full of love, and Neville leaned down to hug her again. Harry pressed against Sirius’s side, enjoying the feeling of Sirius pressing back. It came at the end of a hard fought road, but fighting for the people he loved would always be worth it. There was just one last hurdle, one last bridge to cross, and then it would finally be finished. Harry and everyone else would be free to live their lives, and all of this would be a bad dream in the face of all the happy times yet to come.

Three years of manoeuvring

Chapter Notes

Mature scene ahead.

Starts: "Dean leaned in, head tilting..."

Ends: "They woke up the next morning in a..."

"I'm fine. You don't need to keep fussing."

"You literally told us that you still feel achy."

"And Madam Pomfrey said that will go away over the next few days. It's already much better than it was yesterday. Please, I've been in that bed for forever. Let me walk by myself."

Seamus batted away their hands as he stood from the bed, in a fresh change of clothes. Madam Pomfrey had cleared him to leave the Hospital Wing so they were all heading back up to the dormitory. Harry very much desired to have a proper shower and sleep in his own bed. It was also about time for them to face the music and subject themselves to the rest of the school once again.

Voldemort's attack on Hogwarts was only two days ago, and the castle still bore the signs of the assault. The Entrance Hall was a mess, with the damage getting less severe further up. Harry went red when he realised that this damage could be traced back to him and his fights with the Death Eaters. The other students were to be confined to their house common rooms for the next few days while the teachers assessed the damage. They probably wouldn't be able to repair everything in that time, but between the teachers and the house elves, they could at least make everything stable and safe for the students to move around the castle again.

Despite Seamus's bravado, he moved slower, every now and again a movement causing another twinging ache to spread through him, visible only by the small grimace that appeared on his face. Harry, Dean and Neville said nothing when they saw this, not wanting to make Seamus even more conscious of it. They were silent supporters at his side as they neared the Fat Lady.

"You ready?" Dean asked him.

"As I'll ever be," was all Harry said.

The Fat Lady was practically vibrating, as though desperate to quiz him for details, but when Harry stepped forward, she said nothing of the sort.

"You might want to get a ward ready. They've been a bit eager for any news," she said.

“I’m sure they have,” Harry muttered before giving the password.

The portrait swung open and Harry was the first to climb through the hole. The noise coming from the common room died out almost at once when people saw him, and suddenly Harry was faced with a wall of faces. Everyone in Gryffindor was looking at him with expressions ranging from awe to concern and everything in between. Seamus, Dean and Neville took their places beside him, and that was when the noise erupted once more.

It was like a solid mass of cheers, shouted questions and was generally uproarious. People surged forward, but then two stepped out in front, standing between Harry and the crowd, and there was a bang from a wand.

“Calm down! Honestly, you’d think you’ve never seen him before,” Fred said, putting on his best ‘disappointed in you’ expression Harry was sure he’d picked up from Remus.

“I know we’re known as the party house but this isn’t a Quidditch match. Pull yourselves together before you hurt them,” George said.

“Because know that if you do, right now you’re trapped in the same place as us and we’ve got plenty of products that need testing,” Fred added at the end, “are we all going to be sensible?”

It was almost comical the way the crowd nodded.

“Good. Now then-”

Fred and George both turned around and yanked the four boys into a tight hug.

“You absolute numpties.”

“Running off and getting into fights-”

“-what sort of example are you setting for the firsties-”

“-your brother and I are very disappointed-”

“-consider yourself grounded,” they both said together.

When the twins moved away, Parvati and Lavender appeared, teary eyed, as they somehow managed to hug them even tighter, as though worried that the four of them would actually disappear.

“Is it all over now? Did you manage to destroy the last one?” Lavender whispered into Harry’s ear.

“I did. It’s done,” Harry whispered back.

Lavender sobbed, and Harry let her hug him for a bit longer.

More people approached them, much more calmly than they had done at first. There was Angelina, Alicia and Katie, then Colin and Dennis Creevey, then Seth, Eric and Euan. Many Gryffindors Harry had never met but all wanted to make sure he and the others were alright and wanted to know what happened. They were ushered over to the comfy chairs by the fire and peppered with questions.

Neville was the one to take the lead, giving the basic rundown of the story that lined up with what was reported in the Daily Prophet. They got separated from the crowd in the chaos, then when they realised what was going on, wanted to make sure that everyone else had gotten to safety, which led to them running into the Death Eaters.

“Honestly, why McGonagall didn’t make any of you the prefect is astonishing,” Ed Owen said.

“But on that note, I should point out that you also have a responsibility to keep yourselves safe too,” Maxwell Barham said.

“We know. That’s why we made sure to stick together,” Harry said.

“But what about You-Know-Who?” someone else asked.

“Yeah, how did Harry beat him?”

“There’s not much to tell. It was already in the Daily Prophet.”

“But the Prophet’s hardly a very reputable source these days. Come on, tell us!”

There were quite a few people clamouring for him to tell them about what happened. Harry sighed, and gave them a very rough account. Even now, the events leading up to and during his duel with Voldemort were a blur. It still amazed him that he managed to pull it off. It probably wasn’t the details the others wanted to hear, but none of them complained as they all listened rapturously to what he said.

“That’s so cool,” Eric whispered, in awe.

“Are you ok?” Seth asked.

Harry ruffled his hair.

“I will be.”

He glanced at the others.

“We all will be.”

Across the common room, Harry spotted Ron and Hermione. They were listening just like everyone else, but there was something in their expression that stuck out to him. They almost looked ... put out, as though all of this fuss was really inconvenient to them. Hermione had a book next to her that for once she wasn’t reading, and Ron’s arms were tightly folded.

The final clash with Voldemort must have not gone according to plan. Dumbledore probably had some idea of what he wanted to happen, and had been trying to manoeuvre things for years to set things up so that he and his allies could claim the credit, but that wasn't how it ended up going. Dumbledore hadn't been there. Most of the Order hadn't been there, and the ones that were were Harry's allies more than Dumbledore's. Even Ron and Hermione had been tucked away safely in Gryffindor Tower, kept far away from the action, and away from any potential glory that might have resulted.

Harry wanted to hope that neither of them were jealous because of that, but he wouldn't be surprised if they were.

As Harry finished his brief recounting of events, he saw the way Ginny was looking at him. It was that expression of barely concealed lust and longing that made Harry really uncomfortable, as though she were imagining such a bright future between the two of them. Dean saw it too. Without taking his eyes off Ginny, he wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders, pulling him into his side. Distracted, Harry leaned into the offered comfort, reaching out and lacing his fingers together with Seamus.

"This has gone far enough!"

Ginny was giving Seamus and Dean a venomous glare.

"Which of those two is your boyfriend and which is just your bit on the side?" she snapped.

"Ginny-" Fred warned.

"No Fred! I've had enough! You all got on Ron's case for that mess with Colin so how can you all just sit there while Harry is stringing these two along?"

"Because I'm not stringing them along," Harry said simply, "they're my boyfriends."

Ginny looked aghast.

"No. No, I could almost handle the possibility that you might like men," Ginny said, "but I can not accept that you are dating *two boys!*"

"Good thing there's nothing for you to accept Weasley," Seamus said, "we've been together for over a year now, and I don't know about them, but I couldn't be happier."

"Hear hear," Dean said.

Harry blushed a little at the wholehearted agreement. He pushed himself further into Dean's side and pressed a kiss to the back of Seamus's hand.

"But- but that's not- I was- he should- none of this is right!" Ginny yelled.

"That's not for you or anyone else to decide Weasley," Harry said.

"So unromantic, just like her brother," Lavender said.

That comment seemed to be the final straw for Ginny. As Fred and George moved towards her, she stormed off with a loud screech, disappearing up the spiral staircase to the girls dormitories.

“Well that was dramatic,” Dean said, to a smattering of laughter from the crowd.

“Sorry that you have to deal with her,” Parvati said to one of the other fourth-year girls, who was hanging her head, “is she always like that?”

“Kind of,” she said, “sorry Harry. We knew she was obsessed with you in first-year but we thought she’d gotten over that crush. I guess she hasn’t.”

“Too bad for her,” Harry said.

Ron was scowling but Hermione’s hand on his arm kept him in place.

With Harry’s story told, or as much as he was going to tell it, the atmosphere in the Gryffindor common room became lively and cheerful again. The revelation that Voldemort had finally been defeated for good seemed to have sunk in and now everyone wanted to celebrate. Harry and the other boys begged off, claiming the desperate need for a shower. The crowd parted to let them through. Just before they reached their dormitory, Fred and George stopped them.

“We just wanted to apologise for what Ginny said,” George said, “we didn’t expect her to try hashing that out so publicly.”

“I’ve never held your siblings’ actions against you, so please don’t feel bad about it,” Harry said, “besides, I have what I need. Ginny could never compare.”

“You sap,” Seamus nudged him.

“Also, we wanted to give you this back,” Fred handed across a very familiar piece of parchment, “silly Harry. When we got back to the common room and no-one really knew what was going on, George and I came up to see if we could find the Map so we could see what was happening.”

“We didn’t really expect to find it but then we saw you’d left it on your bed, activated for anyone to read,” George said, and Fred lightly bopped Harry on the head with the Map, “you’re lucky it was us who found it first.”

Harry took the Map, accepting the reprimand and thanking them. Considering how often he used it to avoid the people trying to follow him, it would have been disastrous if anyone else had gotten their hands on the Map. When they reached the dormitory, Harry made sure it was safely stored in his trunk before following the others into the bathroom.

There wasn’t much talking as they stripped out of their clothes and hopped into the showers. There were only three stalls, so they’d come to an agreement back in first-year that when there was a queue, it was first come first served and whoever came later would have to wait. Harry, Seamus and Dean had no issues taking a shower together, having done so many times

before, but they normally didn't do so when Neville was around as they didn't want to make him uncomfortable. Today though, the need to feel clean overrode that. Seamus and Dean took the left stall and Neville the right, leaving the centre free for Harry.

As much as he would have loved to join his boyfriends, Harry couldn't deny that getting to stand beneath the spray of hot water was heavenly. The others must have felt the same as none of them moved for a little while, letting the water wash away some of the tension lingering in their bodies. They all took their time to scrub thoroughly, and when Harry finished and shut off the water, he felt like he was glowing. The others made similar comments as they all dried.

Unfortunately, things couldn't stay peaceful forever. Harry stepped back out into the dormitory, his clothes in a bundle and a towel around his waist, to find Ron leaning against his bedpost. Seamus and Dean came up beside him, similarly dressed and confused about the hold up.

Ron's brow was furrowed, his arms crossed. It was definitely a negative expression, one that immediately made Harry's guard rise. His wand was in the bundle of clothes. It would be too obvious if he tried to get it.

"I suppose you think you're some big hotshot now, don't you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Harry said, "could you please give us a moment to get dressed?"

"So that's what you were really doing," Ron sneered, "there's so many people downstairs who want to talk to you but you just wanted to sneak off and fuck around in a shared space."

"You can think what you like. I don't care," Harry said.

"Weasley, leave us alone," Seamus said.

"I bet you enjoyed all of them fawning over you like you're something special. You go running off to get yourself killed so you can be a hero, and then you break my sister's heart in front of everyone!" Ron said, "do you really not care about other people? Is being famous really that important to you?"

"What the hell!" Dean snapped.

"Weasley, you're the one who doesn't care about people," Neville said.

"At least I care about propriety! At least I care enough not to flaunt my naked body around where anyone can see it!"

"You were the one who ambushed us for this conversation right after we got out of the shower," Harry pointed out.

"Yeah, three showers when there's four of you. So is that gonna be it now? Famous Harry Potter can't possibly be satisfied by one person so he collects himself a little harem?" Ron scoffed, "you three had better watch your backs. Now that he's put himself back into the

public eye, he's bound to find somebody else to wet his dick, and then he'll drop you just like he dropped me and Hermione."

And that was when Harry recognised the expression on his face. It wasn't just anger at supposedly catching them in a compromising position, it was anger at being left out. It was envy for all the positive attention he was getting.

"Are you- are you jealous?" Harry said, "are you seriously jealous that Voldemort attacked and could have killed me again?"

"No, but some bloody gratitude for all that Hermione and I have done for you would be nice!" Ron snapped back, "a little acknowledgement of your friends would be great before you decide to dump us for a fresher model! Besides, you wouldn't have even been in that situation if you'd just followed the plan!"

"I do acknowledge my friends. The only difference is that you and Hermione are *not* my friends, and so deserve nothing from me," Harry said, his voice surprisingly level for how angry he was, "you jumped down my throat at every little disagreement. You thought I was a liar for entering a tournament I made very clear I never wanted to enter, and then came crawling back when the winds changed, only to then viciously insult me because I'm gay. You claimed to have changed, but you strung along an innocent boy's feelings for months in the most intimate way possible to prove it. Even now when you're supposedly so much better, you looked disgusted at the thought that the three of us shared a shower."

Ron's ears were bright red. He opened his mouth to argue but Harry cut over him.

"I now know what real friends are, and I have two boys that I love with all my heart, and I would never dream of *dropping* any of them. You and Hermione are not in that category because of your own actions. This is your fault, so you'll have to deal with it," Harry said, "stay the hell away from us, Ronald Weasley."

He caught the twitch in Ron's hand, and for a moment, Harry thought he was going to draw his wand on them, or even just try and punch them. The moment passed thankfully and Ron stormed out of the dormitory. Harry let out the breath he didn't realise he was holding.

"That utterly delusional, moronic, beyond stupid, tosser, piece of-" Seamus's furious grumbling was cut off when Harry buried his head in his shoulder, wrapping his arms around his waist.

Seamus got the message and hugged back. Dean joined them, and Harry felt a firm hand on his shoulder from Neville.

"Do you really think he was jealous?" Dean asked.

"Of taking part in the fight? No. Of not getting the glory and attention in the aftermath? Absolutely," Harry said, "he can't claim any part of it, not even by osmosis through association. If anything, his reputation will continue to go down as everyone knows I don't like him."

“The absolute nerve to get at us for exposing ourselves when he cornered us just after a shower,” Seamus said, “I was half tempted to drop my towel right then and there; see how he’d react to a naked boy daring to be in his presence.”

“He doesn’t deserve to see that,” Harry said a touch too quickly.

“What are we going to do now?” Neville said, “are we heading back down to the common room or-”

“You can if you want. I was going to, but after that I’m not much in the mood to be around anyone else,” Harry said.

They changed into their pyjamas and the four of them sat together on Harry’s bed. They talked amongst themselves about how things would go, but mostly it was just a chance to decompress.

Dinner was served in the common room, and Harry and the others ended up re-joining the rest of Gryffindor for that. The atmosphere was still lively, and Harry was definitely the centre of attention, but after he got his food and sat with the other fifth-years, people left him alone. Fred and George and the rest of the Gryffindor team prowling like guard dogs certainly seemed to help. Across the common room, Ron and Hermione sat in a huff, completely ignored by everyone else. Ginny was with them, her eyes red and puffy as she glared daggers at Seamus and Dean. Harry took great joy in pecking Seamus’s cheek and seeing the way she flushed with anger.

Eventually the day came to an end. Harry was joined in bed by his boys. Though they didn’t do anything else, the feeling of their naked bodies pressed against him as they curled into his sides, one arm wrapped around each of them, was soothing. It was proof that they were really there. They had all made it through, and now were back in their own bed. Back to some semblance of normality after the utter chaos of the last few days. Back to their lives, together.

The students were allowed out the day after next. The teachers had done a thorough inspection of the castle. What could be repaired was, and what couldn’t yet was stabilised and cordoned off. The entire school was grateful to get to leave their common rooms, though the eagle eyed among them could still see the signs of the battle. A scorch mark on the floor here, a small crater in the concrete there. It would take a long time for all of the wounds in the castle to be healed.

The Great Hall was full of noise as everyone settled in for breakfast. When Harry walked through the doors, the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws all cheered for him. It looked like they wanted to crowd him, but Harry’s friends formed a veritable shield around him, and they quickly got the message to stay in their seats. The Slytherins remained quiet, then as one the entire table stood. The Great Hall went quiet, nobody expecting it, as two people left the table and walked over to Harry.

He recognised them as Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass. From what he remembered of the times Sirius talked politics with him, the Zabini’s and the Greengrass’s were typically

neutral as far as purebloods went, which was likely why they had been sent to represent their house. Not feeling any hostility, Harry stepped through his crowd of protectors to meet them.

“Heir Zabini. Heir Greengrass,” he said, greeting them both with a tip of the head.

“Heir Potter,” they both said in return.

“On behalf of Slytherin House, we would like to extend to you our sincerest gratitude for removing the blight on our house’s honour,” Greengrass said.

She and Zabini both bowed, and everyone else in Slytherin followed suit. It was a remarkable sight, one which left the entire hall speechless. Even the teachers didn’t seem to know what to make of this. Harry could only accept it with grace and dignity.

“You are most welcome.” He extended a hand to them. “It’s a pleasure to formally meet you both.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Greengrass said, taking it, “I’m sure politics will be very interesting in a few years time.”

Looking at the Slytherin table, it was bizarre to see it without Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. While there had been some rumours about their involvement, a few other Slytherins had also been escorted out of Hogwarts, only to return either the same day or shortly after. Somebody in Ravenclaw had seen Sirius escorting Malfoy down the front lawn the other day, so everyone just assumed it was more of that. Harry knew he was back with his mother, having been questioned by the Aurors. There were a few Slytherins who looked angry with him, but most looked relieved. No doubt, Voldemort’s presence had made the dungeons a stifling place to be.

People took advantage of the fairly good weather and what time they had left of the Easter holidays to head out onto the grounds. Some patches of grass looked fresher than others, but otherwise the teachers had done a good job at restoring the lawns to their former pristine state. Harry and the other fifth-years were among this group. The staring and whispers had started back up again, and while he could mostly handle it, it still felt good to get away from it all.

“It’s weird to think that this was a battlefield only a few days ago,” Lavender said, “how long before new editions of *Hogwarts: A History* include it?”

“They’re probably preparing a new edition as we speak,” Dean said.

“Harry will once again have his name in the history books,” Parvati teased, “only this time it’ll be for something he actually remembers.”

“Don’t remind me. Sirius told me he’s had to redirect all mail to a postbox in Gringotts. Pretty much all of it’s fan mail, even a few confessions of love from people I’ve never met before,” Harry said.

“I’d say it’ll die down, but somehow I doubt that,” Neville said, “at least for the love letters. I have a feeling you’ll still be considered the most eligible and desired bachelor right up until you formally announce your relationship.”

Harry just groaned again.

“At least they’ve stopped speculating about the other students who got ‘caught up’ in the evacuation,” he said.

“That’s not something that’s gonna stay secret forever. The Gryffindors already know it was you four, and the Ravenclaws will know it was Luna. It won’t take long for the stories to mix and spread beyond Hogwarts,” Parvati said.

“You don’t mind that you weren’t there?” Harry couldn’t help asking.

“There’s a part of me that wishes I could have helped you, but considering you didn’t even want your boyfriends out there with you, I know why you wouldn’t have even considered it. I will also never spit on somebody’s desire to keep me safe,” Parvati said.

“You came back alive and relatively uninjured. What’s more, you rid the world of one of the most evil people to have ever been born,” Lavender said, “really I should be thanking you for what you did, but I won’t, because I know the last thing you want is endless gratitude.”

A small group of Aurors led by Kingsley marched up the path to the front gate, not an uncommon sight given the events of the last couple of days. The wards still felt shaky. Harry had tried putting magic into it to strengthen and repair them like they’d done with the tear, but every time he tried it felt like he would break them. Neville felt the same way when he tried. Now that they could leave their common rooms, they would need to arrange to meet with Luna. Perhaps the four founders lines together could repair the damage.

Just before lunch, they went back up to the common room, only to find everyone deep in conversations that seemed to stop when Harry entered. This also was not uncommon, to Harry’s chagrin, but the tone of the conversations seemed different than usual when they started back up again. The common room also seemed quieter. Harry frowned. Where were Fred and George? Come to think of it, he didn’t see Ron or Hermione either. Harry went up to the dormitory and retrieved the Marauders Map. Looking over his shoulder, the other boys helped him scour it looking for them.

“I can’t find them anywhere,” Neville said.

“There’s no sign of any Weasley’s, not even Bill,” Seamus said.

“Sirius said that with the charges being brought against Dumbledore, everybody connected would be questioned. Do you reckon this is it?” Dean asked.

It certainly seemed like it to Harry, and it was partially confirmed when they went down to lunch. Angelina told them that McGonagall came to the common room and collected Fred and George personally and took them to her office. Katie said she did the same thing for Ron and Hermione in the Library.

By implicating Dumbledore in a series of crimes, they also implicated the others as conspirators. All were recipients of stolen funds which they did not disclose. They had direct evidence of Mrs Weasley trying to dose him with potions from Kreacher's records, and they could indirectly accuse Ron and Hermione of the same. Ron and Ginny were also implicated with the charges of Line Theft from their brazen attempts to seduce him. Harry still felt a surge of anger whenever he thought of Ron's disgusting Christmas gift. Out of all of them, Hermione would probably get off the lightest, depending on how the investigation played out.

Fred and George were back in the castle by dinner. They jokingly pretended they were returning heroes, playing off people's questions by saying they just needed to go to a meeting at Gringotts to go over some account details. The Weasley's financial situation was well known, as was the twins' desire to start a business, so it was a reasonable excuse but Harry caught the significant look they gave him from across the table. After dinner, they pulled him up to their bedroom, the other seventh-year boys conveniently absent.

"It was a meeting with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, which was scary as all hell," Fred said, "it was the eight of us plus Hermione as they also questioned Percy. Dad went first, then he came back after about ten minutes or so. Bill and Percy were the same. I never thought I'd ever have to speak to Madam Bones in an official capacity in my life, which was ever so slightly terrifying."

"What did she do?"

"She asked us a bunch of questions about our relationship to you, how we treated you, if we had any issues, that sort of thing," George said, "it wasn't too much. There were a few pointed questions where she asked if we knew anything about dosing attempts, and we told her basically everything we knew about what you were going through. The only really scary thing was right at the end."

"She said she had authority for a limited use of Veritaserum. Apparently it's standard practice in the beginning stages of criminal trials. We each had to take a single drop of the potion, which would let her ask a single question with a guaranteed truthful answer," Fred said, "she asked if everything we had told her in the interview had been the truth. Obviously we said yes and she let us go."

"After that it was Molly's turn. She took longer and she didn't come back into the waiting room when she was done. Dad had to go back in with Ron and Ginny, and those two also didn't come back. Hermione went last, and I think they had somebody there to represent her in place of her parents. I don't really know," Fred said, "after that, we were told we could leave. Bill treated us to a late lunch, which Percy begged off of. Pompous git is completely embarrassed, and more than a bit ashamed for some things he said last summer which I'm sure he's regretting now."

"The bottom line though is that I think it worked," George said, "whatever story they tried to spin will have been completely torn apart when they confessed to lying in the last question. That'll give them more power to question them in more detail and then one by one they'll fall."

Harry could hardly believe it. Three years worth of heartache and effort, three years of holding his tongue and playing along, bit by bit manoeuvring and gathering all the evidence he could, it was all coming to a crescendo now. There was no way any of them could avoid spilling all the beans about Dumbledore. Harry might even finally get to learn what Dumbledore's end goal in all this was, assuming he deigned to tell any of them that.

It was in a bit of a daze that he told his friends later that evening. Parvati and Lavender carefully concealed looks of glee, immediately taking themselves back to their dormitory for a full pamper session now that they didn't need to worry about disturbing Hermione. Neville looked just as stunned.

"No more tiptoeing around the dormitory, always worrying we might give something away to Ron," he said.

"Do you reckon they'll be expelled?" Seamus asked in a hushed voice.

"It will all depend on what, if anything, they get officially charged with," Dean said, "I can see them getting suspended at the very least."

Harry tried to imagine what it would look like, a Hogwarts without any of his former friends. It was easier to do after almost a year of being apart from them, but they had still been there, lurking in the background. There was always the worry about saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, but if they were gone, there wouldn't be any of that. It was a brilliant picture of the future, and even if they somehow managed to come back while he was still at Hogwarts, it wouldn't matter to him. They were a part of his past now, and there they would remain.

Later that night in the dormitory, he looked out of the window, seeing the light of the moon illuminating the grounds of Hogwarts, and he smiled fondly. The castle was quickly becoming the place it always should have been. Arms wrapped around him from behind, Dean's head coming to rest on his shoulder. He turned around so he could hug Dean back, practically melting at the love he could see shining within his boyfriend's eyes. Dean leaned in, head tilting, and Harry's head tilted to match him as their lips connected.

The kiss continued, grew more heated, and Harry felt himself being led towards the bed. Dean pushed him backwards and Harry landing softly on the mattress, and then Seamus was there, claiming his lips. The three of them piled onto the bed, giving themselves privacy. Harry enjoyed the feeling of lips on his, on his neck; his shirt was lifted up so lips could explore his chest. It was an odd feeling having his nipples sucked but not an unpleasant one.

Bit by bit, their clothes were removed until Harry found himself completely naked, lying on his back with his equally nude boyfriends kneeling over him. Seamus was practically devouring Dean's mouth. Harry reached up to take hold of their rock hard cocks, his own erection demanding attention.

"You're so beautiful," he found himself saying.

The pair of them parted with a wet smack and Seamus smirked at him.

"It's only just beginning," he said.

Seamus found his wand and waved it over all of them. Harry felt the unusual wetness between his cheeks as his hole was prepared, and Dean jolted a little as he felt the same. Seamus held himself over Harry, his strong arms bracketing Harry's head.

"Can I, Harry? Can I have you?"

"Of course you can."

Harry leaned up to capture Seamus in a searing kiss. It ended when he felt something touch his entrance. His eyes widened as Seamus teased his rim with a slick finger, circling it before gently pushing inside. The intrusion sent a zing of electricity coursing through him.

"Didn't you already prepare him with the spell?" Dean asked.

"Just making sure," Seamus said.

Seamus kissed a trail down Harry's body until he reached his cock, sucking the tip into his mouth and drawing a loud moan from him. He continued down, teasing Harry's balls. He moved Harry's legs aside, opening up his cheeks and the next thing Harry felt was Seamus's tongue at his hole. It was such a different sensation to a finger. Harry pulled Dean in closer, their kiss deep and full of passion as Harry was overcome with an energy in need of release. It was a suitable distraction as Seamus rose, hooking Harry's legs on his shoulders, and Dean swallowed his moan of pleasure as Seamus pushed inside.

Feeling Seamus's dick in his ass was one of the best feelings ever, just as good as Dean's, and on par with being inside his boyfriends. It was overwhelming in the best way possible, and when Seamus started moving, Harry could hardly think of anything else than how good he felt. The only sounds were the rustle of bedsheets and the slap of skin against skin as Seamus found a pace he liked, one which drove Harry mad with pleasure. He plunged inside and found the sweet spot, the little bundle of nerves that had Harry's toes curling and back arching, the noise he made so indecent.

"Come here," he managed to say through his pants to Dean, tugging at his boyfriend to draw him in closer.

At first Dean thought he wanted to kiss again, but Harry reached blindly and found his cock, using that as a guide until he could bring it into his mouth. Dean was a little bigger than Seamus was, but Harry was still able to suck on it, bobbing his head slightly off pace with Seamus. It made him feel even better to hear Dean enjoying it, his hips making little movements as though he wanted to thrust. Harry wouldn't have minded if he did.

He was in a heaven of pleasure, so when he reached his crescendo, Harry cried out. His chest was painted white with his seed. Seamus continued to thrust into him, Harry's ass clenching with his orgasm increasing the friction around his cock until Seamus released inside him. In his high, Harry hollowed his cheeks and sucked. Dean groaned, and sticky fluid shot down Harry's throat.

They were all out of breath, panting heavily as they came down. Harry shivered in the aftermath of his orgasm. Seamus slipped out of him, resting on his knees, eyes closed and

breathing heavily. Dean flopped down beside Harry, a smile gracing his features.

“That was just as good as it always was,” he said, “did you have fun?”

“I’ll never get used to this, and I pray that I never do,” Harry said.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

The pair of them looked at Seamus, and saw the fire in his eyes.

“Shay?”

“I’ve said it before, but give me a few minutes and I’ll be ready to go again. We’re all gonna be bogged down in exams and stuff for the next month, and I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to wait that long before I get to finally try my boyfriend’s ass,” he said, “say the word and we’ll stop right now, but I really want to feel you around my cock Dean. Please, let me fuck you too like I did Harry.”

The fire of lust was clear in his eyes, but the way his tone turned to begging made Harry want to give him whatever he wanted, and he wasn’t even the one the question was directed at. Apparently Dean couldn’t resist him either, and Seamus beamed at him. He gave them both a kiss, more loving and less heat than up till this point. They cuddled, uncaring of the mess they’d made, until Harry felt Seamus’s cock grow hard against his hip.

There wasn’t much sleeping that night. Harry couldn’t say what exactly they did, the details passing in a haze of pleasure. He remembered Seamus’s cock inside Dean at some point, and Seamus hovering over him, eyes wide and blissed out. The details didn’t matter though. They woke up the next morning in a mess of their own making, thoroughly rung out and happily sated. Harry could have done without the knowing looks Neville gave him when they finally got up for the day. At least Sirius wasn’t there to greet them. The teasing didn’t bear thinking about.

The Entrance

As the Easter holidays came to an end, things started to settle back down at Hogwarts. The Aurors coming and going were still a regular occurrence, sections of the castle were still cordoned off for repair, and the scars of the battle could still be found if one knew where to look, but for the most part, normality began to return to the castle bit by bit. This of course led to them all being slightly blindsided when McGonagall stood at breakfast on the last day of the holidays.

“After many meetings with the school board of governors and the Wizing Examination Authority, it has been decided that all end of year exams will take place as previously planned. This includes OWLs and NEWTs. We realise that there has been a large disruption to our lives recently, so all of the teachers will be doing what they can to make sure you are all prepared.”

It was almost surreal to Harry to go from defeating Voldemort to worrying about exams. To be under threat of attack to going through notes and homework like nothing had happened. Judging by the expressions on the other fifth-year's faces, they were also thinking the same. God help them if Hermione had still been there. She would have been completely insufferable as the reminder that OWLs were only a month away crashed into her like a ton of bricks.

“How the hell are we supposed to study right now?” Seamus said, “it’s not as if the common room’s gotten any quieter. People still try to pester Harry about what happened.”

“It looks like we’ll be getting a lot of use out of the Room of Requirement,” Dean said.

From across the room, they saw Luna talking to Cho, and she caught Harry’s eye and nodded. When they finished, they trudged back up to their dormitories to collect their school things before heading for the Room. Even if none of them really wanted to, they understood the importance of these exams, and it would be a waste of all their hard work if they slacked off now. Luna was waiting for them when they got there.

“The wards still feel very weak and fragile. I fear they would not stand up to another assault after Voldemort’s,” she said after the door closed behind them.

“I’ve tried feeding magic into them but it doesn’t seem to have helped much,” Harry said, “I was hoping the three of us could do what we did the last time the wards were damaged. Hopefully the magic from all four founders can do what we can't do alone.”

The others stood off to one side, looking on with interest as Harry, Neville and Luna stood in a circle. They pressed their hands together and closed their eyes, focusing on the family magic of the founders they held within them. Doing this just made Harry even more aware of how much Voldemort and the Death Eaters had pushed the wards. Cracks ran across their surface, and there were gaping holes where Voldemort had forced his way through the gates as well as where the Dementors had crossed on mass.

Harry allowed the magic of Gryffindor and Slytherin to pool within him, felt the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw magic do the same, and as one, they fed it into the wards. At first it seemed like it was working. The smaller cracks closed up but then they felt the strain, as though they were pushing too hard. They parted with looks of disappointment.

“No good?” Dean asked.

“It’s like the wards are still trying to do too much, and asking them to do more would only damage them further,” Harry said.

“Hogwarts is trying to repair itself. It’s not just the wards that were damaged but the castle as well. There is still a lot to do,” Luna said.

“Gran’s never told me about anything like this. She’s always been confident in the Longbottom wards, but surely they couldn’t be that great if they couldn’t be repaired after an attack,” Neville said, “there has to be something we’re missing.”

Following their failure, it was harder to focus on their schoolwork, but they all made an admirable attempt to do so. Harry let Parvati read his palms for Divination while Lavender read through her notes for Herbology. Luna was surprisingly helpful, quizzing Seamus and Dean on Potions recipes. It wasn’t as productive as they’d hoped, but it was better than nothing. For getting back into the swing of things, it could have been a lot worse.

“Potter,” a voice said as they were leaving lunch the next day. Harry turned to see McGonagall walking up to him. “Could you come with me please?”

Bidding goodbye to his friends, Harry followed her up through the castle. Unlike previous times they’d spoken together, she did not take him to her office, but rather the Headmasters office, which technically speaking was also hers for the time being. The gargoyle moved aside to let them pass without issue. There were people waiting for them in the office when they arrived. Sirius and Madam Bones were talking quietly, stopping when they saw Harry.

“Madam Bones would like to ask you a few questions Potter,” McGonagall said, “as your guardian, Sirius requested to be present. I thought here would be a more private place for you to talk, without fear of being overheard.”

Seeing the very serious expressions on Sirius and Madam Bones’s faces, he had a feeling he knew what they wanted to talk to him about. McGonagall left them to it, telling them they wouldn’t be disturbed and to send for a House Elf if they needed anything. When she was gone, Sirius pulled out his wand and conjured a comfortable sofa and armchair for them to sit in.

“Thank you for meeting me, Heir Potter. I won’t waste time with pleasantries, since you likely already know about what is happening,” Madam Bones said, “I have questions related to the actions of a number of people against yourself and your family. We can take this as slowly as you’d like.”

Harry took a deep breath. There was a musical cry as Fawkes fluttered over from his perch to land on the arm of the sofa, his presence a comforting warmth as Harry carefully carded

through his feathers.

“What would you like to know?”

This was not the first time Harry had explained everything that had happened to him, but in a way, this was the most important. Madam Bones mostly let him talk uninterrupted as he explained everything, beginning with when he woke to his magical inheritance, to all the events that occurred at Hogwarts from then to the incident a few days ago that ended with the downfall of Voldemort for good, along with the little spat in the common room afterwards. A quill and parchment had been set up to record everything that was said, freeing Madam Bones to listen. She gave nothing away in her expression. Occasionally she asked him to clarify certain details, but it was mostly all him.

It was hard to tell how long they were talking for, only that Harry noticed the sun had dipped considerably lower in the sky. When he was done, he felt slightly wrung out, but also satisfied. Madam Bones read through the parchment transcript with an analytical eye, then nodded.

“I believe that is everything I need. Is there anything else you would like to add?” Harry shook his head. “If you think of anything, do not hesitate to send me an owl. This concludes the interview of Hadrian James Potter for criminal investigation 04-249-65.”

The parchment rolled up and Madam Bones safely stowed it within a folder.

“Off the record, it is a pleasure to meet you more properly, *Lord* Potter,” Madam Bones said, holding out a hand that Harry shook, “this will be a big help in the coming trials.”

“So there are going to be trials,” Harry prompted.

“Indeed. Between the witness testimony and the records from Gringotts, we have more than enough to bring Dumbledore in on a number of charges. As for the others, technically I shouldn’t divulge this information, but as the primary victim you have the right to know how the case is progressing,” Madam Bones said, “Molly Weasley is being charged with assault of a minor for repeatedly attempting to dose you with all manner of harmful potions; a litany of financial crimes including accepting stolen money; and Line Theft for her role in orchestrating the ‘coupling’ of yourself with either Ronald or Ginevra Weasley.”

“Arthur said he would also be pursuing charges against her for Line Theft as well,” Sirius added in.

“I will keep an eye out for that case,” Madam Bones said, “the elder Weasley children were all cleared. Ronald and Ginevra Weasley are being charged with financial crimes, since they did also accept stolen money, along with accessory to assault charges. They’re also being charged with either Line Theft or accessory to Line Theft; further investigation into how informed they were of what they were doing will determine which is which. Finally, Hermione Granger is also facing charges of accepting stolen money and accessory to assault.”

“How likely is it that they’ll be found guilty?” Sirius asked.

“That I can’t tell you, on or off the record. The investigation is still ongoing,” Madam Bones, “I wouldn’t be surprised if some leniency is shown for the minors. Either way they are all bar Dumbledore in our custody pending their trials, which I am afraid Lord Potter may need to testify in.”

“His statement here isn’t enough?”

“It could be, but it’s possible that the defendants or their counsel may wish to question him. As much as you may wish to, we can’t deny them that right,” Madam Bones said, “I refuse to allow there to be any doubt in the verdict, so everything will be done by the books, as it should be.”

“I understand,” Harry said.

It would mean that the next time he saw them, it would be at their trial, a trial where justice would be served for what they had done.

“As for Dumbledore, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was already tracking him down under Fudge’s trumped up charges. Those charges, of course, will be dropped, and I had considered releasing a statement asking for Dumbledore to turn himself into the Ministry so the matter could be resolved peacefully but that won’t work.”

“No, it won’t,” Sirius said, “unfortunately for all of us, Dumbledore is not unintelligent. He’s seen his fair share of criminal trials and knows a lot of the tricks investigators use to get their targets. He’ll be suspicious of anything the Ministry says, and he’ll know the jig is up when he finds out that Molly and the others have been arrested.”

“Then we shall proceed with plan B: go after Dumbledore full force, get ahead of him so that he has no chance of leveraging his former reputation to avoid consequences.”

Madam Bones stood.

“Thank you for your cooperation in this matter. I shall reach out to your godfather if there is anything else I need.” She gave them both a short bow. “Lord Potter, Lord Black.”

She disappeared using the office fireplace, vanishing in a flurry of green flames.

“So this is it then,” Harry said, “it’s all coming to an end.”

“It is. Feels like yesterday that I was breaking out of Azkaban, determined to get to you and keep you safe. Now look at us, me a free man and Lord of the House of Black, and you the saviour of Magical Britain for real this time and Lord three times over to boot,” Sirius said.

“Sometimes I imagine what things would have been like if I hadn’t inherited that day in the Leaky Cauldron. Things might have worked out the same, or they might have worked out differently. I’m not sure I would have been hurt more or less if things stayed as they were, like all this effort wasn’t worth anything.”

“But has it been worth it?”

Harry thought of everything he'd gained in these last three years since finding out the truth. All the incredible things he'd learned about the world around him, all the amazing people he'd met, the friends he'd made along the way, the loved ones he now had to cherish. He thought of all that and the answer came easily to him.

“Yes. Yes it has.”

It was the last day of the Easter Holidays. Classes were due to start back up again the next day, and everyone was in a bit of a frenzy about it. After a two week break and all the upheavals that went along with it, nobody wanted to get back to normal school days. There was only a month left before OWLs and Harry and the others were all determined to do well in them.

As though the universe wanted to spread one last bit of chaos while it could, the post owls arrived in the morning, bringing with them a flurry of letters from concerned parents. They also brought the Daily Prophet, and gasps erupted from around the Great Hall as people unrolled the paper and saw the headline blaring at them.

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE WANTED ON MULTIPLE COUNTS OF ASSAULT, CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT, AND LINE THEFT

A warrant for the arrest of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, former Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, former Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, and former Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was released yesterday evening on charges of assault, abuse and neglect, among many others. Notably, this warrant comes on the heel of a separate warrant issued by Minister Fudge two months ago.

Albus Dumbledore has been outspoken for many months about the return of You-Know-Who, now identified as Tom Riddle by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and will be referred to as such for the remainder of this article. It is no secret that Minister Fudge, and by extension the Ministry as a whole, was opposed to his stance, and the dissolution of what had previously been a very amicable relationship has been very widely publicised. It culminated in the Minister bringing charges against Dumbledore for conspiracy and sedition. With the revelation that Riddle was indeed still alive, many in Magical Britain expected these charges to be dropped, and the formerly beloved Headmaster allowed to return to his previously held positions.

However, in the wake of the final downfall of Riddle and his supporters, an investigation conducted by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has uncovered shocking evidence that suggests that Dumbledore is not the kindly figure he had always presented himself as.

“Dumbledore has been such a well regarded figure in society for so long, it is difficult for all of us to believe he would do something so heinous. However, this is how he was able to get away with the crimes he has committed for so long,” said Madam Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, in a statement to the Daily Prophet. “For too long we have allowed powerful individuals to escape justice, perverting our systems for their own ends, but I say that this has to end. Dumbledore must stand trial for the wrongs he has done.”

The arrest warrant groups Dumbledore's alleged crimes into three main categories: assault of a minor, child abuse and neglect, and Line Theft. No victims have been named, but given that Dumbledore served as Headmaster for over three decades, there is no shortage of people the first two categories could apply to.

Line Theft is defined as the intentional attempt to gain access to a Noble Family for monetary or magical gain, typically by subverting the power of the Lord or Lady of the family by means of manipulation to seize control. It is also unclear which family Dumbledore attempted to interfere with, but the implications are dire if this is true.

Given that Dumbledore already has an existing arrest warrant, which has now been shown to be illegitimate, questions are raised about the legitimacy of this new warrant. When asked about this, Madam Bones said, "unlike Minister Fudge's poor attempt at exerting his own authority, this warrant is based on actual evidence. For the safety of witnesses, that is all I will say on this matter."

Dumbledore's whereabouts remain unknown. Previous attempts to locate him have ended in failure. International law enforcement bodies have also been notified. The Daily Prophet has reached out to Minister Fudge for a comment, but the Minister's Office has yet to respond to any such requests.

For more information on the alleged crimes, see pages 2-3. For reactions from the public, see pages 4-6. For more on the relationship between Fudge and Dumbledore, and how these new allegations will affect the Minister's efforts to maintain his office in the face of overwhelming calls for his resignation, see pages 7-8.

The Great Hall was silent as everyone managed to read the article. The only sound was the rustling of paper as the Daily Prophet was handed between people, and others turned the pages to continue reading. It was clear that nobody quite knew how to react. Dumbledore had been such a dominating figure in magical society. The thought that he would commit such crimes was likely hitting many people hard.

Harry was glad there was no mention of him in the article at all, even as a passing reference. It would be another load of unwanted attention placed on him if everyone found out that it was him that Dumbledore had hurt so badly.

Then again, there could have been some value in sharing that information. He was currently the saviour of Magical Britain. People may be more likely to believe these allegations if they knew it was him who was affected. Harry tamped down on those thoughts. Crimes should be treated seriously, regardless of who the alleged victim and perpetrator were. Neville was also hurt by Dumbledore in many of the same ways, but he wouldn't get the same level of acceptance purely based on reputation. He deserved justice just as much as Harry, and for people to care about that justice just as much.

The whispers that started up were low and fierce, a nervous undercurrent to them as everyone processed what this meant. Harry heard more than one speculating about who the victims were. Needless to say, everyone was distracted during classes that day.

“Surely by publicising the arrest warrant, it gives him a heads up to be careful?” Parvati said as they studied in the Room of Requirement.

“He was going to be careful anyway,” Harry pointed out.

“It’ll also mean that people are on notice to actively oppose him,” Neville said, “before, there were still plenty of people on his side. They’d seen the Ministry’s campaign to discredit him. When they brought the conspiracy and sedition charges, there’d be many who’d give Dumbledore safe harbour. Now the crimes have changed. Now it’s not opposition to a seemingly tyrannical Ministry, but instead very personal and very serious crimes. People who might have helped him before, hopefully, now won’t.”

“I suppose,” Parvati said.

“I guess it also gets a lot more people looking for him as well. Like you said, before people might not have reported sightings of him if they disagreed with the Ministry’s stance, but it’s kind of hard to hold that view when he’s an abuser,” Lavender said.

“Let’s hope this doesn’t back him into a corner,” Dean said, “you hear about all sorts of things that happen when police chase down criminals.”

That was a very valid concern. Dumbledore was a very powerful man, both in terms of intelligence and in magic. Everything up to this point with the loss of his reputation and position in society could be salvaged. He knew how to work the political game to get what he wanted, and was obviously patient enough that he could wait as things blew over, whispering the right words in the right ears so that when he came back, he was welcomed with open arms. With the allegations being highly publicised in the press, announced by somebody with the authority and drive to follow through, and with those specific allegations making it clear she knew what he had done, now there was no going back from it.

Dumbledore’s plans were falling apart in a way he couldn’t sweet talk his way out of. That combined with his old age, patience might no longer be something he felt he could afford, and with somebody of Dumbledore’s ability, there was no telling what he might do out of desperation to put things back on track.

“We need to make Hogwarts as secure as possible,” Harry said, “Riddle only managed to get inside with the help of his Death Eaters overwhelming the wards. Dumbledore alone wouldn’t be able to get through if the wards were at full strength, but they’re not. We need to find a way to repair them.”

“I’ve sent a letter to Gran but with the article in the Daily Prophet, I don’t think she’ll get back to us in time,” Neville said, “there has to be a way we can repair the damage to the wards apart from what we’ve already tried.”

“Could you not ask Lord Black?” Lavender asked.

They all looked at her.

“I mean, I won’t pretend to understand a lot about wards and stuff, but you said that Longbottom Manor has wards and so does Potter Manor. I’m guessing Noble family properties all have something similar, so surely Lord Black would be able to help you with it,” she explained, “at least until you can hear back from Lady Longbottom.”

“That’s an excellent idea!” Harry said.

Sirius had stuck around the castle, both to help McGonagall with dealing with school matters on behalf of the governors, but also to help coordinate the repairs and additional security in the castle. Harry also thought he just wanted to be close at hand, Voldemort’s attack spooking him. At least he hadn’t been completely smothering about it, and Harry appreciated the thought.

As a group, they headed to the office McGonagall had given him. They found him there reading through a stack of parchment. When he saw Harry, Sirius lit up, clearly eager for a distraction, only for a frown to form as he took in the group.

“I take it this isn’t a social call.”

“I’m afraid not,” Harry said, “we need to repair the wards in case Dumbledore tries anything, but everything we’ve tried so far hasn’t worked. Neville, Luna and I have all tried pouring magic into it separately and together, but the wards still feel really fragile, like anything we do might break them.”

“There has to be a way to repair them all at once otherwise people wouldn’t put so much faith in wards. Gran is always going on about the strength of the Longbottom wards, and Hogwarts’ are so much stronger than that,” Neville said, “since you also come from a noble family and have experience with house wards, we hoped you had some advice or guidance.”

“I also had similar worries about Dumbledore. Best case scenario, he gets caught quickly so this mess can finally end, but he’s lived too long for things to be that easy,” Sirius said, “you’re right about warding. For wards of this scale, lesser damage can be repaired in the way you’ve been trying, by releasing magic into them, but Hogwarts withstood a long assault by a small army of dark witches and wizards, plus Tom Riddle, plus the swarm of Dementors that descended on it. This damage calls for a return to the source.”

“The source?” Harry asked.

“You already know what it is, Harry. You’ve seen the one at Potter Manor,” Sirius said, “the ward stone.”

Harry remembered the deep black stone in a cavern beneath Potter Manor.

“Any ward of sufficient size or strength needs a tether to maintain and regulate the magic. This is the ward stone. It is the source of strength for the wards but also its weakest point. If the ward stone is damaged or destroyed, then all the wards woven into it will be destroyed as well. It’s why they’re always contained in the heart of the structure, and have the highest protections,” Sirius explained, “right now the Hogwarts wards are straining to sustain themselves, repair the damage to both themselves and the castle, *and* continue to protect

against threats. To bring them back to full strength, I believe you will need to put magic directly into the ward stone.”

“In the magical memory, Salazar told Merlin that they needed to re-energise the wards after Lord Malum’s attack. This must be what he meant,” Harry said.

“But then where is the Hogwarts ward stone?” Neville asked, “you told us that the passageway Salazar and Merlin went down wasn’t there when you looked for it.”

“The only one who would possibly know is the Headmaster,” Sirius said, “Harry, Neville, I want the pair of you to find Luna and meet me in front of the Headmistresses office. The rest of you, I’m sorry to have to say this, but if there is a chance that this leads to the ward stone, it’s likely that only the founder’s lines will be able to enter the chamber containing it.”

“You can’t seriously be asking us to stand around and do nothing!” Seamus said hotly.

“Not at all,” Sirius said calmly, “I want you to get the Marauders Map and bring it back here. You four will watch over the castle for any sign of Dumbledore. There’s at least seven secret passageways leading into the castle. Remus and I sealed them after Umbridge was arrested just in case, but if he tries to force his way through, I need you to raise the alarm.”

Seamus didn’t look happy, but he agreed.

They all split up, with Seamus, Dean, Parvati and Lavender heading up to Gryffindor Tower, while Harry and Neville went off in search of Luna. There were a few places they thought she might be, and in the worst case scenario they could always try and catch a Ravenclaw going into their common room to ask where she was. She wasn’t in the Library when they checked, but as they were considering heading down to look in the grounds, they bumped into Cho.

“Harry!” she said brightly, “is everything alright?”

“I’m looking for Luna. Do you know where she is?”

“I think I saw her heading back to the common room. I can check if you’d like?”

“That would be great, thanks.”

They followed her to Ravenclaw Tower. Harry had only been here once as he’d wandered the castle, not wanting people to think he was loitering or trying to sneak inside. It was a surprise to find that there was no password to enter the Ravenclaw common room. Cho knocked on the eagle-shaped knocker and successfully answered the riddle it posed. Harry was suddenly very glad he was sorted into Gryffindor. A moment later, the door opened again and Luna was there.

“It is the time, I believe, that I was bid to help you,” she said before either Harry or Neville could open their mouths.

“Um, ok?” Harry said, trying not to make it sound like a question.

The three of them found Sirius outside the gryphon statue in front of the Headmistress's office.

"I thought Professor McGonagall was using her usual office?" Harry said as they rode the spiralling staircase upwards.

"For her regular duties, she is, but as it gets closer to summer, I think she's taking advantage of the peace and quiet up here to do her Headmistress duties."

Sure enough, McGonagall was hard at work at the desk, which was covered in parchment in neat piles. For some reason, Harry found it hard to believe Dumbledore ever did so much paperwork. It just seemed to conflict with the perfect, put together image of the man. No doubt it got done, but Harry wouldn't put it past Dumbledore to purposefully make his desk look clear whenever he entertained guests in his office.

McGonagall frowned when she saw Harry, Neville and Luna.

"What-" she started but Sirius cut her off.

"Do you know where the Hogwarts ward stone is?"

If anything she seemed even more confused by this question.

"Lord Black, what brought this on? It's hardly an appropriate topic of conversation in front of students."

"If anyone has a right to know it's them," Sirius said, "you saw the article in the Daily Prophet. You know that Dumbledore is unlikely to take that without acting. We need to be sure that he can't try and force his way back into Hogwarts and the only way to do that is if Harry, Neville and Luna re-energise the wards."

"The only way they'd be able to do that is if-" the pieces seemed to click in her head, "-Mr Longbottom and Ms Lovegood too?"

"I'm uh, I'm Lord Hufflepuff," Neville said sheepishly.

"Steward of Ravenclaw," Luna said with a small curtsy.

McGonagall looked astonished.

"To think I have the Lord of three of the founder's lines in my house. My, this is most unexpected, and does this mean I should be expecting Heir Ravenclaw to join the school soon?" she said.

"In two years time," Luna said.

"But this means that the magic of the four founders is in Hogwarts at the same time. Some would call that an ill omen. I can see why you would want to go to the ward stone," McGonagall said.

“Then do you know where it is?” Harry asked.

McGonagall let out a small sigh.

“Unfortunately, I do not. The Headmaster or Headmistress is tied into the wards of the school, and as interim I have done the same. However, to do so did not require me to access the ward stone. As far as I’m aware, none of the previous heads of the school knew where it was either.”

She looked up at the portraits lining the walls. While none of them said anything, Harry saw various shaking heads and disappointed expressions. Sirius frowned, approaching one portrait in particular.

“Phineas,” he said somewhat sharply, “how is it that the head of the school doesn’t know where the ward stone is?”

The reedy looking man in the portrait straightened to his full height. He attempted a sneer but seemed to quail before Sirius. Judging by the resemblance, Harry guessed this was a Black, and as such was bound to respond to Sirius as Lord Black.

“The Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts are not binding themselves to the magic of the school in the way that the Lords and Ladies of the noble families do with their family magic. They are merely temporary custodians after all. As such, claiming the magic through the ward stone is unnecessary,” Phineas said, “I suspect that no Headmaster since the founders have actually seen the ward stone.”

“But there must be some way of knowing where it is,” Neville said, “that knowledge can’t have gone missing entirely.”

Those in the house of Gryffindor

Are brave of heart and true.

The Hufflepuffs show loyalty

And kindness through and through.

All eyes turned to the Sorting Hat, sitting on its velvet cushion on its shelf, overlooking them all.

Dear Ravenclaws possess great wit

Intelligent and bright.

The Slytherins, ambitious lot,

Great cunning and foresight.

The creases of the hat almost looked like a face, and Harry felt as though it was looking at him, Neville and Luna.

Four lords and ladies stood as one,

Together, side by side.

And now their lines need help again.

Such help that I provide

“I don’t suppose that was practice for next year’s song?” Sirius said.

“Not at all, Lord Black,” the Sorting Hat said, “I was merely doing as my master bid me do should the Heirs of the Founders find themselves in need of help.”

“Your master?” McGonagall said, but it had already clicked for Harry.

“Merlin,” he said, “you’re Merlin’s hat.”

“I did say, did I not, all those years ago. Not a bad mind. Master Merlin did wear me throughout his life. He donated me to Hogwarts so that students may still be sorted into the houses they would thrive best in. Each of the founders gave me a piece of their magic and wore me in turn, sharing with me that which they prize in their hand picked students. With their magic and Master Merlin’s, I have sorted every student who has passed through his castle since. In 1000 years, I have never been wrong.”

“So you can tell us where the ward stone is,” Harry said, excitement building in his chest.

“Godric was the one to hide the ward stone, knowing as they all did how much those with power would resist their efforts with Hogwarts. The powerful wards they constructed kept them safe, and they could not be allowed to fall, but as you have discovered recently, sometimes the stone must be accessed,” the Sorting Hat said, “so Godric ensured that when such a time came, the entrance to the stone chamber would reveal itself. It would be in a place that all those who carry the founder’s magic would be able to find it. I believe Lord Gryffindor already knows what to look for.”

“I do, but how do you-”

“Only those with the founder’s magic, or who have tied themselves into the wards, may open the door and enter the chamber. There are those who seek to make an attempt anyway.”

“We won’t let that happen,” Sirius said firmly, “wherever the door is, it will be protected while Harry and the others go inside and re-energise the wards.”

“Can’t you give us a hint about where it is?” Harry asked.

“Only this. Think of a place where all three of you can go. Now that you are looking for it, it will appear.”

Sometimes Harry hated that things couldn’t be straightforward with magic. It didn’t matter that he knew from studying Ritual Magic that the process was often just as important as the

end result, but it would be nice to not have to think through a complex problem when clearly the answer could be easily given.

“Thank you for telling us this,” Luna said, bowing to the hat.

After a moment Neville did the same, and then Harry, Sirius and McGonagall.

“I wonder just what you will say when you meet what awaits you,” the Sorting Hat said as they left.

“A place where all three of us can go. That hardly narrows it down,” Neville said.

“It won’t be in any of the common rooms, nor will it be in Slytherin’s chamber. It would be a place that we could get to easily, but that others could too, hence the need for protection,” Luna said.

“It’s getting late,” Sirius said, “after classes tomorrow, meet me at my office again and we can put our heads together.”

Only that didn’t happen. A place they could all go to could mean many different places in Hogwarts, but there was one place in the castle that all three of them went to every single day. It was easy for them to find, while also being defensible with only a main entrance and easily sealable side entrance. The Hogwarts magic must have been desperate for re-energisation, because Harry would never have imagined it would be there.

Yet when he went down for breakfast the next morning, the other fifth-years at his side, he came to a stop just inside the oak doors. In the middle of the Great Hall, carved into the floor, was the Hogwarts crest. It was the same as what he saw in the Ritual of Remembrance. The entrance to the ward stone chamber was here. A few of the other students had noticed it, but none of them commented on it. McGonagall saw where Harry and Neville were looking and her eyes widened.

It was hard eating anything but Harry managed to eat enough that it wasn’t suspicious that he was taking so long. Slowly, the rest of the students trickled away in twos and threes, until all that remained were the Gryffindor fifth-years and Luna. McGonagall strode out from behind the staff table and waved her wand. The Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables moved aside, clearing space as she and Sirius examined the symbol on the floor.

“Is this it?” Sirius asked Harry, who nodded, “Minerva, now is probably the best time to do it. The more we delay, the more we risk Dumbledore coming here.”

McGonagall took a deep, fortifying breath.

“Very well. I shall summon what Aurors are available and have them stationed in the grounds and in the Entrance Hall. The Great Hall will be sealed, and Lord Black and I shall stay as a rear-guard. All of you besides Mr Potter, Mr Longbottom and Ms Lovegood, please go to your-”

“We’re not leaving them!” Seamus said immediately.

“We can still be useful, even if we don’t go with them,” Dean said.

“We don’t even know if Dumbledore is going to come so the danger might be non-existent,” Parvati said.

“But it also might be immense,” McGonagall said, displeased, “I will not have students put themselves at risk unnecessarily.”

“I agree, but there is something they can do which will free us up and help us out,” Sirius said, “Kreacher-” the House Elf appeared with a crack, “-please collect the Marauders Map from Harry’s dormitory.”

Kreacher disappeared and then reappeared with the familiar piece of parchment. Sirius took it over to one of the student tables, laid it out, and activated it. McGonagall was intrigued by the sprawling web of lines outlining the entire castle, even more so when she realised what else it showed.

“Like before when we met with Minerva last night, I want you four to have your eyes on the Map. You’re right that Dumbledore might not show up, but given what we’re about to do, we need to know as soon as possible if he does,” Sirius said, “would that be agreeable Professor?”

McGonagall pursed her lips and agreed.

“Potter, Longbottom, Lovegood, I suggest you get yourselves ready while we make preparations,” she said.

There wasn’t much for him to do. Harry had his wand with him, and he didn’t know what else he should take. There was such a spectrum of what could possibly happen going forward. It could all go really well, or it could go incredibly badly. All Harry could do was take off the outer layer of his robe, leaving him in just his school shirt and trousers. Neville and Luna did the same. That way if things did go poorly, he would have a bit more mobility. He watched as Sirius talked the other fifth-years through the different places they needed to watch out for, and the next thing Harry knew, McGonagall was walking back inside the Great Hall. The heavy wooden doors swung shut and there was a very distinctive click.

He took a deep breath, Neville and Luna at his side, and he approached the Hogwarts symbol on the floor. Remembering what Salazar did, Harry knelt and placed his hand in the very centre of it. The magic within him leapt into action completely unbidden. A small spark of it flowed down his arm and into the floor. Then there was a rumbling and the symbol split right down the middle. Harry hurriedly backed off as the floor parted, revealing a set of stairs leading down into darkness.

Harry gave Neville and Luna one final look of confirmation. With his wand in hand, Harry took the first step in the journey to the stone chamber.

The Heart of Hogwarts

Waiting had never been his strong suit, but Sirius had learned the value of patience over these last two years. It was incredibly important for his recovery, it was important for every interaction he had with Dumbledore as part of the Order, and it was very important now that the long, hard journey was approaching its end. The plan was a long con, he knew that going into it, and Harry had played his part beautifully. Watching his godson go down into that tunnel had filled Sirius with pride and with fear. He refused to mess it up now by acting rashly.

He and McGonagall stood near the doors to the Great Hall. Beyond, a handful of Aurors were spread out between the Entrance Hall and the grounds. They didn't want to cause a panic by calling in reinforcements. All McGonagall had told them was that they were working on repairing the wards so they needed to consolidate their security as they would be temporarily vulnerable. Across the room, Seamus and Dean, Harry's boyfriends, along with his other friends Parvati and Lavender were watching the Marauders Map like hawks.

There was no way he was letting Dumbledore get to Harry.

"Professor!" Dean called out urgently, "he's here!"

Sirius and McGonagall rushed over. Sure enough, Dumbledore's dot had appeared on the Map, strolling up the front lane as though nothing in the world was wrong.

"The gates were sealed. That old fool must have forced his way in," McGonagall seethed.

Sirius sent a patronus through the doors, warning the Aurors. The Aurors in the grounds moved towards Dumbledore, and they heard the sounds of spells being exchanged. Dumbledore's dot kept moving, while the Aurors didn't, so they could all guess the outcome of that fight.

More sounds, louder this time, came from the Entrance Hall. Sirius and McGonagall both turned their wands to the doors.

"All of you, get back now," Sirius ordered, "I know you want to help Harry, but this is serious. Go into the antechamber behind the staff table and stay there!"

"But--"

"No arguments!" McGonagall snapped.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the four of them leave with the map through the door at the other end of the hall.

Both of them turned their attention fully to the doors. There was silence from the Entrance Hall. Sirius gripped his wand tighter.

A searing light shone between the two doors, moving up slowly from the bottom to the top. There was a smell like burning, then the doors swung open. Albus Dumbledore walked into the Great Hall with that insufferably calm, grandfatherly smile and twinkle in his eyes. It was very much like he had never left Hogwarts and he was walking into the Great Hall for breakfast, as though this was just any other day.

“Minerva, Sirius, how good it is to see you both again,” he said genially.

When he moved closer, they both raised their wands.

“Not another step!” Sirius said.

“My boy, you cannot honestly believe the lies printed in the Daily Prophet. I admit that I never thought they would continue to dig deeper when I was proven to be correct.”

“Do not even try to pretend that isn’t the truth,” Sirius seethed, “I will not let you hurt my godson again.”

“Hurt him? All I’ve done is help him. Was he not kept safe all those years? Was he not happy during his time at Hogwarts? All I’ve done is what is necessary for the greater good of the world.”

“Enough with the excuses Albus!” McGonagall said, “I must insist that you turn in your wand and surrender to the Aurors immediately!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. There is still so much that needs to be done. Magical Britain is in a precarious position right now, what with Tom being defeated and Cornelius in a spot of hot water. An experienced guiding hand will be needed to get us back on the right track,” Dumbledore said.

Sirius caught the way his eyes flickered to the entrance to the stone chamber and moved to stand between them. Dumbledore still looked calm and unbothered.

“Do you really wish to fight me? Talented students though you both were, I think you should perhaps rethink your chances in this matter.”

“We will do what we must, what is right!” Sirius said.

“I will fulfil the duty I took on when I became Headmistress,” McGonagall said, “to defend the castle and its students from all those who would do them harm!”

Dumbledore sighed.

“I had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. I had hoped to avoid violence between friends, but you leave me no choice. I will do what I must, as I have always done,” he said, “for the greater good.”

Then Dumbledore’s wand moved and Sirius barely had time to react. McGonagall was quicker, throwing up a shield to protect them both that shook with the force of Dumbledore’s spell. Sirius threw everything he had. He used every tactic he’d learned over the years to get

the upper hand, cast hexes at Dumbledore's feet to try and get him to move, even delved into some of the darker curses he'd learned as a child. None of them worked. Dumbledore batted them aside and responded with strength comparable to what Sirius had felt that day in the Entrance Hall, with the clash between Harry and Voldemort.

He and McGonagall quickly lost ground as Dumbledore calmly advanced. It was all they could do to block and dodge the onslaught of attacks launched at them. Dumbledore blasted Sirius with wind, before turning his attention to McGonagall. He fired a near constant stream of spells her way. The tables beside her rose up and tried pinning her, but she blasted them away, responding with conjured falcons that soared and swooped at Dumbledore. He conjured his own birds to fight them off, before firing a strange, aquamarine spell. It hit her Shield Charm, but then expanded into a bubble, enveloping her within it.

Sirius allowed the Black family magic to build within him as he fired a curse at Dumbledore. To his surprise, it bounced off the shield Dumbledore produced.

"I'm afraid even with Family Magic, it isn't enough. I am sorry my boy."

The next exchange was a blur, almost too fast to keep up with. Sirius was battered, given no opportunity to respond before the next hit came. A searing pain bloomed in his gut and Sirius was thrown backwards down the hall. His vision blurred, and he could feel the charred skin from where the bolt of light had slipped through his defences. The last thing Sirius saw before passing out was Dumbledore, as calm as ever, walking down the stairs into the tunnel.

The stairs continued, down and down and down, winding in not quite a spiral as they delved deeper and deeper into the foundations of the castle. Gemstones embedded into the wall gave off a pale orange light, illuminating the tunnel and the rocky steps before them. Harry took a deep breath and kept going. Beside him, Neville and Luna were nervous, but all of them stayed quiet. Nobody knew what to expect down here.

He didn't know how long they'd been walking, nor how deep they'd gone. It was hard to tell. Harry thought maybe they were deeper than the Chamber of Secrets, but there was no way of knowing. All there was was the walls of the tunnel and the stairs leading them downward.

A light appeared ahead of them. Harry clutched his wand tighter and carried on, only to be ground to halt by what he saw.

The tunnel opened out into an enormous cavern, larger than any Harry had even seen before, stretching as far as the horizon. Dotted here and there were enormous spires of rock holding up the ceiling, which itself was also pitted with holes through which light was streaming, as though the sun from above was reaching down this far. It illuminated the scene before them, the lush grasses and bountiful bushes and all sorts of flowers Harry couldn't even begin to name. Water fell in crystal clear falls through the open air from above, collecting in pools and flowing in rivers about the place.

The three of them followed the path down from the tunnel entrance and Harry couldn't help brushing his hands through the leaves of the bushes as they passed them. It was all real. The

air down here was warm and full of life, not cold and damp like a cave normally would be. Walking between two fields of flowers, Harry saw little balls of fluff flying amongst them, a soft and gentle buzzing accompanying them.

“Beddy-bees,” Luna said in amazement, “they’re an extinct form of magical bee. Daddy always believed they were still alive somewhere. It was said that the honey from a single Beddy-bee could rescue someone from hunger even if they were on the brink of starvation.”

“This place- I never thought a place like this would be below Hogwarts,” Neville said, “are we below Hogwarts? I’m pretty sure that’s sunlight.”

“Even if we weren’t, we’re deep enough that it shouldn’t be shining through that clearly, and I’m pretty sure somebody would have noticed if an underground cavern with supposedly extinct magical bees was open to the sky like this,” Harry said.

Whatever this was, wherever they were, Harry could feel the way the Gryffindor and Slytherin magics within him seemed to be reaching out, converging on a point somewhere further along the path ahead of them.

They kept walking until they reached a grove of berry bushes. More Beddy-bees buzzed about here, a few coming to investigate these strange newcomers. Up close, Harry could see the insect body beneath the fluff. They were quite cute as they followed them through the bushes.

“They like you, Lord Hufflepuff,” Luna said.

“They can probably smell some of the plants I’ve worked with still on me somewhere,” Neville said as a couple of Beddy-bees landed on his head and shoulder, “I’m guessing they’re like bumblebees where if you don’t bother them, they won’t bother you?”

“I think so. It’s been centuries since they went extinct so nobody really knows much about what they were like,” Luna said.

Considering they weren’t currently being mobbed by them, it was safe to assume they were docile unless provoked.

Their path wound through the bushes until it reached a clearing. In the centre was a large tree with a thick trunk. Leaves as red as sunset rustled above their heads in the breeze. Towards the base of the tree, the trunk was moulded into a sizable hollow, at the front of which was a large, perfectly round stone. It was the same sunset red as the leaves of the tree, and all the magic around them was both emanating from it and drawn to it.

This had to be the ward stone but it wasn’t the only thing there. The rest of the hollow was sculpted to resemble a throne and sitting in it was a boy. He wouldn’t have looked out of place amongst the first-years, dressed in a simple tunic and pants. Resplendent robes of pale blue, much larger than the boy, were splayed around the throne as though the boy had thrown them off. Leaning against the rim of the hollow within arms reach was an ornate wooden staff.

The boy leaned forward, smiling warmly at each of them.

“I had wondered when this day would come. It is a pleasure to see all three of you in person at last,” he said.

Harry eyed the boy with suspicion, but also utter confusion. There was a boy living down here? How on earth did he get here?

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Your suspicion is warranted considering what you’ve recently been through, but I assure you I mean you no harm. I am what you have come to find,” the boy said.

“You’re the ward stone?” Neville said.

“Not quite. Whatever I once was across these last thousand years, I am now merely its humble caretaker.”

“You’re a thousand years old?” Luna asked.

“Older than that I’m afraid. It has been a very long life so far.”

The more Harry looked at the boy, the more familiar he seemed, but why? He was sure he’d never seen this boy before. His eyes kept being drawn to the staff leaning against the tree and the pale blue robes the boy was sitting in. These elements seemed important, but Harry felt like he was missing something. Then he made eye contact with the boy. The depth of those eyes were ancient and vast, and Harry remembered where he had seen that before. It was in the magical memory where he had unknowingly learned about the entrance to the stone chamber, where for the first time since using the Ritual of Remembrance, Harry felt as though he was seen by somebody in the past.

Seen by-

“Merlin,” he breathed.

The boy smiled.

“You’re Merlin?”

“Indeed I am,” he said, “long ago I was known as Merlin Emrys; the sorcerer of Camelot; the teacher of Godric Gryffindor; and the envoy of the land of Avalon.”

Luna’s eyes widened and she immediately dropped into a bow. Harry and Neville hurried to follow.

“Master Merlin, it is an honour to meet you,” she said.

“Please, please, rise, my friends. Do not restrict yourself with formalities on my account.”

They all stood back up, and Merlin looked at each of them fondly.

“I have seen many descendants of the founders come to Hogwarts, some who could access the Family Magic and some who could not. It has been centuries since all of the lines have come together like this, by blood or not,” Merlin said, “I have no doubt that Godric and Salazar have expressed their pride to you in the Ring Realm Harry. Young Neville, I am also certain that Helga would have loved you to pieces.”

He turned his gaze to Luna.

“Rowena could not have asked for a better steward for her family. You have gone above and beyond in your duties, dear Luna.”

Luna ducked her head.

“I only did what was expected of me.”

“Forgive me if I disagree, but you have done far more than that. You chose to accept the burden of the stewardship of Ravenclaw. You chose to assist the other founders Heirs when you did not need to. You stood in defence of this castle against its enemies. Do not discount the importance of these choices. They demonstrate clearly the resolve you have, and are well worthy of respect.”

Luna’s eyes were glassy and she looked away to wipe them clear.

“I am so glad to see you three in person. Seeing you grow up, to persevere through all your hardships, has been something I will treasure.”

“You’ve been watching us?” Harry said.

“Of course.”

Merlin reached out and placed his hand on top of the ward stone. It shone with light and everything around them seemed to dissolve into mist and smoke, immediately reforming into a very familiar sight. Harry was standing in the Great Hall. The four house tables were full of students while at the front, a cluster of nervous looking first-years waited as one of them sat on the stool, the Sorting Hat on their head.

“Gryffindor!” it announced.

McGonagall removed the hat, and Harry was astonished to see himself. A tiny first-year Harry excitedly left the stool to sit at the Gryffindor table.

I have always been there, ever since the day you arrived in this castle, and I will remain here long after the day you leave.

The scene changed to show Harry walking up the steps of the castle at the start of second-, third-, fourth- and fifth-year.

For every student of Hogwarts, I have been their silent supporter. Their watchful protector. I have been by their side for the highs-

Harry stood in the stands of the Quidditch pitch as his younger self caught the Snitch.

-and the lows.

He was in the Chamber of Secrets, watching himself fight against the Basilisk. It changed again to show him returning to the castle with an unconscious Cedric.

The losses-

Ron was yelling at him. Hermione made snide comments about his intelligence. Ginny gave him lustful looks.

-and the love.

Harry saw himself, Seamus and Dean on the shore of the lake last year. It was the day they confessed to one another, and seeing it made his heart swell with happiness.

I have always been with you. Every step of the way.

The scenes finally ended, and Harry found himself back before Merlin in the tree. Neville and Luna looked as though they'd seen similar things to him. Neville had tears running down his cheeks.

"My magic binds the magic of the four founders together and allows it to endure as it has for the last thousand years. You three have reached out to it in the past to help you, and it was me who reached back," Merlin said, "it's only now that we're face to face that you can understand that. It may not always have been the way you wanted, but I have tried my best to help each and every student that has passed through these walls, even if it was only providing a safe passage to class when they were having a bad day."

"Or finding my lost possessions when people hid them," Luna said.

"Or making new secret passageways so I could avoid the Slytherins," Neville added.

"And stopping Hermione from getting up to the boys dormitory when I didn't want her following me," Harry said, "that was all you?"

"My beloved student Godric and his three companions, they each loved this school so, so very dearly. They built it to be a place that children could come to and be safe. It would have broken their hearts for it to fall after they could no longer defend it," Merlin said, "I did not want that to happen, so I did what I had to do, and I do not regret it."

"But you're Merlin!" Neville said, "you're a legendary wizard. Surely there must be something you could have done that didn't involve ... whatever this is."

"There likely was, but this was my choice."

"You told Salazar that the strength of the wards would fail since none of their founders bound their families to their upkeep," Harry said.

“Well remembered.”

“Wait, so you did see me!”

“Not as such. I have always been in tune with magic. That day after Lord Malum’s attack when I arrived, I sensed a presence in the natural magic. It was subtle, but there were three person-shaped impressions. Godric told me about his Ritual of Remembrance, so I realised that this must be what I was sensing: the imprint of somebody reaching back through the natural magic to view the past,” Merlin said, “it was fascinating to think about, but if you’re worried about how much I saw, you were only an impression. There were no *details* and nobody else would have sensed anything. I didn’t even know it was you until you mentioned that conversation. There’s no other way you could have known about it.”

“So you really are Merlin,” Harry said, the awe fully settling in.

He was speaking to one of the most famous wizards to have ever lived, a practically mythical figure with so many stories ascribed to him that nobody had any clue what was real and what was fiction. There were people who would kill to have this opportunity, and he had been here under Hogwarts this entire time. Knowing that the boy liked history, Dean would probably be chomping at the bit to come down here if he knew.

“But how are you still alive? Did you- you didn’t-”

Merlin looked at him kindly.

“No Harry, I did not make a horcrux,” he said, “many witches and wizards over the ages have longed for eternal life, and thankfully only few have taken steps down that path. Tom Riddle was one such individual and now his journey has ended. As far as I have been able to determine, there is only one person who has come closest to achieving it, and that person is me.”

“You’re immortal,” Luna said, “how?”

Merlin let out a small laugh.

“You could not possibly understand how long I have pondered that very question. The answer that I have come to is that I am an anomaly in magic. I was born at the stroke of midnight at the beginning of the new year, at the turn of not only a new century but also a new millennium, to two Muggle parents who nonetheless performed the magical rites as best they could *and* presented me during the Yule ritual,” Merlin said, “the convergence of so many powerfully magical occurrences within one person seems to have untethered me from Death, or at least that is the best that I have been able to determine.”

“So then why are you so young?” Harry couldn’t help asking.

Now Merlin laughed in earnest.

“You sound just like Godric. I have eternal life but I still age. I age until the point of death, and then I age in reverse to the point of life. It is a cycle that is never ending.”

“Well that probably explains all the different stories you hear about Merlin,” Neville said, “if people met him at different times when he was at different physical ages, those stories would have gotten very confusing.”

“I suspect so,” Merlin agreed, “though none have seen me in the last millennium.”

There was so much that Harry wanted to ask, but he didn’t know how to word it without coming across as incredibly rude. Merlin had been a part of Hogwarts for so long, but as Neville said earlier, surely there must have been something else he could have done. A wizard as powerful as him willingly confining himself to one place and one task seemed completely unbelievable considering what the other powerful wizards of the modern age had done. Merlin seemed to know what he was thinking.

“You’re wondering why I made my choice,” he said.

“It’s just, well-” he didn’t want to say that Dumbledore and Voldemort would have never done anything like this. If they had power like Merlin’s, they would have become true tyrants. He didn’t want to say that because Merlin seemed really nice, “-I don’t understand why you didn’t do something ... else.”

“It’s true. I could have done something else. I could have walked the world, seen everything there is to see and know everything there is to know. I could have ruled over everyone, an eternal king who none could challenge, but I *chose* to remain here with my duty,” Merlin said, “there is much to be said about where the true strength of a person lies. External power is what it is, but even a person who wields such power can still be very, very weak. I have found that true strength is not the power one can wield over others, but the power one can wield over themselves. The likes of Riddle may wield immense power and display prodigious skill over it, but they have no power over themselves. Even in the times when they should, they have no ability to stop. That, I feel, is an inner weakness on their part.”

“And you’re different. You have this strength,” Harry said.

“I did when it mattered, and *that* is what counts.” Merlin sighed heavily. “Salazar often called my long life a gift, but I feel it is more akin to a curse. A long life takes as much as it gives. I could never give my heart to someone and have my own flesh and blood family for they would all eventually die. How many times would I be able to do so before I lost my heart entirely? So instead I found a different sort of family: my students, and Godric most of all. The passion and dedication I saw in him was unmatched, until Godric met Helga, Rowena and Salazar, and I knew then that they would create something extraordinary, and they did.”

“Hogwarts was something never before seen in the magical world. A place where young people could come together and learn magic regardless of their status, free from the control of the noble families and requiring no fealty or service. Suddenly, all magical children could gain access to magical knowledge. Those of lower birth did not have to sign their lives away to feudal lords for scraps, and those of higher birth could not hoard knowledge for themselves. There was much resistance to it, but the changing tides were quickly seen. An educated population began to question the order of society, and they had the ability to back up their words. The precursor to what would become the modern day Ministry of Magic formed, and it all started with the dream of the four founders.”

“But such a miraculous feat could never last long, as all four were correctly constrained within the boundaries of a single human life.”

Merlin’s hand was still on the ward stone, and their surroundings once again dissolved into smoke like they were in a pensieve. When it reformed, Harry was still with Neville and Luna. They were in the stone chamber, the ward stone on a pedestal not unlike the one at Potter Manor. There wasn’t the abundance of life like there was in the present. Merlin stood before the ward stone, physically looking like an older teenager. Harry turned and saw four people walking towards them. He knew who all four of them were, but Harry’s eyes were stuck on one in particular.

He had never seen Godric looking so old. The red in his hair was almost entirely taken over by grey. His strength had been withered by age, and there was a stoop to his shoulders. The eyes at least still retained their vigour and energy. Salazar looked the most unchanged of the four with age, his beard long and thin and nearly reaching his knees, but Harry caught the way he clutched an ornate cane tightly. The four founders approached Merlin.

“Thank you all for coming.”

“Is there no way I can change your mind, Master?” Godric said, “there must be something. Surely if the five of us put our heads together we could come up with a different solution.”

Merlin’s smile was fond, and Harry could clearly see the care he had for his student.

“I’m sure we have all been thinking about it since last we met, but it will not change the answer,” Merlin said, “tell me I’m wrong.”

None of the founders could do so. Rowena put a hand on Godric’s shaking shoulder.

“But- but you’ll be trapped down here! I can’t do that to my teacher!”

“I will not be trapped, dear Godric. I will be contributing my fair share to the world.”

“You have already done more than enough for the world,” Salazar said.

“But alas, Salazar, you are wrong, because you still see my eternal life as a gift. Nothing I ever do will be enough, because there will always be something more, and I and I alone will always have the time to do it,” Merlin said, “unlike you four. The time of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin came, and now it is reaching its end, but the four of you had a dream, and dreams can live on. That is what I will do. I will take on the burden of your dream and keep it safe so that it may live, and then perhaps one day should I finally meet Death, I will have done enough.”

“Please, Master-” Godric said.

Merlin swept around and brought Godric into an embrace, regardless of the strength that age had claimed from the latter. Godric held his teacher closely, shoulders shaking. Harry saw Merlin whisper something to him that he couldn’t hear. “Know that I have always been proud of you” was all he caught. Merlin then went to each of the founders in turn. He embraced

Helga and Rowena, offering them words of kindness and support. When he approached Salazar, they did not initially do anything, but then the old Lord of Slytherin did something that took Harry completely off guard. Very slowly and carefully, he lowered himself to kneel before Merlin, bowing his head. Merlin placed his hand atop Salazar's on his cane and thanked him.

No more words were said as the five legendary figures arranged themselves around the ward stone. Merlin took off his hat and placed it on top of the ward stone, then all five pressed their hands to the stone. It shone with magic, and through the air, Harry felt the magic within him stirring with it. The magic of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin glittered and pulsed, flowing through the founders and into the wardstone. The ground beneath Merlin's feet split open as a shoot forced its way through the stone. It grew and grew, the tree blooming into life, enveloping the pedestal and forming Merlin's throne.

Then it was done. Merlin took a deep breath, and the magic breathed with him. Godric looked on the verge of tears.

"Good bye, Master," he said.

"Farewell, my student," Merlin said.

"Well this is a rather dank place for children."

All eyes jumped to the hat. The wrinkles and creases formed a face and its brim opened up as it spoke.

"Know that they'll all be in the best of hands. I will make sure each and every one of them is placed where they need to be," the Sorting Hat said.

Godric couldn't help huffing out a laugh.

"An ingenious solution, and most appropriate too. For centuries to come, it will be our four houses in Hogwarts, and Merlin's gift overseeing them all."

He took the hat, holding it reverently, and the founders bowed to Merlin. In his seat, Merlin bowed back.

I became the beating heart of Hogwarts. I carried on my students legacy, and that all leads to now.

The images faded away and they were back in the present. Merlin leaned back in his throne, looking wistful.

"I do not think that Godric or Salazar expected me to remain here forever. I rather think Godric hoped I might be spared eternity; that I might finally be embraced by Death and join him in the Lands Beyond. Alas it never happened, yet I am not saddened by it. I have been blessed with this chance to see the bright hope that the young bring with them into the world."

Merlin let out a small chuckle.

“It’s almost amusing. Back then, the existence of Hogwarts and the values it upheld was the power it contained, something that people would fight to the death to claim for their own. Because of that, a new power actually came to be,” he said, “the magic of the four founders, preserved and nurtured by Merlin, all contained right here. Now the power is very real, and people like Tom Riddle have already tried to claim it. I suspect Riddle wanted it believing it would grant him a weapon that nobody would be able to challenge, or that he might use it to fully untether himself from Death like I seem to be.”

“He’s not the only one who wants it. Dumbledore wants it too, and that’s why we’re here,” Harry said, “Riddle attacked Hogwarts and severely damaged the schools defences. We came down here to re-energise them.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that.”

“No, it’s not. If we do it now, we can then leave and Dumbledore won’t be able to get here,” Harry insisted, “the ward stone will be kept safe.”

“I have no doubt it will be, but things will not be that simple,” Merlin said, “isn’t that so?”

He was looking past Harry when he said that. Harry turned around, following his eye line. His wand raised instinctively as standing there, on the same path they’d followed to get here, looking beyond pleased, was Albus Dumbledore.

The Greater Good

Chapter Notes

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

Neville and Luna also whipped around to join Harry. The three of them stood with their wands raised, a protective wall between Dumbledore and the ward stone. Dumbledore seemed utterly unphased by the hostility. He was looking around as if this whole thing was a very interesting academic exercise. Even so, Harry didn't take his eyes off him, nor did he fail to see Dumbledore's wand held loosely in the man's hand.

"I had always wondered what the Heart of Hogwarts looked like. The scattered references to it in countless diaries and memoirs does not do it justice, but then I do not think any of those people had actually seen it for themselves." Dumbledore looked past Harry and the others. With a small, polite incline to his head, he said, "Master Merlin, a pleasure to meet you at last."

"Dumbledore," Merlin said, without moving an inch.

"How I wish we had all the time in the world so I could pick your brain, but alas the world is not so kind to us."

He met Harry, Neville and Luna's eyes in turn, his expression almost fond and kind. Harry didn't feel the press of Legilimency against his mental defences.

"Congratulations are in order. There have been many who have attempted to find the Heart, yet you three have managed it. You certainly do like to surpass my expectations, don't you Harry?"

"No thanks to you," Harry spat.

"Come now my boy. That was hardly a very polite tone to take with your Headmaster."

"You are not my Headmaster any more and I am not your boy," Harry said forcefully.

"Forgive me for my over-familiarity. It comes with age, especially when you have been so involved with a child's life," Dumbledore said genially.

"I know all about how involved you've been in my life. I know *exactly* what you've done to me," Harry said, "you bound my magical core, drugged me with potions and strung me along with spells, you stole money from me, and you tried to marry me off to Ginny Weasley."

"I see you've been led astray by the Daily Prophet as well. How disappointing."

"How dare you try and deny it!" Harry yelled.

A touch from Neville tempered the anger that flared in his gut. This was a dangerous place to be right now. With the ward stone so close, any stray spell could cause devastating damage.

“You’ll have to forgive the grown-ups when they do things you don’t like, but know that more often than not, they know more than you do, and thus have their reasons.”

“And what possible reason could justify doing all of that to a *child*! ”

“Would your aunt have taken you in if magic accidentally burst out of you all the time? No, she very likely wouldn’t. Also it would have made it that much harder to keep your location a secret if the Ministry had to get involved for regular bouts of pre-school-aged magic.”

“I shouldn’t have gone to Aunt Petunia’s at all! They all hated me!”

“But you were kept safe,” Dumbledore said, “you do not understand how terrible the country was after Tom’s downfall the first time. There were still countless Death Eaters that remained at large. With the magical community rallying around you as the symbol of hope against the Dark Lord, many of those Death Eaters would have gladly killed you to snuff that fledgling hope out. Tucked away with Muggles with no contact with the Magical world meant that you were safe from all of that. I admit I would have preferred Petunia to be a bit nicer to you, but when the alternative was your death, I judged it to be worth it.”

“You thought that a child going through ten years of feeling like they were worth absolutely nothing was worth it?”

“I do. The Magical world got to have its saviour, and you got to live, and it all worked out in the end. You came to Hogwarts and you were happy. You made fast friends. It was an absolute pleasure watching you grow these last few years,” Dumbledore said with a fond smile.

“I didn’t have friends. I only had people you paid to hang around me,” Harry retorted.

“Does that matter? You were happy with them, were you not? Just as you would have been happy with Ms Weasley in the future,” Dumbledore said, “or if you would have preferred, I’m sure Mr Weasley would have made an acceptable husband.”

“That’s not how any of this works! You don’t get to play god with people’s lives and justify it by saying they’re happy with the outcome, not when they’re only happy because spells and potions are making them that way!” Harry said, “It’s sick!”

“But it is necessary. For many, many years, I have been in the unfortunate position of needing to view the bigger picture, to always act with that picture in mind. It means I do not have the luxury of standing aside when a greater good can be served by acting,” Dumbledore said, “so yes, when people are happy with how their lives are going, regardless of how that happiness came about, I do believe it to be justified.”

“And what about me?” Neville said, “you bound my magical core so tightly, my family nearly thought I was a Squib. Where do I fit into this ‘greater good’?”

“Now that it is an interesting story. You see, shortly after you were born, a prophecy was made foretelling Tom’s eventual defeat. It said that the one with the power to vanquish him was born at the end of July to parents who had thrice defied him. There were two boys who

fit that criteria,” Dumbledore said, “Harry of course, but also yourself Mr Longbottom. This was all that Tom knew of the prophecy, but it continued, stating that he would mark the boy as his equal. Clearly we now know that this refers to Harry, as he was the one who Tom attacked, but then your parents were most unfortunately attacked as well.”

“I realised that if anyone else heard the prophecy, they may come to a different conclusion than Tom. They may believe that *you* were the one destined to defeat him, so I took steps to make that seem incredibly unlikely. By binding your magical core, nobody would believe that you were Tom’s equal, and their attention would return to Harry who was safely hidden with his family. My actions prevented any further harm from coming to you.”

“My Gran prevented further harm from coming to me!” Neville said hotly, “you made me feel weak and useless. You made me a snivelling coward who couldn’t stand up for myself.”

“And yet you found yourself in Gryffindor. The Sorting Hat has never been wrong. Clearly it saw the courage within you, even if you yourself didn’t see it,” Dumbledore said encouragingly.

“He’s revealing too much,” Luna said, speaking for the first time, “he wouldn’t be doing this if he felt he could lose.”

“Another demonstration of the Sorting Hat’s accuracy. A most astute observation Ms Lovegood,” Dumbledore said, “the Ministry is in shambles because of Cornelius’s mishandling of the situation and Tom remains an ever-present shade that must be dealt with. As always, I will do what I must and thus I cannot leave here empty handed.”

“You’re wrong. Riddle is gone for good. He won’t be coming back,” Harry said, “there’s nothing left for you to fight against so just turn yourself in!”

“You may have defeated his body, but Tom has fallen further into Dark Magic than most people realised and so is not so easily defeated. In my time away from Hogwarts, I tried desperately to search for ways to prevent his return, but it seems that Lord Voldemort was craftier than I thought. He will find a way to return, and we must be ready for that when it happens.”

“He won’t ever come back. His horcruxes are all destroyed,” Harry said.

For the first time since this conversation began, Dumbledore actually looked surprised, but to Harry’s frustration, it was a pleasant sort of surprise.

“Once again Harry, you exceed expectations, but I’m afraid your knowledge is incomplete,” he said.

“You mean the piece of his soul in my scar?” Now Harry could revel in Dumbledore’s shock. “That’s gone too.”

He shifted aside his hair. The lightning bolt scar that made him famous was still there, but in the nearly two years since the horcrux was removed, it had faded somewhat. It likely would

never completely vanish, but Harry took some comfort in the fact that it wouldn't be as noticeable.

"It is very good news that Tom is gone for good, but there is still too much to be done. There are too many people who think like he did, not all of whom were captured at Hogwarts, and with the Ministry in such a precarious position, it would be all too easy for one of them to swoop in and take over, potentially doing more damage than Voldemort ever did," Dumbledore said, "but with the power of Merlin at my side, the Heart of Hogwarts would allow me to change that. Scores of future students would be turned away from the dark path that Tom took and led so many others down. Cornelius's incompetency could be made right. I could lead Magical Britain down the right path forever."

He looked past Harry and the others.

"Isn't that right Master Merlin? I would be able to do all of this if I claimed your power?"

"You could," Merlin said, "just as I could have done once before. The only question is should you?"

"I believe I should. There is no one else capable," Dumbledore said.

"We won't let you get to the Heart," Harry said, raising his wand defiantly.

Beside him, Neville and Luna did the same.

"Impressive though your magic may be, especially combined with the Family Magic you wield, I'm afraid it won't be enough," Dumbledore said, his own wand casually tapping his palm.

"That's a very interesting wand you have there," Merlin said, "elder, with a thestral tail hair core."

"You know the significance of this wand," Dumbledore said.

"I do."

"Then you will know that whoever wields the Elder Wand becomes unbeatable in battle. Not even Family Magic can stand against it, which regrettably Sirius found out the hard way."

Harry froze.

"What did you do to my godfather?"

"He is still alive, and likely receiving treatment from Madam Pomfrey as we speak. I merely mentioned it as a warning. I do not wish to fight you, especially not you Harry. There is still so much good you can do for the world."

The air became suffused with power. Harry felt the full presence of Dumbledore, the might of his considerable magic weighing down on him even though the man didn't even move a muscle.

“I ask that you all step aside so that this can be done without need for further violence,” Dumbledore said, “I also ask Merlin to relinquish his power to me.”

“Is this your final decision?” Merlin asked.

“It is. Even you cannot stand against me with the Elder Wand,” Dumbledore replied, “what say you?”

Merlin simply reached forward and tapped the ward stone.

“I say no.”

And suddenly Harry was falling.

Everything happened so fast. It wasn't like when Merlin showed them snippets of the past. The surroundings changed in an instant, and Harry was falling through the air. Racing towards him was an enormous tree branch.

“Arresto Momentum!”

His momentum slowed to a halt just before he hit the branch, his landing soft. Unfortunately the angle was too steep and Harry tumbled down into the cavity at the junction between three equally large branches. Just how big was this tree? No, Harry looked around more closely. It wasn't that the tree was big, he was small. He was tiny, like a bug crawling around on the bark. A scrambling noise heralded the arrival of Neville and Luna in a similar fashion to himself.

“What the hell happened?” Neville asked.

“It has to be Merlin, probably his way of protecting the ward stone by keeping us all away from it,” Harry said.

“Look out!” Luna cried.

Her Shield Charm was battered by a bolt of red light. Casually strolling down one of the branches was Dumbledore, steps forming beneath his feet as he walked. He flicked his wand and a barrage of spells rained down on them. Harry and Neville joined Luna in deflecting them, and he felt the full force of Dumbledore's power unleashed against him. Dumbledore reached the cavity, looking entirely unbothered by their defence.

“Spread out!” Harry said.

The Potter magic rose up within Harry and he fired a Reductor Curse at Dumbledore. Knowing how powerful that spell was, it was only the foreknowledge that Dumbledore had bested Sirius's Family Magic that kept him from being surprised when it was harmlessly absorbed by a shield, even if it was frustrating. He fired off more spells, but Dumbledore deflected them all.

“Stupefy!” Neville yelled, the bolt of red brighter and stronger with the force of Longbottom and Hufflepuff behind it.

Dumbledore produced a shimmering shield that looked almost like water. The stunner harmlessly sunk into it, the water rippling gently. It then became a tidal wave surging towards Neville, forcing him to freeze it. Luna aimed hexes at Dumbledore’s back. Almost automatically, Dumbledore reached behind him, blocking the spells and responding with a barrage of his own. Harry jumped in to take some of the heat from her, but even the pair of them couldn’t seem to get through.

It was like the wand had a mind of its own, responding to Dumbledore’s commands but also moving on its own accord to act in defence of Dumbledore even when he didn’t seem to realise he needed it. Even when they attacked in his blind spots, when there was no opportunity to see it coming, the wand still moved to block it.

“Now!” Harry aimed at Dumbledore’s back. “Expelliarmus!”

At the same time, Neville yelled “Diffindo!” and Luna cried “Bombarda!”

Three different spells from three different angles, all fired at the same time.

Dumbledore swished his arm, his wand moving in a flash. A solid block of concrete appeared in the path of Luna’s blasting curse, Harry’s disarming charm was batted away with ease and Neville’s severing charm clanged against a shining silver shield.

Even simultaneous attacks weren’t enough. Harry’s mind raced as they continued to duel, trying to find a solution to the problem. The only thing he could think of was to get the Elder Wand away from Dumbledore, but that was hardly better than no solution at all. Disarming Charms wouldn’t work, and he seemed more than capable of matching them in power. What else could they possibly do?

Two snarling wolves were conjured and sent by Dumbledore at Luna. She vanished one but had to scramble up the steep slope of the branch behind her to avoid the second. Another swish of Dumbledore’s wand produced a torrent of icy cold water. It swept over Neville and with a flick of his wrist it enveloped him in a roiling ball. With his two friends trapped, Harry was the only target. He leapt out of the way of a violet coloured curse, responding with a banishing charm that Dumbledore neatly sidestepped. Harry allowed the Gryffindor and Slytherin magic to rise within him alongside the Potter magic. His next spell smashed into Dumbledore’s shield with a resounding bang.

The bark around them splintered with the force of the spell exchange. The lights flying through the air were nearly blinding, but still Harry could not break through. He was acting almost entirely on instinct. Cast, dodge, shield, cast, repeat. The only upside was that Dumbledore was also not overpowering him.

Eagles swooped down on him from above but Harry fended them off with a gout of fire. He launched chains to try and bind Dumbledore, only for Dumbledore to transfigure them into a swarm of insects that tried crawling at him. Harry swept them all away with a blast of condensed water, but was then forced to dodge as Dumbledore made a wide slashing

movement with his wand. A blade of deepest black sliced through the air. Harry felt it as it narrowly passed him by, only for a gale of wind to sweep him off his feet. He tumbled backwards, then all of a sudden the wood beneath him vanished as Harry fell off the edge of the cavity.

In the briefest moment in the span of a heartbeat, Harry reacted. The sword of Gryffindor appeared from its bracelet and Harry drove it into the tree, cutting off his fall as he clung on for dear life. That was too close, but he needed to get back up. He couldn't leave Neville and Luna to face Dumbledore alone, only then Dumbledore appeared. He stood at the edge not too far from where Harry was hanging, peering over at whatever was below. Harry followed his gaze.

Beneath them was the hollow where Merlin sat. In their shrunken state, he looked massive as he stared straight ahead, either not knowing or not caring that they were above him. Dumbledore raised his wand, a curse on his lips, and Harry realised what he intended to do when he saw that he wasn't aiming at him, but instead at Merlin.

"No!" Harry yelled.

Before Dumbledore could cast his spell, Merlin almost lazily waved his hand. Harry dropped to the ground as once more the scenery changed. Now they were in a ravine, Harry with Neville and Luna at one end and Dumbledore at the other. A powerful wind tore through the ravine, driving dust and debris directly at Dumbledore. Neville was soaked and breathing heavily, and thankfully it looked like the wolf hadn't managed to get to Luna.

"The Elder Wand is acting instinctively to protect him. That must be how it is unbeatable. It will always protect its wielder," Luna said.

"Then we need to get that thing away from him, but how?" Neville said.

"I'm working on it," Harry said, the sword turning back into the bracelet.

The sudden scene change meant there was only one avenue for either side to attack from. Harry felt the full might of all their Family Magic join the fight, and it was a blistering barrage that they unleashed on Dumbledore. Forced to squint to keep the dust away, Dumbledore produced another shield. Their spells bounced off. Harry fought down the frustration, his lessons with Sirius and Remus coming back to him. They taught him to force the fight to be on his terms rather than his opponents, but Dumbledore was making that very difficult. None of their attacks had forced him to move more than a step. It left only one other option available to him.

"Reducto!"

The bolt of light shot through the air, aimed not for Dumbledore, but for the rocky face of the ravine above him. It was blasted apart, large chunks tumbling down to crash into the man below. Harry didn't let up, even as Dumbledore turned his attention to the minor avalanche. Dumbledore raised his wand, only for it to be yanked back downwards to shield against Harry's curse. The rocks crashed down, and to Harry's surprise Dumbledore was forced to dive out of the way.

What had happened there? Why had done that when he hadn't before? It wasn't that the rocks weren't magical, were they? No, that couldn't be it. The Elder Wand wouldn't be considered unbeatable if it couldn't defend against environmental effects as well as the magic of the opponent, so it had to be something else. What was it though? Harry replayed it in his mind, remembering the odd way Dumbledore's wand moved.

It was the timing. Harry's attack was about to hit at the exact moment that Dumbledore was about to deal with the rocks. The Elder Wand instinctively moved to defend its wielder, but in doing so left Dumbledore unable to respond in time to the rocks.

"We need to coordinate our attacks better. They need to be ever so slightly staggered. Aim for the moment where Dumbledore reacts to something else," Harry said as the old man heaved himself back to his feet.

Having a plan did not make executing it any easier. With only one lane of attack, getting the timing right proved a challenge as Dumbledore combined his defences, maintaining them to account for the offset. Harry tried repeating his earlier move by using the rock walls, but Dumbledore countered that before he had a chance to do any more damage.

"I am impressed by all three of you. You wield the founder's magic well. If anybody had to do so, I am glad it is you. Most would have abused it to make their lives at school a little easier," Dumbledore said, "but this has gone on long enough."

A powerful lightning storm built up around the man. The wind swirled around him, the dust obscuring him from their view. A few arcs of electricity leapt from the gathering cloud, punching craters into solid stone. They couldn't dodge to the side, and the amount of magic in the air told Harry quite clearly that they couldn't dodge this. Their only option was to get out of the ravine.

"Run!"

Harry turned and ran down the ravine, Neville and Luna on his heels. There was a strange, almost ethereal whining sound, cutting through the sound of Luna mumbling to herself. Harry glanced behind him. The whining grew louder and it was followed by a deep rumbling as the storm was unleashed. A bolt of lightning shot down the ravine, smaller arcs leaping from it, filling the ravine with electricity. It rapidly gained on them. Harry barely had the chance to notice as his feet suddenly weren't touching the ground.

The three of them fell, cold water rushing around them as they broke through the surface of a lake. Their momentum carried them deep. Above them, the lightning bolt blurred, its colour bluer and bluer. It struck the water, the energy dissipated quickly across its surface, and down in the deep, Harry felt a tingle across his skin. With a wave of his wand, he cast the Bubble-Head Charm and gladly took in a fresh lungful of air. He grabbed Neville and Luna and did the same for them.

"I called for Merlin's aid and he provided. He's on our side," Luna said as they swam for shore, her voice muffled through the water.

“He couldn’t be a bit more direct about it. Surely someone capable of all this would wipe the floor with Dumbledore,” Neville said.

“But that’s not his duty,” Luna said, “his duty is to protect Hogwarts and its students. By shifting the surroundings, he’s protecting us from Dumbledore, but his magic has never been used to attack. There are others in Hogwarts with that duty.”

They reached the shore. Ahead of them was a forest of giant blades of grass. There was a rush of cold and Neville grunted, his left foot frozen in the lake. Harry whirled around to see Dumbledore on a frozen platform. With a wave of his wand, flaming rocks formed in orbits above his head and with movements like a conductor, he sent them rocketing towards them. Harry cast spells to destroy them as Neville freed himself from the ice. The final meteor Harry managed to stop in the air, and with a heaving cry of effort, he sent it flying back at Dumbledore. Dumbledore raised his wand. There was a burst of light as the meteor was blown apart into tiny pieces, at the same time as a spell shot in from the side, and Dumbledore was thrown from his platform into the water.

“Nice shot,” Neville said to Luna.

“The more people attacking him, the more chances we’ll have to slip an attack through his defences,” Luna said, “we need reinforcements.”

“That would be great, but the only people who can come down here are the Heirs to the founders and the Headmaster,” Neville said.

That meant it was just them and Merlin to face Dumbledore, and Merlin had already shown he wouldn’t act to attack. The three of them weren’t enough, not so long as Dumbledore still had the Elder Wand.

The lake burst apart, the water forced aside as Dumbledore stormed towards them. It was the angriest Harry had ever seen him. The volley of spells that followed was relentless, each one slamming into their shields with such tremendous force they were pushed backwards. Harry leapt aside and the curse that would have hit him exploded. Vines sprang from the ground, snaring Harry’s ankles. Neville burned through more that tried the same with him, but then chains appeared instead which bound his arms. Dumbledore levelled his wand at Luna.

“You couldn’t beat me even with all three of you, so the smart thing for you to do Ms Lovegood would be surrender,” Dumbledore said. His breathing was heavy and his robes were dishevelled and sodden. “I sincerely do not wish to fight any of you. There is so much good you can do for the world. Harry and Mr Longbottom, as the Heirs to Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, you would command tremendous influence, and Ms Lovegood, I am sure the next Heir Ravenclaw would gladly reward you for your diligent service. After all these years of watching you grow, I do not want this to be the end for any of you, but if the difficult decision must be made, then I will do it.”

“Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it,” Luna said.

“I quite agree, which means that this all comes down to one man in particular,” Dumbledore said, “Merlin! I know you are listening to this farce of a spectacle. Let this end. There need

be no blood spilt here today, so long as you give me your power willingly. Their fates are in your hands. I ask that you make the right choice.”

Harry tried pulling at the vines. It was hard to know whether Dumbledore was being serious about killing them, but Harry had a feeling he was. If it furthered his goals, moved the pieces on the game board according to his design, he felt that Dumbledore would do whatever it took.

According to him, this was all for the greater good.

Their surroundings changed once more. There were no dramatic shifts in scale or position. The lake vanished and they ended up in a clearing not unlike where they started, only the tree and the ward stone were gone. The vines and chains binding them didn't come with them, but with Dumbledore so close and wand poised, Harry didn't dare move.

“Merlin! I am losing my patience!”

Merlin helped them before. Luna asked for his help when they were cornered in the ravine, but this wasn't a situation he could help with. As Luna said, Merlin did not use his power to attack. That wasn't his role at Hogwarts. Others took that duty, the teachers and Headmaster, but also the-

Harry's eyes widened in realisation. He didn't know if this would work. He didn't even know if they would be able to come here, but all he could do was focus inward, connect his magic to the magic of Hogwarts that was suffused in the air around them, and hope that his wish was granted.

When nothing happened, Dumbledore sighed.

“Very well. You leave me no choice. I'll start with Ms Lovegood, then at least you'll still have your Heir Ravenclaw in case you change your mind,” he said, “don't worry my dear, I'll make this painless.”

He stepped closer to her and all that went through Harry's mind was that no help was coming. They were on their own. Spells weren't working nearly well enough and so his mind went blank and he lashed out. He swung out his hand, the bracelet glowing as the Sword of Gryffindor appeared. Dumbledore's eyes widened and he scrambled back. The sword barely grazed his chest, but when he looked down, the bottom third of his beard was cut off at an odd angle.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said, sounding so disappointing, “there's bravery and then there is foolishness. It seems that I've indulged you too much. Following the path I laid out for you would have given you a happy life.”

“I found my own happiness,” Harry said, “happiness that would let me be who I was always meant to be.”

“A pity. It seems that the power has gone to your head, such is the way when it is left unchecked. No matter. I can make this right.”

Harry stared Dumbledore down as he raised his wand, only for a piercing, ethereal cry to fill the air. Dumbledore looked up before diving backward, throwing up a shield to block the jet of fire that shot at him. Fawkes swooped in, his song heralding the arrival of the others. Swimming through the air as though it was water was Braich the Giant Squid, and following in both of their wakes, cackling like a mad man, was Peeves the Poltergeist.

Vaporous smoke seeped into the air and the back of the clearing changed. The dirt and grass gave way to smooth stone. A section of wall appeared, along with a very familiar statue. Harry didn't know how this was possible, but he wasn't going to question it. The words came to him as he held his hand holding the Sword of Gryffindor out to the statue of Salazar Slytherin.

“ Come to me, Suil. Hogwarts calls for your aid. ”

A deep, resonating hiss answered him.

“ And Hogwarts shall have it, Lord Slytherin. ”

The mouth of the statue opened and from it emerged the 60-foot long Serpent of Slytherin. With scales of vivid, poisonous green, the Basilisk coiled behind Harry, its head raised high in the air. Those dangerous eyes were covered by a yellow scale, giving the impression that the snake was wearing goggles. Its hiss was loud, cutting through the air. Fawkes landed gently on Harry's shoulder as Braich came to rest next to Neville and Peeves hovered over Luna's head. They all stared Dumbledore down, and for the first time since this fight began, he actually looked worried.

Fawkes was the first to act. He swooped off Harry's shoulder, his form one of burning fire, and he shot at Dumbledore like an arrow. Dumbledore threw up a shield and Fawkes veered to avoid it, but the fire continued onwards, enveloping the shield entirely. It shattered as Suil lunged forward, her fangs sharp and glistening with deadly venom. Sumbledore's attempts to stop her bounced harmlessly off her scales and he was forced to move again. Peeves cackled as he withdrew from his pockets what looked suspiciously like some of Fred and George's fireworks, aiming them directly at Dumbledore. The impact was blocked but the loud crackles and bangs and the dazzling lights disoriented the man. It was only the natural reaction of the Elder Wand that let him defend against the glob of thick ink that was shot at him by Braich.

Harry, Neville and Luna joined the fray alongside the Guardian Spirits. With the power of the Elder Wand and his own immense skill, Dumbledore was still a challenging opponent, but with so many prominent threats attacking him relentlessly, he was forced to remain on the defensive. His piercing blue eyes were constantly scanning his surroundings, looking for any opening he could exploit, but whenever he felt he might have found one, Suil would appear. The fear of those eyes forced Dumbledore to immediately look away.

Suil the Basilisk was the head of their spear. She barrelled through Dumbledore's defences. When Dumbledore attempted to fight back, aiming spells at Suil's eyes, Fawkes would

appear, bringing a curtain of fire in his wake. Dumbledore tried charging up the lightning spell again, aiming for the snake or the bird Harry didn't know, but Braich shot water this time, forcing Dumbledore to abandon that plan. Peeves was a constant source of distraction, throwing a seemingly endless series of fireworks and light flashes to disorient and confuse, interspersed with the occasional knife.

Throughout it all, Harry, Neville and Luna were there. They watched and waited for Dumbledore to react to the Guardian Spirit's attacks before unleashing their own. Judging the Guardian Spirits to be a bigger threat, Dumbledore prioritised defending against them with his magic, thus meaning he had to move to avoid their hexes and curses. Harry could see the old man starting to flag. This was likely the hardest he'd had to fight in a long time, and as exhausted as Harry was feeling, a man who'd spent most of the last few decades working at a desk in a school would be feeling it more.

Unfortunately, Dumbledore seemed to realise this as well, and he acted much more forcefully as a result.

He conjured several sharks that swam through the air at Braich. With the Squid distracted, he turned his wand and fired a vicious, purple curse at Neville. Fawkes flew between them and took the curse, bursting into flames and dropping to the floor in a pile of ash. A point of golden light drew his attention towards Harry. This was a spell he had learned so long ago in preparation for the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. He hadn't used it then, and there hadn't been a good time since, but when what they needed most was a distraction, it was perfect.

Harry shot the spell at him. It hit Dumbledore's shield, but that was the point. On contact, the ball of golden light exploded into a swarm of tiny points, each one sparking with electricity and emitting a piercing cheeping noise. This was the Thousand Chirping Birds. As the points of light ducked and swooped around him, the Elder Wand kept moving. Each time it reacted to one, another would dive for Dumbledore's face. With a slash of his wand, all the lights were dispelled with a flash, but then the water and ink around his feet froze. He traced the Freezing Charm back to Luna. Suil and Peeves both came charging from the same direction, but this time Dumbledore met them head on. He made a wide and forceful sweep with his wand, and a concussive blast fired outwards. It slammed into Suil, grinding her to a halt, and all Dumbledore's other opponents were thrown backwards from the force of it.

All his opponents except one, because Harry was not in front of Dumbledore. In the chaos of the Thousand Chirping Birds, he had moved behind the man. This would not end until the Elder Wand was removed from Dumbledore's possession, and he saw the chance to do just that. As Dumbledore finished his wide sweep, his wand arm extended out to the side, Harry lunged. With a cry, he brought the Sword of Gryffindor down on Dumbledore's wrist. The Elder Wand barely had a chance to twitch as the sword bit into the bone, before slicing clean through. As it fell through the air, Harry kicked the severed hand, and the Elder Wand with it, far out of Dumbledore's grasp.

Everything came to a halt. All eyes landed on Harry, sword in hand, and Dumbledore, who could only stare at the bloody stump where his hand used to be. They had done it. They'd won. Dumbledore was defeated, but for some reason, it didn't feel like enough. The old man

would face a trial, and very likely end up sentenced to live out the rest of his life in prison, but would that really be justice for all that he had done? How many people's lives had Dumbledore meddled with and potentially ruined? How many paths had been arbitrarily cut off because Dumbledore didn't think it was best? Losing a hand and the rest of his life in Azkaban surely couldn't account for all of that.

Harry had a sword. He had his wand. Dumbledore was defenceless, and Harry could make him pay. Voldemort would have done it. Dumbledore himself would have done it, but would Harry?

No, he would not.

Harry dropped the Sword of Gryffindor, taking several steps away from Dumbledore, breathing deeply.

"Luna, could you-"

Luna rushed forward, running her wand in slow circles over Dumbledore's arm. Slowly, the bleeding began to stop. All the while, Dumbledore ignored Luna, his gaze fixed on Harry.

"You cut off my hand," he said.

"Be glad it wasn't more, but it's not up to me what happens to you. You'll face justice for what you've done, and that is the right thing," Harry said, "you're wrong, Dumbledore. The world doesn't need one person to run things like some demented puppet master. One person thinking they know best is how we get people like Tom Riddle. Everyone needs to play their part and work together."

"That's impossible with the way the world is now."

"Maybe, but the world won't stay the same forever. Things don't necessarily need to be fixed in a single lifetime, so long as we move in the right direction, and if we do it side by side, it will be much stronger," Harry said.

When she had stopped the bleeding, Luna moved back and Braich, floating above them, grabbed Dumbledore with a strong arm, binding him tightly. Neville glared at him, but opted instead to pick up the sword and hand it back to Harry. It shone and reformed into the bracelet.

"Well done."

Where the statue of Slytherin once was, the tree had returned. Merlin's face was beaming with pride.

"Come, we have a job to do," Merlin said, "and as my last boon to Albus Dumbledore, he may bear witness to the power he coveted being used for its intended purpose."

Harry, Neville and Luna took their places, standing around the ward stone like four points of a compass. The Guardian Spirits watched on as they each placed their hands to the stone alongside Merlin's.

There was a rush of magic, far warmer and kinder than any Harry had felt before. It flowed out of them like a river, but it did not hurt or drain them in any way. The magic of the founders within them connected with Merlin's own, and the ward stone drank it in and used. About them, Hogwarts sang. The castle above almost seemed to shine, and everybody stopped what they were doing, not understanding what was happening but they could feel it nonetheless. The damage to the wards was repaired, but it was more than that. The destruction to the castle itself was fixed, the stones and glass flying back into their proper places and reforming, good as new.

The wounds of Voldemort's attack on Hogwarts were healed, the castle restored to its former glory. The portraits on the wall found themselves suddenly much cleaner as though they were brand new. Everything in the kitchen was repaired to the highest quality, and the House Elves also found themselves rejuvenated. Though the students didn't see it, all of their beds were freshened and fluffed.

In the stone chamber, Harry could feel it all, and when it was done, he removed his hand. The four Guardian Spirits bowed to them. Dumbledore also had his head lowered, but not out of respect. It was in defeat. Their battle was finally over.

They had won.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delay with this chapter. Wednesday has suddenly become a very busy evening for me.

We're on the home stretch now. The final three chapters will be released as follows:

Chapter 75 - Monday 11th March

Chapter 76 - Thursday 14th March

Chapter 77 - Monday 18th March

His life, his future

“What happens now?” Neville asked, “I feel like there’s still so much to do.”

“Well, dear Neville, there is, but what happens next is entirely up to you,” Merlin said, “each of you have long and fulfilling lives left to lead. The big wide world awaits you. I can’t wait to see what you do next.”

“But you’ll still be here?” Harry said.

“True, but through magic, many things are possible. I have no doubt that I shall see you again,” Merlin said, “after all, Hogwarts will always be a home for magical children, and you will always have a place here.”

“Even when we’re no longer kids?”

Merlin chuckled.

“For one so old, everyone is a child to me, and I will always welcome you home,” he said fondly.

“What about the Elder Wand?” Luna asked.

She held it reverently, having retrieved it from near where Dumbledore’s hand lay.

“There are some who would go to war over the power this wand possesses.”

“Then what would you do with it?” Merlin asked.

Luna thought for a long while.

“The power in this wand is much like your own, but unlike yours, if nobody is able to claim it, it will eventually die and become nothing but a regular wand,” Luna said, “if I may, I would like you to keep it safe, Master Merlin, until such a time that its power is no longer a danger to the world.”

Merlin smiled. Luna reached out with the wand, and a branch of the tree reached down to take it from her. The Elder Wand was carried back into the boughs of the great tree until it became lost amongst the leaves. Seeing his wand taken so far away from him, Dumbledore’s head remained bowed, the aura of defeat palpable.

“Now off you go. Do not linger here on my account. Go and live, go with love.”

Harry, Neville and Luna all bowed to Merlin, and to their surprise, Merlin bowed back. The four Guardian Spirits approached. Peeves whizzed around Luna, cackling away about always wanting to have fun with Dumbledore. Braich lowered herself to the ground and gently wrapped a couple of arms around Neville in a very bizarre looking hug. Fawkes settled on Harry’s shoulder as he stood before Suil. The Basilisk stood tall and regal.

“ Thank you Suil. ”

“ No thanks are needed. I will always come when Lord Slytherin calls, ” she hissed, “ though hopefully it won’t be so long before I see you again. ”

Peeves shot off with a final cackle, Braich swimming off through the air behind him. The statue of Slytherin reappeared and Suil turned, her long body reaching up towards the tunnel in the statue's mouth. Just as she reached it, a globule of silver almost-liquid was pulled from her head, flying through the air towards Merlin's waiting hand. Harry knew what this meant. Merlin had summoned her from the memory of Hogwarts, and now she was returning exactly as she had left it. Her memories of this encounter were gone, meaning the next time she would see him would be after Riddle had driven her mad. Harry hoped that somehow, in the grand complicated inner workings of time and magic and memory, she would remember what she had done just before her end. He hoped that she would know that she had not failed in her duty.

Dumbledore remained bound by Braich's now detached arm. As they made to leave, Harry turned to look upon the Heart of Hogwarts one last time. Merlin settled back into his throne and waved at him. Harry waved back, before following the others. The journey back up through the tunnel felt so much shorter than the journey down. It passed in silence, until eventually the light of the Great Hall shone down on them.

A small contingent of Aurors were waiting for them when they emerged, Madam Bones and Moody at the front. Madam Bones took in their dishevelled forms, before her eyes landed on Dumbledore, bound and defeated. He was swiftly taken into custody, led from the castle under Moody's watchful eye.

“I'm sure the three of you have a story to tell,” Madam Bones said, “but it can wait. We need to seal this passage and get you all to the Hospital Wing.”

That sounded like a very good idea. Harry stood at the edge of the open passage. He pushed a bit of the Gryffindor and Slytherin magic into it, and from deep down, he felt Merlin respond. The tunnel entrance slowly closed over until all that was left was the engraving of the Hogwarts emblem, and then even that faded away to smooth stone. The path to the ward stone, to the Heart of Hogwarts was once again sealed. It would not appear again unless the castle was in dire need, and Harry hoped that would not be for a long time to come.

As it turned out, their entire adventure down in the stone chamber had only taken three hours. Nobody else in the castle knew what had happened, only that Hogwarts suddenly started glowing and now everything was fixed. Harry heard people moving in the halls as everyone made their way down to lunch, but whether it be chance or by design, they encountered no-one on their way as Madam Bones escorted them to the Hospital Wing. The only occupied beds were Sirius and Professor McGonagall. Both were awake, and when Sirius saw him, he tried sitting up, only to wince and clutch his side. Instead, Harry rushed to him, getting pulled into Sirius's arms when he was close enough.

“I'm so sorry. We tried to stop him but he was too powerful.”

“It’s alright Sirius. You did what you could,” Harry said, “and it’s all done now. Dumbledore is beaten and Madam Bones took him into custody.”

“Really?” Sirius said, looking past Harry to where Madam Bones was standing.

“He will face justice for his crimes, including resisting arrest and assaulting the Headmistress of Hogwarts and the Lord of a Noble and Most Ancient House. I will make sure of it.”

“But- but how did you do it? What the hell happened down there?” Sirius asked.

“That is a very long story.”

Madam Pomfrey came bustling over, ushering the three of them into beds so she could look them over. As she worked, Harry asked Sirius about what happened after they went down into the tunnel. It still hurt to hear that Dumbledore had attacked him, but knowing how strong the old wizard was, combined with the power of the Elder Wand, the story made sense. When Madam Pomfrey finished, Harry told the story of what happened.

Even now it was surreal to think that he had actually met Merlin. One of the most legendary wizards to have ever lived was below Hogwarts, using the power of his unique gift to sustain the magic of the founders in place of their family lines. Madam Bones took careful notes, and Sirius was slack-jawed as he described the stone chamber. His jaw snapped shut when he reached the fight.

“Is there any way you can keep what happened down there confidential?” Harry asked, “there was already so much damage done because two powerful individuals wanted to get their hands on the Heart. The last thing we want is for others to get it into their heads to try.”

“I certainly can. The ward stones of the noble families are highly sensitive matters. The official report shall state that you overpowered him while in the most concentrated seat of your power. Nobody would be able to say otherwise,” Madam Bones said, “I shall leave you in peace now. I’ll be in touch as the case progresses.”

“Thank you, Madam Bones,” Harry said sincerely.

“I should be thanking you, as well as Heir Longbottom and Steward Lovegood. The three of you brought a powerful and dangerous man to justice. I look forward to seeing where your lives lead you in the future.”

It was later in the day, after classes were over, that Harry, Neville and Luna were released from the Hospital Wing. McGonagall had left earlier while Sirius was forced to stay behind to continue his recovery. He pouted about it, but dared not question Madam Pomfrey’s edict. Everyone else was in the Great Hall tucking into dinner when they arrived. Their appearance was barely noticed. For all anyone knew, they were just getting to dinner late. Luna joined them at the Gryffindor table, and they were sandwiched amongst the rest of the fifth-years. Seamus and Dean clung to Harry, but none of them made a fuss, not wanting to draw attention to what had happened.

It didn't stop them from dragging them up to the Room of Requirement with the twins afterwards. The Room provided them with a spacious living room full of squishy sofas and soft cushions, not unlike the Gryffindor common room. Once the door was shut, Harry was pounced on by his two very worried boyfriends, and that was when the questions started.

Neville took the lead in telling the story this time as they all sat down. Seamus held Harry in his lap and Dean had a vice-like grip on his hands as they listened. They oohed and aahed at all the right moments, and Harry felt as his boyfriends tensed at the various near misses they'd had during their fight. Even so, there was an undeniable sense of awe as they described what they had done, and Harry could feel it too. There was also a sense of relief. Two years ago, Voldemort was a looming threat in the shadows and Dumbledore was at the height of his power and influence. Now the former was forever vanquished and the latter was brought to heel.

"So does that mean it's all over?" Seamus asked, "you're free?"

"I'm free. We all are," Harry agreed, "it's over now."

Both Seamus and Dean glommed onto him, pressing kisses to his cheeks. Neville found himself in a similar cuddle pile, minus the kissing, with Fred and George, and Luna with Parvati and Lavender.

"I'm so glad you're all ok. It was really scary," Parvati said, "Lord Black and Professor McGonagall told us to go into a side chamber so we were out of the way, but we could hear the fighting. When Dumbledore's name disappeared off the Map, we went back out and that's when we found them hurt."

"I ran to get Madam Pomfrey. By the time I got back to the Great Hall with her, Professor Snape was there and had managed to rouse one of the Aurors in the Entrance Hall. I think the Auror called for reinforcements while Madam Pomfrey got Lord Black and Professor McGonagall to the Hospital Wing," Lavender said, "we had no idea what was happening in the tunnel. Seamus tried going after you but the magic pushed him back."

"You tried coming after us?" Harry said.

"I know I wouldn't have been able to do much, but I still wanted to help," Seamus said, "the magic was a lot gentler pushing me back than I thought it would be."

"I appreciate it, but I'm glad you didn't manage to come down. We only managed to hold against Dumbledore by the skin of our teeth."

"To think that Dumbledore had an unbeatable wand. Do you reckon that's how he got the reputation for being the most powerful wizard of the age? I mean, if nobody could beat him, it would certainly look like it," Fred said.

"I guess it all depends on when he actually got the wand. He couldn't have had it when he was young since surely someone would have noticed. It would have made his fight against Grindelwald easier at least," George said.

“Or maybe Grindelwald had it and Dumbledore won it from him somehow?” Fred said.

“But the wand is supposed to be unbeatable,” Neville said.

“Key word, *supposed to be*. You three managed to beat him with it,” Fred said.

“It is a bit of a mystery what happened in that duel since no-one was there to witness it,” Lavender said, “you occasionally hear rumours that they didn’t actually duel at all, and that Grindelwald surrendered for some reason. Some of those rumours can be a bit spicy.”

“You make it sound like they were star-crossed lovers or something,” Dean said.

“Maybe they were? Who really knows?”

Being with his friends, Harry was overcome with an incredible feeling of lightness, as though the large weights that had been placed on him had been removed. In speaking about it so casually, it made it real that Dumbledore actually had been arrested. He would no longer be able to influence Harry’s life, just as Riddle no longer posed a threat to his safety. Three years of struggle and careful planning had finally reached its end. Casting a patronus would be easy given the strength of his happiness.

As the evening wound down, they returned to Gryffindor Tower. Both he and Neville desperately wanted a shower to wash off the events of the day, but Neville gave him a significant look, stating he would wait his turn in the bathroom. Harry appreciated it, allowing Seamus and Dean to bundle him into one of the showers. He didn’t resist the pampering his boyfriends gave him. It felt good to feel their hands on him, their touches light and gentle. When they were done, they led him back into the dormitory and piled into Harry’s bed.

Even though they didn’t do anything else that evening, Harry still felt content. Today marked the start of a new era for him. One where his choices would be completely his own, free of people trying to control him for their own gains. As Harry made himself comfortable, Seamus and Dean cuddled either side of him, he knew that tomorrow would bring something entirely new, and it would be his life, his future.

Unfortunately, tomorrow did indeed bring something new. It brought fresh reminders that the OWLs were fast approaching. Surprisingly, this did not in any way dampen Harry’s mood. Nothing in the world could be quite as daunting as Dumbledore and Voldemort, and they were now both gone, so Harry felt he had nothing to fear. He threw himself into his studies with gusto, his cheer somewhat infectious and helping to pick up the mood of his fellow fifth-years.

One morning in the last week of May, McGonagall was seen welcoming the arrival of the WIZARDING Examination Authority to the castle. Neville pointed out Professor Griselda Marchbanks as a friend of his Gran. Seeing their examiners made the tension mount, and even Harry started to feel slightly nervous. Those nerves grew even further when the exam timetable was released, and everyone figured out the optimal strategy for revision. Madam

Pomfrey saw an uptick in students needing Calming Draughts as the pressure grew unbearable for some to handle.

June finally arrived, bringing with it two weeks of near constant exams. On Monday morning, the fifth-years all hung around in the Entrance Hall after breakfast as the rest of the school went off for their morning lessons. Professor Flitwick gave them a few encouraging words before he too left. Harry ran through the Charms course material in his head, others around him doing similar. No doubt if Hermione had been here, she would have been pouring over endless reams of notes.

They were called in for their first exam, Theory of Charms, at 9 o'clock. The Great Hall had been completely rearranged, the house tables put away in favour of smaller single person desks. They each took their seats and at the direction of the wizened old wizard at the front of the room, they turned their exam booklets over and began writing. Harry read the first question and felt a small amount of confidence return to him as he found he knew the answer. This propelled him through the rest of the exam.

When it was over, they all left the Great Hall. Harry exchanged glances with his fellow Gryffindors but aside from asking how they found it, none of them said anything, not being in the mood to analyse their performance. Harry was pleased that they all thought it had gone well. After lunch, they were back waiting in the Entrance Hall for their practical Charms exam. All around them people were practising wand movements and muttering incantations beneath their breaths. They were each called in small groups to complete the exam. Harry successfully performed the Levitation Charm, and managed to catch himself before he messed up the incantation for the Colour-Change Charm, remembering Seamus's advice on how not to confuse it for the Growth Charm.

There was no time to rest as they had their Transfiguration exam the next day. As McGonagall was their head of house, it was a small point of pride for the Gryffindors to do as well as they possibly could in her subject. They all filed into the Great Hall for the theory exam in the morning, which Harry felt quite confident in. He was even more confident in the practical, successfully vanishing his iguana and turning his ferret into a perfect feather duster. Professor McGonagall had been watching them as they took their practicals, and Harry was sure he saw a hint of pride carefully concealed on her face.

Wednesday brought Herbology, which was Neville's time to shine. Of course, this also meant he had more than just the Gryffindors coming up to him for last minute revision tips. Harry remembered their many study sessions as he wrote down the correct way to feed self-fertilising shrubs. In the afternoon, Harry managed to harvest a seed pod from a Puffapod without breaking the shell and causing a bloom of flowers, and only suffered a small bite as he tended to his Fanged Geranium. Seamus came out of the exam with petals in his hair, having not been quite so lucky with the Puffapod.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was on Thursday, and this was the exam that Harry felt the most confident in. In contrast, most of the other fifth-years looked distinctly nervous. Remus had worked them all hard in the last two and a half months to try and get them up to speed, but there was still the feeling that it wasn't enough. Harry calmly and patiently explained

various concepts and topics to the people that asked, and when he took the theory exam, he felt very pleased.

They had their practicals in the afternoon. Like before, they were called into the Great Hall in small groups. Harry was assigned to Professor Tofty, the same old wizard who'd supervised their Theory of Charms exam. Professor Tofty ran Harry through a comprehensive list of jinxes and counter curses. Each spell came easily to Harry, and Professor Tofty looked very impressed. Across the hall, Harry saw Parvati also performing well. When they left the hall, she thanked him profusely, as did the others when all the Gryffindor fifth-years had finished.

"Next up is Potions on Monday," Neville said gloomily.

"Chin up Neville. You've been doing much better in Potions this year," Lavender said, "but we can make a start on it now if you'd like."

"Though only light revision today. It's been a long week," Parvati said.

"You two have got Ancient Runes tomorrow, right?" Dean asked Harry and Seamus.

They did, so while the others set about revising Potions recipes, the pair of them pulled out their notes for Ancient Runes. There weren't as many people taking this class so the exam was instead held in a smaller room on the ground floor. Harry leaned against the wall outside, his shoulder pressed against Seamus's as they waited to be called in. Across from them were Zabini and Nott from Slytherin. Both of them nodded politely at Harry.

The exam was split into three parts. The first was purely theory, with questions about the uses and composition of various runic structures; the second was a series of translation exercises; and the third was applying all of these concepts to both deconstruct an unseen runic array, and to construct a new array of their own to achieve a specific result. Harry remembered many happy days lying alongside Seamus on the floor of the Room of Requirement with diagrams spread around them. Feeling his boyfriend's phantom presence at his side helped him work his way through the exam.

The weekend was a welcome reprieve. After Ancient Runes, Harry and Seamus absconded to the dormitory with Dean, practically pushing the boy onto his bed so they could cuddle with him for a bit and decompress after a busy week. Unfortunately, the break couldn't last long as Potions was up next. Without any outside influence, Harry felt confident he would do well, but there was also an element of spite to it. For all that Snape now left them alone, he still wasn't a pleasant person, and Harry clearly remembered all the times over the years where he had been needlessly and vindictively cruel. He wanted to do well just to rub it in the man's face.

All six of them made it through Monday's Potions exam without major catastrophe. Neville kept his head during the practical portion of the exam, and by the sounds of it, they'd all managed to complete the potions they were assigned to brew.

Harry had a break on Tuesday as the others had Care of Magical Creatures, and he spent it revising Arithmancy and Astronomy, which would take place on Wednesday.

“I accidentally squeezed the Bowtruckle too hard,” Seamus said, showing off his bandaged hand, “I’ll need to see Madam Pomfrey again after dinner but then I’ll be good as new.”

“We have more news,” Dean said, “Hagrid’s back.”

Harry gaped.

“I saw him watching from his hut when we had our exam. He came out after we finished to apologise for being away for so long and said he hoped we’d all managed to do well,” Dean said, “he asked if you would be free to visit him after your exams are over.”

Harry readily agreed. Hagrid had been away from Hogwarts all year, and while in third and fourth year he hadn’t visited the man as often since he wasn’t hanging around with Ron and Hermione, he still missed his first friend in the magical world. Hopefully he wouldn’t think too badly about Harry for what happened with Dumbledore.

The Arithmancy exam also took place in a smaller classroom on the ground floor, and to Harry, the preparations felt almost like a repeat of what he’d done with Seamus. Dean was a comforting presence at his side as the fifth-years waited to be called in. The exam itself was tricky, involving the Numerological calculation of various magical forces, and Arithmantic breakdowns of spells, and essays regarding the theory of both. Like with Ancient Runes, Harry fondly remembered the days he had spent preparing this with Dean, and when he left at the end of three hours, he felt he had done a good job.

Harry, Seamus and Dean had the afternoon off while Parvati and Lavender took their Divination exam, and Neville had Muggle Studies. Their next exam, Astronomy, wouldn’t be until the evening. The fifth-years dutifully trooped to the top of the Astronomy Tower, where a set of telescopes were waiting for them. The sky was perfectly clear, which unfortunately made it quite cold. Sirius had jokingly warned him not to let the side down as the Black’s had traditionally done well in Astronomy. Harry didn’t want to disappoint his godfather, even though he knew Sirius would be happy no matter what he got in the end. Filling in his star chart was somewhat relaxing, the only sound the occasional creak of a telescope and the quiet scratching of a quill. Harry saw the pleased look on Dean’s face as they made their way back to the common room once Professor Tofty called the exam to an end.

And then finally, after two weeks of stress and worry, they came to their final exam, History of Magic. It was thankfully held in the afternoon, giving the fifth-years a chance to catch up on the sleep they’d missed from the Astronomy exam. In previous years, Harry had hated History of Magic. Professor Binns droned on and on, his voice soporific even with Harry’s renewed ability to focus. This year however, Harry had been studying from better materials. Professor Nilsson, Harry’s correspondence course teacher, had a grandmotherly vibe to her, and it was her voice in Harry’s head going over key facts and dates as they waited to be called into the Great Hall.

What followed were three hours of scratching quills and not much else. Harry steadily made his way through the exam paper, trying his best to ignore the somewhat frantic energy of some of his year mates as they struggled to remember the things that Binns had taught them. It was a very hot day, the sun streaming in through the high windows of the Great Hall like a tantalising reward.

“Quills down everybody. The exam is now over,” Professor Tofty called.

Just like that, everybody in the Great Hall sagged with relief, nursing aching hands and wrists from three hours of writing. As they left the Great Hall, the excitement hit them. They had done it. Whatever their results may be, they had all successfully made it through their OWLs.

“There’s no use worrying about it now. Let’s just enjoy the rest of this week and not think about schoolwork at all,” Seamus said.

The six Gryffindors made an immediate left once they reached the Entrance Hall, following the small crowd of fifth-years who had the exact same idea. This summer was already shaping up to be better than the last, nice and warm but not searing hot like last year. Harry followed the others, but then he saw Hagrid tilling the soil in his vegetable patch.

“Are you going to speak to him?” Dean asked.

“Now would be as good a time as any,” Harry said.

“We’ll come knocking in half an hour just in case,” Dean said.

He didn’t think Hagrid would do anything bad, but it was still reassuring to hear that.

It was strange to be so nervous approaching Hagrid’s hut. Hagrid had been the one to rescue Harry from the Dursley’s when he was eleven and introduced him to the magical world. He was always a source of comfort and advice whenever Harry had needed it, even after he discovered the truth. Harry’s friendships with the other Gryffindor fifth-years, his closer relationship with Arthur and the twins, and his love for Seamus and Dean, these were all things he’d developed after he discovered the truth about his family and his circumstances. Hagrid represented the last remaining part of the life Harry used to lead, and he didn’t know how to think about that.

Hagrid didn’t notice him at first when Harry reached the garden fence, too busy digging up the dirt ready to plant new vegetables. He stood, wiped the sweat from his brow, then he turned and finally saw Harry. Between his shaggy hair and big bushy beard, there wasn’t a lot of Hagrid’s face that was visible, but what he could see flashed through a series of complicated emotions. There was joy, which gave way to sadness, before settling on something warm.

“Harry,” he said.

“Hi, Hagrid,” Harry replied, trying not to sound awkward, “it’s good to see you.”

“Aye, and it’s good to see you too. Come in, we can have a cup of dandelion juice.”

The inside of Hagrid’s hut was just as Harry remembered it. Fang the boarhound bounded up to him, slobbering down the front of his robes in his desperation to give him kisses, until Hagrid pulled him away. They sat at Hagrid’s kitchen table. Harry had so much he wanted to say, but he couldn’t seem to put them into words.

“How’ve you been?” Harry settled on.

“Could’ve been better. It’s been a long year, but a good one. Glad I went away, I got to see loads of stuff, but there’s a part of me that wishes-” Hagrid trailed off, “I should be the one asking you that, after everything.”

“You heard the news then,” Harry said.

“Hard not to.”

Hagrid rose from his seat, rounding the table slowly, as though worried he’d scare Harry off. Harry watched him with a small amount of concern, even more so when Hagrid knelt down in front of him and ever so gently pulled Harry into a hug. Confused, Harry wasn’t sure how he was meant to react, but then he felt Hagrid trembling. His shoulder grew slightly damp with tears.

“I am so, so sorry this happened to you. You had to deal with that T-Tom Riddle again, and Hogwarts was attacked, and then Dumbledore- I can’t believe Dumbledore would do something like that, not to you.”

Harry froze. There had been a lot of speculation about who exactly Dumbledore had hurt to warrant the charges, but as far as he could tell, nobody knew it was him.

“How do you know that?”

Hagrid shuffled back, wiping his face and blowing his nose on an enormous handkerchief.

“I didn’t realise it at first. Didn’t want to believe it all, really. Dumbledore was always such a good man. He got me the job as gamekeeper after I was expelled, and then let me become a teacher. The Daily Prophet’s been talking nothing but rubbish all year, so when I saw that stuff about Dumbledore assaulting and abusing people, I thought it was just more lies,” Hagrid said, “but then I remembered something. I told you that I was the one to take you away from Godric’s Hollow after- after it happened, and that I was the one who carried you to the Dursley’s, but I never said that those things happened immediately after each other.”

“They didn’t?” Harry prompted.

“No. I took you to Dumbledore as instructed, and then a week later, he asked me to take you to the Dursleys. I thought it was odd when he met me there, since surely he could have taken you himself, but I didn’t really question it. I didn’t think about what Dumbledore was doing with you for a week when you were just a baby, but then I remembered how small you were when I first saw you, how the Dursleys lied about your parents,” Hagrid said, then in a slightly wistful tone, “you know, I saw James the day after he got his magical inheritance. I was assisting Professor Kettleburn in Care of Magical Creatures and James was there. He kept messing up and losing control of magic; sent the Krups running wild with fright he did. I thought to myself, if James had a magical inheritance like that, then surely you would too.”

“I did. It was really hard to keep my magic under wraps,” Harry said.

“You did a really good job of it, because I didn’t even notice, but what I did notice was you pulling away from Ron and Hermione,” Hagrid said, “Professor McGonagall told me they’d been taken in for questioning by the Ministry. Did they- tell me they weren’t part of what Dumbledore did to you?”

“I’m sorry Hagrid,” Harry said.

Hagrid’s face fell.

“No need to apologise to me. It’s not your fault. I never would have imagined that those two would have-” Hagrid said, “I don’t know how you can still be talking to me. I wouldn’t be surprised if you had put a wall between everyone you knew back then just in case they were in on it too, and me be so swept up by Dumbledore-”

“I really hoped you weren’t involved, Hagrid, and I don’t think you were,” Harry said quickly.

“I never would have done something like that!” Hagrid insisted, “even just the thought of it makes me sick.”

“I know that. Hagrid, I can’t say I wasn’t worried about it, but you showed me that you were still on my side. All those times we talked and no matter how much I wasn’t the same boy you met in that shack, you never treated me any differently. You were still the kind man who took me to Diagon Alley for my eleventh birthday,” Harry said, “Ron and Hermione made their choice, but just like I don’t hold Ron’s actions against Arthur and the twins, nor do I hold them against you.”

Hagrid stared at him for a moment, then his face crinkled into a smile.

“You’re one of the best wizards I’ve ever met. Too many people forget it’s not all about brains and brawn, but also about heart too. You’ve got a heart as big as a giant, Harry. Any friend of yours is lucky to have you.” Hagrid chuckled. “I know I’m not the best with keeping secrets, but now that things are out in the open a bit, I’d love to hear more about the real you, and not just the part you were playing so people didn’t get suspicious.”

There was a knock at the door. Hagrid opened it, and Harry saw Seamus and Dean standing there, Neville and the girls a bit behind them.

“Um, hello?” Hagrid said, confused at the group of people on his doorstep.

“It’s alright Hagrid,” Harry said, “these are my friends.”

“We just wanted to check that Harry was alright, Professor Hagrid,” Dean said.

Hagrid turned back to Harry.

“Friends? Are they, you know-”

Harry nodded, unable to stop smiling at the thought. Hagrid’s face beamed with happiness.

“No worries at all. We were just about to have a nice chat. Come in, come in! Though actually, there’s not enough room in here for all of us. Give me a moment to set the table up outside,” Hagrid said jovially.

“There’s no need for that sir,” Neville hurried to say, “we wouldn’t want to disturb you.”

“Nonsense. Any friend of Harry’s is a friend of mine. Besides, it’s been a year since I’ve seen you lot. It’s a beautiful day and we’ve got nowhere to be. Let’s celebrate the end of your exams and you can tell me all about what you’ve been up to while I was away.”

Hagrid’s kitchen table was set up on the grass in front of his hut, Hagrid finding extra chairs from somewhere. The six Gryffindors and Hagrid enjoyed a flagon of ice cold dandelion juice as they talked about everything that happened over the course of the last year. There was a lot they didn’t say, but Hagrid still listened patiently. Of course, they also questioned Hagrid about where he’d been. Hagrid regaled them with stories crossing Europe with Madame Maxime and the wonderful magical creatures they encountered. Parvati and Lavender gasped when he told them they found the last giant tribe on Earth.

Just as Harry and the others left things out of their recounting of the events at Hogwarts, Harry got the impression that more happened on Hagrid’s travels than he was letting on, but he let it go without issue. There would be plenty of time to discuss everything in the future, a future that was looking brighter and brighter by the second.

Eventually, the sun set. Dinner in the Great Hall was a raucous affair as the fifth-years ate with gusto, the happiness of the end of exams still just as strong. They kept things quiet in the common room though as now that OWLs were out of the way, two weeks of NEWTs would start in earnest next week. When Harry went upstairs to bed, his belly full, his mind and his heart were at ease. Seamus smiled at him, coming over to stand beside him where Harry was standing at the window, looking out over the grounds. Dean came up behind both of them, putting an arm around their shoulders. Harry leaned into his boyfriend’s touches. It had been a long hard road, but they were now finally reaching the end.

There was just one more hurdle and then it would all be over.

The trials

Chapter Notes

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

The final two weeks of school passed by in a blur. It was like the clock sped up and suddenly they were at the end of June. Fred, George and the other seventh-years finished their NEWTs, and the celebrations lasted until two in the morning, when McGonagall came storming into the common room demanding they all go to bed. Beneath her stern demeanour, Harry caught the ghost of a smile on her face when George, slightly tipsy on butterbeer spiked with firewhiskey, gave her a big hug. He found out later from Remus that the other heads of houses had to break up similar end of year parties.

And then the school year was over and it was time to go home. Their trunks were packed, pets retrieved and safely stowed, and they all loaded up into the carriages for Hogsmeade Station to board the Hogwarts Express. Harry had never approached the summer holidays so unsure about what would happen next. At the end of third and fourth year, there had always been the understanding that there would be more preparations against Voldemort and Dumbledore intermixed with the time off school. Now though, for the first time in his life, Harry would have a summer holiday as if he were a normal boy.

A boy who happened to also be Lord of three Noble and Most Ancient Houses, and Heir to a fourth.

Normal was relative.

Harry sat with the other Gryffindor fifth-years as the Hogwarts Express wound its way through the countryside, chatting amongst themselves as they played games and made plans. Every now and again, someone that Harry knew poked their head in to say hello.

“From what I hear, Fred and George's products have really taken off,” Neville said, “have they managed to find premises yet?”

“I’m not sure. They told me they were reaching out to Sirius for advice. I know they’ve been saving up as much as they could for it though,” Harry said, “they managed to sell quite a lot when they were at Hogwarts, even starting up an owl order service. I don’t think it’ll be long before they find their feet.”

“It’s quite surprising how business savvy they are. I heard them talking with Lee Jordan about it the other day. They’ve really got their heads on straight,” Parvati said, “although I also get the feeling that Fred and George would be the sort of people who could sell literally anything to anyone.”

“It’ll be a quieter house for them at least, what with Ron and Ginny gone,” Seamus said.

That was true. The Burrow would be down by three members. With Percy moved out, it would just be Arthur, Fred and George. That fact might make the twins hang around for a bit

until they can get set up with something, but eventually they would leave. Arthur had hinted about moving back into Weasley Hall once Mrs Weasley was dealt with. It would be nice if he could so he could also move on from the memories of what had happened.

“Though on the topic of Ron, you two had a bet, remember?” Dean said to Harry and Seamus, “it’s the end of the year so who won?”

“I- I don’t actually know. We didn’t count on them being arrested,” Seamus said.

Harry found his money bag and pulled out ten sickles.

“Technically speaking, they were still friends before being arrested so I think you win,” he said as he handed over the money.

Seamus accepted it with a cheeky grin and a kiss.

They arrived at Platform Nine and Three Quarters to the usual hustle and bustle as everyone left the train. Parents crowded the busy platform, eager to see their children again after the upheaval of the last year. Sirius was there with Lady Longbottom and Mrs Finnegan. Mr Finnegan was waiting with Ms Thomas on the Muggle side of the platform. Both Finnegan’s reassured themselves that Seamus was alright while Ms Thomas held onto Dean tightly.

“Oh Dean, I was so worried. When Aisling told me what happened, I thought the worst! You wouldn’t believe how good it was to finally get your owl,” Ms Thomas said.

“I’m sorry Mum. I didn’t mean to make you worry.”

“You’re safe now, and that’s what matters. You are safe now, right?”

“I think we’re all going to be much safer than we were this time last year,” Sirius said, one arm around Harry’s shoulders.

He seemed just as happy as Harry was.

Before long, they all separated to head back home. Sirius held onto Harry tightly and they apparated directly into Grimmauld Place. The house seemed much brighter than usual, reflecting the good mood of its occupants. There wasn’t a trace of the Order of the Phoenix left behind, and Harry could tell that the rooms had once again shifted around, much of the grandeur of the house no longer needing to be hidden away behind wards in a private section. The layout was still roughly the same, though the two landings that had previously only contained bedrooms were now expanded, with other rooms added onto it.

Over the next few days, Harry found himself full of a boundless, restless energy. It made him feel like a small child in a playground, hyper with excitement at the wonderful possibilities that awaited him. It didn’t help that Sirius seemed just as excited. No longer needing to fear Voldemort or Dumbledore, they went out to see the sights of Muggle London. They went to the cinema and the theatre, and when Harry said he’d never been to one before, Sirius even took him to an amusement park. Riding roller coasters was a similar kind of exhilaration as

flying a broom, and Harry loved it immensely. One evening, Harry and Sirius went out to eat at a somewhat fancy restaurant, inviting the Tonks' and Remus to join them.

Harry went swimming in the pool at Grimmauld Place every morning, and sometimes in the evening as well, and eventually the restless energy began to abate. What followed in its wake was a bizarre emotional sensation. Enormous elation and great sadness washed over him, and Harry found himself repeatedly making excuses to pass through the same room as Sirius just so he could see his godfather.

"Are you alright Harry?" Sirius asked after the fourth time this happened. "You seem a little frantic."

"I don't know," Harry blurted out, and he was mortified when he felt the beginning of tears forming in his eyes, "I don't know what I'm feeling right now."

Sirius looked at him kindly. He stood and rounded his desk, pulling Harry into a firm, yet gentle, hug.

"Everything is going to be fine, Harry," Sirius said, "there's no more Voldemort. Dumbledore and the others have been arrested. There's nobody left to hurt you. You've got true friends now, and those boys you love so much. You've also got me, and I'm not going anywhere. You can let go now Harry. You can let go of all that weight you've been carrying around for so long."

Harry reached up to return the hug, his breath hitching slightly as he buried his face in his godfather's shoulder. He didn't cry as such. It was more of a release of emotions, and Sirius held him through it as it once again became clear to him that his hardships, or rather these ones, were finally over. There would likely be more moments like these, but Harry felt that was alright. He now had people in his life who would gladly help him through them, shouldering some of the weight so he wouldn't be crushed by it.

Once Harry had calmed down, Sirius declared that they deserved ice cream, so at four o'clock in the afternoon, they crept down to Kreacher's kitchen to raid the freezer. Sirius seemed so proud that they didn't get caught. Harry didn't have the heart to tell him that Kreacher had been hovering over him, ready to smack Sirius with a frying pan until Harry caught his eye and shook his head to stop him. The House Elf didn't complain. He had seen the way Harry's eyes were slightly red and let them have it. Dinner that night just so happened to be a smaller, lighter affair as they tucked into chocolate and honeycomb ice cream.

Or at least Harry's dinner was. Sirius still got a normal portion, and when he couldn't finish it, Kreacher gave him a long lecture about ruining his appetite with sweets before dinner. Seeing the servant berating the lord made Harry laugh, the lightness chasing the way the last of his melancholy.

Two weeks into July, Harry received a summons from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. As soon as they saw it, both Harry and Sirius knew what it meant. It was time

for the trials. That was how Harry found himself dressed in his best robes, following Sirius as they entered the Ministry of Magic. Part of him wanted to stop and take in the impressive atrium with its smooth black wood floors and golden fountain, but the butterflies fluttering about in his stomach were too distracting. Instead, they went straight to Amelia Bones's office.

"We have all the evidence we need. As the victim, you have a right to be present during the proceedings. There is a public gallery in the courtroom where you will sit, with an Indistinguishability Ward placed over it so the defendants can't tell who is there, nor how many," Madam Bones explained, "there is a possibility that you will be called to testify. If this happens, you will just need to answer the questions as honestly as you can."

The courtrooms were down on Level 10, only accessible by taking the golden elevators down to the Department of Mysteries and then walking down another flight of stairs. The trials were held in Courtroom Three. It was a large, open room with a raised bench at the front full of people in plum coloured robes. Sirius told him they were the members of the Wizengamot. Either side of the Wizengamot were doors. A wooden seating area lined the left side of the room. Two tables with chairs facing the Wizengamot were set in the main courtroom floor, in between which was an imposing black chair. Chains were pooled like coiling snakes at its feet.

Harry and Sirius sat down in the public seating area. Neville and Lady Longbottom were also there, both looking tense, along with Arthur and Bill. There were also a handful of other witches and wizards Harry didn't recognise, as well as a finely dressed goblin. An older looking man with a prominent cord hanging around his neck took the seat in the centre of the Wizengamot, a young witch beside him ready with sheets of parchment. The wizard looked either side of him, then tapped his wand to the desk in front of him. A deep bang echoed around the room, and the low level of chatter went quiet immediately.

"We now bring to order this criminal trial for case number 04-249-65. Presiding over these proceedings is Lord Cyrus Greengrass, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. Also present is Court Scribe Letitia Tiber. Representative of the prosecution, please state your name and occupation."

"Madam Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Thank you. Members of the Wizengamot present will be included in the official record," Lord Greengrass said, "Madam Bones, you may begin."

"Chief Warlock, there are a number of accused within this case whose actions are all linked to one another but they are not all being charged with the same thing. I therefore propose separating the charges for each defendant, referring to them as 65-A, B, C, D and E respectively," Madam Bones said.

"I accept your proposition."

"Thank you," Madam Bones said, "bring in the defendants."

The door to the right of the Wizengamot opened up. Each flanked by a stony faced Auror, Dumbledore, Mrs Weasley, Ron, Ginny and Hermione were led into the courtroom. All wore the same plain grey robes, and their hands were bound by manacles. Harry was struck by how differently they all looked compared to the last time he saw them.

Dumbledore somehow looked much older, his beard still lopsided from Harry's sword stroke. Mrs Weasley was thinner, with prominent bags under her eyes. Ron looked incredibly nervous, while Ginny and Hermione looked terrified. They were led to the table furthest away from the public gallery and made to sit in the chairs provided. The Aurors then took up positions around the room.

"Given the seriousness of the allegations in this case, all defendants should be aware that at any time, the prosecution has the right to request the use of Veritaserum. It is therefore in your best interests to be honest without it," Lord Greengrass said.

"I call forth Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore in the matter of 04-249-65-A," Madam Bones said.

Dumbledore was led over to the black chair in the middle of the room. His manacles were removed but as soon as he sat down, the chains rose up and bound him tightly. Harry could practically see the cogs turning in Dumbledore's mind.

"Albus Dumbledore, you are charged with grievous bodily harm of a minor, child abuse, child neglect, attempted Line Theft, theft and fraud. How do you plead?" Lord Greengrass asked.

"Not guilty," Dumbledore said.

Harry frowned. The calmness with which he said it told him that Dumbledore had something up his sleeve. Surely he couldn't possibly think he was going to get himself out of this. Madam Bones clearly saw the same thing Harry did.

"Chief Warlock, I request the use of Veritaserum," she said.

"Granted."

Dumbledore's eyes widened slightly, and Harry found himself relaxing. Now there would be no way for Dumbledore to twist events to suit his purposes, nor get away with obfuscation and omissions. Now he would be forced to reveal nothing but the truth to the court. One of the Aurors approached Dumbledore, who reluctantly opened his mouth so three drops of Veritaserum could be administered. Dumbledore's face relaxed, his eyes glazing over slightly.

Madam Bones stood in front of her desk, facing Dumbledore with her back to the public gallery.

"Following the death of Lord and Lady Potter, was young Harry Potter brought to you?"

"He was," Dumbledore said, his tone flat from the Veritaserum.

"How long was he in your care?"

“One week.”

“What did you do with him during that time?”

“I used a ritual to bind his magical core. I also placed charms on him to make him susceptible to accepting suggestions made by myself and a few others. I also made him suspicious of dark magic. I laid the groundwork for additional spells to be added at a later date.”

“Why did you bind his magical core?” Madam Bones asked.

“I needed to be sure his Muggle aunt would take him in. She had proven with her sister that she did not like magic at all. By binding his magical core so tightly, I made sure that any accidental magic would be minimised in his early years,” Dumbledore said, “I also knew that Harry would one day inherit the Potter Family Magic. I had hoped that binding his core would prevent that.”

This caused a ripple of disturbed murmurs from the Wizengamot.

“After the week he spent with you, you then placed him with his Muggle relatives, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Were you named as Heir Potter’s magical guardian?”

“No. Sirius Black was originally listed as his magical guardian, but after he was sent to Azkaban, I submitted paperwork with the Ministry to make me his magical guardian. I then bewitched the office worker handling the documents to give me the Ministry’s copy and then forget she did so.”

“As Heir Potter’s magical guardian, did you ever check on his condition yourself as he grew up with his relatives?”

“No.”

“Did you have any way to monitor him?”

“I had a friend of mine who was a Squib move into the neighbourhood to keep an eye on him.”

“Did you ever ask this person about Heir Potter’s condition?”

“No.”

“To summarise, you left a magical child, a child of a prominent and beloved family, in the care of Muggles and did not check on him even once?”

“I did not.”

“You are aware that by removing the paperwork authorising your position as magical guardian, any actions you take in that role from that point on become fraudulent?”

“I am.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“It was important that I be the one in control of Harry’s home situation, as well as in control his other assets so that he remained unaware of them.”

Harry saw the way Lord Greengrass’s jaw clenched.

“Did you authorise payments to be made from the Potter Vaults?”

“I did.”

“Were those payments made to Molly Prewitt, Ronald Prewitt, Ginevra Prewitt, Hermione Granger, and Petunia Dursley?”

“Yes.”

“Did you attempt to arrange a marriage between Heir Potter and Ginevra Weasley?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I felt that she would make a good match for him. It was also important to keep Harry from fully exercising his power as Lord Potter by removing it from him entirely. The marriage contract would have instead granted power of decision over to his wife’s family, and all his children would be Weasley’s.”

Arthur drew in a deep steady breath.

“What measures did you take to ensure Heir Potter would marry Ginevra Weasley?”

“I arranged to have Harry dosed with an Affection Potion targeted at members of the Weasley family. When Harry stayed at the Burrow before his second year at Hogwarts, I arranged for him to be given an Attraction Potion targeted at Ginny. This would make him become attracted to her so that legitimate feelings could then develop.”

“Did you also attempt to arrange a marriage between Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I was informed that Harry experienced attraction to men. I could not be certain that the potions would be enough to override that, so I made arrangements with Molly for Ron to be a suitable alternative.”

“Besides the potions you just mentioned, did you provide them with any other means of securing Harry’s interest?”

“I provided jewellery to be enchanted that would increase his attraction to them. I provided funds so that Molly could buy a sex toy for Ron to give as a gift to Harry to prove he had changed his attitude. I encouraged Harry to make amends with his friends so that he could become closer to them again.”

Madam Bones stared at Dumbledore for a moment, before turning to face the Wizengamot.

“I have here the results of the diagnostic scan performed on Heir Potter, which gives the full accounting of the spells and potions used on him; the financial records provided by Gringotts showing the full transaction history made by Dumbledore as Heir Potter’s magical guardian; and the betrothal contracts Dumbledore attempted to set up between Harry Potter, Ginevra Weasley and Ronald Weasley, along with the items that Dumbledore provided to ensnare Heir Potter,” Madam Bones said.

She put the stack of parchment she held in her hand back on the desk, before picking up a different stack.

With Dumbledore still under the effects of the Veritaserum, she went through a very similar set of questions about Neville. Dumbledore’s answers remained mostly the same, along the lines of what he told them in the ward stone chamber at Hogwarts. He bound Neville’s core even tighter than Harry’s so that nobody would believe he could be the prophesised child instead of Harry, and also to prevent him from inheriting the Longbottom Family Magic. It was horrible to listen to. Lady Longbottom gripped Neville’s hand tightly. She ended by describing the documentation she had to further prove what had happened to Neville.

“This evidence clearly shows that Albus Dumbledore is guilty of all charges laid before him. I now hand back over to the Wizengamot, Chief Warlock.”

“Thank you, Madam Bones,” Lord Greengrass said, “administer the antidote.”

The same Auror as before poured a small vial of liquid into Dumbledore’s mouth. The glassiness left his eyes as he sat tense in his chair. He knew exactly what he had just confessed before the Wizengamot. Any attempt to walk back or deny it would be thrown out in favour of what he said when he could only speak the truth.

“Do any members of the Wizengamot have any questions for the accused?” Lord Greengrass asked. “Lord Macmillan, you are recognised.”

“You said you bound Heir Potter and Heir Longbottom’s magical cores to prevent them from inheriting their Family Magic. Why would you want to do that? What would be the issue with them inheriting?”

Dumbledore glanced about the room, clearly searching for the right thing to say.

“Because I believe that it is past time for a change in the Magical world. Tom Riddle was able to get as far as he did by leveraging the prejudiced beliefs of the old pureblood families. Those beliefs were allowed to fester because power has become too consolidated. By preventing that power from emerging, it would allow people to rise to their stations through their own merits, not merely because they inherited a seat from their parents.”

“So you planned to do this to other children as well?”

“I have not done this to others.”

Nobody believed him.

Lord Diggory was recognised.

“Why the Weasley family?”

“I felt that they would provide a good environment for Harry to thrive in. Molly is a devoted mother and could provide the care he needed, and he became fast friends with Ron. I have no doubt that had their friendship been allowed to continue undisturbed, it would have lasted a lifetime. Indeed, had Harry’s attraction to men proved to be consistent, I see no reason why they could not have become happily married in the end,” Dumbledore said, “I truly was acting in Harry’s best interest through all of this. No child should have to make such big decisions, not after losing their parents so brutally.”

This did not make the Wizengamot any happier, but nobody had any more questions. They had heard enough from Dumbledore.

“Would any members like to speak to the witnesses?” Lord Greengrass asked. He got no response. “Then we shall proceed to deliberations.”

“All those who find Albus Dumbledore guilty of the charge of grievous bodily harm of a minor, raise your hand.”

All members of the Wizengamot raised their hands, some openly glaring at Dumbledore. They did the same thing for the other crimes Dumbledore was charged with. There was a small whimper from the defendants table as each one was read out and received a guilty verdict, Hermione sobbing quietly.

“At the end of deliberations, this court finds Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore guilty on all charges,” Lord Greengrass said, “as representative of the Wizengamot, I sentence you to life in Azkaban.”

Lord Greengrass tapped his wand to his desk again. There was a bang and Harry felt the magic in the room shifted. The ground beneath Dumbledore opened up, and still bound to the chair, he was lowered into the hole. Once he was gone, the hole closed up and a new chain chair appeared.

The remaining defendants all looked very scared now. They had likely thought that if Dumbledore could somehow be exonerated, then by association they would go free too. Seeing him be found guilty must have made it clear to them that there would be no escape for them.

“I now call forth Molly Weasley in the matter of 04-249-65-B,” Madam Bones said.

Mrs Weasley trembled slightly as she was brought up to the chair, the chains immediately rising to bind her to it.

“Molly Weasley, you are charged with assault of a minor, accepting stolen money, and Line Theft. How do you plead?”

“N-not guilty.”

“Did you give potions to Harry Potter intended to manipulate and control his behaviour?” Madam Bones asked sternly.

“Well, y-yes, but that wasn’t-”

“Did this start when he first came to stay at the Burrow in the summer of 1992?”

“That’s not- Albus asked me to-”

“Molly Weasley, answer my questions directly or I will be forced to use Veritaserum,” Madam Bones said, “there will be time for you to elaborate on your answers later. Do I need to repeat my question?”

“No. I- I did give him the potions then.”

“When you stayed in Heir Potter’s home during the summer of 1995 and the Christmas holidays of that same year, were you responsible for all of the meals?”

“Yes, I cooked for everyone. It was my way of giving back as a guest.”

“And during those time periods, did you try and give Heir Potter any more potions via those meals?”

“No, I did not!” Mrs Weasley said forcefully.

Harry could practically see Madam Bones’s raised eyebrow.

“I have here a comprehensive list of potions provided to me by Heir Potter’s guardian. By this point, they suspected this was happening and Lord Black ordered his House Elf to inspect their guests' belongings for potions and neutralise them before they could be used. This is the record of every potion that you had with you, along with the date and time you attempted to use it,” Madam Bones said, “you tried using at least one potion with every meal Heir Potter ate, didn’t you?”

Mrs Weasley’s eyes were wide. Clearly she hadn’t figured out how Harry was able to eat her dosed food without being affected by the potions.

“Y-Yes, I did.”

“Did you receive payments from Dumbledore?”

“I did. He told me it was to help cover the costs of looking after another child.”

“Yet the payments were monthly, from August 1992 to August 1993. You have already testified that Harry Potter stayed with you in August 92, but are you now saying that he

stayed with you for the remaining time that you were receiving payments?”

“That- it was- no, he was at Hogwarts.”

“Did Arthur Weasley know about these payments?”

“No. Arthur was always so unnecessarily particular about money. I kept the money secret as a nest egg in case we fell on hard times.”

Harry saw the way Arthur tensed, his jaw clenched. The Weasley’s barely scraped by on Arthur’s lone salary. Surely that would count as hard times.

“Is that secrecy why the vault was registered to you as Molly Prewitt and not Molly Weasley?”

Mrs Weasley didn’t say anything.

“Were you aware that Albus Dumbledore was not Harry Potter’s legal magical guardian?”

“No!” Mrs Weasley burst out, “I only found that out today!”

Madam Bones shuffled some papers.

“I have here the betrothal contracts that were attempted to be made, both between Harry Potter and Ginevra Weasley, and Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. This is your signature, yes? Even though you are not the head of the household?”

“It is my signature, yes.”

“You are aware that since you are not the head of household, even if Dumbledore had been Harry Potter’s magical guardian, these contracts would not be legally enforceable?”

Mrs Weasley nodded.

“And you are also aware that making these contracts and filing them with the Ministry constitutes attempted Line Theft?”

“I just wanted my children to have a happy and secure future!” Mrs Weasley said, “they were so close with Harry, and I knew that this would be what was best for them! Harry would have a wife that loved him dearly, and Ginny would no longer have to live in poverty like I had to!”

“A wife?” Madam Bones said, “then why also set up a contract between Heir Potter and your son?”

“We- I didn’t want Harry to think we were trying to change him. If he l-likes men, then there was still a way for him to officially be a part of our family,” Mrs Weasley said.

“Chief Warlock, I request the use of Veritaserum,” Madam Bones said.

“Granted.”

“What? No! I’ve been telling you the truth! I swear!”

Mrs Weasley needed to be frozen in place to keep her from resisting as she was given three drops of the truth potion.

“Did you conspire with Albus Dumbledore to marry Heir Potter off to either your son or your daughter?”

“Yes. Albus told me that Harry deserved to be part of a family that loved him, and that after all the horrors in his life he shouldn’t need to be burdened with managing a noble house. Marrying him to Ginny and giving her the authority would be in his best interest. He reached out to me because he knew what I had tried to do to Arthur, and told me this would allow me to get the kind of life I wanted. I agreed with him. I gave Harry the potions and encouraged Ginny to get close to him. When Harry showed signs of homosexuality, I told Ron to do the same even though he didn’t want to.”

“What did you try to do to Arthur Weasley?”

“My family was already diminished when I was in school, and it only got worse during the war. I hated that I didn’t have any kind of standing. Nobody had to listen to me. None of the other noble families would have agreed to a marriage with me, but Arthur had always been kind. I tried to seduce him but he did not respond, so in our seventh year I slipped him a potion and we had sex that resulted in me getting pregnant. Because Arthur is really honourable, he married me to support his child, but I did not know that he knew what I had done. He met with Lord Septimus Weasley to give back the Heirship. I could not access the full Weasley vaults and was forced to rely on whatever money Arthur could earn himself.”

“When Lord Septimus died, I thought Arthur would inherit the Lordship, but because of their meeting, this didn’t happen. I tried pressuring Arthur to take it; kept having more children with him to try and force his hand as our financial situation grew worse and worse, but he refused.”

“Is this when your plan changed to instead rely on your children marrying into a noble family?” Madam Bones asked.

“Yes. Bill and Charlie were lost causes as both of them were too close to their father. Percy was too much of a rule-follower and the twins too poorly behaved. Fortunately, Ron and Ginny were similar in age to many of the other Heirs, so they were perfect.”

“Chief Warlock, I believe this evidence clearly shows that Molly Weasley is guilty of all charges laid before her,” Madam Bone said.

The antidote was administered, and now Mrs Weasley was trembling where she sat chained to her seat. All members of the Wizengamot were looking at her with the utmost disgust. Lord Greengrass leaned forward in his seat and asked if any of them had any further questions for her.

"If you didn't want to live in poverty, did you ever consider getting a job like everyone else?" Lady Zabini asked.

"As if you can talk," Mrs Weasley snapped, then immediately ducked her head.

"I have one question," Lord Greengrass said, "you said you had further children with Arthur Weasley. Were these children also conceived after you had plied him with potions?"

Mrs Weasley was shaking like a leaf, and she nodded.

"I call forth Arthur Weasley to stand before the Wizengamot."

Arthur rose from his seat and left the public gallery. Mrs Weasley jumped when she realised he was there. Arthur didn't even look at her or his children as he stood beside Madam Bones and faced Lord Greengrass.

"Arthur Weasley, given the crimes committed against you, I would like to add an additional charge to the matter of 04-249-65-B," Lord Greengrass said, "on account of Molly Weasley's admittance of having used potions to force you into conceiving children with her, I would like to also charge her with assault in addition to the Line Theft charge she is already facing. Do you consent to this charge?"

"I do," Arthur said.

Like with Dumbledore, Lord Greengrass read through the list of charges and called for a vote of guilty or not guilty. Each one was unanimous. Mrs Weasley was found guilty of everything, including the new charge of assault against Arthur. Ginny let out a sob, and Ron went completely white.

"At the end of deliberations, this court finds Molly Weasley guilty on all charges. As representative of the Wizengamot, I sentence you to 25 years in Azkaban," Lord Greengrass said, "there is an additional matter that has been raised. Arthur Weasley, given the crimes that have been committed against you by your wife, would you like to begin divorce proceedings?"

"I very much would like to do so," Arthur said, "I asked the Weasley Account Manager to come with me today."

"You can't do that! I refuse!"

One of the Aurors cast a Silencing Charm on Mrs Weasley.

The Weasley Account Manager was the old goblin from the gallery, named Silverring. He joined Arthur before the Wizengamot. The divorce proceedings were very short, all things considered. Since Mrs Weasley was at fault, they did not need her consent, and since her fault was crimes against the family, she also did not have any say. Silverring presented an agreement that Arthur must have drawn up ages ago to the Wizengamot, and with three quick signatures from Arthur, Silverring and Lord Greengrass, it was done. The floor opened up and Molly *Prewitt* was lowered into the floor, a new chain chair taking her place.

Arthur remained in front of the Wizengamot as Ron was called up next.

“Ronald Bilius Weasley, you are charged with accepting stolen money and accessory to Line Theft. How do you plead?”

“Guilty,” Ron said.

Clearly seeing Dumbledore and his mother being taken away had drained whatever courage Ron may have once had.

“You accept that you received money from Albus Dumbledore that was stolen from the Potter vaults?”

“I didn’t know it was stolen. Mum told me it was a grant from Gringotts.”

“You accept that Molly Prewitt was trying to forcefully marry you to Harry Potter?”

“Mum told me I needed to get close to him and be his friend so he could end up marrying Ginny. She said it would mean we wouldn’t be poor any more, and I’d finally have something that none of my brothers could get. Then she said that I needed to try and get Harry to marry *me* since he might not like girls at all, and so I had to be the one he married,” Ron said that with just a hint of disgust in his voice, “she gave me stuff to give to him, but I’d already messed things up, so I started going out with Colin to show Harry that I could handle being in a relationship with a boy. I even had *sex* with him to prove it!”

“Chief Warlock, this evidence clearly shows that Ronald Weasley is guilty of accepting stolen money,” Madam Bones said, “I would also ask that his charge be upgraded from accessory to Line Theft to attempted Line Theft.”

“What! But I was just doing as I was told!”

“Ronald Weasley, you may have started out just doing as you were told, but you have just admitted to actively conspiring ways to get closer to Heir Potter for the purposes of committing Line Theft,” Lord Greengrass said, “this is accepted.”

The deliberations were swift and Ron was found guilty on all charges.

“Given your age, you will not be sentenced to Azkaban. Instead, you will serve two years in Paenitentia Prison, followed by three years of surveillance. If you commit any further crimes in these three years, you will be sent back to Paenitentia for a further three years.”

Ron was taken back to the defendants table and Ginny was brought up next. She was openly crying, and unlike her brother, she pleaded not guilty to the same crimes.

“I didn’t know the money was stolen! I swear I didn’t mean to do anything wrong! I didn’t give him any potions or do anything gross like Ron! I just wanted Harry to like me like I like him! It’s not my fault!” she wept.

“Were you aware of what Molly Prewitt was doing with her plans to marry you to Harry Potter?”

“She just told me she was making arrangements for my future, and that I needed to get in my future husband's good graces, but then Ron had to ruin everything and now Harry's dating *two boys* when he should be dating me!”

“Chief Warlock, the evidence clearly shows that Ginevra Weasley accepted stolen money and followed the path her mother laid out for her with regards to Heir Potter and is thus an accessory to Line Theft,” Madam Bones said, “I return this matter to the Wizengamot.”

“Ginevra Weasley, why do you believe that you should be the one to marry Heir Potter?” Lady Zabini asked.

“Because- Because he's like a dashing prince. He's the hero of the magical world, and I could be the one to stand at his side and support him when he's in his darkest moments. Mum always told me that behind every strong man is a stronger woman,” Ginny said, “I just wanted to be Lady Potter.”

“I think you've been reading too many fairy tales, girl,” Lady Zabini said.

“Lady Zabini, I would ask you to keep such comments to yourself,” Lord Greengrass reprimanded her, “let us move to the deliberations.”

These passed quickly, and were once again unanimous.

“This court finds you guilty on all charges. Like your brother, your age has been taken into account. I sentence you to two years of surveillance. Any crimes committed in this period will see you automatically sent to Paenitentia for two years.”

Ginny looked to Arthur as her sentence was cast, her eyes wide and pleading, as though begging him to do something, but Arthur kept his eyes resolutely forward and didn't look at his daughter as she was taken back to the defendant's table. Even so, he looked harrowed as he returned to the public gallery.

And then finally it was Hermione. She was brought forth and chained to the chair. A representative from the Muggle Liaison Committee stood beside her, alongside people Harry recognised as her parents. Mr and Mrs Granger both looked deeply troubled.

“Hermione Jean Granger, you are charged with accepting stolen money and accessory to assault. How do you plead?”

“I plead guilty,” Hermione said, her voice small and scared.

“You accept that you received money from Albus Dumbledore that was stolen from the Potter vaults?”

“I didn't know it was stolen at first. Professor Dumbledore approached me at the start of first year about a brilliant opportunity to make the world a better place for all magical people. He told me the money was from a fund to help Muggle-borns find their feet in the magical world. It was only after I was petrified in second year that I found out the money was coming

from Harry's vault, but considering all the danger I'd been put through by being Harry's friend, I thought it was just compensation."

"And you accept that you played a role in Albus Dumbledore's assault on Harry Potter by dosing him with potions?"

"Professor Dumbledore had a plan. He told us what he knew of what was to happen in the future and told us our role in his plan to stop it. Ron and I were to become Harry's best friends and help to guide him down the path Professor Dumbledore laid out for him. It was scary, but Professor Dumbledore assured us that as long as we followed the plan, no matter how dark things got, it would get better in the end. The potions were a part of that because otherwise Harry might not do what he needed to do," Hermione said, "he gave us the potions, but Ron was too blunt to slip them to him unnoticed so I had to do it. Professor Dumbledore said I didn't have to be his friend forever, that once I left Hogwarts I could walk away from it all without a backwards glance, and I could go on to become one of the finest minds the magical world had ever seen."

There was a light scoff from the Wizengamot. Her parents both looked deeply disappointed in her. There weren't any further questions, and the Wizengamot deliberated. It was another unanimous decision that Hermione was guilty on all charges.

"It is clear that you were merely acting on Dumbledore's behest. You were eleven and he hoodwinked you, but as you grew older and continued to act in ways you should have known were wrong, that excuse becomes less and less convincing. As such, I sentence you to a six month sentence in Paenitentia, followed by two years of surveillance."

And just like that, the trials were over. The Aurors moved forward to escort Ron, Ginny and Hermione back to the holding cells. For Ron and Hermione, this was to arrange transport to Paenitentia. For Ginny, it was to be processed for surveillance. Tears streamed down Hermione's face as she was led from the room, but Ron and Ginny were both staring at the public gallery. They might not be able to tell which person was Arthur, but they now knew he was there.

"Dad?" Ron said in disbelief.

"Daddy, please! You can't let them do this to me!"

Arthur stifled a pained noise as he watched his youngest children being led from the courtroom. Then the three of them were gone, and the trials were over.

"Are you going to be alright Arthur?" Sirius asked.

"Yes, I think I will." He gave himself a small shake, as though pulling himself back together. "I have my life back again. I'm free to live it how I see fit. Even if I have to support Ginny since she's a minor, things won't be like they once were, and that is good. This is all good. Justice has been served."

Indeed it had. The curtain on the last three years, no, the last fifteen years had well and truly been drawn. When Harry left the Ministry of Magic that day, the world around him seemed

brighter. He took a big deep breath and as they passed the golden fountain in the Ministry atrium, he tossed in a handful of galleons to pass along his good fortune.

Two weeks later, it was July 31st and Harry celebrated his sixteenth birthday surrounded by his friends and loved ones. Potter Manor was busier than it had ever been. Neville was there with Lady Longbottom, Parvati and Lavender, and Luna too. There was Sirius and Remus, and the Tonks's; Angelina, Alicia and Katie; Arthur and the twins; Bill and Fleur. Shortly after the party got started, Cho arrived with a much recovered Cedric on her arm. Following behind them was Viktor, which made Katie very happy.

Of course, a beloved presence by his side were Seamus and Dean. Together, the three of them ate from a delicious buffet provided by the Potter House Elves, enjoyed a brilliant fireworks show from Fred and George's new line, and danced and laughed and acted like idiots until late into the night. When the party eventually came to an end, he thanked those guests who would be leaving, and bid goodnight to those who were staying in the guest rooms.

"I heard Sirius say that next year will have to be a more formal ball since you'll be turning seventeen," Dean said once they were safely tucked away in Harry's room, "it still amazes me that seventeen is the big birthday and not eighteen."

"But just think about it. This time next year we'll all be seventeen. We'll be adults, meaning we can do magic whenever we want!" Seamus said.

"But we'll also be expected to get jobs and move out and things like that."

"Sure, but that'll be fine. We'll be together so nothing can stop us! Isn't that right Harry?" Seamus said, turning to face him, "Harry?"

Harry stood there nervously, hands behind his back so his boys couldn't see what he was holding. He had been building up to this all week, consulting with Sirius about the best way to do it, and making sure everything would be absolutely right. The nerves had been completely drowned out with the eclectic rush of the party, but now that he was alone with them, they had returned.

Dean and Seamus both looked concerned, but Harry spoke before they could ask what was wrong.

"I know this is my birthday, but I still wanted to give you something as well."

From behind his back, he pulled out two black ring boxes. He saw their looks of astonishment, which only grew when they realised what this meant. Inside each of the boxes was a simple, silver ring. They were unadorned on the outside, but on the inside were carved their three names in runes.

"I don't know what I would have done these last three years if I didn't have you beside me. It amazes me to this day that I could love somebody as much as I do you two, and even more so that you love me back. I've had a lot of time to think about it, and I've realised that this is it.

There's no one else I'd rather be with," Harry said, finally managing to look his boyfriends in the eye, "I love you Seamus. I love you Dean. I might only be able to give you a promise ring now since we're not adults yet, but I want you to always be by my side, if you'll have me?"

"I love you Harry.

"I love you too."

Harry could only beam as they accepted. They each kissed him fiercely and without hesitation, Seamus pulled off his shirt so he could put the ring on the chain around his neck. It came to rest next to their metal disc. Dean did the same thing a moment later. As soon as they turned seventeen, they promised they would wear these rings proudly, but for now, the world didn't deserve to know how much they loved him, not when it was already clamouring for all the news it could about Harry's private life.

They got very little sleep that night because once clothes had started to come off, the rest must surely follow. Harry followed Seamus and Dean into his bed, and his world shrank until it was just the three of them. Them three and the passion they shared between them. Every inch of their bodies were explored, and all manner of feelings and sensations were drawn from them, and Harry was caught by the sight of the rings hanging from their necks, the promise they had made to one another flush against their skin. They kept going right up until the sun rose, catching small naps between bouts of love-making. Celio brought them breakfast, and afterwards they cleaned themselves up, the three of them sharing a relaxing bath, which led to Harry making love to his boyfriends one final time.

After that, they crawled into bed and slept. It was well past lunch when they finally emerged, fresh faced and rested as though nothing had happened. Sirius gave them a very knowing look, likely knowing exactly what they had been doing all night, but Harry didn't care.

In the years to come, Harry would look back on these days as the start of his brand new beginning. Gone were the shadows of the past, never to haunt his present. The future was so much brighter now, and with his boys at his side, Harry couldn't wait to see what it had in store.

Chapter End Notes

And here we are, with one chapter remaining.

The years to come

Chapter Notes

A bit of an epilogue to end the story.

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

“Go on, go on. Open it!”

Honestly, Sirius could act like such a child at times, but Harry forgave him for his enthusiasm. They’d both been eagerly awaiting this letter all summer. The delivery owl had had the air of firm professionalism which immediately clued Harry in to what it was delivering. The seal of the WIZARDING Examination Authority was on the front. They were in the dining room at Grimmauld Place, and Harry got the distinct impression that Sirius would use a sticking charm on him if he dared trying to leave without opening it. With a slightly trembling hand, Harry broke the seal and read through the sheet of parchment inside.

ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL RESULTS

Hadrian James Potter has achieved:

Core Subjects

Astronomy - O

Charms - O

Defence Against the Dark Arts - O

Herbology - E

History of Magic - E

Potions - O

Transfiguration - O

Elective Subjects

Arithmancy - E

Study of Ancient Runes - O

Staring at his results, Harry felt a surge of happiness. He couldn’t believe he’d done so well. Six O’s and three E’s. It was a far cry from his performance in first and second year, where at

times it felt like he was lucky to have passed everything. Completely free of mental manipulation, Harry was able to perform as he should have done, and this was the result. He'd even managed to get an O in Potions, and felt a small amount of glee at the thought of Snape's irritation at that fact.

"Well?" Sirius asked, "how'd you do?"

"Awfully! I thought I'd done well but I've failed!" Harry said, playing it up.

For a moment, Sirius thought he was genuine, but then Harry handed him his results and his anguished face turned into a beaming grin. Sirius lit up as he read the parchment, and when he looked up at Harry, he practically shone with pride. He yanked Harry into a tight hug, one that Harry eagerly returned.

"You little bastard! You actually had me worried there for a second!" Sirius said, grinning as much as Harry was, "oh Harry, you've done so well! This calls for a celebration. A big party would be a bit much, wouldn't it? Maybe we can go out somewhere? Remus should be free, and I'll see if Andy wants to come too. I cannot wait to tell everyone!"

"Who's everyone?"

"Who do you think it means? *Everyone*."

"You are not going to bother random people on the street with my exam results," Harry said flatly.

"Ok, maybe not unprompted, but if they ask-" Sirius teased.

Harry felt the heat of his disk against his chest and knew that Seamus and Dean also received their exam results. He retreated to his room and listened to their messages, congratulating them on their performance and sharing his own. A letter was waiting for him on his desk from Luna.

Congratulations on your exam results. I know you are very happy about them, it read. Harry shook his head fondly, not questioning how Luna knew either of those things. He wrote a reply thanking her, and then more letters to Neville, Parvati and Lavender asking them how they did. After watching Hedwig fly off, Harry turned to the calendar on the wall. There were only three weeks to go before he started his sixth year at Hogwarts. He could hardly wait!

Luna read the letter fondly. The vision she received hadn't been clear at first. All she saw was Harry opening a letter and then being incredibly happy. Then she remembered what had been on its way and so she had written to Harry to congratulate him. While she hadn't seen anything about the other Gryffindor fifth-years, she had spent a lot of time with them last year and knew how hard they had worked for their exams, so she sent letters to them too.

Did this make them friends? She liked them all very much, and they didn't treat her badly for her oddities. Luna had never really had friends before, and this was fine with her. She had her

own imagination to pass the time, coming up with wonderful stories that filled many books on the shelves on her bedroom walls, perhaps to be published when she was older. Then when she started at Hogwarts, she had her duty as Steward of Ravenclaw. It was enough for her, but she had to admit, it did feel nice to have friends. Hopefully when they returned to Hogwarts they could still be friends, even now that the danger that originally drew her to them had passed.

“Luna,” her father, Xenophilius, called up the spiral staircase, “we have guests.”

She descended the stairs, and immediately curtsied when she reached the bottom. Standing in their living room was Garrick Ollivander, but while she respected the man a great deal, her curtsy had been directed more towards the other guest. The ten year old Lord Ravenclaw, Gannon Ollivander, was holding his great-uncle’s hand.

“How good it is to see you again my dear,” Garrick said, “and so well too, especially after all that nasty business at Hogwarts this year.”

“Thank you sir,” Luna said, “I’m glad I could do my duty and keep Hogwarts safe.”

“You did indeed. Lady Ravenclaw made the right choice all those years ago when she chose your family as stewards for her line,” Garrick said, “the Ollivander’s may not take advantage of the Ravenclaw magic all that much, but I am glad that the fact we hold it allowed you to protect the school. My only regret is that you were forced to do so in the first place.”

“My Luna has done our family proud,” Xenophilius said, “I know I couldn’t be prouder.”

“Steward Luna is so cool,” Gannon said quietly.

At Garrick’s encouraging nod, he took a step forward, closer to Luna.

“For your actions in the name of the Ravenclaw family, a-as Lord Ravenclaw, I would like to reward you for your service,” Gannon said, his tone slightly nervous, “the cottage and associated grounds owned by the Ravenclaw family in the Caledonian forest is yours, to be passed down to your descendants or returned to the Ravenclaw family upon your death.”

He glanced back at Garrick as though checking he was doing it right. Garrick nodded encouragingly. When he looked back at Luna, she smiled.

“It is a very kind offer, and I am most humbly grateful for it my lord, but it is unnecessary. I did what I did without need of any reward. I protected my school and my friends, so I will not accept this gift. I deeply apologise for any offence.”

This was clearly not in the script. Gannon’s eyes went wide. He looked back to Garrick for support, but Garrick did not say anything.

“But, um, b-but you should be rewarded! It’s- it was a really good thing you did, and uh, my-my family really appreciates it.” Gannon paused, thinking hard. “Your stories! The stories you used to tell me when I was little! I- I want to help with them. If, um, if you want to get them made into a proper book, I can- the Ravenclaw family can help support you?”

It was very sweet the way that Gannon insisted that Luna needed rewarding for doing the right thing, even as he tripped and fumbled over his words, not entirely sure how to put what he wanted to say in the proper 'lordly' manner. Taking pity on him, Luna knelt down to be closer to his level. Offering to help her publish her stories was much more personal to her than giving her property, and it still left Luna the option of not publishing them at all so she wouldn't feel like she was forcing him into it. Gannon went quiet as he waited for Luna's answer.

"Though I do not feel like I need it, I will accept. Thank you, my lord."

Gannon sagged in relief, then pulled himself back up to his more official posture.

"Then that is what we shall do," he declared.

"My lord is most kind," Xenophilus said.

"Indeed, and also well handled," Garrick said.

Gannon beamed. Luna leaned in closer to him.

"Would you like to come with me down to the river? We can go fishing for freshwater plimpies," she said.

In an instant, gone was Lord Ravenclaw, replaced by a wide eyed and excited ten year old.

"Yes, yes, yes!" he said, then to Garrick, "can I Uncle? Can I please?"

"We don't mind watching the little lord if you need to get back to the shop," Xenophilus said.

"That's no issue. My daughter's running it today. It'll be good practice for when she takes over from me. She's got an eye for matching wands to their wielders, and in another few years her wandmaking will easily match my own." Garrick smiled at his great-nephew. "Of course you can."

Gannon beamed.

"Come on Aunty Luna!" he said, tugging Luna's hand to hurry her up.

"Slow down Gannon. We need to get our welly-boots on first," Luna said patiently.

As they left the house, Xenophilus offered Garrick a cup of tea, and Garrick accepted so long as it was actually tea and not gurdy-roots. Luna left her father to his company, walking hand in hand to the river with Gannon, her lord, but at this moment her little nephew in all but blood.

Her actions had helped to bring peace to Magical Britain. The children born now would not know the darkness of Lord Voldemort, nor the ever present shadow of Albus Dumbledore. They would be free to live their lives without that manipulation. She had fought alongside her friends for that bright future she could now catch glimpses of, and when she looked down at

the happy child beside her, Luna felt herself looking forward to it. Even a Seer couldn't see all possible outcomes, and as Luna had learned this last year, there was something terrifying, yet deeply exciting, about facing the unknown with friends.

Sixth year eventually arrived. Harry joined his boyfriends on the Hogwarts Express, waved off at Platform Nine and Three Quarters by Sirius and Mrs Finnegan. They'd spent a lot of the summer together, so there wasn't much need to catch each other up, but when Neville and the girls arrived, they chatted away for the entirety of the journey. There was still plenty to talk about, particularly the new developments in their responsibilities. Dean and Parvati both had shiny new prefect badges on the front of their robes, and Harry had the badge of the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain.

Occasionally other people that they knew poked their head in, including one very welcome sight.

"Cedric!"

Cedric Diggory, with Cho at his side, leaned against the door to their compartment.

"Fancy seeing you lot here," he said.

"Seeing *us*? What are you doing here?" Harry asked lightly.

"It's the end result of being in a magical coma for most of a year when I already hadn't been preparing for NEWTs, what with the tournament and everything. McGonagall asked Mum and Dad if I wanted to come back to re-do my seventh year and I said yes," Cedric said, "I'm in no rush. The big wide world will still be there waiting for me, but this way I get to finish things properly."

Cho was beaming with happiness, likely thrilled that she would be able to spend time with Cedric without the Triwizard Tournament looming over them.

Another guest arrived not long after Cedric left. Draco Malfoy opened the compartment door. He didn't look nearly as haughty as he had done in previous years, and somehow he seemed smaller, though that might be because Crabbe and Goyle were no longer flanking him.

"Thank you for what you and Lord Black did for me," Malfoy said, not quite meeting Harry's eye, and then in a much quieter voice, "and I apologise for my earlier behaviour."

He gave Harry a brief bow then disappeared before Harry could respond. It was certainly an odd encounter, but Harry was pleased. Hopefully Malfoy wouldn't be so unpleasant this year.

Hogwarts Castle was just as welcoming as it always was. Harry felt his magic reach out to it, and Hogwarts reached back. There was something more personal about this greeting, and he realised this must be Merlin's way of welcoming him back to school for another year.

Professor McGonagall had been officially instated as the Headmistress, with Flitwick as her deputy, and it was she that stood at the front of the Great Hall to give the start of term notices.

Almost immediately, she informed them that all products from Weasley's Wizards Wheezes had been banned by Filch. There were a few mischievous looks on people's faces, and Harry just knew that Filch had invited chaos on himself. Fred and George's joke shop in Diagon Alley was already a smashing success. It was packed when Harry visited over the summer, and no doubt the students had returned to school well armed for their battles with the caretaker.

Up at the staff table, Remus smiled serenely out over the students, having been permanently hired as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Hagrid was also there, and he waved cheerily at Harry. Snape was still there too, looking surlier than usual.

"Five sickles Snape quits after this year," Seamus said to Harry in the dormitory that night.

"Alright, but five sickles if he's still there at the start of next year," Harry responded, "and ten sickles if he leaves before the end this year."

"As long as I get ten sickles if he's still here by the time we leave Hogwarts, you've got yourself a deal."

They shook hands, Dean and Neville watching them fondly.

Classes began in earnest the next day. Harry's timetable was lightened by the loss of History of Magic and Astronomy, but with seven subjects he was still pleasantly busy. He also found time to arrange tryouts for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. With Angelina, Alicia, Fred and George having left Hogwarts last year, he had at least two Chasers and two Beaters to find. Katie and McLaggen both wanted to continue, even though they were both seventh-years.

In the end, Harry was very happy with his team. Katie defended her position as Chaser, and was joined by Demelza Robins, a fourth-year who was very good at dodging Bludgers and was also very accurate when shooting the Quaffle. To Harry's surprise, the final Chaser ended up being Seth. He was easily the smallest person on the team, but he was fast and nimble on the broom, and what he lacked in being able to score goals he made up for with a spectacular ability to pass the Quaffle and set up plays. The Beaters were Jimmie Peakes and Ritchie Coote, neither of whom looked like traditional Beaters, but Peakes certainly had strength in his swing and Coote had managed to hit a Bludger so accurately it knocked the Quaffle out from under Katie's arm without hitting her at all.

He worked the team hard, and watched with pride as they slowly but surely got better and better. Their first game was against Slytherin. Malfoy had re-joined the Slytherin team as Seeker, and Harry looked forward to once again going head to head with him. The match was fierce. The Quaffle changed hands with a rapid pace, the Slytherin's growing increasingly annoyed when Seth would seemingly appear out of nowhere to intercept their passes, handing it off to Katie or Demelza before they could retaliate against him. Harry soared high above them all, watching for the Snitch. He and Malfoy dived, neck and neck, when they both saw it. They flew in between all the players, made a full circuit of the entire pitch, until finally Harry's hand grasped the cold metal of the Golden Snitch.

Besides running regular team practises, Harry was almost entirely focused on his schoolwork. It helped that he had friends who were willing to be as diligent as him, and also that he no

longer had to worry so much about the goings on outside and inside Hogwarts. The material was much harder than anything they'd studied before, but Harry relished the challenge, throwing himself into it with gusto. Even Snape's irritation at having Harry in his class couldn't bring him down, and Harry found that Snape was somehow a much better teacher in a smaller class.

There was no Ron, Hermione or Ginny to try and tamper with him. Ron was in prison, and until the end January, so was Hermione. Even so, Hermione and Ginny had been suspended from Hogwarts for the year. They would only be allowed to return if they complied with the terms of their surveillance and provided they successfully passed their OWLs at the end of the year. Hermione would also not be returning to Harry's year. She would be with the year below, and out of Harry's hair.

The year continued on at a sedate pace. Interspersed between classes and Quidditch, Harry made sure to spend time with all of his friends. When the first Hogsmeade visit arrived, they all went down as a group and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. The second Hogsmeade visit just before Christmas was different though.

"Look, aren't they being so sweet?" Seamus whispered, as the three of them tried very hard to pretend that they weren't shamelessly spying on their friend.

Neville had plucked up the courage to ask Padma Patil if she wanted to accompany him to Hogsmeade. This had been brewing for a while now, but Harry was thrilled that Neville had taken this next step.

The rest of the year passed by in a whirlwind of classes, homework and Quidditch. The Quidditch Cup was even more hard fought for this year than any year prior. In the end, it was between Gryffindor and Slytherin, and after a challenging match against Ravenclaw, Gryffindor emerged victorious. The celebrations lasted well into the night, and even the shy Seth was in thick of things, slowly but surely coming out of his shell from the elation.

With the end of the year came exams, but it also brought something else.

There was a buzz about the school as a group of witches and wizards walked up to the castle from the front gates. Harry stood at the top of the stone stairs to greet them. He saw Fred and George, along with Angelina, Alicia, and the former members of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team; Fleur, Martin and the other Beauxbaton students; the most excitement came when people saw Viktor Krum, though Harry was also happy to see Viggo with him too. Harry, Cedric, Cho and Katie went to join them. After all, there was some unfinished business, now that Cedric had recovered.

The Champions Quidditch Tournament.

With the Inter-House Quidditch Cup over for the year, everyone had returned to finish what they had started nearly two years ago. Taking place across the three weekends of the Easter holidays, they played the three games they hadn't been able to in Harry's fourth year: Harry vs Fleur, Harry vs Viktor, and then the final Championship match. The excitement for these games reached a fever pitch, and when Harry walked out onto the pitch for the first time, his

former teammates and Viggo at his side, he even saw a couple of reporters from the Daily Prophet.

The team from Beauxbaton were no less skilled now than they had been before. The Quaffle moved up and down the pitch rapidly, both sides determined to score goals, leading to several very impressive saves by both Fleur and Viggo. Fred and George were in fine form, easily falling back into place as Beaters as they batted Bludgers at the opposing team. Harry scanned the pitch for the Golden Snitch, Martin doing the same thing. Then they both dived. The chase was short but intense. The Snitch suddenly veered, zooming around Angelina, forcing Harry to swerve to avoid her, and Martin intercepted it. There was a great cheer from the stands as Martin held the Snitch up high.

Despite the loss, Harry joined in happily with the celebrations. The rest of his team weren't disheartened, and they threw themselves into preparations for their next match. Harry was sure he saw Colin sneaking off alone with Martin when nobody else was looking.

One week later, it was Harry vs Viktor. All eyes were on the Seekers, and Harry was filled with exhilaration to be playing against such an internationally renowned player. He didn't let it distract him though. Viktor tried leading him and feinting him, but Harry refused to be affected by it. Around them, the other players were battling fiercely, but never before had Harry been so absorbed into his task as Seeker. Harry dived, feeling Viktor following behind him. At the last moment, Harry pulled out, though owing to his skill, Viktor managed to make it out of the Wronski Feint unscathed. It gave Harry some precious time to find the Snitch.

And he did. He darted after it, Viktor hot on his heels. They flew in laps around the pitch as they chased after it, the crowd nearly silent in anticipation. Viktor drew level with him, his longer arm reaching past Harry. In his desperation, Harry removed his other hand from the broom, batting Viktor's arm to the side. At such high speed, it nearly unseated him from his broom, but his reaching hand closed around cold metal, and he clung to his Firebolt like a sloth. When he righted himself, he realised what he'd done, and the crowd roared with a deafening cheer.

He, Harry, had beaten Viktor Krum.

"Very well done Harry," Viktor said, not sounding disappointed by it in the slightest, "it's been a while since somebody's really tried to make me work for it."

With his victory, it meant that he and Viktor both had two wins and one loss, meaning they would play each other again next week in the Championship game. This match was, if possible, even more intense. From the very moment Madam Hooch blew her whistle, they were off. The Chasers fought furiously to score every point possible, the Keepers and Beaters desperate to stop them. Throughout it all, Viktor and Harry zoomed after a particularly energetic Snitch which had a nasty habit of appearing, leading them around, and then disappearing. Harry's team were in the lead, he heard the commentator announce the score of 180-290 in his favour. If they could only get even further ahead...

Then, high above the pitch, Harry and Viktor dove after the Snitch. They flew straight down, both of them pressed tight to their brooms to eke out every possible ounce of speed. The

ground was rapidly approaching, the Snitch not altering its course until the last possible moment. Both of them swerved after it. The sudden shift in momentum had them skidding across the ground, then they lurched off their brooms, coming tumbling and rolling to a halt on the ground. Bumped and bruised, Harry picked himself up, Viktor doing the same beside him, only for Harry to see the Snitch clutched tightly in Viktor's hand.

The end of the Champions Tournament ended in Viktor's victory, but all four Champions were brought up onto a stage set up in the Quidditch pitch. The story made the front page of the Daily Prophet, much more publicity than the original ending of the Triwizard Tournament got. Harry didn't care in the slightest that he didn't win. He got to experience something very few people would ever get to. Though he wished things hadn't had to happen the way they did, he was glad to have met Fleur and Viktor. His loss was certainly helped by Seamus and Dean, who made sure that Harry was well rewarded in the dormitory that night.

Very, *very* well rewarded.

Harry's seventh year came with a small amount of trepidation. This would be his final year at Hogwarts, the school he'd attended for the last six years. All the memories he'd made here, the good and the bad, that would be it after this year. While he was definitely looking forward to it, there was also sadness. Sirius assured him that was perfectly natural.

His Hogwarts letter arrived, bringing with it a surprise. Professor McGonagall had made him Head Boy, something Harry had not seen coming. The letter explained it was for his efforts to bring the school together, as well as his support for those who needed it, regardless of House. It was certainly an honour, one that Harry would accept graciously, but now he had to put up with Sirius's teasing about how much he was taking after James. At least the Head Girl, Susan Bones, had nothing to do with him.

This was also the year that Hermione and Ginny returned to school. According to Arthur, Ginny had not been happy at all about basically being stuck at the Burrow, especially when Arthur himself had been preparing Weasley Hall to return to. Even so, using some money from the Weasley family vaults, he had paid for her to complete a Ministry correspondence course so she could complete her fifth year. Evidently Hermione had managed to do the same. Both of them were allowed to return to the school, though McGonagall assured them they would be under strict conditions.

Aside from a few glances on the first day, neither of them could spare Harry any attention at all, too busy trying to find their feet again now that whatever social standing they once had had been completely uprooted. Hermione couldn't even bother him in class, as she was taking the sixth-year classes while Harry prepared for his NEWTs. Ginny occasionally looked heartbroken when she saw Harry with Seamus and Dean, but wisely stayed well clear of him.

Speaking of Seamus and Dean, Parvati and Lavender had nearly shattered glass with their squeals when they saw what they wore on their fingers. The promise rings Harry had given them were now worn proudly for all to see. They had gifted Harry a ring of his own on his seventeenth birthday, and everyone who saw the three of them understood what it meant.

Harry couldn't wait until the end of the year, as there was a different set of rings he would like to give them.

As the year approached its end, Harry prepared to leave Hogwarts for the final time. They won their final Quidditch match, barely beating Ravenclaw 310-290 to win the Quidditch cup, and Harry handed the Captaincy of the team to Demelza. After that, NEWTs were upon him.

These exams were much worse than OWLs. The material was a lot harder, bringing with it a corresponding extra amount of stress, and the additional two weeks while the fifth-years took their OWLs didn't feel like enough time. Harry and his friends had been knuckling down for months, all of them studying and revising to prepare as much as possible.

One by one, Harry took his NEWTs, and then just like that they were over. The great weight of pressure was released, and Harry could breathe freely again. The elation of finishing was met by an equally great sadness upon the realisation that this was truly it. His time at Hogwarts had come to an end. School always seemed like it would last forever, but now, the big wide world awaited them.

On the last night of term, Harry snagged Seamus and Dean. While the rest of the school was celebrating the end of exams and happily anticipating the Leaving Feast, the three of them snuck away from the others, walking around the lake. They reached the secluded little cove that Harry used for his morning swims. In his mind's eye, Harry could see the Durmstrang ship moored nearby. Three and a half years ago, the three of them had been in this spot and confessed their feelings to one another. Now here they were, and Harry wanted to take the next step.

The sun was making its way towards the horizon, bathing the castle in orange light. The surface of the lake glistened like it was inlaid with jewels, rippling gently in the slight breeze. Harry watched it for a moment, then turned to his boyfriends. There were so many things he could say, but he settled on the most important thing.

"I love you," he said, once to Seamus and once to Dean, both just as sincerely.

With fond smiles, they told him they loved him too. With a small amount of trepidation, Harry pulled out two ring boxes from his pocket and went down on one knee. It was almost the same as the night of his sixteenth birthday, only now he wasn't asking for a promise.

"Seamus, Dean, will you two marry me?" Harry asked.

Instead of answering, both Seamus and Dean also knelt down, mirroring Harry's position. Dean pulled out a ring box of his own from his pocket, and they held it between them.

"Only if you will marry us too," Dean said.

Harry could only laugh.

"What- but how did you know I would-"

“We wanted to be able to propose to you as well, so we asked Sirius if you’d shared any of your plans with him,” Seamus said, “he didn’t say anything, only that you’d been shopping around for two rings, so we knew what we needed to do.”

“I’ve been carrying this around for weeks now,” Dean said, “well Harry, will you marry me?”

“And will you marry me?”

Harry felt tears starting to form in his eyes.

“Of course I will.”

The three of them returned to the castle with brand new rings on their fingers. Lavender was the first to notice. She quickly got Parvati’s attention, and the other girl’s eyes went wide. They both hugged them tightly. Neville congratulated them, likely having known this would be coming. Nobody else in Gryffindor knew what was going on, attributing their exuberance to the end of exams. Harry was fine with that. He got to spend the rest of his life with the boys he loved.

The very next day, they loaded onto the Hogwarts Express for the final time. Harry paused on the station, looking back at the castle in the distance. A thin layer of magic wrapped around him like a comforting blanket, and Harry understood the message.

Farewell, dear Harry.

“Thank you Merlin,” Harry whispered.

And as he embarked on the train, it didn’t feel so much like an ending. The Hogwarts Express set off, leading them towards their new beginnings, a life that Harry, Seamus and Dean would lead side by side, together.

Harry often found himself looking back on those final two years at Hogwarts with fondness. The years in between had been just as kind, all leading up to this moment. It was small in the grand scheme of things, but Harry had been looking forward to it for a while. It was a tradition the Potter family had not been able to engage in in a generation, one Harry wanted to continue.

“And this is great-great-grandfather Charles. He wrote that book on the Potter Family history that Papa-Harry read to us. Grandma Dorea made those honey cakes that Uncle Sirius loves to make when we go to visit him,” Jamie happily narrated, pulling his younger brother down the corridor ahead of them.

Leo followed after him, the four year old listening with rapt attention as Jamie made funny faces at the portraits. Many of the portraits made faces back at him. Harry followed a few paces behind them, watching fondly as his two youngest children interacted with the history of the Potter family. His eldest walked beside him.

“Not going to join in?” Harry asked him.

“And try and keep up with Jamie? No thank you,” Aaron said, “I’ll wait until he tires himself out.”

“You’ll be waiting a long time.”

Born to Harry and Seamus, Aaron was the calmest of Harry’s three children and the one who would carry the Potter Family Magic. He had definitely picked up Dean’s sensibleness and patience. Harry ran his fingers through his son’s dark blonde hair, just as messy as Harry’s own, and smiled when bright green eyes looked up at him. It was sometimes crazy for him to think that Aaron was already eleven. In a few months time, he would be going off to Hogwarts. Harry didn’t think he was ready for his children to start leaving the nest, even if it was only for school.

“And this is great-grandfather Fleamont. He died not long after Papa-Harry was born so he didn’t get to meet him, but Uncle Sirius said he developed a cool hair potion because his and Grandpa James’s hair was always so messy!” Jamie said, continuing his narration.

“But Papa-Harry’s hair is still messy?” Leo said.

“Because Papa-Harry doesn’t use it,” Aaron said, “he says it’s his look.”

“I have used it on occasions,” Harry said, “should I use it on you the next time you need a bath?”

“No, that won’t be necessary!” Aaron said, a touch too quickly.

“Messy hair!” Jamie cheered, pointing at Aaron.

“Messy hair,” Leo said, copying his brother.

“You’ve got messy hair too!” Aaron insisted, “it runs in the family. You can see it in the portraits!”

“What’s this I hear? Is this an argument brewing?”

Harry’s heart warmed when from the other end of the corridor, Seamus and Dean came around the corner.

“Papa-Shay! Papa-Dean! I was showing Leo all the pictures!” Jamie said.

“Really? It sounded more like you were having an argument with Aaron, and you know what that means. Arguments attract the Tickle Monster!” Seamus said, dropping into a playful crouch with wriggling fingers as he stomped towards them.

“No!” Jamie pushed Leo behind him. “Run Leo! I’ll hold him off!”

“Will you now?”

Seamus pounced on Jamie, easily finding his son’s sensitive spots and filling the hall with peals of laughter as he wriggled and squirmed and ineffectually tried to get Seamus to stop.

Not that Seamus would, knowing how much Jamie was enjoying himself. If neither Harry nor Dean stopped him, those two would be playing games for hours.

Born to Harry and Dean, Jamie was easily the most energetic and rambunctious of the Potter children, always up and about and wanting to do stuff. Already he was signed up for a junior Quidditch team, and it was hard to tell if the nine year old had also inherited the Potter messy black hair since it was just as likely to be messy from all the time he spent running around. It was perhaps destiny that someone so like Godric would be the one to carry the Gryffindor magic.

Wide eyed, Leo ran up to Harry and Aaron, tugging on their hands to bring them closer to Seamus and Jamie.

“Come on! We need to save Jamie from the Tickle Monster.”

Aaron took Leo’s hand, running with him to where Jamie was being ticked, and jumped onto Seamus’s back. When Leo tried to help, Dean scooped him up. Seamus turned his attention to Aaron, but when Jamie thought he was safe, Harry appeared behind him. Hearing his children all laughing so freely filled a hole within Harry that he didn’t realise was there. The three adults stopped, leaving all three children breathless but with big smiles on their faces. Leo hid behind Aaron, just in case the Tickle Monster made another appearance.

“Everything alright at the office?” Harry asked while his children caught their breaths.

“Aye. Production’s going smoothly. I think word really got out after the Ministry started using them for urgent communication between departments,” Seamus said, “the next thing we know, there’ll be a SpeakerBox in every home.”

“And then wizards will only be *ten* paces behind Muggles in this regard, rather than twenty,” Dean said, “with the smartphones they’ve got, they’re basically walking around with tiny computers in their pockets.”

“Like Grandma Jill? Can you make the SpeakerBoxes play games, Papa-Seamus?” Aaron asked.

“We’re still quite a way away from that unfortunately.”

The SpeakerBox was the brainchild of Seamus and Dean, based on the discs the three of them wore around their necks that they could use to record messages for each other. Once Seamus finished his Mastery in Charms, the pair of them took that concept and tried to make something along the lines of a Muggle telephone. Their first breakthrough was in linking SpeakerBoxes to allow live communication. The second was even more impressive, giving each SpeakerBox its own ID key which could be inputted into a different SpeakerBox. When they showed that different SpeakerBoxes could talk to more than one other SpeakerBox and didn’t require the indignity of crouching in front of a fire, that was when people really got interested. The current models were cubes that were just bigger than the size of the average hand, not quite portable yet but getting there. Harry was so proud of them.

Though Dean grumbled that they couldn't just call them phones, because apparently that sounded too Muggle and wouldn't sell well.

"We also bumped into Neville on our way home. He sends his regards, and asked if we wanted to come over for dinner next Friday," Seamus said.

"We can go play with Annie and Bertie?" Jamie asked excitedly.

"Only if you behave and eat your dinner," Dean reminded him.

"Yes Papa-Dean," all three of the children said in response.

Harry looked up at the portrait on the wall. James and Lily were looking down on them. Theirs wasn't like the other portraits, since it was made from a photograph and not the living subjects, but even so, the way they looked at Harry and his family with such love made Harry think their years on the wall of Potter Manor had somehow imbued them with enough magic that a small part of James and Lily was there, able to be with them.

Leo looked up at the portrait curiously, and it was Aaron that took over the narration.

"This is Grandpa James and Grandma Lily," he said.

"He looks like Papa-Harry," Leo said.

"Lots of people have said the same thing," Dean said.

"Grandpa James and Grandma Lily aren't around any more. They, they um," Aaron trailed off, looking sad.

His expression was mirrored by both Leo and Jamie, the latter unusually quiet. None of Harry's children liked this part of the story, but it was hard to avoid when Harry was such a famous person.

"They're gone because of a very bad man who did very bad things. That's why Papa-Seamus, Papa-Dean and I, along with so many other people, did everything we could to make sure he couldn't hurt anyone else, ever again."

It was important for them to know their history, but equally so for them to understand that things had gotten a lot better. Leo came out from behind Aaron. He tugged on the front of Harry's robes, and when Harry picked him up, he wrapped his little arms around Harry's neck, tucking in close.

"Don't be sad Papa-Harry," he said softly.

"Thank you Leo. I'm not sad any more. I may not have my mum and dad, but I've got you and your brothers, and Papa-Seamus and Papa-Dean. That's more than enough for me."

He rubbed a gentle hand up and down Leo's back, idly noting the lack of the Black Heir ring on his finger, since Harry was no longer Heir Black. After Aaron and Jamie, they didn't think

they would have any more children, until they were lying in bed a few years after Jamie was born and Seamus nervously asked if they could have one more.

“I love our kids so much. I am so happy with them I could scream about it for days,” Seamus had said, “but something in my heart tells me I’ve got more love to give, like there’s room for one more.”

After more discussions, they were all in agreement, and so Seamus bore them Leo. He had Harry’s black hair, but it was wavy like Seamus’s. A quiet, sensitive soul, Harry could think of no-one better to carry on the Black Family Magic, a sentiment Sirius agreed with. It was a fresh start, far removed from the past actions of the Blacks, and Harry knew that Leo would go on to do great things, just like his brothers.

Realising Leo wasn’t letting go any time soon, Harry held him close as they continued their journey through Potter history to the final portrait. The frame on the wall was brand new, a velvet curtain hiding what lay beneath. It had taken six months to make, but now it was finally ready.

“Go on,” Harry said to Aaron.

Aaron reached out and pulled the cord, and the curtains fell away. The portrait was revealed, the six figures in the hall mirrored by the figures in magical paint. The painted Harry stood with Seamus and Dean either side of him, his hands on Aaron’s shoulders. Aaron was holding Leo’s hand, while Jamie stood on his other side. All were dressed in fine dress robes. Harry’s eyes drifted to the plaque below the frame.

Lord Hadrian Potter, Lord Consort Seamus Potter, Lord Consort Dean Potter, Heir Aaron Potter, Jamie Potter, Leo Potter.

The renditions of Harry’s family in paint smiled out at those in flesh and blood. The painted Jamie waved excitedly at them, and Jamie, just as excitedly, waved back. Aaron was looking at the portrait in awe at seeing himself alongside the Potter ancestors, immortalised in canvas for all the generations to come. Harry felt the same way. His eyes roamed over the portrait, finding all the details of both his husbands in all three children, whether it be Aaron and Leo’s slightly tan skin, Jamie’s blue eyes and Leo’s hazel eyes, or Aaron’s slimmer frame.

It was his family.

Seamus’s arm came to rest around his waist, and Harry leaned into his embrace. He felt Dean’s presence, heart full to bursting as he watched his husband patiently answering Jamie’s questions. His family was all here together, as it always should have been.

The scar on his forehead, so famous in the magical world, had faded to the point of near invisibility. The darkness of his past had similarly faded, left behind to exist in memory only. Long gone were the days of Voldemort and Dumbledore. The bright future of a world at peace was here, and it was this world that Harry would bring his children into. He had what he had wanted for so long. Seamus and Dean both knew what he was feeling. They felt it too.

After admiring the portrait for a bit longer, there were a few rumbling stomachs. Seamus declared that it must be time for dinner, to everyone's agreement. Jamie took off down the hallway in the direction of the dining room. Aaron ran after him, both of them ignoring Dean's reminder to be careful. Leo wriggled until Harry put him down, and he was off too, chasing after his older brothers. Harry laughed as he, Seamus and Dean followed them. In the years to come, when Harry was old and grey, he would look back on these moments and smile; when he had his family, and they were happy, and all was right with the world.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone was curious,

Aaron Harry Potter, Heir Potter, September 23rd 2001

Jamie Dean Potter, Heir Gryffindor, February 10th 2004

Leo Seamus Potter, Heir Black, May 4th 2008

I've had the picture of Harry's future family in my mind for a while now, and there's part of me that would have happily kept writing more chapters describing how things came to be. In the end, I restrained myself as this was a good place for the story to end.

I have said this in the replies to many comments, but it feels incredibly bizarre to have reached this point. From completing the first chapter at the beginning of February 2023, to uploading the first chapter here in June, here we are at last at the journey's end. It has been a joy to write, and very informative too. I now know that I can write a long story like this and actually bring it to a (hopefully) satisfying end.

Thank you so very much to everyone who has read this story. Reading the comments left on each chapter is always fun, but even if you have never left a single comment, I am still grateful to each and every one of you. Of course, I must also thank Angelwithwingsoffire for writing Ignite the Spark, a most excellent story to read, and one I am deeply interested in seeing how it progresses.

I shall restrain myself from rambling too much here, and leave with once again with my thanks. I wish you all the best.

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