

Scion of Gryffindor 1 - Meet Godric

On the morning of Harry Potter's sixteenth birthday, his sole surviving relatives celebrated it in exactly the way Harry expected them to do so.

They completely ignored it.

That's assuming, of course, that they even knew when it was.

Instead of lavishing him with good wishes, cake, and presents, the Dursleys forced Harry to prepare their breakfast, begrudged him the pathetically small portions they allowed him, and generally berated him for the unmitigated gall he had for merely existing.

Not that it mattered to Harry. He'd already gotten more for the day than he was expecting. At one minute after midnight that morning, he'd let a dozen owls into the smallest bedroom of Number 4 Privet Drive. The mostly well-behaved owls queued up for him to relieve them of their burdens, and then they'd all flown out except for Harry's own Hedwig, Ron's Pigwidgeon, and the Weasley family owl Errol. Pigwidgeon was apparently expecting a reply to the note he'd brought, and Errol had passed out from exhaustion.

Most of the gifts weren't all that unusual. Meat pies, rock cakes, sampler packs of Wheezes, candy, teaching guides, and so on. Among the more unusual gifts Harry had gotten included So You Think You're a Man Now? from Fred and George (Harry was honestly afraid to open it); auror quality dragonhide wand holster to attach to his belt and dragonhide boots from the Order; and a small pensieve from Dumbledore.

The most surprising note, however, was from Gringotts bank inviting Harry to come in for a reading of the Last Will and Testament of Sirius O. Black.

Harry had pushed aside his melancholy to read Ron's note:

Hey, mate!

Happy birthday!

Dumbledore finally gave the go-ahead for you to come to the Burrow on the twelfth. Dad and I will be around at noon.

Don't let the muggles get you down!

Ron

As Harry fixed breakfast for his relatives much later that morning, he smiled. He only had twelve more days until he would escape.

"What are you grinning at, boy? Finally gone batty, have you? Touched in the head, no doubt. Well, get that unnatural smirk off of your face and get breakfast on the table before Dudley comes downstairs," said Uncle Vernon.

Yes, a normal birthday for certain.

Early that afternoon, Petunia answered the doorbell. She found a powerfully built man with engaging hazel eyes. She felt that she should recognize him, but she couldn't quite place him. "Hello?" she asked hesitantly.

He smiled. "May I speak with young Mr. Potter, please?" he asked politely.

She hesitated. The man appeared to be dressed normally in a polo shirt and jeans. But if he was normal, what could he want with HIM? Knowing it was useless to fight it, she grudgingly stepped aside. After the man entered, she closed the door and called up the stairs, "Get down here! There's someone here to speak with you." Suddenly realizing that what she had said could be taken the wrong way, she added, "Please."

Harry made it down the stairs just in time to see a stranger throw his aunt a tolerant smirk. The man turned to Harry and smiled in a way that Harry found strangely familiar. He stepped toward the young wizard and extended his hand. "Hello, Harry Potter. I'm Godric Gryffindor."

Harry's hand, which had come up in automatic response, froze short of its goal. "Godric Gryffindor? LORD Gryffindor?" Harry asked in wide-eyed amazement.

Godric shrugged in amused acceptance and folded his arms. "If you'd rather call me that, that's fine."

"Lord?" Petunia asked, trying to remember where she'd heard the name before and whether any of the high society types had that name.

Indeed," Godric said. "I was given the title by the Ministry of Magic after my friends and I founded Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

Her face scrunched up. "Oh. One of THEM."

"Yes," he agreed. "I'm one of them. Now, may I speak with Harry, please?"

"If you must," she sniffed.

He turned to the wizard still standing nearby. "We have a great deal to discuss, my young friend. Is there somewhere we can speak?"

Glancing at his aunt, Harry shook his head. "We'd better go outside, sir."

Godric nodded agreeably. He opened the door again and waved Harry out. "After you, young lion."

Fighting their smiles, the two left a flustered Petunia Dursley sputtering behind them.

They'd gone an entire block before Harry burst out, "Lord Gryffindor?"

"Hmm?" Godric asked absently.

"Um, please don't take this the wrong way, sir, but aren't you . . . well, dead?"

Godric laughed. "Yes, indeed. By your standards, I am indeed dead. However, I'm sure you're aware that some people come back as ghosts."

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. However, if what Sir Nicholas said is true, it's due to unfinished business or fear of what comes after."

"Absolutely true. I had some unfinished business. That's part of what I wanted to talk to you about. Tell me, young man, how good is your knowledge of history?"

Harry flushed. "Honestly, not that good, sir."

"With that dry, old ghost Binns, I can't really blame you," Godric laughed. "For our purposes, the important part is that Salazar and I had a blood feud going when we died. Actually, we ended up killing each other. At any rate, I swore that my family would continue defying his family so long as they continued trying to take over the wizarding world. After I died, I stayed to help my family."

"As fascinating as this all is, sir, what does this have to do with me?"

"You haven't guessed yet? Even after what Albus told you? How'd that go? 'Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the hat.' For what it's worth, I'm glad that my sword could help you against Salazar's little pet."

Harry's jaw was hanging open. "I'm your heir?"

Godric smiled at him fondly. "Yes, indeed. About this 'Lord Gryffindor' thing, just call me Grandfather. There are too many 'Greats' in front of that to bother with. Besides, technically YOU are the current Lord Gryffindor."

"You . . . I . . . But . . ."

Gryffindor laughed at Harry's expression before sobering. "My eldest son's family was all hunted down and eventually killed off by Slytherin's family and their supporters. My second son, however, left Scotland, moved to Wales, and took the name of Potter in order to hide from the war. By the laws of the time, you are the most direct descendant of that branch."

"Most direct? Does that mean there are more heirs around?"

"Oh, heavens yes. The Weasley family, your friend Neville Longbottom, even that crazy Quidditch captain of yours, Wood. There are hundreds of living witches and wizards who are descendents of my sons and daughters. But by the laws of Magic, primary inheritance goes down the lines of the males. You, therefore, are the legal and magical heir."

"I . . . I don't know what to say," Harry quietly spoke as they were passing the dilapidated park. Harry absently noted that Dudley and his gang had recently applied another layer of graffiti over the Welcome and Rules sign.

Godric shook his head. "Nothing needs to be said. I know I'm dropping a lot on your head all of a sudden. Oh, before I forget, happy birthday."

"Thank you." Harry still couldn't quite comprehend the conversation he was having.

"It is because you are now sixteen that I can have this conversation with you just as I had it with your father on his sixteenth birthday. I have a few gifts for you." He stopped walking and turned to Harry.

The young wizard nervously watched his many-times-great grandfather wave his hands in the air in front of him, mumbling quietly. Vaguely, Harry thought he felt SOMETHING but couldn't even make a guess as to what it was.

Finally Gryffindor stopped and studied the young man, nodding his head in satisfaction. "There. I have thus far given you two gifts, Grandson. First, I unlocked your full potential as a wizard. All that this means for you is that you will now grow as strong as you would have if Riddle hadn't damaged your magical core with his Killing Curse all those years ago. Second, I have also given you the gift of Mage Sight." He raised his hand to Harry's gathering frown. "In simple terms, you can see magic. The next time you're around a spell being cast, you'll see what I mean."

Harry nodded, looking intently at Godric. Upon close examination, he was slightly translucent; a fact that Harry was certain hadn't been noticeable before.

Godric nodded, pleased. "Yes, you can see that I'm a ghost. Very good." He reached into what appeared to be his pants pocket and pulled out two objects and held them out to Harry. "This key is to the family Gringotts vault. There is no money in there, but rather something much more valuable. Knowledge. This vial . . . Actually, I don't want to tell you about it yet. Just hold onto it. I will tell you when it's useful."

Harry took both items in hand and studied them. The key was a larger version of his own Gringotts key, with "Gryffindor" etched into it. The small vial appeared to hold a single hair. Something occurred to him and he looked up. "Wait a second. If you're a ghost, how can you be holding these things?" He blushed and looked down. "I'm sorry, sir. My mouth has a way of running off. I apologize."

Godric smiled. "Not at all. And what did I tell you about this 'sir' business? Call me grandfather."

"Yes, s - Grandfather," Harry tried the title out. He found it oddly satisfying to say.

Gryffindor waved them into motion again. "As for the objects . . . Well, without being modest about it, I was a very powerful wizard. Still am, as it happens. It was a simple Levitation Spell to carry the items around."

Harry blinked. "Ghosts can cast spells?"

"Certainly."

"But if you can't hold a wand -"

Godric sighed. "Just because I can't hold a wand doesn't mean I can't cast spells. You've seen wandless magic before. Animagus transformation and apparition are forms of wandless magic. Your casting of a Light Spell from your wand when you weren't holding it last summer was another."

"So ghosts can cast spells, but only if they can do it wandlessly?" Harry asked, not paying attention to Godric's entire explanation.

Gryffindor snapped his metaphysical fingers and pointed at Harry with a flourish. "Precisely!" he exclaimed.

The pair continued their walk in silence for a few minutes. "Just so you know, I've modified your guards' memories. They'll think you spent all this time in the front room of your house. They won't remember seeing me at all."

Harry nodded, relieved. He hadn't been sure how he could explain this to the Order guards. "Thank you. That certainly simplifies some things. Before we go any further, though, I have a question."

"Shoot."

"You're not talking like I'd have expected."

Godric smiled. "Wouldst thou prefer I spake thusly?"

Harry shook his head with a grin.

"I've paid attention to you youngsters all this time. I've tried to change how I talk so that it's more comfortable for my heirs when I speak with them."

"It's worked. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Incidentally, you may notice some things change at Hogwarts when you return. As my acknowledged heir, you'll find the castle provides you certain . . . benefits. You might also want to speak with Alistair."

"Who's Alistair?"

"The Sorting Hat. He has another item of mine that he'll give to you."

"Should I ask?"

Godric chuckled at the hesitant question. "Nothing bad, I assure you. It's just the Gryffindor signet ring. Speaking of which, you may want to visit the Potter vault and get the Potter signet ring. I noticed you aren't wearing it."

"The Potter vault?"

Godric's face clouded over. "He never told you?"

Harry blinked. "Who never told me what?"

"Albus never told you about your family vault?"

"I know my parents left me one to pay for school -"

Godric waved a hand, cutting Harry off. "No, not the trust vault. I mean the family one. The one with family heirlooms and such."

"I... what?"

Gryffindor's expression became darker and he started to mutter quietly. "What are you playing at, Albus? Keeping his heritage from him? That's reprehensible."

"Grandfather?" Harry asked fearfully.

Godric's expression softened. "I'm not upset with you, lad. I'm angry at Albus. He's withheld so much from you."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, I know."

"Even I don't know all of it, I'm afraid. Being my heir and the existence of the Potter fortune and vaults are the obvious ones I can suggest you inquire about."

"Vaults, as in more than one?"

"Oh, yes. Most of the old families have several. Having one for ready cash, one for material items, and one for paperwork is quite common."

"I wonder why I'm named in Sirius's Will," Harry wondered aloud a short time later.

"Sirius's Will is active?"

Harry looked sideways at his grandfather. "I thought you knew everything."

"Hardly everything, Harry," Godric denied with a chuckle. "My portrait at Hogwarts knows a great deal, and I often speak with him, but even between the two of us, we hardly know EVERYTHING."

"You have a portrait at Hogwarts?"

Godric grinned mischeviously. "Yes. He's difficult to find, though, so I'm not surprised you don't know about him. I'll let him know that I spoke with you, so if you need him, he'll make an appearance. What was this about your godfather?"

"I got an owl this morning to attend the reading of his Will. I just have no idea why he may have wanted me there."

Godric smiled slightly. "Knowing Padfoot, just about anything's possible."

Harry blinked in surprise. "You knew him?"

"I spent a fair amount of time with your father, as I mentioned."

"Right."

Scion of Gryffindor 2 - To Grimmauld

Harry closed the front door of 4 Privet Drive with a sense of wonder, trying to think through everything that his many-times great-grandfather had just told him.

His internal musings were interrupted, however, by a solid mass in front of him. Looking up, he found himself face to face with a livid Vernon Dursley.

"What is the meaning of this, boy?" Vernon's voice was a ragged whisper, a fact that scared Harry more than he was willing to admit. Vernon was not quiet when he was angry. In fact, yelling was his normal state. This was the first time Harry could remember his uncle being quieter than any other person's regular tone of voice.

"The meaning of what, sir?" Harry asked cautiously.

"That . . . That freak coming into our home," Vernon growled, his tone getting back to what passed for normal. "I thought they said they wouldn't invade our home again if you sent a letter off with your ruddy owl every three days. You didn't FORGET, did you?"

"No, sir. Lord Gryffindor isn't part of that same group that spoke to you on the platform."

"James," Petunia whispered, still staring at the closed door.

Harry and Vernon both jerked their heads around to look at her.

"WHAT?" Vernon roared.

"James," Petunia repeated in a firmer voice. "That's who that . . . individual reminded me of. James Potter."

This made sense to Harry. He was, after all, the man's descendant. By about fifty generations.

"WHAT?" Vernon roared even louder than before.

Dudley, apparently alerted by the raised voices, poked his head down the stairs. "Whazzup? What's the freak done now?" Everyone ignored him.

"Is that true, boy? That man can't be James Potter. Your freak father died, didn't he?" Vernon demanded of Harry.

"Yes, he did. He died trying to protect his wife and infant son." Petunia flinched, but Harry ignored her reaction. "And no, that wasn't James Potter. I told you, his name is Godric Gryffindor."

"But he looks so much like . . ." Petunia trailed off.

"Lord Gryffindor is my ancestor," Harry admitted.

All three Dursleys looked at him blankly.

"If he was your ancestor and he looks that young . . ." Dudley's thought processes were clearly trying to pound a square peg through a round hole.

"Oh, he's a ghost," Harry said cheerfully.

Petunia and Dudley went pale.

Vernon, on the other hand, went red. "WHAT? That's it! That's the last straw! Out! Get out of this house! I will not subject my family to any more of your unnaturalness!" His words were starting to slur together, and he was spraying his nephew with spittle.

"Fine," Harry growled, completely fed up with the treatment he'd been receiving at his home. No, not his home. It was merely the house he'd been living in. He made to move past Vernon to gather his belongings.

His uncle blocked the movement. "No! Out! NOW!"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I'm going up to my room and gathering my things."

"NOW!" Vernon gargled out at high volume but low coherency.

Harry drew his wand, intending to intimidate his uncle into letting him get his things.

It was almost as if a light bulb had gone off over Vernon's head. Even as Petunia and Dudley squeaked and moved away, Vernon's hand moved quicker than Harry expected and snatched the wand from his hand. It took only a moment before Vernon had snapped it over his knee.

With a look of deep satisfaction, Vernon dropped both broken halves to the floor. "Now," Vernon said with a truly evil smile, "we'll see what you can do without your little toy."

Harry hadn't heard a single word. He was staring at the pieces of his broken wand. It somehow felt like a piece of his heart had been torn out.

Even as Vernon's large hand was reaching toward Harry, the front door evaporated in a flash of light and a muffled bang that caused the floor to shake. Harry's reflexes, inadvertently trained into skittish paranoia by repeated encounters with Death Eaters, sent him diving to the side before his mind caught up with the situation. He looked up in time to see five glowing bands holding his Uncle Vernon to the wall by his wrists, ankles, and neck.

Mad-Eye Moody clumped into the room, flesh and blood eye fixed on Vernon. "What the bloody hell do you think you're doing, Dursley? What we said at the station didn't soak in through that blubber-coated rock on top of your shoulders? You were to leave the boy alone. Couldn't you even accomplish that task? 'Course not. Break his wand and try to physically attack him instead. By rights, I should drag you in to face charges." He turned away from the pinned, and incoherent with rage, Vernon and addressed Harry. "You alright, kid?"

Harry picked himself up off the floor. "He broke my wand," he answered blankly, mind still not processing things properly.

"I saw," Moody answered gruffly but with a trace of compassion. "Well, no hope for it now. We gotta get you out of here. Go on upstairs and pack."

Harry nodded numbly and moved to obey. He mechanically packed his few belongings into his school trunk. Once that was done, he opened Hedwig's cage. The snowy owl hopped onto her companion's shoulder and rubbed her head along his cheek. She didn't really know what had happened, but she knew something was desperately wrong with her human.

"Hi, girl," he whispered, running one finger over her head.

She hooted softly.

"Mad-Eye's taking me away from here. Headquarters or the Burrow, I suppose. Do you want to fly or ride?"

She made an unusual crooning noise and stayed on his shoulder.

Harry eyed his trunk warily. "I hope this is light enough to carry," he muttered. When he went to lift it, he found that it was indeed light enough. He had difficulty maneuvering it down the stairs, scraping it along the wall at one point, before making it back to the front room.

He found Moody standing over the three Dursleys. They were sitting in the front room, confusion written all over their faces.

Moody jerked his head toward the repaired front door. "Jones is outside with a portkey, Potter. I'll clean up here. Go along now, lad."

Harry's blank gaze passed over his relatives before he turned away without a word.

He left the house and was met on the front stoop by Hestia Jones. She silently held out a wire coat hanger. Even in his shocked state, Harry remembered how badly he handled portkey travel. With a resigned sigh, he set the trunk down, sat on it, and grabbed the near end of the hanger. When she tapped it with her wand, he felt the telltale jerk behind his navel. He and Jones landed in the foyer of 12 Grimmauld Place.

"Thanks," he said tonelessly.

"You're welcome," the small, rotund witch said, looking at him curiously.

"Harry?" asked a voice from the direction of the kitchen.

Harry turned to look and saw Ginny standing there, Ron behind her. Both of the Weasley siblings looked surprised to see Harry.

"Hi, Ginny, Ron," Harry said tiredly.

"What are you doing here, mate?" Ron asked.

"Uncle kicked me out. Broke my wand. Moody just sent me here."

Ron's eyes went wide when he heard about the broken wand. To break a wizard or witch's wand was just about the worst insult they could receive. Their magical core was tied to their wand, so there were physical and emotional consequences as well as the obvious physical security problems of not having a wand. Having had his own wand broken in second year, Ron could sympathise with what Harry was feeling.

"Here, let me help you with that," Ron said, extending a hand to take one of the handles of the trunk that Harry was sitting on.

Harry hopped down and moved to take the other end but missed his hold and dropped it with a loud thud.

This, of course, woke the portrait.

"FILTH! MUDBLOOD LOVING, BLOOD TRAITORS INFESTING THE ANCIENT AND NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK! KREACHER! KREACHER, EXPEL THESE -"

"That's enough, you old hag," Harry said flatly.

Despite the low volume, this brought Mrs. Black to an abrupt halt in her tirade. When Harry said nothing further, she shrieked again, "KREACHER!"

"Kreacher is dead," Ginny informed her. "He committed suicide earlier in the summer," she added as an aside to Harry.

Harry couldn't care less at that moment. He'd had a rollercoaster of a day and needed to vent some of his pent up anger. Mrs. Black's portrait seemed, at that point, to be a good target.

With a frustrated growl, he reached forward and started to pull at the frame. To his absolute astonishment, the bottom of the frame came off of the wall accompanied by a shower of sparks. He stared stupidly at the length of wood in his hand for a moment before smiling grimly at the portrait. "You're going down," he informed her. Grunting in effort, he tore the other three sides of the frame from the wall, each time accompanied by bright aqua sparks.

Mrs. Black was screeching all the while. "BLOOD TRAITOR, DEFILING THE ANCIENT AND MOST NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK! HOW DARE YOU TOUCH A SINGLE ITEM WITHIN . . ."

Once the frame was down, Harry peeled at one corner of the canvas that was still stuck to the wall. With a ripping sound, it began to pull up from the wall. After tugging at it until the entire canvas was down in a crumpled pile at his feet, Harry turned his back on the muffled but still screaming portrait to find that he'd gained an audience.

Remus, Tonks, Jones, and Professor McGonagall all were standing in the now crowded hallway, staring at the scene.

Standing on Harry's trunk, Hedwig hooted. Harry got the distinct impression that she was laughing.

"Well?" Harry asked his audience.

"Well, what?" Tonks asked, blinking rapidly.

"Aren't one of you going to vanish or set fire to that damned portrait?" Harry demanded.

The four adult witches and wizards looked at each other before they all drew their wands. "*Incendio !*"

Harry fancied that he could see the spells moving from the four wands to the pile of wood and canvas. It all ignited with a flash and burned rapidly.

"Thank you, Harry," Ginny said sincerely.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, still wide-eyed at what he'd seen. He moved to take the trunk again and helped Harry carry it up the stairs, leaving a gaggle of witches and wizards staring at the retreating back of the Boy Who Lived.

Remus poked his head into Harry and Ron's room less than an hour later. "Harry, if you're feeling up to it, Albus would like a word with you."

Harry suppressed his flash of anger. *NOW the headmaster is deigning to talk with his weapon? No. Must keep calm.* Harry levered himself off the bed and dropped the copy of Quidditch Weekly he'd been reading.

Remus led him to the library and sat with him on a couch across from Dumbledore and Moody.

For a minute, the only sound in the room was the crackling of the fire.

"What happened, Harry?" Dumbledore eventually asked.

Harry, remembering everything Godric had said, replied, "I don't really know, sir. My uncle suddenly demanded that I leave the house. When I tried to go upstairs to retrieve my belongings, he stopped me. I drew my wand in an attempt to intimidate him. He grabbed my wand and broke it over his knee. Moody came in at that point."

Moody reached a gnarled hand into his robes and pulled the broken wand out, laying the pieces on the coffee table between them.

Harry sighed and looked sadly at the remains of his faithful wand.

"Did your uncle tell you why he decided to throw you out?"

"He needed a reason?" Harry growled quietly. Remus looked at him in concern, so Harry decided to explain. "All three of them have hated me forever, Moony. When they weren't calling me a freak, they were forcing me to do all the chores on little or no food. Only Professor Dumbledore's threat to Aunt Petunia kept them from throwing me out long ago."

"They were carrying on about the ghost of James Potter," Moody reported.

"Did you see the ghost of my father?" Harry asked the retired auror.

Moody shook his head.

"I didn't either. Maybe their guilt over their mistreatment of me drove them insane," Harry said sarcastically, trying to redirect the conversation.

"Harry, there is no need for this," Dumbledore chided him gently.

Harry bit back his reply and remained silent. He was secretly very pleased that nothing he'd told Dumbledore was actually a lie. Not that he expected Dumbledore to actually believe everything he'd said, but keeping him away from the truth would be good enough for now.

"What did you do to the portrait?" Remus asked, moving the conversation forward.

Harry shrugged. "I tore it off the wall. I'm surprised nobody else ever tried something that simple."

"We did," Moody said. "It had a Permanent Sticking Charm on the back. Nobody could get the thing down."

"Except young Harry did just that with his bare hands," Dumbledore observed.

"Well, good riddance," Harry said.

"Agreed," Remus said. "I'm just curious on how you got it down. What spell did you use?"

"Without my wand?" Harry waved at the broken pieces.

"With regards to that," Dumbledore said, "we shall have to get you to Diagon Alley in the near future to get a replacement."

"While we're there, Gringotts wants me to visit. Something about Sirius's Will."

Dumbledore's face closed down. "I am afraid I cannot allow that, Harry."

Harry frowned. "We'll be there anyway. Why can't I just stop in Gringotts? I need some more galleons for Hogsmeade weekends anyway."

"Give Molly your key and she can restock your money bag. I feel that a trip to Gringotts for you is out of the question at this time."

Harry let it go but noted the closed expression on Remus's face.

Remus and Tonks entered the library the next evening, finding Harry reading an ancient-looking black leather book.

"How've you been, Harry?" Tonks asked gently.

"Better now that I'm away from Privet Drive," Harry answered, carefully putting the book down. "Moony, how're you doing? There was a full moon recently, wasn't there?"

"Three nights ago. I'm doing fine, thanks for asking. Harry, Dumbledore has asked us to take you to Diagon Alley tomorrow to get you a new wand."

"And Gringotts?" Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. "He thinks it's too dangerous."

"Too dangerous for me to go to the bank?" Harry asked incredulously.

Tonks shrugged hopelessly. "That's what he said."

"Or maybe he doesn't want me to go hear Sirius's Will," Harry hypothesized, eyeing Remus.

Because Harry was looking so closely, he saw Remus shift uncomfortably.

"What am I missing, Remus?" Harry asked directly.

"I can't answer that, Harry."

"Can't, shouldn't, or won't?"

"I've been ordered not to," Remus admitted, looking more uncomfortable by the moment.

"Does it perchance have anything to do with my not having been told of the Potter vaults? Or will something Sirius did hurt Dumbledore's little weapon?" Harry asked bitterly.

Remus just stared blankly.

"He's keeping things from me, Remus. You know it, and I know it. Don't you think his keeping information from me has cost us both enough?"

Tonks winced and Remus visibly flinched as if in pain. "That was low, Harry," he whispered.

"But not untrue."

Remus sighed and nodded. "But not untrue," he agreed. "Okay, yes, I agree to take you to Gringotts. Tonks?"

She shrugged. "I need to listen to the Will as well. If we're doing more than just Ollivander's, I'm going to ask Kingsley to come along."

Scion of Gryffindor 3 - Private Reading

"Thank you all for taking me to Gringotts," Harry said as the four walked down Diagon Alley.

Without turning, Kingsley answered, "It's the least we can do. After all, you are the one, right?"

Harry nearly stumbled. "Pardon? I'm the one what?"

"The one prophesied . . ." Remus spoke from beside Harry, clearly trying to lead the conversation without saying anything TOO sensitive out loud.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "If you don't mind my asking, who told you about that? How much do you know?"

From behind them, Tonks said, "We heard the first part years ago. Albus told us all of it after the fight in June."

Harry's jaw clenched. "So much for keeping it to yourself," he growled.

"What's that?" Remus asked, not taking too much attention away from scanning around.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it," Harry bit out.

Without another word, Kingsley continued to lead the quartet into the Gringotts lobby.

Once inside, Harry walked to the desk labeled as **Inquiries**. "Hello, I received an owl two days ago to attend a Will reading?"

In a bored voice, the goblin asked, "Name?"

"Harry Potter."

The goblin jerked himself to attention so fast that Harry was momentarily worried that he'd hurt himself. "Yes, sir, Mr. Potter. Right this way, please." The goblin waved another goblin over to his desk and then personally led the four magicians down a hallway. After a short walk, he opened a door to what looked like a small conference room.

Tonks led the way in and peered around the room while Remus held Harry back.

Kingsley saw the aggravated expression on Harry's face. "Standard security, Harry. Please, just let us do our jobs."

Before Harry could respond, Tonks nodded, and Remus let Harry enter, immediately following him in. Shackbolt stayed outside the room.

The goblin entered and closed the door behind him, acting as if such security concerns were commonplace. "My name is Garack. Thank you for coming in so quickly. May I presume that the Black Will is the one in question, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes," Harry answered, seating himself. Tonks and Remus flanked him.

The goblin nodded and ran one finger along the wall, muttering lowly. A hidden hatch opened up to reveal a pensieve and a scroll. The goblin moved both items to the table before seating himself, then opening and reading the scroll. "Do you have any objections to your two companions staying for the private reading, Mr. Potter?" he asked a moment later.

"None." He paused and then added, "They're likely named in there as well."

They both nodded.

"Names?"

"Remus Lupin."

"Nymphadora Tonks."

"Bet that had to hurt," Remus muttered as an aside to Harry.

Harry quickly stifled his snickers.

"They are indeed also named," Garack said, eyes still on the scroll. He rolled it up and then waved his hands over the pensieve, causing ghostly violet hues to wash around it. "As you are not the executors, I shall only display the parts relevant to each of you. You are, of course, all invited back

for the public reading on August the tenth."

"Public reading?" Harry asked in surprise.

Remus leaned over and whispered, "This is a private reading. They only invite the ones required to do a lot of paperwork afterwards to private readings like this. The public reading is where the entirety of the Will will be heard."

Harry nodded at Remus's explanation as a small image of Sirius formed above the silvery surface.

Harry suddenly realized that his eyes were prickling. "Sirius," he whispered.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Sirius Orion Black, and this is my Last Will and Testament, recorded January 12th, 1996." The image paused, presumably skipping the parts not related to the three in the room.

"To Nymphadora Tonks, the only first cousin once removed that I'll even acknowledge right now, I leave twenty thousand galleons. Find yourself a good wizard, Nymphie, and remember to live.

"To Remus Lupin, my last remaining brother by choice. Moony, I know you never let James or I give you anything, but this time you have no options. To you I'm leaving one hundred and one thousand galleons, one thousand of which must be spent within the next two weeks on clothing, furniture, and other personal items. You also are my chosen guardian for Harry, if he has not come of age by this point. I know you're a very private man by nature, Remus, but please find someone to share your life with. No matter what some blind, frightened wizards say, you're a good man, and you deserve a happy life.

"Lastly, I leave all remaining monies, property, and vault contents to Harry Potter." The image seemed to sigh. "Harry, I don't know what happened, obviously, but I DO know you well enough to know that you're probably blaming yourself for my death. Please don't. However it happened, please know that it was my choice. Remember me, but don't dwell on it. I'm with your parents now, and that's the happiest thing I can think of for myself, short of staying here for you. I'll give you the same advice I'm giving most of my friends. Look for a nice witch that you can spend the rest of your life with. Above all, remember to live.

"This is Padfoot, signing off."

The image dissolved.

Harry blinked rapidly and leaned tiredly back in his chair. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Remus was weeping silently.

The goblin gave the three several moments to compose themselves. "I am not the Gringotts employee in charge of the Black accounts, so I cannot answer any specific questions you may have on that topic. However, I can take some preliminary actions right now. Ms. Tonks, shall we transfer the money into your vault, or do you want to open a new one?"

In a choked voice, she answered, "Mine is fine."

"Mr. Lupin, the same?"

Remus merely nodded.

Garack frowned slightly, looking back and forth from Harry to Remus. "We are in a bit of a quandary regarding the guardianship of Mr. Potter, I am afraid."

"How so?" Remus asked, his voice hardening.

"It is nothing to do with you, Mr. Lupin," the goblin assured the bristling werewolf. "It is in regards to whether Mr. Potter is of legal age."

Harry frowned. "How's that? Either I am or I'm not, right?"

Garack shook his head slightly. "I am afraid that it is not that simple. For most families, the age in question is seventeen. For the oldest of families, the ministry has a little known law on the books that lowers that age to sixteen. I do not recall if Potter is an old enough family to qualify."

Harry smiled slightly. "I think I can help you out on that one. I'm not only the only surviving Potter; I'm also the heir of another, older family."

Remus looked at him with a frown.

Garack shook his head sadly. "This is measured by genetics, Mr. Potter. You're the financial heir of the Blacks, but for purposes of this law -"

He stopped at Harry's raised hand. "I'm also the heir of Godric Gryffindor."

Remus and Tonks gaped. Garack merely looked at Harry steadily, waiting.

Harry fished a key out of his pocket. Making sure it was the one that Godric had given him, he handed it over.

The goblin peered at the Gryffindor key closely before giving a decisive nod. "My apologies, Lord Gryffindor. We here at Gringotts were aware of the relationship, but did not know whether you, yourself, were aware of it."

Harry just nodded. He was well used to informational security.

This simplifies several things," Garack said. "As an adult wizard, you have no need for a guardian, so that clause of the Will is irrelevant. It also means that all of the vaults and properties being held in trust for you can now go into your direct control. Do you have the time now to do all of this additional paperwork, Lord Gryffindor?"

"Call me Harry, please. I greatly dislike the term 'Lord' if it applies to me, and my relationship to the Gryffindor name is generally unknown. I'd like to keep it that way."

Garack inclined his head in understanding.

Harry looked from the staring and shocked Tonks to the flabbergasted Remus. "Do I have the time today?"

Remus gathered his wits enough to nod.

Harry turned back to the goblin with a smile. "It appears that I do have the time. After the paperwork, I'd like to visit my vaults."

In the first Potter vault, Harry was pleasantly surprised to find a pile of galleons about three times the size of his trust vault. Next to it was a modest pile of uncut precious gems.

But that was only the liquid cash vault.

Another, smaller vault contained paperwork relating to part and full ownership to a huge variety of muggle and magical businesses. From a chain of muggle hotels to an emerald mine in Bolivia to part ownership of the Comet Racing Broom Company to stock in the Daily Prophet. Harry stopped trying to keep track of everything after rifling through the first stack of parchment.

In the Potter heirloom vault, he found snoozing portraits, artwork, jewelry, a rack of small weapons and wands, and piles of household furniture. It took him some time, but he eventually found the Potter signet ring, as Godric had suggested. It was made of a solid, silvery-white metal that Harry couldn't immediately identify, and it was imprinted with the Potter crest. Etched along the inside of the ring were the Latin words **Audaces Fortuna Juvat** which translated to, "Fortune favors the bold." After Remus positively identified it (James Potter had worn it after his own father had died), Harry slipped it onto his right hand. After a moment of re-sizing itself, it fit his finger snugly.

For the longest time, Harry considered trying to put some of the items into a trunk to take with him, but he eventually decided against it.

Upon Remus's suggestion, he DID hold each of the dozen or so available wands, taking the one that felt the best to him. A small note below the wand identified it as having belonged to Victoria Potter; it was ash with a dragon heartstring. It wasn't a perfect match, but it was more than sufficient until he could get a better fit. Even if they were only going to go down the street, Harry didn't want to go completely unarmed any longer. Besides, having a second wand struck both he and Remus as a good idea, if somewhat illegal.

As Godric had promised, the Gryffindor vault (Gringotts vault number three, Harry was interested to note) contained not a single knut but instead held what appeared to be a library that rivaled Hogwarts. Harry again fought off the urge to take items out with him. He firmly reminded himself that they could always return later with more trunk space.

Then it was time to visit the Black vaults.

The difference between the Potter and Black vaults was dramatic. Whereas the Potter fortune seemed to be tied up in ownership in a wide variety of businesses, the Blacks apparently spent little or nothing. There was no paperwork vault for the Blacks. Nor was there an heirloom vault. Instead, a small mound of dark artifacts and a handful of property deeds sat in one corner of the only Black vault. The rest of the space in the huge vault was taken up with ready cash, gemstones, and jewelry.

When he was eleven, Hagrid had taken him to his Gringotts trust vault for the first time. At the time, the piles of golden coins seemed to be a fortune beyond counting.

Now Harry really HAD a fortune beyond counting.

Garack, who was escorting them personally, informed them that the other bequests had already been removed and that Harry Potter himself was now among the five richest wizards in the country.

At the age of sixteen.

(-) (-) (-) (-) (-)

Remus led the still dazed and barely responsive Harry out of the mine cart and toward the Gringotts lobby. There, they picked up Tonks and Shacklebolt again and headed back into Diagon Alley.

They didn't make it far.

Standing at the base of the steps, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge was waiting, not fighting the smirk playing over his face.

"Well, well. Look who we have here," Fudge said in a tone as if he'd just accidentally bumped into Harry rather than having blatantly been waiting. "Mr. Potter, a known werewolf, and two of my aurors whom I distinctly remember telling to stay away from Dumbledore and all of his lackeys."

Harry sighed. He didn't know exactly where this conversation was going, but it clearly was not good.

Fudge pulled himself up to his full, inconsiderable height and majesty and spoke, "Senior Auror Shacklebolt and Auror Tonks, you are both hereby terminated from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Auror Branch. You will surrender your badges and all other auror equipment immediately."

"You have no authority to do that, Fudge," Remus spoke calmly. "Only Director Bones, being their boss, has the authority to fire them."

Fudge's smirk returned. "And you somehow think Amelia is sympathetic to Dumbledore and his Order?"

In his deep voice, Kingsley said, "Thank you for trying, Remus, but we both know that this was bound to happen sooner or later."

"Yeah," Tonks agreed in a chipper voice. "Besides, the high and mighty Minister of Magic has spoken, and he did say 'immediately.'" She drew her auror badge out of her robes and tossed it casually at Fudge, who fumbled the catch and leaned down to retrieve it. By the time Fudge looked up again, Tonks had stripped to bra and knickers, morphed herself into a VERY voluptuous form, and had glowing lettering floating above her head **Minister Fudge just fired me and ordered me to take my clothes off** .

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?" Fudge roared, guaranteeing every witch and wizard in earshot turned and watched the spectacle. As they were standing at the base of the steps to Gringotts Bank in Diagon Alley, that meant they got a LOT of attention.

Kingsley, in the process of handing his auror robes to one of Fudge's bodyguards, turned to him wearing nothing but a pair of white silk boxers and a polite expression. "You ordered us to surrender all of our auror equipment, Minister. These robes qualify." He politely took his wand and moneybag back from Remus.

Harry was torn between ogling Tonks and laughing hysterically.

Fudge sputtered for a few moments before throwing his hands up in disgust and stomping away, his small entourage following in his wake.

Kingsley couldn't tell for sure, but one of Fudge's auror guards looked to be fighting his own snickers. Much of their audience was similarly affected.

Calming down from his laughing fit, Remus looked from one seriously underdressed former auror to the other. "I think we'd better leave. We can't protect Harry all that well since we've gathered this much attention."

Tonks nodded. "I think you're right, Remus. I don't have anywhere to hide my wand."

Harry very nearly popped a blood vessel in refusing to say a word.

Remus, on the other hand, calmly spoke up, "If I weren't such a gentleman, I could suggest a few places – some polite and some not – for you to stick it."

Scion of Gryffindor 4 - Out of the Order

Returning from Gringotts in search of clothing for two of the Order members, Remus and Tonks flooded into Grimmauld Place without fanfare. Shortly afterwards, Harry flooded in and promptly fell on his face.

Chuckling, Tonks helped Remus pick him up and said, "I know you enjoyed looking at my chest, Harry, but that's no cause to fall at my feet like that." Harry blushed fit for a Weasley but still managed to glare at her.

As Kingsley appeared in the fireplace behind Harry, Remus said, "You must admit, Tonks, that your current form is a bit . . . ah, distracting. For Harry, I mean."

Whatever response Tonks may have had was lost when a disappointed looking Dumbledore strode into the room. He didn't even bat an eye at their state of dress. "Meet me in the kitchen in ten minutes," he brusquely ordered before turning on his heel and leaving the room again.

The four conspirators glanced at each other in concern before they scattered to their respective rooms.

A few minutes later they walked into the kitchen, now cleaned up and fully clothed. There, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Mrs. Weasley, Professor McGonagall, and Mad-Eye were seated around the table, apparently waiting.

Harry squeezed in between Ron and Ginny. "What's up?" he asked.

Ron shrugged. "Dunno. Dumbledore just asked us all to be here."

The headmaster himself entered the room, and everyone quieted down. He took a seat and tapped his fingers together for a moment, looking from Remus to Tonks to Kingsley. "Why did you disobey my instructions?" he asked eventually.

Harry's eyes hardened slightly. Remus and Tonks kept their heads up. Kingsley kept his habitual, calm expression.

Remus spoke, "Harry has the right to know about his inheritance, Headmaster."

"That is not the point," Dumbledore waved a hand.

"Isn't it?" Harry asked quietly.

Dumbledore looked over at him with an eyebrow raised.

"It's NOT my right to know about my inheritance, Professor? Is that what you just said? Or was it that you didn't want me to know about what I may or may not have inherited from Sirius?"

For the first time, Dumbledore looked a bit uneasy. "You would have learned in time."

Harry snorted in disgust. "Like you told me about my connection to Voldemort in time?"

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley scolded him after wincing.

"It is quite all right, Molly. As pained as I am to admit it, he is correct. Instead of dwelling upon that, Harry, perhaps you could tell us what you did in Gringotts today."

Harry eyed the bearded old man for a moment. "Visited a few vaults and listened to a Will."

Apparently choosing not to pursue that thread, Dumbledore turned back to Remus, Tonks, and Kingsley. It was only now that Harry recognized that they were being subtly segregated from the rest of the Order by the seating arrangement.

"Despite my specific wishes, you three agreed to take Harry to Gringotts, correct?"

They all nodded steadily.

Harry again spoke up. "You make it sound like they helped me do something dangerous, Professor. We just went to a bank." He paused for a moment before turning his full attention to Dumbledore. "What was it about Sirius's Will that you're so afraid of my learning?"

"That's it," Molly burst out. "Harry, you will NOT talk to the headmaster in that tone!"

Without shifting his attention, Harry quietly noted, "I have every right to speak anyway I want, Mrs. Weasley, as this is my house." That little tidbit of information was one of the things he remembered during the whirlwind paperwork spree at Gringotts before they'd left.

"That was a somewhat childish reaction, Harry," Dumbledore chided his student as Molly simply stared, open-mouthed, at Harry's words.

"I'll tell you what; I'll stop acting like a child if you all stop treating me like one," Harry fired back.

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley and Hermione chorused.

Dumbledore paused, but his expression never wavered. "This is getting us nowhere."

"On that we agree." *And he has yet to explain why he didn't want me to go to Gringotts*, Harry added mentally.

"Harry, Kingsley, Nymphadora, Remus, perhaps we should discuss this in private."

The rest of the Order and students left after a bit of grumbling. Once they were all gone, Dumbledore magically closed and sealed the room.

Harry moved around the table to sit beside Remus, a move that did not escape anyone's attention.

Dumbledore sighed and appeared to grow older. "I cannot allow such disobedience from you four."

"Ah," Harry said. "So we're not allowed to disagree with one of your unexplained proclamations?"

"Why are you being so hostile about this, Harry?"

"Because you did the very same thing to me last year, and it cost me my godfather," Harry replied, finishing the accusation in a whisper.

Dumbledore appeared to be surprised at Harry's words.

"You ordered me to take occlumency lessons from Snape," Harry explained.

"Professor Snape," Dumbledore gently corrected him.

"SNAPE!" Harry shouted. He took a deep breath and started again. "When we're at Hogwarts, I will refer to him as Professor. Outside of school, I will not give him any more respect than he deserves, which is very, very little. Now, back to the point. You ordered me to take occlumency lessons but didn't explain WHY. Snape and I ended up pissing each other off so badly that I quit the lessons. If you'd explained the rationale behind your decision, I probably wouldn't have allowed the situation to deteriorate that badly."

"So now I am to blame for Sirius's death?"

Harry gave him a look of aggravation. "No more than Snape or I. No, Voldemort and Bellatrix deserve almost all of that blame. I'm just saying that giving us orders without the reasoning behind them doesn't work out all that well. I think you'll agree that we've proven that."

"For security reasons the leader of a fight like this can't always explain his actions or orders," Kingsley said.

Harry smiled bitterly at Kingsley. "The problem with that argument is that I never asked him to lead me. I was never offered a choice."

A long silence held until Dumbledore finally broke it. "I will endeavor to remember that, Harry." He turned to the three adults. "However, we must take into account your disobedience. I cannot allow members in the Order to ignore their orders."

Tonks's jaw tightened. Shackbolt remained impassive. Remus narrowed his eyes.

Now seeing where this was going, Harry turned his head. "As I'm the cause of you three apparently getting tossed out of the Order and losing your jobs, I'll step in and fix it. All three of you are hereby offered jobs, double whatever you were making before, as my personal bodyguards." As the three adults stared at Harry in shock, he turned Dumbledore. "That should reduce the strain on the Order as well. Now, you're not going to tell me why you refused to let me go to the bank, are you?"

Dumbledore slowly shook his head, "I am afraid I cannot tell you."

"Cannot or will not? I wonder if it's the Potter fortune that you didn't want me to get control of. Or perhaps it was Grimmauld Place."

"I would like to point out that you are still underage, and as such do not as of yet have 'control' over any of it."

"Ah, but I'm not underage," Harry disagreed with a slight grin.

Dumbledore frowned. "The Potter line is not old enough for the ministry law to -"

"You're desperate to keep me from learning that I'm the last heir of Godric Gryffindor, aren't you?"

Dumbledore sighed and closed his eyes. Kingsley was shocked as this was the first he was hearing about it.

"Why is that, I wonder?" Harry went on. He knew he was being very cruel with his words, but he'd long since lost patience with the man telling him half-truths to keep him under control. It was going to end, one way or another.

"Hogwarts," Remus started, quickly thinking quickly. When Harry looked at him questioningly, Remus went on, "I wonder if being an heir of a founder gives you some powers in the castle that you otherwise wouldn't have."

Dumbledore let the comment slide by without responding. Instead, he adopted a formal tone. "Lord Gryffindor, do I have your blessing to continue to use this house for the Order of the Phoenix?"

Harry thought about it for a moment, honestly surprised that Dumbledore would even ask. "Under some conditions."

Dumbledore appeared wary. "What conditions are those, if I may ask?"

"You leave me alone. No guards unless I approve it ahead of time. You do not tell me what to do. You may ASK me to do something, but if you do, you'd damn well better give me an explanation. You are on probation, Headmaster. If I find that you've reneged on this agreement or lied to me, then you'll have a very unhappy Gryffindor on your hands. Do you understand me?"

Dumbledore inclined his head.

"Say it out loud, Professor. I want there to be absolutely no question about this," Harry persisted.

Dumbledore deflated just a little bit. "I understand and agree to your terms. In return, the Order has unlimited use of 12 Grimmauld Place."

"Agreed," Harry said. He saw twin, ghostly pulses of magic flare out of himself and Dumbledore.

Tonks's eyes widened a little bit, but nobody else reacted. Harry was tempted to ask, but he figured he could simply do so later.

"Is there anything else you would like to discuss, Lord Gryffindor?"

Harry frowned at Dumbledore in annoyance. "Yes. Please don't call me Lord Gryffindor. Very few people know about it."

"As you wish. If there is nothing further, I shall take my leave." When Harry didn't respond, Dumbledore stood up and quietly left, unsealing the room as he went.

Harry immediately stood and walked to the door, closing it back up. He then threw as many warding, locking, and secrecy charms around the room as he knew. When he was done, he sat down and put his head down on his arms. "That wasn't any fun."

Kingsley drew his wand and cast one more charm that Harry didn't know before putting his wand away. "Is what you said about not being underage true?"

"Yes, Mister Shackbolt."

"Call me Kingsley." He paused. "You realize you could have gotten more out of Albus?"

Harry looked up and grinned. It wasn't a cheerful expression. "Oh, I have more demands. But those are for a later conversation with him. Can't drop too many shocks on the old man at once.

"Now, what was that that Fudge said about Madam Bones?"

Remus slumped a little. "Her grand-niece Susan was killed in a Death Eater attack early this summer. Amelia blames the Order. We only had enough people to guard three of four possible targets that night."

Harry winced and looked down again, mourning the cheerful Hufflepuff girl who was one of the more prominent D.A. members.

Gathering his composure again, he said, "I suppose I should have asked you three about the jobs before springing it on you like that."

Tonks shrugged. "I just got fired, Harry. You offering me a job at double the pay? It's not like I'm going to turn that down. So long as your demands aren't TOO outrageous." She grinned.

"Like a private showing of your earlier form?" Remus asked with a wink at Harry.

Again blushing brightly, Harry folded his arms and refused to say a word. Tonks grinned, not at all embarrassed.

Chuckling, Remus let the young wizard off the hook and returned to a previous topic. "I didn't have a job before, Harry."

Harry nodded, remembering that as a werewolf, consistent employment was very difficult for him to find. "I'll pay you whatever I'm paying Tonks."

Kingsley tilted his head. "You have no idea how much money you just offered us?"

Remus grunted. "I saw his vaults today, Shack. He doesn't need to worry about the money."

Kingsley looked thoughtful for a moment. "Potter and Black AND Gryffindor vaults? No, perhaps he doesn't."

"The Gryffindor vault had nothing but books," Harry pointed out. "Which brings me to my next question. Could you three tutor me?"

Remus sat up straighter. "In what?"

"Dueling, charms, and transfiguration as they relate to defense. Plus whatever auror techniques you think are appropriate. You'll recall a prophecy explaining why I have this really ugly wizard trying to kill me . . ."

Tonks made a face at him, which is quite entertaining for a metamorphmagus to do.

Kingsley offered, "Occlumency?"

Harry blinked at him. "You can teach me?"

Shacklebolt nodded.

Harry frowned. "Bastard." When Kingsley's expression closed down, Harry shook his head. "No, not you, Kingsley. Dumbledore. He said that Snape was the only one who could teach me. Looks like another lie's been uncovered." He snorted and continued in a softer tone, "Just add it to the list."

"You really are angry at Albus, aren't you?" Remus asked hesitantly.

Harry grimaced. "Angry? Perhaps. Disappointed and frustrated is probably closer to the truth, though." He immediately shook his head. "No need to get into that now, though. So, where do you three think I should live?"

Scion of Gryffindor 5 - Gryffindor Keep

Where Harry was to live, as it turned out, had a very unexpected answer.

The four persona non grata magicians had spent the night in Grimmauld Place on the top floor. The following morning after an uninspired breakfast (Molly was not staying at Grimmauld), a falcon swooped in through the chimney and landed on Harry's shoulder, going out of its way to not dig its talons into his shoulder.

"A falcon?" Remus said in wonder.

"What's so strange about a falcon?" Harry asked, admiring the bird as well as he could from such a close perspective. "I mean, I've seen birds other than owls used before to carry post."

"Falcons, eagles, and hawks can do it, obviously, but they're very uncommon. It takes a very powerful, noble personality to befriend one."

Nodding absently at the new information, Harry finally got the scroll off of the falcon's leg and read it.

Grandson,

This parchment is a portkey. Tap it with your wand and say, "Take me home," and it will bring you to my Keep. As my heir, you are entitled to it. On top of that, I'm encouraging you to move here permanently with any and all of your new bodyguards. Moving to Gryffindor Keep would not only improve your security, it would also provide you space away from Albus's Order.

I am waiting for you there.

Please give the messenger your acceptance or regrets.

Grandfather

Well, that explains the falcon. But how did he know about my hiring Remus, Tonks, and Kingsley?

Harry looked up from the note with a grin. "Housing is being taken care of." He turned to the falcon. "Thank you. We'll be along later this morning."

The falcon seemed to nod before swooping back out through the fireplace.

His three guards didn't appear to be all that impressed with Harry's announcement. "What do you mean, our housing is taken care of?"

Harry handed the parchment to Remus.

He looked up from the page a moment later. "It's blank." Tonks and Kingsley, trying to read the letter, nodded agreement.

Harry looked over and saw the words still sitting innocently. "You can't read that?"

"No . . ." Remus slowly said.

Kingsley gently took the parchment from Remus's hand and laid it down. Both he and Tonks subjected the thing to several revealing spells each before they gave up.

"A blood link is the only thing left that could produce script that Harry can see that we can't," Kingsley concluded with a shrug.

"So only my direct ancestors or descendants can read that?" Harry asked, remembering the information on blood links he'd researched after the ritual that had resurrected Voldemort. From what he could remember, diluting his own blood with what had been in Wormtail's hand precluded the possibility that Voldemort was the sender of this letter, fortunately.

Remus nodded in answer to Harry's spoken question.

"Well, then there's only one person who could have sent it to me, right?"

All three of them stared blankly.

"Sorry, forgot you three don't know. For the moment, I'll just tell you that I trust this source implicitly. Once we're to a more secure place, I'll explain everything to the three of you."

Kingsley shook his head. "I have a home, wife, and daughter, Harry. I'd much prefer to live with them. If our security is threatened, then we can talk

about moving here, but for now, I'd like to leave things as they are."

Harry nodded. He was mildly ashamed to realize that he didn't know Kingsley was married, let alone had a daughter. He turned to Tonks, Remus, and Kingsley. "I was presumptive to think you'd want to live here. My apologies."

Remus waved it off. "I'd love to, if you'll have me. It'll be a damn sight better than that grim, old place."

Tonks smirked at Remus's pun before she turned to Harry and shrugged. "If you're offering free lodging, I'll take it. I'm not tied down anywhere."

Harry turned back to Dobby. "There you have it. I have a Gringotts vault that contains some furniture, so we'll have to figure out how to get that here. And then later, we'll figure out an account so you can buy things in my name."

Dobby was looking at Godric curiously. "You is a ghost."

Godric nodded. "Indeed, Dobby out of Woorby by Kirby. I am Godric Gryffindor."

Eyes wide, Dobby bowed very low. "Lord Godric Gryffindor sir, Dobby is being very pleased to be meeting you."

Godric sighed. "Seeing as I'm dead, Harry is the current Lord Gryffindor. If you must call me something beyond 'Godric,' then Master Godric will do."

Dobby bowed again. He turned to Harry. "Master Harry, it is being the time for lunch, but Dobby is very ashamed that he is not being able to prepare meal for Master Harry, Master Remus, Master Kingsy, and Mistress Nimma." He looked around for a moment before grabbing one of his own ears and twisting it painfully.

"Stop! Dobby, another rule: No punishing yourself. Ever. Understood?"

Dobby's large eyes were leaking equally large tears as he fell to his knees. "Master Harry Potter sir is greatest wizard ever! He is mostest kindest greatest wizard."

"Sweet Merlin, what have you gotten us into, Harry?" Tonks muttered lowly enough that only Remus heard her.

Harry sighed and rolled his eyes at the elf. "Dobby, please stop with the groveling, okay? Now, considering the state of the Keep -"

"Hey!" Godric objected.

"- I wasn't expecting to eat here."

"I'll get us something from the Leaky Cauldron," Kingsley offered. Harry reached for his money pouch, but Kingsley raised a hand. "I'll flip for this one, Harry. You're paying me well anyway." With a bemused grin in place, Kingsley walked toward the entrance hall to apparate out.

Remus and Tonks headed toward the dining hall to conjure table, chairs, and so forth for their meal. The conjured furniture wouldn't last, but it was better than eating while sitting on the floor. Dobby scurried around in a cleaning frenzy.

Suddenly not having anything to do, Harry wandered over to Godric. "Grandfather?"

"Hmm?" Godric responded, watching Dobby in amusement.

"Can you tell me about my parents?"

Godric blinked and looked down at Harry. "That's right. As good a man as Sirius was, his story-telling skills were limited to recounting pranks, weren't they? Well, how about I tell you about James and Lily's first date? It was the first Hogsmeade weekend of their seventh year, and this new tea shop had just opened up in town . . ."

Scion of Gryffindor 6 - Some Explanations

Their first full day at Gryffindor Keep was spent in a whirlwind of setting up more wards, making banking arrangements, retrieving and moving furniture to everyone's satisfaction, and generally making their new home livable for the three humans, one house-elf, and a ghost.

After dinner, they had a long discussion about Harry's training. After much debate, they decided that Kingsley was going to teach him Occlumency and the basics of potions, Tonks was going to teach him charms and some basic auror techniques including silent casting, and Remus was going to handle transfiguration and apparition. Everything else was going to be done as-needed or as-wanted.

Godric then put in his opinion. "I'll teach you wandless magic."

Harry blinked. "Wandless?"

Godric nodded. "Sure. It'll be useful to be able to cast wandlessly."

"No question of that, but doesn't it require a very powerful wizard?"

"You ARE a very powerful wizard, Harry," Tonks countered.

Harry frowned.

"Listen to us, Harry," Remus said firmly. "You cast a patronus when you were thirteen. THIRTEEN! Only a quarter of adult wizards can do that. So I'm going to say this one time and one time only. You. Are. Powerful."

Godric looked amused. "There. Will you listen to me now?"

All four of the adults in the room smiled at Harry's gob smacked expression.

"Now," Godric said, shifting into a lecturing tone, "wandless magic requires a certain threshold of power before it's useful beyond the very basics. You're well beyond that threshold, so no problems there. The next obstacle is BELIEF. If you believe it's possible, then you can do it. Do you believe wandless magic is possible?"

Harry nodded. "I've seen both Professor Dumbledore and you use it."

"Do you believe wandless magic is possible for YOU to do?"

Harry frowned. "I don't know."

"THAT is the first thing we have to break through, then." He paused for a second to gather his thoughts. "All accidental magic is wandless. Apparating to the roof of your school, shrinking that sweater, removing that sheet of glass, and so on."

"What's this?" Remus asked, looking at Harry.

Harry himself was looking at Godric strangely. "I'll explain them later, Remus. I'm just curious how Grandfather knows those stories."

Godric smiled and completely ignored the implied question. "Wandless accidental magic is one thing. Wandless INTENTIONAL magic is something else again. Fortunately, you've already done some. If I recall the story, when the dementors showed up at your home last summer, you dropped your wand, correct?"

Harry nodded.

"You cast a Light Spell. THEN you picked up your wand."

Tonks's jaw dropped open. Kingsley's eyes went wide.

"Yep, wandless magic," Remus agreed with a bright grin.

"That was wandless magic?" Harry asked in surprise. "I mean, I was using my wand, wasn't I?"

"It wasn't in your hand, so it counts as wandless," Godric explained. "Try it. Summon Nymphadora's water glass."

Tonks growled at Godric.

Godric smiled at her before turning back to Harry and waving his hand in invitation.

Skeptical expression in place, Harry raised his hand. "*Accio* glass."

Nothing happened.

"Belief, Harry, belief," Godric chided his young pupil. "*Accio* glass." The glass smoothly flew over and into Godric's hand. "Try again, but this time BELIEVE you can do it."

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Focusing on the image of Tonks's plate coming toward him, he raised his hand again and intoned, "*Accio* plate."

Tonks's startled squawk caused Harry to open his eyes. The plate clattered to the tabletop halfway between the two of them.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked anxiously.

Tonks had her arms crossed over her chest. Wide-eyed, she cleared her throat and shakily said, "In addition to my plate, you tried to summon my shirt and my, uh, bra."

Harry blinked once before turning beet red. The three men in the room laughed.

Calming himself, Godric looked at Harry with gleaming eyes. "We'll have to do some work on your wandless control. Unless the goal there WAS to disrobe Nymphadora . . ."

Harry blushed brighter and started trying to stammer out an apology.

Snickering, Kingsley said, "You really should wait until at least the fifth date, Harry. Wine and roses wouldn't hurt. Maybe some soft music."

Tonks and Harry both tried to glare at the big man, but it was a half-hearted attempt at best.

"Aside from the, um, unstated targets," Godric said with a mostly straight face, "the fact is that Harry WAS wandlessly summoning the plate. My congratulations, Harry. It usually takes a wizard longer than the second try to get the required level of belief."

Harry looked a little bashful. "I've run into this kind of situation before."

His audience looked curiously at him.

Looking fearfully at Kingsley and Tonks, he said, "Technically what I did was illegal . . ."

Kingsley snorted. "We're not aurors any longer, remember?"

Nodding in relief, Harry told the story about using a time turner and driving off the dementors around Sirius. " . . . so the second time I was there, I KNEW I could do the patronus as I'd already done it. Since I knew I could do it, I did it."

Tonks was staring in shock. "Dumbledore and McGonagall let Hermione use a TIME TURNER for something so prosaic as taking extra classes? Don't they realize those things are restricted for a very good reason? Are they INSANE?"

"That's been open for debate for quite some time," Godric noted dryly. "At any rate, now that we know it's possible for you to use wandless magic, Harry, we can add that to the schedule. I'd also like to go over some of the older combat spells. As you have a phoenix feather wand, we know it can handle any power levels we might try to channel through it."

"I don't have a phoenix feather wand," Harry disagreed, his face falling.

Godric frowned. "But I thought that Fawkes -"

Harry interrupted him. "My old wand DID have a feather from Fawkes. My uncle broke my wand, so I had to borrow one from the Potter vault."

Godric's face suddenly looked murderous. "He BROKE your WAND? Is he naturally stupid, or does he have to work at it? Doesn't he know that your ability to defend that house was one of the few things keeping him and his family SAFE? Of all the acts of incomprehensible mental deficiency I've ever heard . . ." He trailed off, visibly calming himself. "Once we get a new wand for you, do you want to challenge him to a duel?"

"He's a muggle," Harry pointed out.

"So?" Godric asked coldly.

"I can legally challenge him to a duel over this?" Harry asked, surprised at this unexpected facet of his grandfather.

Kingsley answered, "It's frowned upon to issue duels but perfectly legal. For a gross insult of this magnitude, I'm sure a lot of the older families would definitely look the other way."

Harry shook his head over the whole thing. "Like I said, I borrowed a wand from the Potter vault." He pulled it out and laid it on the table.

Godric frowned down at it. "Is it as compatible as your old one?"

Harry shook his head again. "Not really, no. It felt the best of all the ones there, though. We were on our way to Ollivander's when Fudge stopped us."

"Fudge? What did he want?"

After Remus finished telling the story of their confrontation in front of Gringotts, Godric rolled his eyes. "Idiot. Well, that explains why you had to hire them, Harry."

"You heard about that?" Remus asked.

Godric nodded.

"How?" Harry asked in curiosity.

"I told you that I have a portrait in Hogwarts, right?"

Remus perked up in curiosity as Harry nodded.

"He heard some of the highlights of the Order meeting last night. He told me. That's how I knew to send you the portkey this morning."

"You were at Hogwarts last night?"

Godric shook his head. "I have a portrait here, too. Anyway, not having a good match on your wand is something that we need to take care of soon." He paused and looked thoughtful. "Actually, we don't really need to get you a second wand, do we . . . ?" He trailed off.

"I'd really like to have a better wand," Harry observed.

Godric shook his head. "That wasn't what I was thinking. Yes, you should get a better wand. But what I meant by a second wand was not buying you two. Just buy one and have a magical focus made instead."

"Isn't a wand a magical focus? You're talking about a custom made wand?"

"Yes a wand is a magical focus, but I was thinking of a different kind of focus, actually. A ring or bracelet, maybe . . ." He trailed off for a moment before resuming. "Several reasons to do it this way. Most importantly, a ring or bracelet wouldn't be lost to a Disarming Spell. Almost as important, custom making a focus, if you pick the right ingredients, makes for a much more efficient focus than the best of wands."

Remus and Kingsley looked fascinated. "You called the core an ingredient?" Remus asked.

"Ingredients are things more than the magical core. The wizard's blood and a hair are always in there, too. If you have others who love you and are willing to donate a hair, then that helps as well."

"Harry definitely has people who love him," Remus remarked to Harry's obvious shock. The werewolf smiled at him. "Yes, Harry, people love you."

"Don't you mean that they love The Boy Who Ruddy Lived?" he asked sullenly.

Godric scowled at Harry's tone.

So did Remus, but he was a lot scarier. "I loved you as a nephew long before you got that title, Harry. Now get it through your thick skull. I love you. So do Molly and Arthur. Ginny, Hermione, and Ron."

Harry relented, now looking slightly embarrassed.

"Uh, oh," Kingsley chortled. "Which one do you think hit the nerve?"

"Ginny or perhaps Hermione," Remus guessed.

Harry rolled his eyes. "That's my best friend and my best friend's little sister you're talking about."

"You can love them without wanting to snog them," Godric noted in amusement. "After all, you love Remus and Arthur, right?" He tilted his head. "Unless you WANT to snog Remus."

Harry shook his head. "Nope. I like girls, Grandfather." He snorted in self-deprecating humor. "Despite my track record."

"Yes, that Chang girl. At any rate, you might want to think of as many people, preferably of differing types, who would be willing to donate a hair toward your wand."

"What are the requirements and what do you mean by different types?" Remus asked.

"Actual love isn't really needed. Deep respect, affection, like that is the more important criteria. It has to be to HIM and not to his title as there is no emotional connection to the Boy Who Lived icon. Different types means just that. A long list of witches and wizards isn't nearly as useful as fewer numbers but more variety. You, Remus, are a werewolf, and that will help. James and Lily, if we can find hairs, would also be good as they're direct blood relations."

"Animagi? Metamorphmagi?" Tonks asked.

"Would other species help? I expect Dobby would donate without any problem. Buckbeak is already a friend, or at least as much of a friend as a hippogriff can have," Remus added.

"Yes, yes, and yes," Godric answered. "The more, the better. Getting someone who might or might not have enough of an emotional connection is better than not. One of the steps is to weed out the non-contributing ingredients."

"That's what that was!" Harry suddenly exclaimed, wide eyes on Godric.

Tonks and Kingsley, after their eyes finished sweeping the room at the unexpected outburst, asked, "WHAT?"

Godric smiled. "Indeed, Harry."

Harry sank back in surprise. "Wow," he said quietly.

"WHAT?" Remus had now joined the chorus.

"He gave me one of his hairs," Harry explained.

"Forgive the somewhat personal question," Tonks said slowly, "but haven't you been dead for like a thousand years?"

"Yes, Nymphadora," Godric agreed.

Tonks glared at him for his repeated use of her first name. "You've kept a hair since that time?"

"More than one, but yes."

"THAT'S why James did that!" Remus said with a look of comprehension.

"NOW what are you on about?" Tonks asked in aggravation.

"Just at the end of seventh year, your father shaved his head," Remus said to Harry. "Sirius and I had no idea why James would do that. He claimed it had been hexed off by Snivellus, but we knew it wasn't. He never explained why."

Godric smiled. "He did? Good. It is a tradition in the Potter House to do that for this reason, among others. I wasn't sure that he did it." He turned to Harry. "Looks like another trip to the Potter vault is needed in the near future.

"At any rate, that makes at least two –"

"Three," Tonks interrupted.

"Four," Remus instantly corrected.

"Er," Kingsley looked momentarily embarrassed before running a hand over his bald head.

Everyone else laughed.

Wicked grin in place, Tonks then opened her mouth.

"No," Godric interrupted her. "It has to be naturally grown hair from the head. Both reasons are in order to retain the maximum amount of residual magic."

Tonks collapsed back in her chair with a pout. "Drat." She suddenly frowned. "If it has to be naturally grown –"

"Metamorphs are the exception," Godric assured her. He turned back to Harry. "Where was I?"

"Four hairs," Harry answered, amused by the antics of the "adults" in the room.

"Yes, four hairs. I suggest you begin thinking of who else you may ask. While looking for your father's hair in the vault, you could check for Lily's, too."

"Something for another day," Remus reminded Harry. "Anything else about Harry's training since we're all on the subject?"

Nobody spoke, so after a moment, Harry said, "Not on my training, but about you, Grandfather."

"Certainly. What did you want to know?"

"You said when we met that the Weasleys are related to you and therefore me?"

"Yes."

Harry looked hurt. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"I doubt anybody, including the Weasleys, know about it," Kingsley said. "You're aware that most of the pureblood families are interconnected to some extent, right?"

Harry nodded.

Kingsley shrugged. "There you go. You're probably related to just about every pureblood name at some level or another. They generally don't keep track of it more than three or four generations back. That's what the old family tapestries are for if you're really curious about it."

"Yeah, I saw the Black one." Harry grinned at Tonks. "Though there were a couple of names blasted off of it."

Tonks looked inordinately proud. Everyone chuckled at her.

Harry turned back to Godric. "Grandfather, you mentioned that Voldemort's Killing Curse damaged my core?"

"What's this?" Remus asked in concern.

Godric waved a hand to calm the werewolf. "When Riddle tried to kill Harry all those years ago, I think his Killing Curse fractured Harry's magical core. Not enough to be noticeable under normal circumstances, really, but still damaged. When I met him on his birthday, I did what I could to heal it, thereby releasing his true potential."

"Two questions," Tonks said, looking curious. "First, who's Riddle? Second, if you healed some magical damage, does that mean he'll be more powerful than he was?"

"'I am Lord Voldemort' is an anagram for 'Tom Marvolo Riddle,'" Harry explained. "Slytherin, head boy, class of '45."

Godric nodded. "Very charismatic young man, I've heard."

"Charismatic enough," Harry muttered, remembering that he'd effectively seduced Ginny in her first year.

"Lord Gryffindor -" Remus started.

Godric sighed. "Am I doomed to have this conversation with everyone?" he asked the ceiling. "Call me Godric, Remus. That goes for all of you, actually. Harry here is the current holder of the title of 'Lord Gryffindor,' not I. Now, what was your question?"

Remus looked unconvinced, but asked his question anyway. "Why did you wait until Harry's sixteenth birthday?"

"According to the ancient laws of magic, sixteen is the age of magical majority."

"Then why did I have to wait until I was seventeen before I could legally use magic?" Tonks asked in annoyance.

"Shortly after Hogwarts was founded, the general practice was to wait until after graduation to freely use magic. Once the Ministry was created, they put legislation through that made it the law. However, the purebloods left the loophole in place for the oldest of the families."

"That's fundamentally unfair."

"Yes, it is. This is just one of the smaller and least talked about examples of that. You need to understand that the old laws very subtly favored the purebloods. Or at least the family lines in your case, Harry."

"Before we get sidetracked with a discussion of pureblood arrogance and their attempts to legislate their delusion of superiority, I have more questions for our host."

Everyone blinked at Remus's interruption.

Godric abruptly laughed. "Rowena would have loved you, but I'm rather glad Alistair chose you for my house. Ask your questions, Remus."

"If you spoke with Harry on his sixteenth birthday, did you do the same with James?"

"I waited until he was home from Hogwarts for the next summer, but I did speak with him, yes."

"Why didn't he tell me?" Remus sounded hurt.

Godric sighed. "I asked him not to tell you, Sirius, Peter, or Lily. It wasn't anything against you four. Considering the fact that I'm here and haven't moved on to the next dimension, it was imperative my existence wasn't leaked to Slytherin's heir. Remember, rumors of a leak in the Order were already circulating by that point."

"My mother didn't know?" Harry asked.

"I spoke to Lily after she was pregnant and before they went into hiding. She knew she had wed the Heir of Gryffindor and was bearing the next one. She was actually quite chuffed about it."

"I can imagine," Remus said with a grin.

"Any other questions, Remy, or can I ask mine now?" Tonks asked.

"I cede the floor to the lovely metamorph, Mistress Nimma," Remus said gallantly.

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Godric, if you're a ghost, why do you appear to be solid?"

"Merlin's ghost wrote a book called, How to Live Now That You're Dead . Every ghost is given a copy when we decide not to move on."

All four of the living magicians in the room stared at him.

He rolled his eyes. "Can't you people take a joke? It's just a glamour."

Shaking her head to bring herself back on track, Tonks asked, "If you've been floating around, forgive the pun, for a thousand years, what do you do with all of your time? I've never heard rumors of you being around, so you can't be all that active in the magical community . . ."

"Oh, I have several projects going on at any given time. For instance, between meeting Harry on his birthday and this morning, I spent my time translating the text that's in the Kama Sutra into Mongolian."

Scion of Gryffindor 7 - Another Visit to Diagon Alley

The following morning during breakfast, Kingsley walked into the room and dropped a copy of the [Daily Prophet](#) in front of Harry.

The Boy Who Lived Inherits Millions

Harry dropped his head to his hands.

"What is being wrong, Master Harry?" Dobby asked in concern.

"Nothing, Dobby, nothing," Harry groaned.

Remus pulled the paper over and started reading the article.

"It is not being nothing, Master Harry," the elf chided him. "You should be telling Dobby what is the matter."

Kingsley answered as he poured himself a cup of tea. "There was an article in the paper about him."

"Does Master Harry wish Dobby to turn the bad Skeeter person into a bug and step on her?"

Harry looked up at Dobby. Dobby's expression of polite attention didn't tell him anything. "How did you know?"

Dobby gave him a toothy grin. "House-elveses know many, many things, Master Harry."

"Who would've thought that house-elves were gossips?" Tonks wondered aloud.

Dobby didn't answer but rather just smiled and got back to clearing breakfast from the table.

"How did he know what, anyway?" Tonks asked Harry.

"Skeeter's a beetle animagus," Harry explained.

The two former aurors raised eyebrows at that.

"Oh, really?" Remus muttered with a chuckle, still reading the paper.

"What?" Tonks asked.

"How bad is the article?" Harry asked in dread.

"Most of it isn't so bad," Remus assured him without looking up. "Skeeter was even good enough to cast some doubt on Sirius's guilt. No, it's the next article that's . . . um, controversial."

Reaching over, Tonks plucked the paper out of his hands and pulled it over the table, knocking over Remus's cup in the process. She found the article in question and started reading it, a smile quickly blossoming. "Oh, ho! This is something that wouldn't be out of place in [Teen Witch Weekly](#)."

Ignoring Harry's horrified gasp, she gleefully read, "' . . . addition to the millions he just inherited, the word on the street is that Harry Potter is one hot hunk. Known to have dated at least two witches in the past few years, he's consistently described by his female classmates in glowing terms. From his sparkling emerald eyes to his fly-away black hair, Mister Potter will no doubt make the eligible bachelor list now that he is of age.'"

She read silently for a moment. "Are you really twenty-five centimeters?" she asked in an innocent voice, looking up at Harry.

Remus and Kingsley sprayed tea. Harry turned red in mortification.

"Oh, no, Mistress Nimma," Dobby disagreed. "Master Harry is being much, much more than that."

Remus and Kingsley were now having trouble breathing. Harry contemplated using his cereal spoon to try to slit his wrist.

Godric Gryffindor walked into the dining hall of Gryffindor Keep to find one composed house-elf clearing breakfast, two wizards alternately coughing and laughing, one witch grinning in a truly disturbing manner at his heir, and the young wizard himself apparently attempting to spontaneously combust. "Okay, what'd I miss?"

Harry stood in place and stared at the wall behind the Leaky Cauldron.

"It's not going to open itself, Cub," Remus noted in amusement.

"Cub?" Harry asked, looking over at Remus and ignoring the real issue.

"I called you 'Cub,' and Sirius called you 'Pup.' I suspect your father would've called you a fawn, but your mother wouldn't let him," Remus explained. "Now stop procrastinating, and open that arch."

Harry sighed and raised the hood of his cloak before tapping the correct brick with his borrowed wand. The wall opened up and spilled the four onto Diagon Alley. Harry kept his eyes forward and moved quickly toward Gringotts.

He'd only made it just past Eeylops Owl Emporium when he heard, "It's Harry Potter!" shouted in a squealing, giddy voice.

His three guards immediately closed in around him, but it didn't matter very much. Fifteen girls aged twelve to twenty-five all moved toward Harry. The youngest ones were very shy and just wanted to look at him. The older ones were anything but shy. Before Remus could pull her off of him, one had whispered a suggestion into Harry's ear that threatened to permanently short out his brain, and two more had pressed scraps of parchment, or perhaps they were cloth, into Harry's hands. All the rest of them wanted to touch, or perhaps be touched by, the fabled Boy Who Lived.

"Enough!" a strong, feminine voice bellowed suddenly.

Mind still reeling, Harry looked over in the resulting silence to find himself looking at a very good-looking witch of roughly his age that he didn't recognize.

"Harry and I are trying to go for a quiet shopping trip. Please leave us alone," the dark-haired beauty growled out before firmly taking Harry by the arm and starting to steer him toward Gringotts.

Nearing a state of panic, Harry looked toward Kingsley. To his shock, Kingsley was smirking at him before the former auror turned and began breaking a path through the crowd. One hand on his wand, Harry allowed himself to be led through the scowling and muttering crowd of witches.

Once they made it through to Gringotts and found a miraculously clear lobby, Harry stepped sideways and dropped the items the crowd of girls had pressed into his non-wand hand. He carefully did not look to see what it actually was as he turned to face the woman who'd entered with him. "Thank you for getting them all off of me, but I'd appreciate you not trying to take their place," he said firmly.

She pouted. "Aw, Harry. Don't you love me anymore?" Before a bewildered Harry could say a word, her hair flashed to pink and then back to its previous black.

"Tonks?" he gasped out. He looked around, trying to find Tonks and instead only saw an amused Remus and a laughing Kingsley.

"I've seen her pull that stunt before," Kingsley explained to Harry's sour look.

Calming down, Harry turned back to Tonks. "Sorry. It's just with all of this . . ." He waved his hand vaguely.

Tonks nodded. "I should have thought of it before we got here, honestly. If you're obviously in the company of a date, your groupies are less likely to attack."

Harry considered objecting, but discarded it as a juvenile reaction. She was, after all, trying to help. "So you're my date?" he asked instead, offering his arm.

Her smile brightened, and she threaded her arm through his. "If my Lord wishes," she answered flippantly.

Harry turned with the metamorph on his arm and moved toward the nearest teller. "Please don't call me that, Tonks," he requested in a low voice.

"Oooh," she purred. "Is the big, bad Lord Potter-Gryffindor mad at little ol' Tonks? If I keep calling you 'Lord', do you promise to -" Whatever else she may have said was lost as she tripped over her own foot and fell with all the grace of a pole-axed hippogriff.

Harry immediately banished the unflattering comparison from his mind. "You alright, Tonks?" he asked, bending over her prone form.

"Ouch," she responded eloquently.

In the vault, Harry first gathered a bag full of galleons. Next, he searched for a few minutes to find the vials of hair that he hoped were available to him. Eventually he opened one trunk that had a note on top of a stack of parchment and miscellaneous objects.

Harry,

This trunk contains some of the more personal of the Potter treasures. Nothing of particular value, but more along the lines of keepsakes as well as personal copies of contracts. Longer letters from your mother and I are also enclosed.

Your Father

Closing his eyes in an attempt to keep his emotions under control, he rifled through the contents and spotted the two vials he'd been looking for.

Shrinking the entire trunk, he pocketed it.

Knowing that their next stop would be Ollivander's, Harry also reluctantly returned his borrowed wand to its place in the Potter Vault. With three dedicated bodyguards around him, he felt slightly better about walking down the street without a wand.

"Mister Potter," intoned Ollivander an instant after Harry set foot into the shop. "Holly wand of eleven inches, as I recall. I trust it is in good condition?"

Harry suppressed the reaction he got around the slightly creepy man and shook his head. Pulling out the pieces of wand that Dumbledore had let him keep, he placed them onto the countertop.

Ollivander sighed with his eyes on the broken wand. "Pity. That was a magnificent wand, that was."

"Yes," Harry quietly agreed. "It saved my life from Voldemort more than once."

"I presume you are here for a replacement, then?" Ollivander asked, looking up at the younger wizard and fixing him with his eerie eyes.

"Among other things."

Ollivander set to work at once, quickly bringing a veritable mountain of wands for Harry to try.

Eyeing the stack of boxes warily, Harry said, "Before we start trying these out, Mr. Ollivander, I should tell you that I've been encouraged to find another with a phoenix feather core."

Looking slightly put out, Ollivander asked, "Encouraged by whom, Mr. Potter?"

"That brings me to our second item of business. I trust anything that I say here will remain confidential?"

"So long as you do not attempt to buy two wands from me, everything else we discuss remains confidential if you wish it, Mr. Potter."

Nodding, Harry pulled a parchment out of his pocket and handed it over.

Ollivander blinked at the crest impressed into the melted wax before breaking the seal and reading the letter from Godric. Once he was done, he looked up and nodded. "Understood, Milord. Godric said I could speak freely?"

Harry nodded again. "You know Grandfather, then?"

"Yes, we've met a few times. The last time was when he came in with your grandfather William. I assume you know what he asked of me?"

"Bracelet as a magical focus, yes. I'll be gathering the hairs over the next few weeks. How soon do you need everything?"

"Your hair and blood now as well as your old wand. The other hairs I don't need for at least a week. It will take that long for the item - a bracelet you said? - to be produced. After that, I'll need a few days to do the baseline work with this feather," he tapped the broken wand, "and the ingredients from you personally. After that, you can bring the other ingredients, and the final steps will take no more than another hour. For now, I will inform Madam Flanner that you are coming, and you can see her about the base item you would like. Is this acceptable?"

Harry almost smiled at the novelty of being asked for his opinion. "Yes, that sounds fine. How much will I owe you?"

Ollivander looked scandalized. "Nothing, Lord Gryffindor. None of the ingredients will be coming out of my stock, so I have no expenses. As for my time? The challenge of doing it is more than adequate recompense for me." He smiled. "This will only be the fourth magical focus that isn't a wand I've ever produced, you know. All of them, incidentally, went to wizards with the surname of 'Potter.'"

Remus, standing near the door, smiled at Harry's embarrassment.

Ollivander quickly (and painlessly) gathered the items he needed from Harry and then helped the young Potter heir find a new wand. After two holes in the roof, three blasted stools, a blinding flock of pink butterflies, and a near miss that almost took off Tonks's left ear, Harry finally found a new wand that matched up with him.

Ollivander looked pleased. "Ten and a half inches, pine, phoenix feather. As I know you will be asking, Mr. Potter, your new wand does indeed have three brother wands. One is still in my stock. I sold one to Regulus Black and the last to Gideon Prewett."

Harry blinked. "Sirius's brother Regulus?"

Ollivander, Remus, and Tonks nodded.

"Where have I heard the name 'Gideon Prewett' before?"

Tonks answered quietly, "Molly's maiden name was Prewett."

Remus finished the description, "Remember Moody showing you the picture last summer? Two of them were Gideon and Fabian Prewett."

The answer sobered Harry. Shaking off the threatening mood, Harry nodded solemnly to Ollivander. "Thank you for telling me, Mr. Ollivander. How

much do I owe you for the wand?"

Quickly concluding their business at Ollivander's, the four went to Flanner's Jewelry, which was only three storefronts down. Fortunately, they weren't outside long enough for the crowds to notice Harry.

Once they were through the door, Remus blandly said, "Let's hope the Prophet doesn't have a picture of you walking into a jewelry store with a lovely young witch on your arm, Harry."

Tonks smiled very widely, and Harry flushed in embarrassment. In a doomed bid to hide his reaction, Harry immediately moved toward the counter only to run into an even larger problem. Behind the counter was none other than Alicia Spinnet.

"Harry!" she called in greeting when she recognized the wizard coming at her.

Remus and Tonks started laughing.

Harry's former quidditch team mate looked at them curiously for a moment before her eyes widened. "Professor Lupin?"

Remus smiled. "Hello, Miss Spinnet. Just graduated, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," she responded before turning her attention to Tonks. "Er, hello," she said, clearly trying recognize her. Based on Tonks's apparent age, she just HAD to know who this was.

Adopting an accent that defied all description, Tonks strode forward and took her hand. "Hello, Miss Spinnet, isn't it? Any friend of Harry's is a friend of mine. I'm Griselda Wojehowitts."

"Pleased," Alicia responded with a slight frown of confusion. She turned to Harry with a clear question in her eyes.

Harry was saved from terminal embarrassment by an older, portly woman coming out from the back. "Ah, Mr. Potter. I was just warned that you'd be stopping by. Thank you, Alicia, I'll take it from here. Please come into the back, Mr. Potter."

"Nice seeing you again, Alicia," Harry called as he followed the woman behind the counter.

Once the back door was closed, Remus broke into laughter. "Tonks, you just confused that poor girl. Now she doesn't know if you're a girlfriend or something else."

Tonks smiled impishly but didn't respond.

Smiling at the byplay, the rotund witch introduced herself to Harry. "Mr. Potter, my name is Elizabeth Flanner. Hector said you wanted a custom piece made?"

Harry and Madam Flanner spent ten minutes discussing what he was interested in (an armband instead of a bracelet as it turned out) and settling on materials, design, and price. Once they were done, Harry and his entourage again wandered out onto Diagon Alley.

Tonks immediately pulled Harry into a small storefront that specialized in leather and dragon hide items. Inside, she badgered Harry into buying an auror style wrist wand holster. It held his wand against his right forearm and could be retrieved quickly with a simple wrist flick. The holster also shrunk the wand itself, so the length of the wand didn't make it uncomfortable to wear.

As Harry was practicing his quick draw, Remus quietly suggested a protective dragon hide vest. Seeing the practicality of this, Harry got himself and all three of his companions measured for the items.

Remus tried to decline, but Harry wouldn't take no for an answer when it came to everyone's protection. Remus finally gave in when he realized that Harry had inherited a full measure of his mother's stubbornness. Tonks and Kingsley took it in stride as they'd occasionally worn such things during their auror duties.

After making arrangements for the bank draft and when to pick up the vests, the four again headed out.

After a quick stop at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes to see what Harry's Tri-Wizard Tournament winnings had helped finance, and quickly leaving again at the twins' merciless teasing of Harry on his "date," Tonks dragged Harry into a different store. This time it was Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions.

Harry turned a pleading, panicked look onto Remus and Kingsley.

Remus just raised his hands in surrender and moved toward a spot near the front door.

Kingsley, not even trying to hide his laughter, stepped back out to stand his post outside as he'd done for most of the morning.

"Traitors," Harry muttered before giving in to the inevitable. Tonks, Madam Malkin, and a younger saleswitch all swooped down on him when he turned to them.

Scion of Gryffindor 8 - The Public Will Reading

The next few days after their shopping trip were busy for what Godric had coined as the "new House of Potter".

They finished arranging Gryffindor Keep, and more importantly, Harry's summer training started.

Kingsley, in addition to meditation and the rudiments of occlumency, was teaching Harry potions. Unsurprisingly, with a decent teacher who actually explained the "why" of each ingredient, Harry was picking up the subject quickly. For practical experience and practice, he was building a stock of general household potions.

Godric didn't start Harry's wandless training immediately. Kingsley's meditation techniques were a good starting point for wandless training, and he promised to further Harry's wandless talents after he went further in his meditation. To fill in his allotted training time, Godric worked with Harry to harness his Mage Sight.

Most spells, it turned out, were very difficult to see simply because they moved so quickly. A stream of spells was visible after a bit of practice, but individual spells were proving nearly impossible for Harry to spot or track.

A sustained spell, on the other hand, was very much visible. Levitating an object, for instance, produced a halo of sorts around the object that Harry could easily see. Glamours, wards, and other such sustained spells all had their own color schemes and visible patterns that Harry was slowly learning to recognize.

He was also surprised to note that breaking a spell, as opposed to dispelling one, was visible as a shower of sparks.

Remus began Harry's apparition training and polished his transfiguration skills, showing him how and what to conjure as physical barricades during dueling practices.

During one such training session, Harry broached a subject he had been thinking about. "Remus, could you teach me to be an animagus?"

Remus wasn't surprised by the question. "Not very easily. James, Sirius, and Peter had a study guide they wrote as they were going over the theory. Last I knew, Peter had it, as he was the last to transform. I honestly don't know where it is now." He smiled at Harry's despondent look. "I didn't say I couldn't. Only that it would take some time. Next time we're in Gringotts, let's look for it in the Black vault. If it isn't there, I'll talk with Minerva about helping you out, okay?"

Harry frowned. "I was hoping to learn about it over the summer."

Remus laughed. "It took your father and Sirius YEARS, Harry. You want to do it in two months?"

Harry grinned impishly. "Well, with you teaching me, why couldn't I?"

"Flattery will get you far, young man, but not THAT far."

"He's flattering you, Remus?" Tonks asked as she entered the dueling chamber that they group was using as a practical classroom. "Should I be jealous?" She batted her suddenly ridiculously exaggerated eyelashes at Harry and gave him a deep sigh and a smitten look.

Remus laughed. "Sorry, Nimma. He's not my type." He smiled over at the blushing young wizard and said, "I think we're done for the day. Just think about which types of stone you'd use to block which categories of spells, and we'll discuss it tomorrow. I'll leave you to Tonks's tender mercies."

"Ooh, he's at my mercy, is he?" Tonks asked, now with a wide and somewhat lecherous smile.

"Only if you can beat me in the duel, Mistress Nimma," Harry replied with a smile, thoroughly enjoying the teasing with the two.

In truth, Tonks was his favorite teacher. In addition to auror tactics, she was teaching him how to cast silently. With her outgoing personality and sense of humor coupled with her metamorph abilities, the classes were always great fun for the young wizard.

And then there was the fact that she was also his dueling instructor. He already had a solid, if somewhat unorthodox, skill level before she started working with him at what she called the intermediate auror dueling techniques. These classes always taught Harry a great deal, and he enjoyed every minute of it. He had yet to win a full duel with her, though.

August the 10th came upon Harry almost without his noticing. Having four demanding but excellent teachers living with him, the days had flown by.

This morning, however, Dobby had left out one of his formal robes for him after his shower. It took more than a few seconds before Harry remembered that this day was the day for the formal reading of Sirius's Last Will and Testament.

After a quiet breakfast, they talked about further training instead of dwelling on the upcoming reading. When the appointed hour arrived, the four living magicians made their way to the warded room that contained the only floo connection in the Keep.

"You could probably apparate safely; you're learning it as quickly as your mother did," Remus explained at Harry's disgusted sigh when the fireplace came into view.

"But I'm not licensed," Harry finished the argument the two of them had had the previous day. "Say, could we stop by the ministry and get my apparition license today?"

"Don't see why not," Kingsley said as Tonks flooed out. "The ministry will recognize that you're of age without making a big deal of it. Actually, some of the individual workers might, come to think of it. But the purebloods will try to keep it quiet if at all possible. At any rate, you may as well get some benefit from that law."

"Great," Harry said, smiling for the first time that day. "Leaky Cauldron."

Woosh.

Fortunately, Tonks caught Harry as he came flying out of the fireplace behind the bar in the Leaky Cauldron, with Remus and Kingsley following quickly behind. A series of quick Scouring Charms later, the four walked out into Diagon Alley and made straight for Gringotts. Whether by luck or fate, nobody noticed Harry this time, so he made it into the assigned conference room without being molested.

After stopping just inside the door to the crowded room for a moment, Tonks led the three men toward an older couple. "Mum! Dad!" she cried. After hugging each of them, she turned back around. "Harry and Remus, I'd like to introduce you two to my parents, Andromeda and Ted Tonks. Mum, Dad, this is Harry Potter and Remus Lupin. I'm sure you remember Kingsley?"

The stately looking witch, showing her Black bloodline in her hair color and bearing, smiled and offered her hand for a courteous shake. "Of course I remember your partner, Dora, and I've met Remus before. Mr. Potter, pleased to make your acquaintance. Please call me Andy."

"Ma'am."

Mr. Tonks smiled pleasantly and also shook Harry's hand and then immediately engaged Kingsley in a conversation about something or another.

"What are YOU doing here, Potter?" asked a snide voice from behind them.

Three wands were instantly drawn, but Harry had already recognized the voice. He turned around to face Draco Malfoy. "Hello, Malfoy."

Behind her son, Narcissa was watching the confrontation in quiet disgust. Having just seen Andy, the resemblance between the sisters was clear.

"Baron Malfoy," Andy interrupted, "Lord Potter has as much right to be here as does anyone." She shifted her attention. "Hello, Cissy. It's been a while."

"Andy," Narcissa responded tightly.

"Lord? Potter's a LORD?" Draco gasped out belatedly.

"Yes," Andy responded calmly. "Were you not aware that the head of the House of Potter carried the title of 'Lord' just as the head of the House of Malfoy is entitled as a Baron?"

Tonks was grinning widely by this point. "You know, cousin, technically you should be calling him 'Milord Potter'."

"NEVER!" Malfoy ground out, eyes wide in hatred and denial. He spun in place and stormed off to a relatively empty part of the room, taking a seat next to Professor Snape.

"My apologies, Lord Potter," Narcissa said quietly. "Draco, I'm afraid, has been unduly influenced by his father for far too long."

Unsure of what to say to the woman, Harry merely nodded noncommittally at her.

Narcissa looked at Andy for a moment before giving a quiet sigh and moving away without saying a further word.

"What was that all about?" Kingsley asked before Harry could.

"Cissy is desperately unhappy," Andy answered in a low tone. "She married because our father told her to, not because she loved Lucius. Since then, with everything that has happened . . . Well, she's in a position that she doesn't know how to get out of."

Harry was surprised. Though he admittedly knew very little about Mrs. Malfoy, the fact that she was Draco's mother had told him enough. Or so he had thought.

Harry's attention was caught by a wizened looking goblin moving toward the front of the room with a pensieve in hand. "If everyone will please take a seat, we shall have the public reading of Sirius O. Black's Last Will and Testament," he said as he reached the front of the room.

Harry and company sat next to the Tonks family as everyone else found seats.

In addition to the two Malfoys and a Snape, Harry also saw Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Molly Weasley, the four youngest Weasleys, and Hermione taking one corner of the seating area. Ron and Ginny waved to Harry when they saw him looking. Hermione smiled.

Harry smiled back at the group as he continued looking around. What he took to be a gaggle of reporters plus assorted ministry and bank personnel were in the remaining corner of the conference room. There were a dozen more witches and wizards that Harry didn't immediately recognize scattered around as well.

The goblin, meanwhile, had set the pensieve in action. "I ask that everyone refrain from questions or comments until after the recording is finished." As before, a small image of Sirius formed above the pensieve.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Sirius Orion Black, and this is my Last Will and Testament, recorded January 12th, 1996.

"Instead of getting all maudlin about things, I'm just going to say that I expect that I died doing something idiotically heroic. And if Snivellus didn't just snort in disgust at that line, I owe you a galleon, Professor McGonagall."

Most of the room laughed, as that was exactly what had happened. Snape looked very sour at this reaction.

"Now, on to the best part." Image Sirius rubbed his hands together. "Giving away all the blood money from the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, no matter how dishonorable they mostly were."

Andy Tonks almost smiled, and Tonks snickered.

"To Fred and George Weasley, I leave a trunk of items and books that my friends and I collected while in school. Maybe you can find some ideas for your store tucked away in there. My only request of you is to let Harry read the two books in there first.

"To Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, and Hermione Granger, I leave five thousand galleons each for being a better friend to my godson than I could ever be. Oh, and Ron, take Hermione out on a date, would you?"

Ginny grinned widely. Ron and Hermione, though smiling, were also both blushing furiously.

"To Arthur and Molly Weasley, I leave ten thousand galleons for taking Harry in when he so desperately needed it.

"To Albus Dumbledore, I leave all of my warm, woolen socks - yes, Harry did tell me that story once - and a bottle of hundred year old Napoleon brandy.

"To Severus - see, I DO know your name - Snape, I leave one hundred galleons a month on the condition that you provide Wolfsbane Potion to Remus and any other werewolves requesting it at each full moon. Snargtooth," one of the goblins in the front lazily waved a hand, "will provide the ingredients out of a trust fund for the purpose.

"To Alastor Moody, I leave five thousand galleons. Please help train Harry. I don't know the full story, but Voldemort will clearly keep coming after him until one or the other falls. I'd rather Harry lives to a ripe old age and has a lot of stories to tell before I see him again.

"To Kingsley Shacklebolt, I leave five thousand galleons. I also request of you to help train Harry and for the same reasons. Oh, and no offense, but I'm not all that sorry that you never caught me, Mr. Shacklebolt.

"To Narcissa Black-Malfoy, I leave fifty thousand galleons under two stipulations. First, you divorce that bastard husband of yours and renounce the Malfoy name. Second, you take a magically binding oath not to assist in any way, shape, or form the Death Eaters, Voldemort, or any other dark wizard or witch or any such followers for as long as you live."

Surprisingly, her expression didn't flicker.

"To Draco Malfoy, I leave thirty-five thousand galleons under the same conditions as your mother.

"Snargtooth has the paperwork ready if and when either or both of you want to move forward with this."

Draco's expression, however, most definitely did change. He looked nearly apoplectic with rage.

"To Andromeda Black-Tonks, I leave twenty thousand galleons as the dowry you were denied previously.

"To Nymphadora Tonks, the only first cousin once removed that I'll even acknowledge right now, I leave twenty thousand galleons. Find yourself a good wizard, Nymphie, and remember to live.

"To Remus Lupin, my last remaining brother by choice. Moony, I know you never let James or I give you anything, but this time you have no options. To you I'm leaving one hundred and one thousand galleons, one thousand of which must be spent within the next two weeks on clothing, furniture, and other personal items. You also are my chosen guardian for Harry, if he has not come of age by this point. I know you're a very private man by nature, Remus, but please find someone to share your life with. No matter what some blind, frightened wizards say, you're a good man, and you deserve a happy life.

Lastly, I leave all remaining monies, property, and vault contents to Harry Potter." The image seemed to sigh. "Harry, I don't know what happened, obviously, but I DO know you well enough to know that you're probably blaming yourself for my death. Please don't. However it happened, please know that it was my choice. Remember me, but don't dwell on it. I'm with your parents now, and that's the happiest thing I can think of for myself, short of staying here for you. I'll give you the same advice I'm giving most of my friends. Look for a nice witch that you can spend the rest of your life with. Above all, remember to live.

"This is Padfoot, signing off."

The image dissolved, and the room erupted. The Weasleys were gasping, laughing, or staring in shock. Snape was glaring. Andy Tonks was crying silently.

"HOW DARE HE?" screeched Draco Malfoy. "He can't do that!"

"He can't do what, Baron Malfoy?" the unnamed goblin in front asked calmly.

"That mongrel mutt can't leave everything to Scarhead, can he?"

The goblin raised an eyebrow at the phrasing but answered the question, "I assure you, Baron Malfoy, the former Baron Black is perfectly within his rights to give anything he wishes to Lord-Baron Potter."

The scratching noises coming from the reporters' area took on an even more frantic pace at these words.

Snargtooth spoke up, "Please let me know if you intend to accept Baron Black's offer, Baron Malfoy, Lady Malfoy."

"We will NOT be renouncing the Malfoy name, you subhuman thing, and to even suggest -"

Malfoy's tirade was cut off by his mother's quiet words, "Sit down and be silent, Draco."

Sputtering and glaring, Draco dropped into his seat and clenched his teeth. Harry fought to keep from snickering.

Into the tense silence, the goblin in front again spoke, "Will all named parties please see one of these bank representatives to arrange for disbursement of bequests, please? Lord-Baron Potter, please stay. Otherwise, thank you all for your attention."

The reporters made a scrambling dash from the room. The ministry representatives and other uninvolved spectators made a more dignified exit from the room. Giving Harry one last poisonous glare, Malfoy strode from the room as well.

For the moment, Harry stayed in his seat as most everyone else, Kingsley included, moved forward. Harry turned toward Remus and asked quietly, "What's with all the titles the goblins are using?"

"Goblins are very status conscious. They'll usually refer to a wizard by their full title or, in your case, the full title that everyone in the room knew at the time. You'll notice that they didn't refer to your barony until after the reading?"

"What barony?"

"Sirius's. The titles mean different things for wizards than they do for muggles, Harry. Lordships are granted for services or honorable actions toward the wizarding community. Baronies are more or less automatic for sufficiently wealthy families. In your case, because you have two different titles from two different lines, you're technically a 'Lord-Baron'. Actually, the Potter name probably counts as a barony in its own right, but they also were awarded a lordship, therefore, the 'Lord Potter' bit."

"Confused yet?" Tonks asked cheerfully.

Harry goggled.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," Remus said with a grin. "Don't worry much about it. Just know that in formal occasions, you're Lord-Baron Potter. Depending on the person, you could even insist on 'Milord' or 'Sire' as honorifics."

Harry blinked.

Tonks smiled. "Information overload I think, Remus."

"What happened to him?" Kingsley asked, peering curiously at Harry as he returned to the group.

"I was trying to explain his titles."

Harry snapped himself out of it. "So the title of 'Lord' is for services to the wizarding community?"

"Yep. Your family's was granted sometime in the early 1500's, if I recall. Helping to thwart a dark lord."

"So Riddle taking the title of 'Lord Voldemort' -"

"He is trying to corrupt the title," Remus explained.

For the first time, Harry relaxed a fraction about his title. If Voldemort was trying to corrupt an honorable title, then wearing it proudly would be just another small way of fighting him.

"Harry!"

"Best mate!"

"Primary -"

"- only -"

"- financial backer of ours!"

"If we beg nicely -"

"- would you please -"

"- PLEASE -"

"- come back into the store?"

"Why?" Harry asked, amused as always by the twins' antics.

"'Why?' 'WHY?' he asks," one twin (George?) lamented.

"Well, to be fair, he ran out the last time before he saw the result of him being in our humble store."

"Do you really blame me?" Harry wondered.

Both twins thought about it for a moment. "Naw, not really."

"Perhaps the line about playing 'Tonks-il hockey' was a bit over the top."

Kingsley's eyes bugged out as Tonks growled. He'd been standing post outside the door and couldn't get any answers from Harry or Tonks after they'd escaped the store the previous week. The laughing werewolf hadn't helped matters any.

Shaking his head, and wondering if he really wanted to know where the twins had picked up the Americanism, Harry asked, "Why did you need me to come back in, anyway?"

"You should've seen it," one (Fred?) said.

"Wall to wall, as far as the eye could see."

"Customers!" they chorused.

"That's what you wanted, wasn't it?" Remus asked.

"Yes, but they came in after Harry left."

"No doubt looking for the Boy Who Lived."

"Rumors abounded about you making the rounds of Diagon Alley with a lovely young witch on your arm."

"The pool among the Diagon Alley proprietors is at a hundred galleons as to who it was."

"Nobody recognized her."

"Or at least nobody admitted to recognizing her."

"Little Harry all grown up and dating mysterious witches."

"Makes my heart proud that we helped raise him from a naïve little cub."

"You guys are both mental, did you know that?" Harry asked in amusement.

They looked at him in amazement. "This is just now occurring to you?"

"Let me get this straight," Tonks interrupted the conversation. "You want Harry to come in, with a mysterious witch on his arm, only so that he can leave again?"

Both twins nodded solemnly. "It was great for business."

Harry and company broke into laughter.

Smiling happily, the twins left.

Hermione and Ginny looked like they would approach Harry, but Molly, after concluding her business with the goblins, shot Remus, Tonks, and

Kingsley disapproving looks and shooed her children away from Harry. Ginny looked very frustrated at her mother's actions, so Harry called out, "We'll talk later," to the departing Weasleys.

After the room had finally cleared, the goblin who had been sitting in the audience moved toward Harry with a distinguished wizard following in his wake. "Lord-Baron Potter? My name is Snargtooth. I am the Gringotts employee in charge of the Black account. The wizard behind me is Maxmillian Wordsmith. He was the solicitor for Sirius Black."

The wizard in question gave an abbreviated bow. "Lord-Baron."

"Mr. Wordsmith. Both of you, please, I'm unaccustomed to all this formality. My name is Harry."

Both flicked their gazes to Kingsley, Remus, and Tonks. "We're not alone, sir, and we have several confidential items to discuss with you," Snargtooth said, ignoring Harry's words for the moment.

Harry smiled. "Then allow me to introduce you to my comrades. Kingsley Shacklebolt, Remus Lupin, and -" Harry paused and flicked a glance at her before finishing, "Tonks. They are friends. I'm not going to hide anything from the three of them, so you may as well speak in front of them."

Both wizard and goblin nodded. "In that case, call me Max," the wizard said as he took a nearby seat. "I understand that you are of age, Harry?"

"Yes, sir. Max," Harry corrected himself at a look from the older wizard.

Nodding approval at Harry's words, Max pulled a small attaché case out of his pocket and enlarged it. A stack of papers and a small box were pulled out and placed onto the table. "This is the Black signet ring," he said, pushing the box over. "You are not required to wear it as it isn't your bloodline, but for formal occasions, it might be a good idea. Some people will respect you more, the more signet rings you can legitimately wear."

Tonks suddenly coughed, part of it sounding like the word "Malfoy".

Max smiled. "Indeed, dear." He looked at her for a moment. "You're the daughter of Andromeda Black-Tonks, correct?"

As Tonks nodded, Harry said, "Thank you for reminding me. How do I go about un-disinheriting Andy and Tonks? For that matter, how do I disinherit the Malfoys and Bellatrix Lestrange from the Black name?"

"Reversing a disinheritance is only a few legal forms and a small ritual. I can owl all of that to you tomorrow. As for Lady and Baron Malfoy, I'd recommend you hold off on that." He paused before grinning wryly. "Assuming, of course, that you keep me on as your solicitor."

Harry smiled. "You seem a decent sort, Max. Tell me, were you the Black solicitor, or just Sirius's?"

Max snorted quietly, and Snargtooth shifted in his seat. "Oh, no. I was most definitely NOT the Black solicitor," the wizard answered. "That would have been Ignatius Howe. I don't mind telling you that I had a devil of a time getting all the information out of him that I was entitled to after Walburga Black died and Sirius hired me."

Surprisingly, Snargtooth spoke up. "Far be it from me to tell you your business, sir, but I believe you should know that Mr. Wordsmith has a much . . . lighter reputation than the previous Black solicitor."

Harry looked at him curiously for a moment before nodding. "Good to know. Thank you for your candor, Snargtooth." He turned back to the solicitor. "I'll keep you on, at least for the moment. Please get that stuff to me tomorrow about brining Andy and Tonks back into the Black family."

"Yes, sir," the much older solicitor said to the young heir to the Black name. He slid the stack of papers over. "Here is the current accounting of the estate. You may have noticed in the vaults that it is somewhat . . . disorganized. This breakdown should give you a much firmer idea of what you have in the way of properties, incomes, business ventures, and the like."

"I have one question, if I may," Tonks said hesitantly.

Max glanced at Harry but then nodded to her.

"I know the Black family is quite wealthy, but I have never heard where the wealth came from."

Max looked over at Harry for permission and answered after Harry's nod. "Land ownership, mostly. The estate owns a great deal of valuable real estate here in London and rents it to the commercial shops atop it." He turned to Harry. "Please look through that summary. Feel free to owl me with any questions. I'm on retainer to you for any legal work you may need, but nothing is pending at this point." He turned to the goblin. "That covers all of my immediate needs, Snargtooth. Does Gringotts have any further business to bring to the House of Black?"

"Not at this time. I was told you already have the vault key, Lord-Baron Potter?"

"Yes, but I thought I asked you to call me Harry?"

Snargtooth was silent for a moment before saying quietly, "It would not be proper for me to do that, Lord-Baron."

"Despite how past Blacks may have treated you, I am not a pure-blooded, racist asshole."

Tonks snorted with a very unladylike noise.

"No offense to the only legitimate Black in the room," Harry added with a grin to her.

"None taken." She smiled.

Scion of Gryffindor
9 - Attack on the Shackles

Dear Ginny,

Happy birthday!

As you've probably noticed by now, this handsome fellow is not Hedwig despite being perhaps the only other snowy owl in England. He is, in fact, my birthday gift to you. I was told that as a magical post owl, he'll likely live at least forty years. It's nice to know that Hedwig will be with me for so much longer. How old is Errol, anyway?

Back to your owl: I have not named him. Please let me know what name you eventually choose.

A great deal has happened since I spoke to you in London a couple weeks ago. Just in case you aren't staying somewhere where you're keeping up with the news: After Fudge (and Dumbledore) fired them, I hired Remus, Kingsley, and Tonks as bodyguards and teachers. Not only do I get several great tutors out of the deal, but this also lets the Order focus on something other than me. I just hope they're actually doing something constructive.

I keep going off on tangents, don't I? Back to my story. We've found a place to stay that I inherited from my family. Yes, I have inherited several things from my family. Imagine my surprise when I heard that I was never informed of the Potter Vault, as it was my legal right. Recall that this is AFTER Dumbledore forbade me from attending Gringotts for the reading of the Black Will.

To make a long story short, (too late [sorry, muggle joke]) I'm no longer blindly following Dumbledore's orders.

Enough about my woes. How're you doing? Has Hermione scared you to death about the OWLs yet? Is Percy still an unmentionable topic around your family? Ron and Hermione still dancing around each other like the clueless ponces they are about each other? How're you getting along with Dean?

Always,
Harry

Harry read over the letter again and nodded in satisfaction. Rolling it up, he dripped hot wax from a stick of wax and imprinted the Potter signet ring onto the cooling wax to seal the letter. After carefully tying the parchment to the leg of the white owl standing patiently, he carried the owl to the nearby window and said, "Take this to Ginny Weasley tomorrow morning, please. Stay there after delivery. You'll be her owl from now on, okay?"

The owl gave a quiet hoot and took off.

Harry watched the owl fly away into the darkening sky and wondered if he should have included more in the letter. Godric, Gryffindor Keep, being of age, dragon hide armor, more shopping after the Will reading, earning his apparition license . . . He had indeed been busy. The problem was that he didn't know how much to tell her without it getting back to Dumbledore. Not that he didn't trust her. He did, with his life. The problem was that he couldn't reasonably expect her not to talk to her family, and Harry was sure at least Molly and Arthur would tell Dumbledore anything and everything.

A quiet hoot pulled his attention from the setting sun. "Yes, Hedwig. I know you're upset." He smiled at the dignified tawny owl standing on her own perch next to Hedwig's. "You'll just have to get along with her for a while, Hedwig. I'll give her to Hermione in a month for her birthday. Now, do you two want to go hunting?"

Later that night, Harry was fast asleep and having a dream typical of sixteen-year-old males. In short, nothing he would EVER repeat to an adult.

He was just getting to the really, REALLY interesting parts of his dream when he was awakened by a scream from Tonks.

Bolting upright and breathing heavily from the sudden burst of adrenalin, Harry fumbled putting his glasses on and was just picking his wand up when his bedroom door burst open. He narrowly avoided casting a particularly nasty hex when he recognized the wide-eyed, panicked look on Tonks's face.

Remus, wearing only pajama bottoms, skidded to a stop against the doorjamb. His eyes raked over Harry and, not finding anything wrong with him, turned to Tonks. "What's wrong?"

"Shack!" she said in a state of near panic, her face showing indecision. "His family's under attack."

"Go!" Remus ordered. "Wait!" he amended as she turned. "Get your armor on, and then get your butt to his place. I'll stay here with Harry."

"You too, Remus," Harry ordered as she tore down the hall without a backward glance.

"No, Cub. You need someone to stay with you. This could well be a diversion to get your guards away from you."

Harry's eyes narrowed, and he nearly growled aloud at his pseudo-godfather. The tense werewolf was saved from a verbal tongue-lashing by Godric's arrival.

"Wards are good," Godric reported. "I'll stay with him. Between me, the wards, Dobby, and Harry himself, this place is dangerous to attack."

Remus looked torn.

"Go!" Harry snarled in frustration.

Harry and Godric watched Remus give them a momentary smile of thanks before he turned and ran toward his room. Harry counted out ten seconds before Remus was sprinting toward the front door. Tonks was long since gone.

"How can I get there?" Harry murmured to himself.

"Floo, apparition, Knight Bus, or portkey" Godric promptly answered.

Harry looked at him in surprise.

The ghost almost smiled. "Surprised I'm not trying to keep you here?"

"Er, yeah, actually."

"You're a Gryffindor, through and through. I am not about to ask you to not go to the aid of a friend. All I ask is that you wear your armor. I'm getting kind of fond of you, and you ARE my primary magical heir."

Smiling, Harry spun to where his armor vest was hanging over a mannequin. As he wiggled it over his head, he said, "Taking the Knight Bus would only bring non-combatants into the firefight, so that is out. Can you make a portkey for me?"

"I've never been there, so no."

"Damn."

"Agreed. However, I do know that the floo address is 'Shacklebolt's Shack'."

Harry ran, with Godric on his heels, toward the floo fireplace. "Shacklebolt's Shack!" Harry cried. The floo trip was over an instant after it started. Harry looked up from his undignified heap on the floor to find himself looking at Godric. "Damn!"

"Indeed. Their floo connection is either damaged or more likely blocked. We have no phoenix handy, so that is out."

"Dobby!" Harry called, having an inspiration.

Dobby popped in. "Yes, Master Harry?" the nervously twitching elf asked.

"Can you take me to Kingsley Shacklebolt's home?"

Dobby's ears drooped. "No, Master Harry. I is not being able to take someone using house-elf travel."

"DAMN!"

"Why does Master Harry not use wizard travel?" Dobby asked.

"I've never been there. I can't apparate somewhere I've never been."

"Says who?" Godric asked.

Harry looked over at him. "What?"

"It's true enough that most wizards can only apparate to somewhere they've been before. You, Harry, are not like most wizards, however. Concentrate on Remus or Tonks sufficiently and trigger an apparition with them as the destination."

Harry stared for a moment before closing his eyes and focusing on Remus as hard as he could, and then he pushed his magic forward as he'd learned during his apparition lessons.

"STOP!" Godric yelled.

Harry opened his eyes to see a wavering yellow glow all around the room and Dobby and Godric looking around in fear. The glow went away, and they both relaxed.

"Please get out from under my anti-apparition ward before you try that, Harry. You nearly tore through that ward. You probably saw it."

Harry smiled in embarrassment before turning on his heel and pelting toward the front door. "Sorry!" he called over his shoulder. "We'll be back when we can!"

Harry sprinted out the door and along the path until he reached the tree that marked the ward boundary. Once in place, he paused for a moment to gain his breath. Again concentrating on Remus, he triggered an apparition.

"*Protego*," he whispered, the instant the feeling of being pulled through to his new destination ended.

He was immediately glad he put up a shield. He expected to arrive into a running firefight, and he wasn't disappointed. His new shield deflected a purple curse coming in at Remus that he'd appeared in the path of. Even as his shield was wavering with the impact, Harry had a sudden case of vertigo that threatened to topple him over where he stood.

The scene paused for a moment as everyone adjusted to the surprising new player on the field. Remus glared at Harry for a moment before moving away quickly.

Harry half dove and half fell behind a stone wall on instinct as five more hexes came in at him. It took more than a few seconds before the disorientation faded and he could properly focus on his surroundings. The six Death Eaters he could see were paying most of their attention toward Harry and his stone wall defense. So far, the field stone wall seemed to be holding up, but that was only a matter of time. The Death Eaters themselves appeared to be hunkered down behind makeshift barricades around the front door to a modest two-story home tucked into a small wood.

Peeking the tip of his wand over the wall, he gathered his focus and shouted, "*Reducto*!"

The barricades the Death Eaters had been hiding behind exploded, sending rock chips and wooden splinters in all directions.

Harry immediately broke into a cold sweat and threw up. Watching his enemies' cover explode was bad enough, but Harry's body was now violently rebelling against what he was doing to it.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, Harry took deep, gulping breaths to calm himself and steady his stomach. After thirty seconds, his body started responding to commands again, and he looked up.

Remus and Tonks were standing over the six prone Death Eaters, binding the last ones with conjured ropes. The whole area showed signs of the fight that had just ended.

Harry stood and unsteadily moved to join Remus and Tonks.

Remus glared at Harry. "Damn fool. Well, if you're here, you may as well do it right. I saw at least two -"

"Three," Tonks interrupted, fully the professional auror.

"- three wizards enter the door. No telling how things are going inside."

Smoke started coming from somewhere behind the house, and a low explosion was heard by the three.

"I daresay it isn't going well," Tonks said as she stepped to the side to look through a window. "Nobody in the front room," she reported.

Remus tried the battered front door and then cast an unlocking charm when it didn't open immediately. The door flared violet for a moment but refused to open.

"Hell with it," Tonks growled and promptly blasted the door into matchsticks. The three moved cautiously inside, listening. Other than the sound of a growing fire from somewhere, no sound was heard. The front room was unoccupied but showed clear signs of a fight with the overturned furniture and scorch marks on the walls.

Tonks raised her wand and murmured something. A small, silver form darted from her wand and immediately melted through the ceiling.

"Tonks?" Kingsley's voice shouted from above.

"Here, Shack! Lower level secure. Remus and Harry are with me."

"Upper level secure. Get up here. Got four stunned bad guys to deal with, and I don't know how far that fire's gotten."

The three sprinted up the stairs to find four unconscious Death Eaters, one with a messily destroyed shoulder, piled around a destroyed door that led to a bedroom. Kingsley was just now stepping out from his defensive position behind the door. A willowy black woman, who was carrying a silently sobbing child, followed him.

Tonks and Kingsley threw a practiced eye over all six standing magicians before turning and casting levitating charms over the bodies, leading them down the stairs.

What Harry presumed was Kingsley's wife placed their child on her feet before looking around the small hallway. She looked at one bloodstain on the floor and another on the wall before collapsing in a dead faint. Remus caught her before she made it to the floor.

Shrugging, the werewolf easily hoisted the unconscious woman in his arms and went downstairs.

This left Harry with the child. Hoping he was doing the right thing, Harry went down to one knee and smiled at her as much as his mood and physical condition allowed. "Hi. My name's Harry. What's yours?"

Her crying stopped, but her eyes were still bright with tears. "Momma? What happened to Momma?"

"She's downstairs. Do you want to go and see her?"

The little girl nodded and shot down the stairs under her own power. Harry followed more slowly and unsteadily. They found all ten bound Death Eaters now stacked haphazardly about the front room with Kingsley standing over them, wand drawn and a grim expression on his face. Kingsley noticed the two enter the room and nodded. "I'm fine here. Please go out back and help put out the fire. Come here, Princess. Momma and I are fine." Father wrapped the now relieved child in a hug as Harry moved toward the sounds he could hear coming from down a hallway.

"Dobby!"

Dobby popped in and looked around. "Master Harry called for Dobby?"

Harry didn't slow his pace, forcing Dobby to jog to catch up and keep pace. "Please help us put out the fire, then go to the ministry and report this attack to the aurors on duty. After that, go back to the Keep, tell Godric we're all fine, and get one of the empty suites cleaned up and ready." They got to within view of the fire that was trying to move through the kitchen but was being held in check by the combined efforts of Remus and Tonks.

"Magical fire!" Remus called when he noticed Harry. "We can hold it in place but can't get it to stop!"

"*Aquas*!" Harry added his efforts to the two, and they slowly began making headway.

Dobby silently studied the room for a moment before closing his eyes and holding both arms out wide. He suddenly snapped fingers on both of his hands simultaneously and most of the fires winked out of existence. The one corner still burning was handled quickly by the three magicians.

"Well done, Dobby!" Harry praised, managing a smile for his small friend.

The house-elf smiled. "Dobby will now go, Master Harry. Dobby will do your bidding and then be at the Keep if Master Harry needs to speak with Dobby." He popped away.

The three paused and looked around the damaged, and now dripping wet, room.

Breaking the resulting silence, Harry said, "Interrupted a damn nice dream, too."

Remus broke into laughter.

Smiling widely, Tonks asked, "What color was her hair?" as her own hair shifted back and forth from dark red to bushy brown.

Harry clamped his jaw shut.

Still laughing, Remus led the two others back to the front room.

Kingsley, now in full auror mentality, had revived his wife and installed her and his daughter together on the undamaged couch. He was casting diagnostic spells on each of the ten unconscious men in series.

Three of the men from upstairs had no visible wounds, and the fourth looked like his shoulder had been attacked by a particularly angry hippogriff. The six from the front door had various cuts and embedded splinters from Harry having destroyed their defensive wall. Some of them only had minor cuts, but two looked pretty well torn apart.

Kingsley was just checking the second of these when he sighed and shook his head. "This one's gone," he pronounced.

Harry felt like a petrification spell had just been cast on him; his whole body stopped. A man died from the spell he'd cast? A man had DIED? From HIS spell?

He'd KILLED the man?

Remus had his back turned, so he didn't have a chance to catch Harry as he collapsed.

Scion of Gryffindor 10 - Aftermath of the Attack

Harry slowly drifted back up from a deep sleep. As his mind started working again, his memory of the fight at the Shackbolt home came flooding back and threatened to throw him back into unconsciousness with guilt. He groaned.

"Awake, are you?" a voice quietly asked.

Harry opened his eyes and could make out the blurry form of Godric sitting next to his bed in the Keep. Harry groaned again. "Did I really kill him, or was it all an awful nightmare?"

"Hmm," Godric made a non-committal noise. "You helped save three lives and capture nine Death Eaters."

Harry pried himself into a sitting position and took the glasses Godric handed him. "You didn't answer the question, Grandfather."

Godric sighed. "One of the attacking Death Eaters, who would have cheerfully killed you and everyone you hold dear if he could've, did die as a result of your spell, yes."

Harry groaned a third time, dropping his head into his hands.

"Harry, do you hate me?"

Harry's head shot up. "Of course not!"

"Do you hate Remus?"

Harry vehemently shook his head.

"Tonks? Kingsley?"

Again, Harry shook his head.

"All four of us have killed, Harry. Yes, you killed that man. But it wasn't at the whim of a psychotic madman. It was in defense of your friends and two innocents. Don't you dare feel guilt for that."

Harry sighed. "I know that. It's just that I feel guilty anyway. That was the first person who died as a direct result of my actions."

Godric nodded and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not saying it isn't an easy burden to bear. I still remember those that I was forced to kill, one of whom had been a good friend at one point. Let your heart grieve for them, yes, but not because you killed them. Rather grieve their poor choices that led them to their fate."

Harry nodded tiredly.

Having given his heir something to think about, Godric leaned back in his chair. "Nine Death Eaters were turned over to the ministry. Remus got you back here before anyone else showed up, so it's possible your presence at the fight won't be known. We'll have to wait for this morning's Prophet to know for sure. The Shackbolts moved into the suite you asked Dobby to prepare. Did that answer all your questions for the moment?"

"Who were the ten Death Eaters? Who was the one I . . ." Harry choked up, unable to finish his question.

Godric shook his head. "I haven't heard any names. You can ask the others at breakfast if you still want to know."

"Did you hear about it?" Harry asked in a small voice.

"Remus told me about it."

"How did I do that? I mean, I can't believe Remus or Tonks hadn't hit their cover with a Reductor Curse before I tried it."

"We keep telling you and telling you, Harry. You're powerful. Got that? Pow-er-ful. Your Reductor Curse was at least twice as strong as anything else that hit it by that point, thereby causing it to explode into shrapnel. Same thing with apparating to Remus like you did, by the way. Apparating to a person instead of a location requires intense mental focus and power that only a handful of wizards can claim."

Harry skeptically said, "I don't know about that, but I suppose I did try to focus on putting a lot of power into the blast before I fired it off."

"Then the spell was three times as powerful as Remus can do instead of only twice. That explains why you were sick and weak, as well. Your body

Isn't used to channeling that kind of energy, and it reacted in the way it could. We'll be working on channeling that kind of power in our future lessons. Meanwhile, I'm going to keep telling you the same thing until you start to believe me, Harry. In raw magical power, you're probably in the top ten living wizards on the planet right now."

"This can actually be measured?" Honest curiosity was finally piercing the blanket of gloom that Harry was trying to fight off.

"Not really. Oh, you can compare yourself to another by both casting a spell and seeing which is more powerful. Stone cutting spells or heating massive amounts of water are good for that kind of comparison. After you teach for a while, though, you can recognize these things in students." He winked. "And I've taught more than a few students in my time."

Harry smiled a little at one of the founders of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. "Yeah, I heard rumors to that effect."

Godric laughed. "Well, now that you're perhaps feeling better, shall we go down and get you some food? It's about time for a late breakfast."

Harry found Remus and Tonks, both looking like they hadn't gotten any sleep, sitting at the table and reading copies of the Prophet. Harry's face fell a little. "Dare I ask?"

Remus looked up. "Morning. How'd you sleep?" He paused and asked more quietly, "How're you doing?"

Harry's instinctive response of, "I'm fine," died before it passed his lips. He flopped down into a seat and smiled thankfully at Dobby as the loyal elf placed a gargantuan breakfast in front of him. "Thank you, Dobby. If we interrupted your sleep with everything overnight, please go back to bed."

Dobby shook his head. "Dobby needs less sleep than Master Harry. Dobby does not need more sleep."

"House-elves really do need less sleep than humans," Tonks said, looking at him over the top of her own copy of the Prophet. "Now stop trying to avoid the question."

Harry took a sip of his pumpkin juice as he framed his answer. "Angry, upset, and depressed."

None of the adults could think of anything to say.

Harry continued, staring into space introspectively, "I have all this power, it seems. Too much even for my body to keep up with it. I'm fated to kill someone. Here I go and kill someone else instead. Everyone around me keeps getting hurt or killed. Cedric and Sirius were killed, not to mention how often Ginny, Ron, and Hermione have been hurt just by being near me. Not to mention most of the Order. I'm a danger to everyone, aren't I? Maybe I should just go -"

"NO!" three voices shouted their denial.

Startled out of his mood, Harry looked at them in confusion and shock.

"Don't you DARE go anywhere, Harry James Potter," Tonks said vehemently. "People keep getting hurt? Perhaps so. But remember that we all are choosing, of our own volition, mind, to stand with you against a greedy, murderous psychopath."

"Yes, you have the power," Remus said. "Patronus at thirteen? Those things are rare and difficult enough to do once a witch or wizard reaches their full potential at eighteen or so. Thirteen is unheard of."

"You also nearly tore through my anti-apparition ward," Godric added.

Remus looked over at him. "He did? Come to that, why did you let Harry come to the fight? I thought you said you'd keep him here."

Godric grinned. "I never promised that. I just said that this place is too dangerous to attack with us both here. As for why I let him, as you call it? You two went to the aid of a friend. Are you denying Harry has the right to do the same?"

Remus scowled. Tonks grinned and nodded in acknowledgement of the point.

Harry was enjoying the minor dressing down Remus was getting. "He's got you there, Moony."

Ignoring the ghost's point, Remus said to Harry. "Are you listening to us? Leaving won't solve anything. Voldemort will just have an easier time taking over the wizarding world and killing Ginny, Hermione, and everyone else." He took a breath to calm down and continued in a calmer tone, "Harry, running away to try to protect us won't accomplish anything. It'll just make us all worry. It probably wouldn't work either, as Voldemort would just find you. Now, the only thing I can see for you to do is to become strong enough to survive the war that's coming our way. And by Merlin I'm going to be here to help you avenge James, Lily, and Sirius."

Harry looked stricken. "Moony -"

Tonks interrupted as Remus shook his head. "He's just pointing out that we all have our own reasons to be in this fight." She paused, and Harry slowly nodded his head as the information sank in. "As for having killed that idiot last night, that is something that is tough to deal with."

Harry gave a small smile. "What, you aren't going to give me some platitude about his deserving it by following a sociopathic wanker?"

She grinned at his phrasing and answered the question, "You've never struck me as wanting to dance around the issue. Like most aurors, you'd rather get a straight answer."

Harry blew out a breath as he sank back in his chair. "Yeah," he agreed in a whisper. He shook his head. "Grandfather talked with me after I woke up. That helped."

Tonks and Remus both nodded and sighed identical sighs of relief at the minor crises they'd averted.

Changing the topic, Harry waved a hand at the paper and asked, "Should I ask what the rag that claims to report news is saying?" Not waiting for a response, he picked up his fork and started in on his breakfast, surprised at his own appetite.

Remus smiled in approval at Harry's actions. "Two articles you'd be interested in hearing about. Sirius's Will was reported. Done more or less accurately, actually. Even got the terms to the Malfoys and Severus right."

"That was only yesterday, wasn't it? Come to think of it, I was surprised to see them there," Harry said around a mouthful of eggs.

"The goblins invite everyone who is named in a Will. Then it is open to anyone else as well. The Black family is big news, so that's why there were so many other ministry people and reporters there."

Harry's face fell. "Bloody hell. Did anyone check for Skeeter? I don't remember seeing her, but she could've been there as a bug."

Remus nodded. "I checked after you started talking to Snargtooth. She wasn't in the room. Now, on to the second article. They got the story about the attack in this edition of the paper, as you were apparently worried about. All ten of the Death Eaters are named. The wounded have all already been treated at St. Mungo's. Kingsley and his family are named as the targets, though his position as former auror and currently your employee isn't mentioned." He took a breath and dropped the bad news. "We tried Harry, we really did. Somehow, the Prophet learned that the three of us were there. They even learned that you were the one who . . ." He grimaced.

"Cast a spell that killed one of the attackers?" Harry asked with a slight catch in his voice.

"Yes," Remus asked quietly.

"Who was the . . . fatality?" Harry finally asked.

Remus slowly shook his head. "Does it really matter? As far as I know, the name doesn't mean anything to you."

Harry took a shuddering breath. "No, I suppose not." Shaking off the morbid mood threatening him again, he asked, "Any interesting names in the ones caught?"

"The father of one of your classmates, I think. Geoffrey Crabbe?"

Harry nodded, not really surprised. His expression flattened out into a scowl, and he asked sarcastically, "Have either of you written to Dumbledore to THANK him for all the help the Order gave to us?"

"Yes, I owled him," Kingsley answered as he entered the room carrying his daughter, his wife trailing behind the pair. "As we didn't have the time earlier, I'd like to introduce you to my wife Kelly and daughter Laura."

Harry smiled at the two. "I met Laura for a few minutes, but she wouldn't tell me her name."

Laura responded by turning to bury her face in her father's shoulder.

The adults chuckled.

Kelly approached the table and knelt beside Harry's chair, taking his hand in hers. "Kingsley tells me that this is your home, and you've invited us to stay. That, plus rescuing us last night . . . Well, that is a debt that we'll never be able to adequately repay."

Harry almost flushed in embarrassment. "Well, after all that Kingsley's done to help me over the past year, I couldn't very well turn you away, could I?"

"Most would, very easily," Kingsley corrected him as he placed Laura in a chair beside Tonks. "And call me Shack. That's what all my fighting comrades call me, even if they are only just sixteen."

Laura looked over from the funny faces Tonks was already entertaining her with. "Harry Potter can't be only sixteen, Dadda. He has to be at least a hundred." She turned to a suddenly laughing Harry and said, "Dadda says you've fought the REALLY BAD wizard five times and a giant snake and dementos and lots and lots of bad guys. You hafta be lots more than sixteen!" she insisted.

Desperately fighting to maintain her composure, Tonks said, "I know you're a very big six years old, Laura, but that really is Harry Potter, and he really is just sixteen years old."

She turned skeptical eyes to Harry.

Smiling, Harry lifted the fringe of his hair from the infamous scar. He hated the attention the thing brought him, but it was universally recognized.

Suddenly wide eyes stared at Harry. "Wow."

"Tonks says you're already six?" Harry asked as Dobby put an already cut apart waffle in front of the oblivious child.

Laura nodded. "I'll be seven in March!"

"You're getting to be a big girl, then. Do you know what house you're going to be in when you go to Hogwarts?"

She frowned. "I don't know. Momma was a Hufflepuff, and Dadda was a Rafencaw."

"You don't have to be in Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw. You could be in Gryffindor. Or Slytherin," he added, almost grudgingly. "I am in Gryffindor. Remus," he pointed to the watching werewolf, "was in Gryffindor, too." He glanced over at Tonks.

Looking vastly amused, Tonks addressed Laura, "I was in Slytherin. So there is someone from each of the houses here in this room!"

Blinking momentarily in surprise at the unexpected information, Harry leaned over toward Laura and caught her attention. "Have you met my grandfather?"

She shook her head, clearly trying to keep up with all the information pouring in at her.

"I call him my grandfather, but he's not, really. He is my ancestor, though. Kind of like my grandfather's grandfather's grandfather. He's a ghost."

Laura's eyes darted over to the only unidentified man at the table. Godric let his Glamour lapse for a moment, and he took on the normal, translucent appearance of a ghost.

Kelly, too, appeared surprised by this. Harry began to wonder how much, if anything, Kingsley had told his family.

Harry stood and walked around behind Tonks to whisper into Laura's ear. "His name is Godric Gryffindor."

Her suddenly wide eyes showed starkly against her dark skin. She turned to stare at Godric, apparently at a loss for words.

Kelly looked from Godric to Harry, a question clear in her eyes.

Godric threw Harry a tolerant smirk before he addressed Kelly. "Allow me to introduce myself as my young heir doesn't seem to recall his manners." He stood and swept into a formal bow toward her. "Godric Gryffindor, at your service."

After thirty seconds of silent staring, she turned to her husband. Kingsley merely nodded.

"Wow," she silently mouthed.

"You're pretty good with kids, Harry," Remus observed.

Harry shrugged as he took his chair again. "One of the few places I could walk to from the Dursley's was the park. As everyone over the age of ten had been told I went to a school for criminal boys, the young kids were the only ones willing to talk with me when their mothers' backs were turned."

"You'll make a good father someday," Kelly observed.

Harry grunted in morbid amusement. "Assuming I live long enough," he said very quietly.

Remus shot him a look, but nobody else seemed to have heard him.

Trying to head off the dark mood he was again falling into, Harry answered Kelly's question with a grin, "Doesn't that require a prospective mother somewhere along the line?"

She laughed. "Don't tell me that there aren't any interested witches out there."

As if summoned by her words, a snowy owl flew in and perched on Harry's chair back.

Remus started laughing. "Speaking of interested witches . . ." he trailed off with a truly wicked grin at Harry.

Harry tried for a dignified silence, but he figured the heat he felt pouring off of his neck gave away his embarrassment. As a laughing Remus explained the significance of Ginny's owl to Kelly, Harry retrieved his post.

Harry,

Thank you SO much! He's a very well behaved owl, and Ron is already jealous. I have decided to name him Henry.

It's before breakfast, so I have a few minutes to write. Lucky you.

Things here are . . . interesting. I am indeed somewhere that we're getting plenty of news. Rumor has it that you recently inherited it, actually. Gred and Forge keep us informed of the unclassified stuff, and occasionally we see a copy of the Prophet, so we're not totally cut off from the news.

Now that the place has been thoroughly cleaned, the number of household chores I've been drafted into has fallen. That would be good news if there were actually something interesting for me to DO.

At any rate, on to the important things; namely, gossip. Ron and Hermione are NOT sniping at each other anymore. I've even seen

Ron voluntarily doing his summer homework.

Combine these facts together, and see if you come to the same conclusion I have regarding my brother and your bushy-haired best friend.

To answer your other specific questions:

I asked Mum, and Errol was Dad's when he first when to Hogwarts. That makes him in his late thirties! For a tawny, even a magical one, that's positively ancient!

Without anything else to do, I've been revising like a good little fifth year. While not exactly impressed, Hermione at least hasn't been nagging me about it.

Percy. He's not so much unmentionable as unmentioned. He's still working in Fudge's office, but nobody's heard anything else about him.

I can't tell you much about Dean. In all honesty, I said that merely to twist Ron's tail. Sorry to disappoint you. No stories of lurid love affairs here.

Now, give Henry a piece of your bacon; ask Dobby for a quill, parchment, and ink; and write me back! What're you up to? You mentioned the three with you are tutoring you. What are they teaching? Where are you staying? Are you having fun? Have you found a young witch worth wooing?

**Yours,
Ginny**

Harry was smiling by the end of the letter, and he did as asked. Or was that ordered? Lifting a rasher of bacon, he offered it to Henry. "Dobby?"

Dobby appeared in the room. "Yes, Master Harry?"

"Could you please bring me a piece of parchment, my quill, and inkwell? I have a letter to write, and I daren't wait until later."

Dobby bowed and left to carry out his orders.

"The fireball ordered you to write back immediately?" Remus asked in amusement.

"Would YOU cross a female Weasley if given the choice?" Harry asked back with an answering grin.

Dobby had delivered the requested items, and Harry was about to write back when Pigwidgeon arrived.

Henry looked downright sour at the owl's appearance. Kelly and Godric looked bemused at the tiny owl's energy and enthusiasm. Laura was entranced at first before giggling at Harry's futile attempts to catch the feathered menace.

"*Immobulus*," Harry cried in exasperation. Pigwidgeon stopped moving abruptly and just gently floated.

Godric started laughing. "Care to again try to claim you can't do wandless magic, Harry?"

Harry looked down at his hand only to realize he didn't have his wand in hand but rather was holding his butter knife.

Kelly goggled. Laura giggled. Everyone else just laughed.

Smiling in embarrassment, Harry retrieved Pig and unrolled his post.

Harry,

I just read the story in the Prophet ! Is everyone there okay? Nobody here seems to know anything about it. They were all at different targets, none of which made the paper.

Is what the paper said true? I mean about what happened to the tenth attacker? If it is, Harry, I'm sure you had no choice in the matter. Between everything that's been happening to you recently, I hope someone there is talking to you about it. I mean the anger and guilt that you must be feeling.

I know you looked okay at the Will reading, but I also know how you can hide your true feelings. Harry, I know you don't want to, but you MUST talk with someone about it. If you're uncomfortable talking to anyone there (wherever you are), then you can talk to me. If you still aren't comfortable with that, I can recommend a few names of professionals. Totally confidential, of course.

Speaking of where you are; where are you? Nobody here seems to know anything. Dumbledore and Mrs. Weasley are beside themselves with worry. I know Tonks, Auror Shackbolt, and Professor Lupin are with you, so I expect you're safe enough for the moment, but everyone would feel better if you were here with us where it is truly safe.

Please write back and tell us how you are doing, really. Or better yet, come back here where it is safe.

Scion of Gryffindor 11 - Madam Bones

Harry Potter sat at his breakfast table, reading the letter that Pigwidgeon had just delivered.

His audience included, among others, a werewolf, a ghost, a senior auror with fifteen years fighting against the worst the wizarding world had to offer, and a junior auror.

Despite the eclectic and largely fearless group, every single adult was scared of the expression on his face and the power that they could all feel pouring off the young wizard.

"Dobby, bring me another sheet of parchment," Harry ordered in a low voice.

Dobby, just as frightened as the rest, complied in less than a second.

Harry wrote furiously for only a minute. Once done, he looked up and asked, "How do I make this a howler?"

The adults looked amongst themselves for a moment. "Cast '*creo clamor*' and the recipient's name," Godric answered uneasily.

Harry pointed his finger and growled, "*Creo clamor* Hermione Granger." It immediately folded itself into the familiar red form. He looked over at the still immobilized Pigwidgeon and muttered, "*Finite . Volo festino .*"

Remus, the only one to hear him, raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Pigwidgeon!" Harry snarled, stopping the hyperactive owl in its tracks. "Take this to Hermione. Make sure she's surrounded by as many people as possible. If you can catch her at breakfast still, that would be best. Go."

The tiny owl scooped up the red envelope and was out of the room so quickly that he looked like a blur.

"Harry?" Tonks asked softly.

"Yeah?" he asked shortly, glaring at the tabletop.

"You're scaring Laura. And me," she admitted.

Harry looked up quickly. The wary expressions on the adult faces saddened him, but the expression of fright on Laura's face hurt worse. "I'm sorry," he addressed to the young witch. "I just got something from someone I thought was a friend, and it made me very angry. I'm not mad at you or anyone else here."

"Promise?" Laura asked in a little voice.

Harry forced himself to relax and lean back in his seat. "Promise."

Remus cautiously suggested, "Let's take the morning off, okay? You need to write to Ginny still and then calm your magic. We'll see how the afternoon looks after lunch."

"Try the meditation I taught you," Kingsley suggested. "It'll help you with your emotions."

Harry's eyes flared.

Godric spoke firmly to the young wizard. "Whether you want to admit it or not, you are angry. That's not a good mental condition to be in when you're trying to learn. Any spells you cast will be overcharged and erratic until you calm down."

Harry stared at his ancestor for several seconds before closing his eyes and taking several deep breaths. When everyone felt the static energy in the air dissipate, they all breathed a little easier.

Harry opened his eyes again and addressed Kelly. "My apologies. It's the first time we meet, and you had to witness that. I'm sorry for my behavior."

Still a little wide-eyed, Kelly shook her head. "Everyone gets upset at some point. This just happened to be yours."

Harry smiled bitterly. "According to the Prophet over the last year, Mad-Dog Potter has violent tendencies at least twice a day."

"For what it's worth, I didn't believe all that twaddle," she offered.

He found that he believed her. "Thank you," he said simply.

Changing the subject, he asked, "Was your room okay last night? Anything else I can do to make your stay more comfortable?"

She shook her head. "You've already done so much for us, Lord Potter. There is nothing more we could ask."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Call me Harry, please. This 'Lord Potter' thing makes me think someone important is standing behind me."

Henry, still perched on Harry's chair back, hooted.

After a startled moment, everyone laughed.

Kingsley stood. "We'll leave you to write your note, Harry. If you need one of us, we'll be eating in the kitchen." He picked up his plate of untouched breakfast and gently guided his family out. Remus, Tonks, and Godric followed his lead after nodding at Harry.

Seeing everyone leave, Harry gave an amused grunt. He looked over his shoulder at Henry. "Everyone's scared of me, I guess. Wonderful."

Hedwig fluttered into the room and perched on Harry's other side.

Harry looked at her curiously. "What's going on, girl?"

Hedwig cooed and rubbed her face against his cheek for a moment before preening his hair.

Harry laughed. "Okay, okay. I'll stop being so grumpy. Happy?"

Hedwig gave Harry a firm hoot before turning her attention to the unfamiliar owl. The two sized each other up for a few moments before Henry made a questioning noise. Hedwig hopped to another chair and settled down comfortably. Henry moved over and nestled in beside her before the two started making quiet noises and small movements that Harry had no hope of interpreting.

"Hey, you two. Are you gonna behave, or do I need to get you a room?"

Both snowy owls looked at his amused smile for a moment before turning back to each other.

Chuckling, Harry requested, "Just warn me before I become a grandfather, okay?"

Hedwig gave him a rude squawk in response.

Shaking his head at his owl's antics, Harry began writing.

Ginny,

Henry has Hedwig's approval, so he must be a good owl. And don't think I don't know the significance of that name, young lady!

On a related note, if these two get any more chummy, I might have to ask for support when the chicks are born. Talk about an instant infatuation.

If you're anywhere near Hermione, I'm sure you've heard firsthand or at least secondhand about my response to her letter. Did she admit what she wrote that set me off? In short, it was a demand that I seek professional help for the depression that she is just SURE I'm suffering. I guess what upset me the most was that she TOLD me to seek help. She didn't ask.

While I'm on a roll with the uncomfortable topics, I'll go ahead and get the other one out of the way. I know you're too polite to ask but are still curious about it, so I'll tell you that the basic facts about last night were correct in the Prophet article. There weren't reports of any other attacks, and Hermione said that's where all of Dumbledore's people were. Can you tell me anything about it?

There. Now that all the unhappy talk is out of the way, we can go on to more cheerful things.

About the gossip you mentioned: It's about time.

My three tutors are great. I'm learning loads from them. Kingsley is doing potions, and I think I've learned more in one week than with six months being terrorized by Tall, Dark, and Greasy. Remus is showing me some nifty transfiguration tricks. I asked about animagus, but that's apparently too much to deal with right now. Tonks is helping me with my dueling.

I hope you can forgive me, but I can't tell you where I'm staying. Please accept that I'm safe.

A "young witch worth wooing"? And then you sign it, "yours"? Was that a hint of some kind, perhaps?

**Always,
Harry**

Harry looked up hours later when he heard someone enter the room. "Hi, Remus."

Harry," the werewolf answered, looking at Harry carefully.

Harry waved him off. "I feel better now that I've had some time to calm down."

Remus relaxed and took a seat. "What's all this?" he asked, waving a hand at the table cluttered with parchment.

"Remember the papers the Black solicitor gave me? The rundown of the Black accounts? Well, I've traced where the money comes from. I think I need to go and visit Madam Bones this afternoon."

"Is something wrong?" Remus asked in concern. Considering the history of the Black family, it wouldn't surprise him to learn that Harry had inherited more than one illegal venture.

Harry thought about it for a second. "Not wrong, really. Just something I need to talk with the head of law enforcement about. Considering she didn't reverse Fudge's termination of Tonks and Shack, I don't think those two will be all that welcome. So, care to go to the ministry with me?"

Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, stood and waved her hand toward the visitor's chair in front of her desk. "Lord-Baron Potter. Welcome. I must admit that I'm curious as to why you asked to see me."

"Madam Bones," Harry, unsure how to deal with the entire situation, gave her a short bow of respect before seating himself. "First, I want to express my condolences regarding Susan. We did not know each other all that well, but she was invariably kind and good-natured in the D.A. meetings."

She nodded carefully. "Thank you. Please permit an old and busy witch to forgo some of the pleasantries and ask for the reason of your visit, with a known werewolf in tow no less."

Harry glanced over his shoulder at Remus's cool expression as he stood by the door. "Remus is a trusted friend, Madam. At the moment, he is acting as my bodyguard. However, I asked to see you about another matter entirely. Are you aware that I recently inherited the bulk of the Black family fortune?"

"Indeed, including the barony."

"Yes. What is generally not known is that the Black family owns a great deal of commercial property here in London."

"This is fascinating, but what does it have to do with me?"

"Among others, I now seem to own all the land of Knockturn Alley."

To her credit, her eyes merely widened. Harry had privately been hoping for a more extreme response than that. A gasp, perhaps. Maybe even stunned gaping.

"Indeed."

"Indeed. So, my question of you is what I should do about that."

Now she just looked confused. "I'm not sure what you mean, Lord-Baron."

Harry frowned slightly. "Please call me Harry. As for the land, it occurs to me that I could do any of several things. My first thought was to simply chuck them all out, preferably after the aurors arrest them all. However, the lease contracts could get me into a lot of legal trouble if I tried to do that. So, I can think of three other things to do. First, I could refuse to renew their leases when they come up. Second, I could go to the other extreme and simply let it go on as it is. Third, I could add a clause to the new leases that they forfeit the remainder of their lease if they are convicted of dealing in dark artifacts or engaged in dark activities."

Madam Bones slowly nodded. "I see. Why are you asking my opinion?"

Harry almost smiled. "I wanted to know which of the choices, in your opinion, would be best for the safety and security of wizarding Britain."

One eyebrow came way up over her monocle. "If I didn't give you an opinion, what would you do?"

"Probably the third one: the clauses against dark activity. That would have the benefit of slowly driving the dark magic out of the area yet keep it a viable commercial area for me to lease out. I'm sure there are legitimate businesses down that alley. If there were more good than bad, then it could become another Diagon Alley within a few years."

"Then why don't you simply do that?"

"Because then all the dark shops would be scattered around the country instead of concentrated in one place. I presume having them all in one place makes some parts of your job easier. I was curious to know which was better from your point of view."

Madam Bones straightened up in her chair and actually smiled at him. "Very insightful question, young man. In some ways, you're correct." She sat back and thought about it for a few seconds before speaking again. "Ideally, a clause of the lease would open the shops to search at your discretion and all shop owners to submit to veritaserum."

Harry stared at her. "That would have the same effect as refusing to renew any leases as well as driving off all the legitimate businesses."

She nodded. "Quite so. I understand that you're willing to work with me, but only within reason. A clause as you suggested earlier would be just fine with one modification. The balance of the lease AND ALL SHOP CONTENTS will be forfeited upon conviction. That will eventually drive out all the dark elements, but it will also be taking all their stock off of the streets."

"But they would just start up shop somewhere else, wouldn't they?"

She shrugged. "Probably. Don't worry about us, though. You're right in that one place to watch is easier in some ways. A bunch of scattered places, with less defenses, is also reasonable for us to keep track of. It's a double-edged sword, no matter which way you look at it."

Harry nodded. "Very well. I'll have my solicitor, Mr. Wordsmith, send a copy of the new lease to you once he finishes writing it. Just so you know how it's worded, of course."

A sly smile came to her face. "Of course. May I presume that you wish your part in this to remain confidential, Lord-Baron?"

Harry smiled back in the same way. "We understand each other, then. Within reason, I am at your disposal, Madam."

She nodded but looked pensive for a moment. "You know, I had thought that you were Dumbledore's man."

All expression washed from Harry's face.

She nodded understandingly. "Based on your expression and that of Mr. Lupin, I can see that assumption was false. I am sorry for thinking that of you." She tilted her head slightly. "With that in mind, would it help if I offered to re-instate Shacklebolt or Tonks with the caveat that they distance themselves from Dumbledore?"

Harry frowned. "I don't know. I'll talk to them about it and leave it up to them." His face cleared. "You've heard about my hiring them, then?"

She nodded. "I have the report on the attack on Shacklebolt's home. It included who his employer is and why you, Tonks, and Lupin here were all there. Despite everything, I am glad to hear that everyone came out of it well."

Harry winced. "Except for one of the Death Eaters," he muttered.

"You are not in any trouble for that," she said quickly.

Harry just nodded, face still pained. "Will I be required to give a statement?"

"Not if you don't want to. We have all relevant witness statements already."

Harry stood. "Very well. If there is nothing else?"

"Thank you for coming in. I shall expect an owl from your solicitor, then?"

"Yes. Good day, Madam."

"Lord-Baron."

Once they were back in the atrium, Harry turned to Remus. "Let's stop at Wordsmith's office - it's in Gringotts bank, isn't it? - and get that in motion. Then we'll go home and back to our missed transfiguration lesson."

Scion of Gryffindor 12 - More Aftermath

Dinner, the evening after Harry's meeting with Madam Bones, was just finishing when Harry told Tonks and Kingsley about her offer to re-hire the two former aurors.

While they were quietly talking with each other and Kelly, Remus asked a question that had been bothering him all afternoon. "Harry, why did you ask Max to buy that stock?"

"What stock?" Tonks asked, breaking from her conversation and looking over at the two.

"Harry asked his solicitor to buy stock in some muggle company."

"Not company, singular. Companies, plural," Harry corrected him. "In addition to the Black accounts, I also paid more attention to the Potter accounts. On the Potter side, I saw that I owned a lot of stock already. I just gave him instructions for buying more."

"Some of it, sure, but I haven't heard of some of those names, Harry. Are you sure you're going to make money from them?"

Harry smiled mysteriously. "Making money isn't my main goal for some of them. There are other things you can do with it. Besides, if given the chance, wouldn't you want to own your own quidditch or football team?"

Remus laughed, and Laura giggled. "You could rename them . . ." The werewolf paused. "What could you call them? Nothing goes well with 'Potter', does it?"

"Somehow, 'Potter's Flower Pots' doesn't strike fear into the opponent," Harry dryly agreed.

"Potter's Hotter Trotters?" Tonks suggested with a wide grin.

"Buy the Harpies, and you can rename them to 'Harry's Harem of Hotties'," Godric countered.

"Or you could go the gruesome route and take 'Potter's Poison' or 'Harry's Hags'."

"Potter's Quidditch Team!" Laura suggested.

Fighting his grin at the other suggestions, Harry smiled at the girl. "I like that one, Laura. Yes, if I do own my own quidditch team, I'll call them 'Potter's Quidditch Team'. Do you want to play for me?"

She shook her head solemnly. "I wanna be a seeker, but you'd already be seeker for your own team." She brightened. "But Dadda can be a beater!"

Harry smiled over at the big man. "You played beater for Ravenclaw?"

Shack nodded. "Played against your father once, actually. I was a third year, and it was my first game. We lost eventually, but it was a good game all around."

"I think I remember that one," Remus said. "It was in our seventh year, wasn't it? Didn't you end up breaking your arm or something?"

Shack nodded and ducked his head in embarrassment. "Missed a bludger, and it broke my humerus."

Harry smirked. "Sorry, but the proper response to that one is just too easy."

Tonks, Remus, and Kelly snickered. Shack rolled his eyes. Laura just looked confused.

"At any rate," Harry said in a total change of topic, "what did the two of you decide about Madam Bones's offer?"

"We'll be staying here," Shack answered.

"We appreciate the offer that she made to us, but we both think we can do more good in the long run by staying here and helping you than working through the ministry."

Kingsley nodded accord with Tonks's words. "May I borrow Hedwig to deliver our note back to her, Harry?"

Harry was back in the phoenix-song cage, his wand and Voldemort's connected by a golden thread of power.

Just as Harry was gaining his bearings, the beads along the thread entered his wand.

A thick, gray smoke immediately began pouring from his wand. Even as it coalesced into a body, another was flowing forth, followed by another, and then another. Harry lost count of the bodies when they began speaking to him.

"You killed me," a figure in Death Eater garb accused him.

"You killed me," Sirius echoed.

"You killed me. You killed me. You killed me." Over and over, the same thing was echoed. The unknown Death Eater, Sirius, Cedric Diggory, Susan Bones, James and Lily Potter. The faces, known and unknown, piled around him.

"I didn't!" Harry cried desperately.

"You did. We are dead because of you."

"NO!"

"HARRY!"

Harry jerked awake as if a gallon of icy water had been thrown onto his face.

"Harry! What's wrong?"

Harry just about lashed out with undirected wandless magic before his mind caught up and identified Remus kneeling beside his bed.

On the verge of hyperventilation, Harry screwed his eyes shut and panted out. "Nothing. Stupid dream."

"It was NOT nothing, Harry. I heard you thrashing around, and you were shouting, 'No,' as I got here. What was the nightmare about?"

"Nothing," Harry insisted, sitting against his headboard, drawing his knees up to his chest.

"You're an awful liar, Harry. You'll never make a good Marauder until you learn that basic skill."

Something finally gave. "I'M NOT A BLOODY JUNIOR MARAUDER OR WHATEVER THE EFFING HELL YOU AND PADFOOT THINK I SHOULD BE! The whole damn world expects me to save them from Voldemort, but then they crucify me if anything at all goes wrong. Sirius treated me like James Junior. Dumbledore thinks I'm some bloody weapon he can lock in a drawer when I'm not needed. My only family treats me like I'm two steps below a leprous slave. Hermione thinks I'm about to crack from the pressure. And YOU are trying to treat me like a younger version of your best friends! I'm TIRED of it, Moony. I'm not my parents or Sirius. I GOT THEM KILLED! Don't you GET that?"

"I'm just Harry, not Lord Gryffindor, not Lord-Baron Potter, just the Boy-Who-Is-Bloody-Unlucky-Enough-To-Still-Be-Alive." Anger spent for the moment, his head fell forward to his knees. He finished in a whisper, "I'm so many things to so many people. The only problem is that I don't know who I am."

Head down, Harry heard but didn't see Remus stand and leave the room without a word. Voices murmured in the hallway for a moment before someone else came in and sat in the chair in the corner.

"What now?" Harry asked tiredly.

"Feel better?" Tonks's voice asked.

"Not really."

Silence stretched for nearly a minute before she asked, "Do you know what you need?"

Harry snorted. "I can think of many things. What'd you have in mind?"

"You need a good shagging."

Harry finally reached for his glasses and looked over at his visitor. "Why, Nymph, are you volunteering?" He tried for lighthearted banter but didn't quite manage it.

Grin in place, Tonks shifted into the form of Ginny Weasley.

Far from what she was expecting, Harry's face slipped into a mask of horrible anger. "OUT! If you think that was funny, then you clearly don't know a damn thing. GET OUT!"

Eyes wide, Tonks bolted for the door and slammed it shut behind her.

Harry let loose a series of Bludgeoning Hexes at it anyway.

Two minutes later, Godric stuck his head through the closed but now dented door. "Is it safe to enter?"

"Why the hell are you here?" Harry demanded rudely.

"Everyone figures I'm the safest choice. You can't kill me, after all."

"Don't tempt me. I've been researching a way to get rid of a really annoying poltergeist."

"Yes, Peeves. I'd point out the differences between poltergeists and real ghosts, but I don't think you need a lecture on magical theory right now."

"Wonderful. Someone ELSE deciding what I need or don't need."

Godric almost smiled as he appeared to seat himself in the same chair that Tonks had used. "Very well, do you WANT the lecture?"

"No," Harry admitted.

Godric nodded. "Okay, then what DO you want?"

"I don't know!" Harry exclaimed. "Why the hell can't I have a normal life? I should be spending all my time owling a girlfriend and trying to figure out a way to get her into a broom closet, skiving off my divination homework, tormenting Mrs. Norris, and complaining about Snape. Instead, I'm in the center of this bloody war, no idea what to do, nor even a clear idea who I bloody well am anymore."

"Snape is a greasy git, isn't he?"

Harry glared at him. "You're not helping, Grandfather."

Godric Gryffindor shrugged. "I thought you wanted someone to commiserate with you about snarky potions masters. Sorry, but that's the only one I can help you with at the moment. I can't help on the girlfriend thing, and I'm even worse at divination than you are. That was Salazar's thing, not mine."

Despite himself, Harry snorted in amusement. "Slytherin was into divination? That's just funny."

"Isn't it?" Godric watched his descendant slowly calm down. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked eventually.

"About what?" Harry asked tiredly.

"Anything. Everything. What do you think of the chances the Cannons have at the championship this year?"

"About as good as the past generation or so. Ron's the one you want to talk with about the Cannons." Harry sighed. "I'm just so damn tired of everything everyone expects from me, Grandfather."

"I know. To some degree, I had the same problem when I was alive. Everyone kept expecting the four of us to solve all their problems. The fact that I was just as mortal and fallible as the next man seems to have been forgotten somewhere along the line."

"Yeah. Maybe we do have some things in common after all."

"Well, you ARE my forty-eight times great grandson."

Harry smiled briefly. His face calmed, and his eyes remained shut for so long that Godric thought he'd fallen asleep despite sitting up in bed when he spoke next. "In my nightmare I was becoming as bad as Voldemort. Priori Incantatem on my wand was pulling shades out. Sirius, Susan, Cedric, my parents, lots of others that I didn't know. Logically, I know that only that one Death Eater is my fault, but all the rest of them accused me of causing their deaths."

When Godric didn't respond, Harry looked at him curiously. "What, no comment?"

"What do you want me to say? You already know only one of them can really be attributed to you. That one was more than justified, as it was in self defense and defense of several others. The rest aren't even partially your fault. You're just feeling undeserved guilt over them. Now I'm not trying to make light of that guilt, but I don't know of anything I can say to help other than, 'It wasn't your fault, you know.'"

"Yeah," Harry whispered. He took a deep breath and said, "Thank you for coming in, Grandfather, but I'd like to get some sleep."

"Of course. Sleep well, Grandson."

Harry hesitantly entered the dining room the next morning. Kingsley looked up from his breakfast and nodded politely. Kelly smiled sympathetically at him.

Laura waved cheerfully. "Guess what, Harry. Dobby made me banana pancakes!"

Harry approached her with a quizzical expression and peered at her intently. "He did? Maybe he did it wrong. You still look like Laura and not banana pancakes."

She giggled. "No, silly! I mean, he made them for me to eat."

"Oh! Well, you should've said so."

Again giggling, the young girl went back to her breakfast.

As Harry was sitting down, Tonks entered the room and stopped abruptly at seeing Harry.

He stood again immediately. "I apologize, Tonks. Last night wasn't very easy for me. You were just trying to make a joke, and I took it badly. I am sorry."

She nodded slowly. "In retrospect, it may not have been in very good taste, so I apologize as well. If you don't mind my asking, why did you react that badly, though?"

Harry frowned. "My heart is one of the few things I still feel that I have control over, Tonks. And considering what you were offering, even if it were in jest . . . Well, let's just say that there are some things that I don't want to joke with, and that's one of them, okay?"

Kingsley's eyes were darting back and forth, a slight scowl on his face. Kelly was watching them in fascination.

"Friends?" Tonks asked, stepping forward with hand extended.

Harry smiled and was about to agree when she tripped on the rug and fell into him. His reflexes kicked in, and he caught her smaller form against his chest.

The tableau held for a moment before Harry turned to the Shacklebolts and asked, "Do friends always fall into hugs with each other?"

As they laughed, Tonks pushed herself upright again and lightly swatted his shoulder. "Only special friends." She moved around and sat next to Laura.

Harry was half done with his breakfast when Remus and Godric walked in together, talking quietly.

"Remus, I'm sorry," Harry blurted out. He immediately flushed. That had come out much more abruptly than he'd wanted it to.

Remus looked tired. "No, I'm sorry, Harry. I shouldn't be trying to mold you into a Marauder."

"But you aren't," Harry objected. Indeed, Remus had done very little aside from the occasional joke. Sirius was the one who had done the most to Harry in that regard, and it was one of the few things Harry resented him for.

"I am, at least a little bit," Remus countered. "If you said it, even under so much stress, then it must be at least partially true." He sighed as he dropped into a seat. "Look, I'll try to remember you aren't a - What'd you call it? - Junior Marauder. Or even want to be one. You're as mischievous as the next teenager, but real pranking is something you have to WANT. Considering your personality and upbringing, it clearly isn't for you."

Not knowing what else to say, Harry whispered, "Sorry."

Remus shook his head. "Nothing to be sorry for, Cub. Not your fault that I couldn't see what was in front of me."

"But I feel as if I've let you down."

"Nonsense. I'm sorry if I led you to that conclusion. In fact, I'm quite proud of everything you've accomplished. You're not a prankster. Fine. I'll try to remember that. But I DO know that you are not James Junior." He grinned. "His transfiguration skills were far better, and your charms and defense beat his scores by a fair margin."

Harry sat back down and looked at his plate. "Not even done with breakfast and it's already felt like a long day. What else can go wrong?"

Harry's heart nearly stopped as four owls picked that exact moment to fly into the room.

Henry perched on Harry's chair. Two owls went to Kingsley and Remus with copies of the [Daily Prophet](#) .

Nobody paid them any attention, though. Every eye was on the red envelope that Pigwidgeon carried in and dropped in front of Harry.

Staring at the smoking envelope, Harry gave serious consideration to casting a Finite Charm or a Silencing Spell. No matter what Hermione may have sent back, he didn't expect that he really wanted to hear it.

"HARRY JAMES POTTER, HOW DARE YOU SEND ME SUCH AN INSULTING DISPLAY! NEVER HAVE I BEEN SO HUMILIATED IN ALL MY LIFE! NOT ONLY THE WEASLEYS BUT ALSO PROFESSORS DUMBLEDORE, MCGONAGALL, AND SNAPE HEARD YOU TELLING ME OFF!

"YOU BROKE THE WINDOWS IN THE KITCHEN, AND MADAM POMFREY HAD TO DISTRIBUTE HEARING REPAIR POTIONS AFTERWARDS!

"IT'S A WONDER THE MUGGLE NEIGHBORS DIDN'T HEAR IT!

"HOW DARE YOU DO THAT TO ME!"

The resulting silence was broken by Godric. "She just doesn't get it, does she?"

Harry sighed. "Nope. Dobby, parchment, ink, and quill, please." Items in hand, it took only a moment to write his response.

Next time, listen instead of just hear.

- HJP

"Pigwidgeon," Harry called.

The little owl continued fluttering around, drawing a disapproving look from Henry.

"Pigwidgeon," Harry called more firmly. When the owl again ignored him, Harry cast, "Accio Pigwidgeon!"

A startled squawk later, Pigwidgeon was in Harry's outstretched hand. He deftly tied the short note to Pig's leg and whispered to the owl, "No spell on you this time, Pigwidgeon. If you can manage it, crap in her hair, though, okay? Now, off you go." He released the little owl out the window before returning to Ginny's note.

Harry,

A hint about what I meant? Naw. I'm well aware you're handicapped by being a guy and, therefore, clueless about some things.

I was indeed in the room when Hermione received your howler. What'd you do to make Pig fly that fast, anyway? It took Ron nearly a half-hour to catch him later.

Anyway, back to the howler. You got a pretty good audience. Fred and George thought it was quite entertaining until they realized you were honestly angry with her. They came to that realization about the same time the windows cracked, I think. Snape rolled his eyes and muttered something about overbearing attention-seekers, but what could you expect from him? Mum, Professor Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall all had VERY disapproving looks on their faces. I'd be careful of them for awhile.

I overheard Ron and Hermione talking later, and I think she's planning on sending you a howler in return. The really annoying thing there is that Hermione is now mad at you. Not for what you said, mind you, but just because it was a howler. She didn't understand what you were trying to say, I think.

I'm glad to hear that Henry is welcome there, wherever you are. He came back looking very full of himself. He's asleep now, so I'll wait until tonight to send this out.

As for any owlets, I'm entitled to half the proceeds when they're sold! Maybe we can start a trend at Hogwarts for students to own snowy owls.

Sorry, I have no information for you regarding the other night other than they indeed were guarding more places. They're keeping any other interesting news to themselves again this year. I definitely sympathize with your comment last year about being left in the dark. What's that muggle phrase? Something about mushrooms?

Well, Mum is yelling for me to help with lunch. Gotta go.

Found a young witch worth wooing, yet?

**Yours,
Ginny**

Shaking his head over the mysteries of young witches, Harry reported, "Ginny confirms more attacks than just at your place the other night. She doesn't know where, though."

He looked up and saw a look of growing horror etched on Remus's face. "Remus? What's wrong?"

Kingsley, face grave and holding the other newspaper, answered, "The ministry just passed a new law regarding werewolves. They're now required to register and check in with the ministry both the day before and the day after each full moon. Failure to do so for any reason is an automatic death sentence."

Scion of Gryffindor 13 - Harry versus Dumbledore

Harry didn't bother to knock. Instead, he sent the door crashing inward.

"Why the hell didn't you stop this?" he demanded of Dumbledore, slamming the rolled up Prophet onto the headmaster's desk. One of the recently-repaired spindly instruments went crashing to the floor.

Tonks silently and unobtrusively entered the room behind him and took up station in a corner.

Without even trying, Harry saw that the room was awash with magic. Most of the items in the room had at least one magical aura around them. Even as his eyes were sliding around the room, Harry noticed the slight golden glow of a spell over Dumbledore. Based on the color and shape, Harry tentatively identified it as some form of low-level compulsion or influencing charm. Deciding not to say anything about it, Harry silently thanked Godric for his Mage Sight tutoring.

"Good morning, Harry, Nymphadora. How have you been?"

Glaring, Harry folded his arms and demanded, "Answer my question."

"I had no control over the situation, Harry. You are perfectly well aware that the headmaster of the school has no control over the laws passed by the -"

"That's bullshit and you know it!" Harry interrupted.

The portraits, naturally, took exception to this. "Now see here!" "How very rude!" "Such disrespect in the younger -" "In my day, a student -"

Harry whirled and shouted at all of them, "Shut up!"

Instantly, each and every one of them snapped their jaws shut so fast that there was an audible click.

Smiling coldly, Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Seems that being the heir of a founder does have a few perks, doesn't it? No wonder you never told me about my birthright." He paused before going on in a pseudo-thoughtful tone. "I find myself wondering what I could do to the wards if I really wanted to."

Dumbledore's expression didn't flicker. "Speaking of your ancestry, Harry, you never answered my question of where to learnt about your relationship to Godric Gryffindor."

"And you never mentioned who told you I would be in Gringotts that day. Now, why didn't you stop this?" He waved a hand at the paper.

Dumbledore peered at him for a few moments.

Harry felt a niggling tickle in the back of his mind. Knowing exactly what that meant, he lashed out with a mental roar of anger.

Dumbledore blinked and leaned back in his chair.

Harry smiled coldly. "I'm still waiting for an answer."

"I have no answer that would satisfy you, I fear. I had no hope of winning the vote."

"So you didn't even try? I seem to remember a quote from someone. 'We must do what is right, not what is easy.'"

Dumbledore had the grace to look down at his desk in shame.

Harry threw his hands up in disgust. "I give up. I quit. I'm not coming back."

Dumbledore looked up in alarm and half stood. "You must come back to school."

"I MUST?" Harry asked in a very quiet voice. "Didn't you hear about the result the last time someone told me what I MUST do?"

Dumbledore sighed. "It would be better for all concerned if you returned to school with the other students, Harry."

Harry gave a mirthless grin. "Better for whom? Me? Hardly. Here in your school I have had to fight for my life nearly every year. Or are you going to claim I'd get a better education here? I have several capable tutors right now, as you're well aware. And I haven't been attacked, abused, belittled, or raped once by them. Can you say the same of the teachers here?"

Dumbledore's face fell into stern lines. "I am quite certain you are exaggerating, Harry, but I must insist you tell me what you meant by the alleged rape."

"Repeatedly, violently violating my mind when I had no chance, nor instruction, of defending myself."

"He was attempting to teach you -"

Harry waved it off. "Never mind. You won't believe anything I say against Snape, so what's the point? No matter how much everyone in the school complains, you never censure him, so why should this be any different? I'm curious, though, about what would happen if I took a few pensieve memories to the Hogwarts School Board or perhaps the Ministry of Education." He tilted his head for a moment. "Does Gryffindor have a seat on the School Board, you think?" He waved the thought off. "Back to Snape, I'm sure the auror recruiters have to know about his absolute pro-Slytherin bias."

"They do," Tonks acknowledged, entering the conversation for the first time. "They're close to asking for an investigation on their own since eighty percent of the qualified applicants have been Slytherin for the past ten years."

"Good," Harry said. He turned an accusing stare onto Dumbledore. "Maybe if someone ELSE, outside the school, tells you the same bloody thing, you'll actually start to listen."

Dumbledore looked pained. "Harry -"

"Lord-Baron," Harry interrupted once again.

"Pardon?" Dumbledore asked, momentarily thrown off balance.

"My friends call me Harry. You will call me Lord-Baron or Sire."

Tonks's quiet snicker was the only sound for a few seconds.

"Very well, Lord-Baron," Dumbledore finally conceded. "As I was saying, you are well aware of why I must keep Severus on staff."

"I will acknowledge that you need to keep him close, but for the sake of the school, it would be far preferable if he were sacked."

"I cannot allow that to happen."

"Yes, you can. You've already proven you're quite capable of sacrificing your pawns. You just choose not to sacrifice this particular one."

A tense silence was interrupted by the door opening and none other than Snape himself entering the room. He glanced momentarily at Tonks and her drawn wand before turning his superior smirk onto Harry. "Put your silly wand away, Potter. What are you doing here, anyway? No doubt pathetically pleading with the headmaster to force me to accept you into my N.E.W.T. potions class. I can tell you right now that it won't work. No matter how much you may grovel -"

"Shut up," Harry commanded flatly.

"Insolent brat," Snape snapped back. "Now you see, Headmaster? How much time and effort I've wasted on this ungrateful whelp. Instead of thanking me on bended knee, he continues to believe himself above his betters."

Jaw clenched, Harry said, "For Remus's sake, I'm not going to answer that."

"Because you know I'm right." Snape gave Harry a triumphant smirk.

Harry rolled his eyes and turned his back on the potions master. "As I was saying -"

Harry felt the surge of magic in the room and dove to the side, but nothing came at him. Harry looked back at his would-be assailant over the top of his drawn wand. Snape had been petrified and silenced by Tonks in the act of drawing his wand, face locked into a grimace of hatred.

"How typical," Harry said, standing and brushing himself off. "Cursing a student in the back. I guess I shouldn't be surprised anymore by him, though."

He turned his head to Dumbledore. "I notice that you made no move to defend me from Snape. AGAIN. Does he have some juicy blackmail against you or something?"

Harry stared at Dumbledore for a long moment, mockingly awaiting an explanation that never came, before looking around the office for a moment, his eyes stopping at an ancient hat. "Hello, Alistair."

To Dumbledore's wide-eyed amazement, the Sorting Hat responded, "Harry Potter. Or shall I call you Milord Gryffindor? No matter. Are you ready for your inheritance?"

"Please. And you're welcome to call me Harry, Alistair."

The hat paused for a moment, and Harry heard a small sound from under it. "Lift me up, if you would, Lord Gryff - Harry."

Harry lifted the hat and picked up the heavy silvery ring that was underneath him before replacing the hat onto his spot on the shelf. The crest was a

solid red background with an exquisitely detailed golden lion overlay. Tiny emerald chips were in place of its eyes. With no hesitation, Harry slipped the ring onto his right middle finger. After a moment of resizing, it settled comfortably.

Spotting another of his rightful possessions and seeing no need for subtlety, Harry drew his wand. "*Evanesco* ." The display case now gone, Harry picked up the sword of Gryffindor. A scabbard on a long chain popped into existence after he'd lifted the sword. It was the effort of only a few moments to sheath the sword and loop the magically adjusting chain over his head and settle it comfortably around his waist.

"Thank you, Alistair."

"Of course, Harry. Please feel free to visit again. I have a story or two about your ancestor you may enjoy."

Harry laughed. "Deal."

"Good day." Alistair resumed its immobile state.

"That brings us back to how you knew of your lineage," Dumbledore said.

"And back to you refusing to divulge who ratted me out about going to Gringotts. We're clearly at an impasse, Dumbledore. I blame you for everything from repeatedly sending me to prison to allowing this incompetent and sadistic bastard," he waved at the unmoving and unhearing Snape, "to rape me due to lack of supervision. I'm sure you can justify it to yourself by going on about the greater good. I have no idea how many martyrs, from toddlers to adults, you've sacrificed on that altar. Frankly, I'm sure the answer would horrify me."

"I have always done what I thought was for the best," Dumbledore countered quietly.

"That's the only thing keeping me from petitioning the Board of Governors to bring you up on charges like some others I could name."

"Is there any way I can talk you out of attempting to bring Severus before the Board?" Dumbledore asked. Though he was clearly beaten, his tone never deviated from its grandfatherly tones.

"Yes. You provide me, Kingsley, Tonks, and Remus unrestricted access to all intelligence the Order collects on Tom and the Death Eaters. We'll talk it over at home and figure out a reasonable method of getting it from you."

Dumbledore looked very unhappy with this line of discussion.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Fine, I'll make it easy on you. What is the primary goal of the Order of the Phoenix?"

"Protect the wizarding public from dark elements."

"Including dark lords like Tommy. Now, who's the only person prophesied as capable of defeating Riddle?"

"You are." Dumbledore looked VERY unhappy by this point.

"So the Order, by rights, should be doing its damndest to help me in any way. Like training me properly after first coming to Hogwarts, letting me be raised in a loving and stable home environment, protecting me from sadistic professors, minor things like that." Sarcasm was absolutely dripping from Harry's words.

Shaking his head sadly, Dumbledore asked, "Why do you hate Severus so?"

Harry stared incredulously at the headmaster. Huffing a breath out in exasperation, Harry turned on his heel and addressed the portraits. "I have a hypothetical situation for you all. I place before you an incoming, muggle-raised student. He has no idea he was even a wizard until a month ago and only received his textbooks shortly thereafter. He has not been permitted to study them. In one of his first classes, this student politely answers the professor's questions with, 'I don't know, sir.' The professor continues asking him magic-related questions. The student politely continues to admit ignorance. Then the professor takes points and insults him for not knowing the answer. Now I ask you, former Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts, is this a fair teacher?"

All the portraits shook their heads, muttering negative answers. None of them appeared to be angry at Harry any longer and were all watching the unfolding scene avidly. Even Phineas Nigellus was looking at Snape with something less than neutrality.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "This is one of the best classes I had with him, as he didn't actively try to hurt me or permit one of the Slytherins doing the same. This started in my very first class with him. And it's all years before he repeatedly mind-raped me on YOUR orders. Now, you STILL wonder why I don't like him?"

Dumbledore slumped back in his chair. "I suppose not. I agree to your terms. Thank you for coming in. You may go."

Harry smiled coldly. "You're still assuming you have control over me. You do not. Next and lastly, I wish to officially tell you that I will not be returning to Hogwarts in September."

"You must not do that."

"There's that word again."

Dumbledore sighed. "I wish you would reconsider."

I wish you hadn't consigned me to hell on earth fifteen years ago. I wish you'd actually followed my parents' Will - oh, yes, I've read it - and placed me with Remus, Andromeda Black-Tonks, the Weasleys, or with Neville. I wish you'd told me about my godfather earlier. I wish you'd told me about the prophecy earlier. I wish you'd told me about my ancestry earlier." He paused for a moment to let his words sink in before ending in a bitter, resigned tone, "We don't all get what we wish for, do we?"

"I suppose we do not," the headmaster quietly agreed.

Harry gave a sharp nod, finally having gotten at least some of his point across. "Goodbye, Headmaster. I'll be in contact about passing the intelligence to us."

Dumbledore silently nodded.

Harry left, followed closely by Tonks.

Two hallways later, Tonks asked, "Was Mum really listed in Lily and James's Will?"

Harry nodded. "She was the only family of Sirius's that anyone trusted. She could've raised me with all the right traditions and knowledge. At least that was the thinking in my dad's notes."

"She's never mentioned it."

"Oh, she didn't know. She was just listed as one of the people to contact about possibly doing so in the worst case. Weasley, Longbottom, Bones, and a bunch of the professors were all also listed." Harry snorted softly. "Dursley was way at the bottom with the notation, 'Do NOT leave Harry with them.'"

Tonks stopped and stared at Harry. "Dumbledore violated your parents' Will?"

"You sound surprised. After all the meddling you heard me accuse him of in there, do you really think something like ignoring their Will is unexpected?" He shook his head. "Come on, Tonks. We have one more stop to make today."

The pair walked toward the Entrance Hall silently. Everywhere they went, the portraits watched closely.

"This is getting spooky," Tonks commented after a few silent minutes of walking.

Harry grinned at her, slowly relaxing after the stressful meeting. "Big, bad auror scared of a drafty, old castle?"

"When the castle is magical, rumored to be alive, and hosts ghosts and polter -"

"Nimmy and Rotter Potter!" Peeves cackled from just above them.

Tonks sighed in resignation. They were temporarily caught on a landing without any stairs available to them, so they were at the mercy of the poltergeist. "Hello, Peeves. Long time."

"Peeves. Do you recognize this?" Harry asked, showing the Gryffindor signet ring and playing a hunch.

The unpredictable spirit peered at the ring for a few seconds before dropping into a low bow, much to Tonks's astonishment. "Lord Gryffindor. How may Peeves be serving you?"

As tempting as it was to send the spirit after Dumbledore, Harry didn't want his few remaining friends at Hogwarts to pay for his spite. "We're just passing through. Have a good summer."

Peeves nodded and left them after a quick look at Tonks.

"That was . . . weird."

"Yes it was," a child-like voice said from beside them.

The pair looked over and saw a portrait of a young girl. She had her hair done up in pigtails with purple bows and was holding a book that Harry couldn't quite make out the title of. She stood from her chair and quickly curtsied. "My name is Sally, Milord."

"Hello, Sally," Harry smiled at her.

"Peeves is always so mean to us. I am glad that he respects you."

"As am I," another voice came from the portrait. An image of Godric Gryffindor stepped into the picture of a young girl's playroom. "My apologies, Miss Sally, but I need to speak with my young heir."

She curtsied again, this time to Gryffindor. "Milord." She smiled shyly at Harry and Tonks. "Good bye." One step and she disappeared off the other side of her frame.

"Grandfather," Harry greeted him.

"Grandson. Just so you know, I have been in touch with my ghost self, so I know what you've been up to at the Keep. I overheard your conversation with Albus just now as well. I must say, I am disappointed in him. Your biggest question, at least at the moment, of him was who told him you were

going to Gringotts, correct?"

"Yes, Grandfather. I have a suspicion of who it is, but I don't know for certain."

"I heard Albus speaking about it in his office. The Granger girl told him, apparently, after convincing the young Weasley lad that it was a good idea."

Harry closed his eyes and let out a sigh at the minor betrayal.

"That doesn't surprise you," Tonks noted.

Harry shook his head. "Of all the people who knew ahead of time, she was the one I figured was the most likely to tell Dumbledore. For my own good, of course," he added bitterly.

"According to the fire call I overheard, the young Weasley lass was against the other two," Godric offered.

Harry nodded. "Thank you for the information, Grandfather."

Godric nodded. "Farewell."

"Wait!" Harry called back the retreating portrait. When Godric looked at him with a raised eyebrow, Harry asked, "Your ghost didn't mention where your portrait was here in the castle?"

Godric grinned. "In the headmaster's office, of course. Just in a direction that nobody ever seems to look." Nodding pleasantly, Godric left.

"In a direction that nobody looks?" Harry asked in confusion.

Tonks grinned. "What direction are you least likely to look when you're in an office?"

At Harry's blank look, she pointed upward.

Harry, not understanding, looked up for a moment before realizing what she meant. After a moment of thought, he began to laugh. "A portrait on the ceiling?"

She shrugged. "Why not? Who would ever think to look there?"

Godric poked his head around the side of the portrait again and winked at her. "Very good, young lady." He turned to Harry. "Incidentally, that ring of mine is good for more than demanding obedience from portraits, armor, gargoyles, ghosts, and the like. You can also affect Hogwarts herself." When Harry continued to look confused, he appeared to lean forward and added in a whisper, "The house point system, for instance." Smiling at Harry's wide-eyed look, he waved and disappeared again.

A thoughtful Harry changed the direction of their movement and went toward Professor McGonagall's office.

"Mr. Potter and Miss Tonks," the transfiguration professor greeted them in surprise. "To what do I owe your unexpected presence?" She waved the pair toward chairs in front of her desk.

"I need to warn you about something, Professor," Harry explained, seating himself. He took a few minutes and explained that he would not be returning in September and outlined, in vague and non-specific terms, his grievances against Dumbledore.

McGonagall sighed. "I tried to warn him fifteen years ago, Harry, I swear to Merlin I did. But he wouldn't listen. Like you, I have repeatedly tried to warn him about Severus's actions as well. For my failures to convince him, I do apologize."

Harry smiled sympathetically at her. "I have made mistakes with him as well, Professor. We can't change the past, bar borrowing that time turner." Student and professor shared a smile. "As I said, we can't change the past, only the future. That's why I've come to this decision."

She nodded. "I totally agree, Harry." She smiled at his reaction. "You expected me to try to talk you into staying? No, I understand that you're simply doing as you must. I cannot speak against that." She sighed and leaned back. "I presume you've thought this decision through? Yes? Good."

"You're taking this much better than I thought you would, Professor."

"I may not always show it, Harry, but I always have been on your side. From trying to keep you from those wretched relatives of yours - forgive my language - to your current disagreement with Miss Granger."

"Thank you for that. My parents thought very highly of you, Professor, and so do I. Thank you for everything you've been doing."

"James and Lily?" McGonagall asked in confusion.

"Their Will lists various individuals to approach to raise me in the worst case of their original list all being unavailable. You were on that secondary list along with many other notable names. I'm not telling you this to make you feel badly, Professor. Just trying to show how much my parents trusted and respected you."

A smile played around her face. "I do not have the time today, but if you would care to listen, I have one or two stories about their school days you may be interested in, Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled back. "I'd be delighted, Professor."

She nodded agreement and then started slightly as she saw the ring on Harry's hand. "Is that what I think it is, Mr. Potter?"

Harry smiled and held it out for her to inspect more closely. As she was examining it closely, he gave a condensed version of Godric's visit on his birthday, finishing with the warning that Dumbledore knew that Harry knew his lineage but not who had told him.

"I shall, of course, keep it confidential. I do suggest, however, that you come back before September and help Filius and myself with some of the ward work we do every August. Having an heir of a founder in on the renewals will only add power to the castings."

Harry nodded. He held no grudge against the vast majority of the students and saw no reason not to help. "Certainly, Professor. Now, on a completely unrelated request, and I am not asking this in exchange for the help with the wards, I would like to ask you to donate a hair to a new magical focus for me."

She frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

As Tonks was explaining the hair donation and the effect it would have on a personalized magical focus, Harry's gaze drifted around the room and came to rest on the four miniature hourglasses that represented the house points. Remembering what portrait Godric had told him, Harry thought about it for a moment and then tried an experiment and focused on changing a few of the rules regarding the house points.

Meanwhile, the two women had finished their conversation and McGonagall had willingly donated a hair to the cause. Harry stood and collected it into a small vial that he conjured for the purpose.

The professor nodded approvingly. "Good conjuration, Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled in embarrassment. "I know that solid conjuration is seventh year transfiguration, but Remus thought I needed it before then. Mostly as solid shields for duels, I think."

She nodded thoughtfully. "He is correct, of course. At any rate, I would suggest you gather your hairs from the rest of the staff as you're here anyway if Miss Tonks was correct about the timing with Mr. Ollivander. Filius and I will owl you with the date for the warding spells if that is acceptable to you, Lord Gryffindor." The amused expression in her eyes belied the overly formal title she used.

As Harry and Tonks stood to take their leave, Professor McGonagall held them back for a moment. She dug around in a desk drawer for a moment before leaning forward to hand Harry something.

Harry accepted the item and looked down at a miniature version of his Firebolt. Smiling brightly, he nodded to her. "Thank you very much indeed, Professor."

"Now off with you, scamp." Though the words were brusque, the expression was anything but.

It took another hour of walking and talking with the school professors, but Harry eventually gathered additional hairs. Hagrid and Professor Flitwick both willingly donated hairs without much persuasion needed. Hagrid because he would do nearly anything Harry asked of him, and Flitwick because he understood the reasoning behind it and was honored to be asked.

The most surprising one was a small, red feather that appeared in a flash of fire while they were talking with Firenze.

The centaur managed to look surprised. "The headmaster's firebird has taken a liking to you, Harry Potter. As do I." He reached up and pulled a hair from his own head with a small grimace of pain and presented it to Harry.

After thanking the centaur divination professor, Harry headed toward the Entrance Hall again, Tonks still in tow.

"Eventful day," she commented.

"Yep. About this damn werewolf legislation though, I still need to speak with -"

"Potter!"

Harry looked up in surprise before a slow, feral smile formed. "Fudge."

Scion of Gryffindor 14 - Harry versus Fudge

"Fudge!" Harry's tone was chipper and polite. It was not, however, happy.

This should have warned Cornelius Fudge.

Of course, it did not.

"Jolly good to see you, young man! I needed to see you sometime today in any event and luckily enough, here you are finding me! Visiting your school, are you? How have you been?" In addition to Fudge, Percy Weasley was along to carry the parchments and a handful of aurors was along for security.

"Funny you should ask, Minister," Harry answered the question. "I saw the most interesting article in the paper today."

Fudge's face fell into sad lines. "Yes, yes, the werewolf registration thing. I'm terribly sad that such things must be done, but dangerous dark creatures must be controlled, as you're well aware."

"Oh, I agree," Harry said easily. "Dangerous dark creatures should be controlled. So how have your efforts to control the dementors gone?"

Fudge looked a bit uncomfortable for a moment. "Well, as you're aware, they've abandoned Azkaban. We're working on rounding up all the strays, however, so no need to fear. No, Harry, what I was referring to was the werewolf problem."

"Werewolf problem?" Harry asked in an eerily calm voice. "I'm not aware we had a problem with the werewolves aside from the utterly reprehensible way your government treats them."

"They're a danger and a menace to society!" Fudge returned sharply, finally realizing that he didn't have a sympathetic audience in Harry.

"Some individual werewolves are a danger, yes. The one who bit Remus, for instance. What was his name again?"

"Fenrir Greyback," Tonks answered from her shadowy spot by the doors to the Great Hall.

Fudge gave her a dirty look before turning back to Harry. "Now, Harry, I know you like the . . . individual, but you must understand that Lupin is a dangerous and out of control creature who would think nothing of killing you."

Harry sighed. "That is wrong on so many levels I don't know where to start. He's only dangerous one night a month and then only if he's not taken his potion or not restrained. With the proper precautions, he is a much better man than many I could name."

The insult flew by Fudge without his noticing. "But you admit that he's dangerous without those precautions. Isn't a little restriction to him worth the safety for the rest of us?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Taking that argument to its logical conclusion would dictate we should execute them all on the chance that one would infect someone!"

Fudge jumped at the chance. "Would you publicly endorse such a law, Harry?"

Harry stared incredulously. "No, I would not! Executing or even restricting someone for something that happened to them against their will? That's beyond inhumane, Fudge, and I can't believe the Wizengamot went along with it!"

"They saw the same need to control the darker elements of our society that I did, Harry," Fudge said somewhat pompously.

Harry took a deep breath to keep his temper under control, but his voice was still low and rough. "First, you will refer to me as Lord-Baron or Sire. Second, if you actually believed that, you'd have dealt with the dementors, Death Eaters, and Voldemort - oh, grow up! - long before now. As I haven't heard you're even hiring more aurors, you're clearly lying to me about wanting to 'control the darker elements'." Harry put mocking air quotes around the phrase.

Percy joined the conversation at this. "Now see here, young man! You can't speak to the Minister of Magic in that tone!"

Harry couldn't decide if Fudge or Percy was more outraged. "Why not?" he asked Percy calmly. "If he's an incompetent imbecile in the pocketbook of the pure-blood supremacists and one step removed from a full Death Eater, he deserves nothing but my contempt."

Percy paled in rage. Fudge went the other direction and turned purple. The color didn't look any better on him than it did on Vernon Dursley, Harry absently noted.

"Aurors! Arrest him!" Fudge shrieked.

Before any of the aurors could move, Harry asked, "For what? Slander? Is it still slander if it's the truth? Do you really want me to publicly call for an audit of your ministry, Fudge? We all know what a chum you are to Lucius Malfoy, helping him get out of all that nasty business fifteen years ago when he claimed Imperius as his defense. The fact that he's been arrested AGAIN for the same thing can't look good. Leaving aside the Death Eaters for a moment, you're still in the pure-blood supremacist court. After all, that little law regarding the age of majority for certain family names isn't public knowledge, is it?"

Fudge's face took on a mottled look. "You . . . What . . . How . . ."

"The how is irrelevant. The fact is that I DO know and am legally an adult."

Fudge slumped.

Something Fudge had said earlier finally registered. "You needed to speak with me anyway?" Harry asked.

Both Fudge and Percy looked uncomfortable but didn't answer. The aurors, until now wearing their professional, blank masks, started shifting uncomfortably with the conversation.

"You were going to try to make me a ward of the ministry, weren't you?"

Percy visibly paled. Tonks gave a sharp bark of laughter.

Harry just sighed. "Fudge, you're an idiot beyond measure."

Fudge turned purple again. "You insolent little -"

"Shut up," Harry ordered. "You will only speak when spoken to, and I'll tell you why. This law that blatantly favors the purebloods will be described in loving detail to the Prophet and the Quibbler if you don't. Your support of Umbridge and the fact that she sent dementors after me in a muggle neighborhood, tortured me with a blood quill, and attempted to overdose me with veritaserum. Her later attempts to use corporal punishment for two students for playing a prank. THEN her near use of a Cruciatus Curse against me. Your smear campaign against me last year for saying that Voldemort was back, and, lo and behold, he really is. Now, do you think you can survive a publicity war against me, Fudge?"

"Now see here!" Percy exploded.

"Peeves!" Harry shouted in an apparent non sequitur.

Everyone in the Minister's party looked confused as the resident poltergeist zipped into the room and came to a floating stop in front of Harry. "My Lord bellowed?"

Harry smiled in a manner that Tonks was glad wasn't aimed at her. "Yes, Peeves, I did. Percy Weasley here keeps interrupting the argument Minister Fudge and I are having. Would you be good enough to entertain Percy and keep him from bothering us again?"

Peeves snapped a perfect salute and spun in place. Harry had a split second to see Percy's look of absolute horror before Peeves dove into Percy's chest, leaving a wide, wet stain on Percy's robes that looked like some kind of green slime.

Peeves dove out the other side of Percy's chest immediately and grabbed the robes of the former head boy and drug him backwards toward the stairs to the dungeons.

"Please don't hurt him too badly, Peeves."

Peeves stopped moving and turned to Harry with a wounded look. "Hurt? No, My Lordliness, Peeves would never HURT someone. Scare, paint, dunk, slop, mess, gag, tickle, nauseate, annoy, frighten, infuriate, and aggravate, but Peeves would not HURT someone."

"Very good. Please carry on then."

Peeves turned to Fudge. "Bye, Fudge Budge Judge Kludge Ludge Mudge Nudge Pudge Sludge Wudge Fudge. Peeves will return your Measly Weasley later." With an insane cackle and an anguished wail, the two flew down the hall.

Harry turned back to Fudge. "Where were we?"

Fudge tore his eyes from where his assistant had disappeared. "How did you manage to control that pest?"

"Hmm? Oh, I didn't. I asked Peeves to take him away instead. Now, I believe we were threatening each other with bad publicity, weren't we? Though that's something I've had to suffer through from you before."

Fudge wisely ignored the additional comment and instead took on a calculating expression. Finally, the competent political operative was making an appearance. "I can see that threatening you won't work any longer. On the other hand, you really don't want to fight me politically, do you, Harry?"

Harry let that one go by without correcting Fudge's form of address. "Not especially. It's a waste of everyone's time and energy, of which neither of us has all that much. How about this? In exchange for a couple of concessions from you, I'm willing to help you out."

Fudge's eyes narrowed slightly. "I'm listening."

"First, these werewolf laws."

Fudge immediately shook his head. "I can't repeal them the day after they go into effect. That'll make me look bad."

As if you don't already look like a complete fool to those who think for themselves, Harry mentally scoffed. "Okay, modify them. Permit werewolves to get decent jobs if they buy wolfsbane from the ministry or get it from a government sanctioned foundation."

Fudge nodded slowly. "I heard about the terms of Black's Will. It's more complicated than you make it sound, but something like that is possible."

"Good. Second, any previously convicted Death Eaters who are re-captured after escape are put to death after questioning. No more tossing them back into Azkaban. Kiss, Veil, A.K., I don't really care how."

Fudge raised his eyebrows. "That's very bloodthirsty of you."

"Not at all. If we keep capturing them and Voldemort keeps freeing them, then they really aren't being punished, are they? We have to actually start PUNISHING them. This is the most obvious way to do that and to reduce the numbers of trained Death Eaters running around." Harry looked straight into Fudge's eye. "This also has the added benefit of legally getting rid of Lucius Malfoy and any . . . embarrassing information he may let slip."

Fudge's lip twitched.

Harry nodded. "Third, all prisoners get a trial. Always. I'm sure the headmaster has told you the tale of Sirius Black."

Fudge winced. "Point taken."

"Fourth, a pardon for Sirius."

Fudge shook his head. "I can't do that. Unless some new evidence surfaces, and testimony from Albus or anyone else won't do it, I can't just pardon him. I need something stronger."

Harry grimaced. He didn't like that answer, but it made sense. Fudge was apparently willing to work with Harry, but only so long as it didn't make him look bad. "Fine, will delivering Peter Pettigrew be sufficient?"

Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "Fifth, you stop protecting Umbridge and turn Madam Bones loose on her. She deserves punishment for the dementors, blood quill, and attempted Unforgivable Curse."

Fudge frowned. "I'm not sure I believe she actually did all that, but allowing a trial wouldn't hurt. There's already enough pressure from parents and the school board."

"I don't care why you do it so long as it's done. Those are my immediate demands. In exchange, I won't bring up any of the issues I mentioned earlier and will publicly acknowledge that I'm cooperating with the ministry in fighting against Voldemort."

"And support my re-election campaign."

Harry glared at him coldly. "I'm not doing this to make you look good, Fudge. I'm working with the ministry, specifically Madam Bones and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Fudge frowned. "A joint press conference?"

"Madam Bones and me, sure. I'm not backing you personally, Fudge, so stop asking. I'm supporting the ministry's actions against Voldemort."

Fudge grumbled but eventually acquiesced.

"I'll show up for a press conference after the announcement about the modification of the werewolf laws. Have a good day, Fudge."

Fuming, the Minister of Magic took his dismissal for what it was and headed toward Dumbledore's office.

Gathering Tonks from her unobtrusive guardian position, Harry walked out of Hogwarts and towards Hogsmeade.

"Busy day," Tonks idly commented after five silent minutes.

Harry grinned. "Yes it has been, hasn't it?"

"I'm a little surprised at you, Harry."

"Why's that?"

"The clause of immediate execution for re-captured Death Eaters? Sounds like something a Slytherin would suggest."

"Not all Slytherin ideas are bad, Tonks. You're the last one I thought I'd have to tell that to. You're, what, Slytherin class of '91?"

"'92. You were a firstie when I was in my last year. Helluva quidditch game you gave us, by the way."

Harry blinked at her. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't remember you."

She shrugged and morphed into a form that looked only vaguely familiar. "I had to promise Mum and Dumbledore not to use my abilities during regular school hours. Everyone knew I was a metamorph, of course, but I only used it during the evenings and weekends."

"And Gryffindor firsties hardly run in the same social circles as seventh year Slytherins. I guess that explains it."

She nodded and reverted to her more common image. "As popular as I was, you weren't about to ask a Slytherin out."

Her tone of voice started raising some warning bells in Harry's mind. "Big dater, were you?" he asked cautiously.

Her face twisted in disgust. "No offense, Harry, but men are pigs. By the end of the date, they'd always ask me to change into someone. Celestina Warbeck was very popular with my classmates, by the way."

She shook her head. "Enough about my pathetic social life. What will you do if and when Fudge reneges on his deal?"

Harry let the subject drop, knowing that she wanted to pretend they'd never said anything. Instead, he answered, "I was thinking of having a howler delivered to him during a press conference, detailing not only our agreement that he broke, but also all of the dirt I know on him. Then, if the twins are willing, hit him with a Wheeze that dresses him in a bright pink tutu and a parasol, gives him bloodhound ears, bright red hair, a glowing green nose, gorilla hands, ostrich legs, and a killer case of flatulence. Or do you think that's too lenient?"

Scion of Gryffindor
15 - Quiet Days and Haircuts

"You made WHAT deals?" Remus's voice was somewhere between incredulous and panicked.

This wasn't the first time Harry had to repeat it since returning from Hogwarts and its multiple meetings, so he boiled it down to its essence. "The Grand Pooh-Bah will keep us informed of all Order intelligence. In exchange, I don't turn Snape or him in to the Board of Governors. The political flunky sitting in the prettiest chair will stay out of our hair and will do one or two useful things for us. In exchange, I have a nice little press conference with Madam Bones and show the world that the ministry and the Boy Who Lived are all chummy."

Remus blinked at the venom in Harry's words. "A little unhappy, are you?"

"Very," Harry admitted. "Why do I feel the overwhelming need to wash my hands?"

"After those deals, I'd be worried if you weren't feeling a bit soiled. What was that you said earlier about an aura around Albus?"

"I saw what I thought was a Compulsion Charm around him."

All four of the adults in Harry's group looked alarmed.

"Not ON him, AROUND him," Harry added at their expressions. "It wasn't that someone was forcing him to do anything. It . . ." He trailed off and frowned in thought. "It's like he had a permanent Trust Me Charm if there is such a thing."

Godric frowned. "Oh, there is. It's very frowned upon, though, since it's so close to a mind control spell. As you guessed, such a spell would make whoever he talked to more likely to trust anything he says."

Tonks looked pensive. "Since nobody would expect the greatest light wizard in the country to try to trick anyone with such a spell, nobody could resist something they didn't believe would be there."

"Even someone as naturally distrustful as Alastor, though he wouldn't necessarily be affected, couldn't see it unless he could see magic," Kingsley pointed out.

"His eye can't, can it?" Harry asked.

Everyone shook their heads. "It's magical, but it can't see magic like you can."

"Manipulative old coot," Tonks said in a tone of grudging admiration.

"Is there anything we can do about it?" Harry asked.

Remus frowned in thought. "Now that we're aware of it, it won't affect us. It's a very subtle magic that requires the subject to be unwary. We are anyway, but now that we know about it, it's guaranteed to fail against us."

"Should we tell anyone else about it?" Harry persisted.

"If there's anyone in Hogwarts you want on our side, you could tell them. I'd be kinda careful of that, though. If he starts noticing anyone acting differently, he'll know something is up and then no telling what would happen."

Kingsley sighed. "I really don't like treating Albus as the enemy, but . . ." He trailed off, not knowing how to finish the thought.

"I know what you mean," Remus said.

Tonks nodded agreement.

Godric said, "I'm really concerned about this press conference."

"Why?" Harry asked in surprise.

"You're starting in a whole new field, Harry. Politics. Much as we all dislike Fudge, he IS more than proficient in this arena. Albus is even more so. I wish you'd spoken to us about this beforehand, but there's nothing to be done for it now. Backing out after getting those concessions out of Fudge would be seen as a serious show of weakness."

"Why would I want to back out? I show up, smile for the cameras, and say that I'm working with Madam Bones to fight the Death Eaters."

Godric shook his head sadly. "You're in over your head, Grandson. Well, we'll work more with you as the day draws closer."

"If you say so," Harry grumped. "Any other concerns?"

"That provision you gave to Fudge about executing re-captured Death Eaters. That's the first step down a very slippery slope, Harry," Remus warned him.

"Harry phrased it carefully, Remus," Tonks interjected. She started ticking them off her fingers, "Previously convicted, escaped or broken out, re-captured, and then only after questioning."

"What happens when the first one escapes or is rescued before the questioning is complete?" Remus persisted. "Will you then advocate skipping the questioning and just killing them on sight?"

"Absolutely not!" Harry objected. "They're a great source of intelligence on Tom and his activities." He raised his hand to Remus's gathering frown. "That may seem cynical, Remus, but it's true and you know it. Besides, how can you otherwise guarantee they're out of action for the rest of this fight? Azkaban has already been proven to be far from impenetrable. Ministry holding cells? Please. Give me another option and I'll take it, but we have to start permanently cutting down on his numbers somehow."

"Harry isn't advocating killing all Death Eaters on sight, Remus," Tonks added. "As he pointed out to Fudge, under the current rules of engagement, they aren't really being punished. If we make becoming a Death Eater an offense that is REALLY punishable, then he might have more trouble recruiting."

"I'm not saying the idea's bad, just warning that it can be taken to extremes very easily. Paving the road and all that."

"That's why you're around, Remus," Harry said lightly. "You're the group's conscience."

"I thought that was your job, Harry."

"Naw. I'm the Light side poster boy. You're the conscience and Kingsley's the brains."

"What does that make Nymphadora and I?" Godric asked in amusement.

"You give us historical credibility, and Nymph here is for good-looking comic relief."

Harry smiled at her glare.

Remus, trying to head off an explosion, asked, "What'd Fudge and Albus say about the werewolf laws?"

"Dumbledore said it was a doomed fight, so he didn't even try. Fudge basically said it was an effort to make the rest of society safe."

"By exposing us to unsympathetic bigots when we're feeling our most anxious and volatile? By forcing us to come in the next morning when we're feeling our absolute worst and might or might not physically be able to do so? Sweet Merlin on a bike, is it a WONDER so many of us turn to the dark?" Moony snarled.

"Hey, we're on your side, Moony," Harry attempted to calm the man.

"Yeah, Cub, I know. Just letting off a little steam," Remus grumbled.

"So long as it doesn't scald anyone important."

"Funny."

"That could well be his goal," Kingsley pointed out to bring them back on track. "If Fudge is trying to get someone to attack the check-in people, or some exhausted and wounded werewolf fails to check in the next morning, then he'll have the law on his side to go on a hunting expedition."

"He WANTS to kill the werewolves?" Harry asked.

"Why does this surprise you so much?" Remus asked bitterly.

Harry frowned mightily. "One of us needs to contact Snargtooth to get that portion of Sirius's Will started up. We have GOT to make Wolfsbane generally available or Fudge and his cronies will kill the entire population in less than a year."

"I'll take care of it," Remus volunteered. "May I borrow Hedwig this evening?"

"Sure. That reminds me. Come to my room please, Remus."

Remus shared a blank look with the others at the table before he followed the young wizard out of the room.

"I have a birthday present for you, Moony."

"You're five months late, Harry. My birthday was back in March, remember?"

"Think of it as a late gift, then, since I haven't given you one for sixteen years."

Fifteen. You got me a present in eighty-one."

Harry stopped and looked at Remus. "I was eight months old, wasn't I?"

"You were," Remus readily agreed.

"Okay, what'd I give you?"

"You recognized me and - without prompting, mind you - said, 'Uncle Moony'."

Harry grinned and resumed his trek toward his room. "I was that articulate?"

"Well, maybe not, but we all knew what you meant. Padfoot tried to claim you were saying, 'yucky pooey,' but Lily, James, and I knew the truth."

Harry laughed as he opened the door to his suite. He walked over to the two owl perches and waved a hand at the tawny owl with her head tucked under a wing. "Happy birthday, Moony."

Remus frowned. "I thought you were going to give her to Hermione for her birthday."

"I was. Right up until I learned that she was the one who snitched the Diagon Alley plan to the high and mighty master manipulator."

Remus winced at hearing who had told Dumbledore their Diagon Alley plans, but he addressed Harry's reference to Dumbledore instead. "You're really upset with him, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I kinda am, Moony. He didn't even try to stop those humiliating regulation laws, but that's just the most recent problem. He's never given me a choice, always ordering me around and making decisions that affect my life 'for my own good'." Harry mimed quotes around his words. "He's always told me what to do, and never asked me my opinion or whether I wanted to do something. Dumping me on the Dursleys, never telling me anything, letting Sirius go to prison without a trial, those disastrous occlumency lessons with Snape. Take your pick on the reason. I'm just tired of how he's always treated me.

"At the end of the year, right after we lost Sirius in the ministry, he promised never to withhold information from me again. Then a month later I find out I'm the last heir of Gryffindor and that I'm due two major inheritances, all of which he's known for decades. He also told the Order the contents of the prophecy after specifically telling me he wouldn't do so."

Harry sighed. "I'm tired of him lying to me, Remus, even if it is only lying by omission. I'm tired of him running my life without having any control of it myself. The first time I tried to do something on my own - completely legal and within my rights - he tried to scold me and lock me under tighter restrictions.

"Is it so surprising that I'm doing my best to pull myself out from under his thumb?"

"No, I suppose not," the werewolf quietly answered. Instead of pursuing that line of conversation further, he looked at his new owl before turning back to Harry. "Thank you."

Harry left Remus to begin bonding with his new post owl and to write that letter to his goblin representative.

Harry went back downstairs to write his own letter only to find Kelly and Laura in the dining room instead of the rest of his houseguests. Kelly was apparently cutting Laura's hair with her wand.

"Honey," Kelly said in exasperation, "you have to hold still. If I miss, your hair might end up looking like Daddy's."

"What's wrong with Daddy's hair?" Laura asked belligerently. It was clear that she adored her father and defended him at any opportunity.

"Nothing is wrong with it," Harry said as he took a seat. "But have you ever seen a girl without hair?"

Laura thought about it for a moment and shook her head.

"See? Girls look better when they still have all their hair."

"Okay!" Laura cheerfully replied. She turned back forward and held herself perfectly still.

Kelly shook her head and quickly trimmed her daughter's hair. "I said it before, Harry. You have a way with kids."

"Yeah, well, I'm a kid myself, right?"

"Chronologically, perhaps, but emotionally you're no more a child than Kingsley is." She concentrated for a moment to finish the trim over Laura's forehead. Giving a nod of satisfaction, she vanished the loose clippings. "All done!" She turned to Harry. "While I'm at it, do you need a trim?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope. Ever since Aunt Petunia cut off almost all my hair and I regrew it overnight, I haven't had to cut my hair. It has to be subconscious magic of some kind. It doesn't matter to me all that much, honestly. It works for me and that's all that matters."

Kelly blinked a little at the unexpected answer. "Okay, then." She cocked her head, and a small smile formed.

"What?" Harry asked warily.

Oh, just thinking about what you said a few minutes ago. Something about girls looking better with hair. Any girl in particular?"

Harry blushed and mumbled.

Grinning widely now, Kelly asked, "What was that? I didn't quite hear you."

"I said, 'Yes, maybe.'"

"Maybe?" Kelly was now confused. "Maybe you like her, or maybe it's a girl?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I like her, she's a girl, but I don't know if she likes me."

Laura clapped her hands and giggled. "Harry likes someone, Harry likes someone!"

Kelly laughed as Harry groaned and dropped his head to the tabletop. "Laura, honey, please stop teasing Harry."

Laura pouted. "You don't let me have any fun."

"You want to have some fun?" Harry asked with a sudden grin. "*Locomotus scamnum*."

Laura's chair began walking around the table to her squealed delight.

"Show off," Kelly accused good-naturedly as she watched her daughter.

"Faster, faster!" Laura demanded.

"In the words of a goblin I know, 'One speed only,'" Harry said.

"You aren't getting out of it so easy," Kelly mentioned.

"Well, I COULD make it go faster, but it wouldn't be safe."

"Not that. I meant the potential girlfriend conversation."

Harry grimaced briefly. He thought he had gotten out of that. "Like it's safe to date me? I have the Hogwarts Headmaster, the Minister of Magic, and - oh yeah - a mass murdering dark lord all angry with me to varying degrees. I'm really good dating material," he finished in deep sarcasm.

"And you decided this on your own?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Yes, but isn't this HER choice? By not giving her the choice, aren't you as bad as anyone who has refused to give you any options?"

Without waiting for an answer, Kelly pulled out her wand and cast, "*Finite*". Come on, Laura. Time to do some of your school work."

Harry only half-heard the child's attempts to get out of doing the work. He was realizing that his refusal to even give her the choice made him as bad as he'd accused Dumbledore of being.

This was not a pleasant thought.

Instead of thinking about it, Harry composed a letter.

Ginny,

It's only lunchtime and already so much has happened today.

First, why didn't you tell me that Hermione had told Dumbledore I was going to Diagon Alley that day? I know you knew and am curious as to why you never told me. I'm trying not to be angry with you until I know the full story. I hope you do give me good news. I don't have all that many friends left and don't want to lose you over this, Ginny.

On to less accusatory topics.

I assume you read the story in the Prophet about the werewolf registration. The headmaster claimed he couldn't stop it even if he tried, but I'm not so sure I believe that. I'd like to think he'd stop it just because of how it reflects on our society, but I can't help the niggling doubt that he didn't stop it as a strike at me. If so, I feel bad mostly for Remus, as he's been caught in the crossfire no matter how it plays out.

I spoke with Fudge, too. Did you know that ponce was planning on making me a ward of the ministry? I don't know if that'd be better or worse than the Dursleys, honestly. Remind me to tell you the story about Peeves and Percy the next time I see you. I promise you'll enjoy it.

Good news. Professor McGonagall isn't mad at me. At least not for the howler. I spoke to her after ---

Oh, yeah. I'd better back up a little. In addition to yelling at Dumbledore about the new law, I also told him I wasn't returning to Hogwarts (feel free to share that bit of news with everyone - they'll know quickly enough anyway). I have great tutors here with me, and I'm not under threat of attack from professors or fellow students. I figure I'm safer, happier, and will learn more this way.

Anyway, McGonagall. She's surprisingly not angry about my not returning. She said she even understands my reasons. She was good enough to give me my Firebolt back, too.

As you predicted, Hermione sent me a howler. In short, she was angry that I sent her one, so she sends one back. It doesn't make any sense to me, but then again I've never been able to figure out the female mind. Care to clue a bloke in?

Come to think of it, she'll probably send me another one when she learns I'm leaving Hogwarts. Now THERE'S something to look forward to.

"Found a young witch worth wooing, yet?" You've asked me that twice now. Do you, perchance, have any suggestions on where I'm supposed to look?

Yours,
Harry

**Scion of Gryffindor
16 - Harry and Tonks**

Kelly Shackbolt entered the dining room after putting her daughter to bed. The group had just finished a late dinner. Taking her seat again, she asked, "Where's Harry?"

"He went up to his room. He said it's been a long day between Hogwarts and the grilling we gave him afterwards." Tonks chuckled. "Can't blame him, really."

"Hmm. I suppose not. Anyway, there are a couple of things I think you all should be aware of. Now seems as good a time as any to discuss it."

Remus frowned. "You know how he dislikes people talking about him behind his back."

"As long as we don't actually decide anything, what does it matter? Besides, it's not like anything I'm going to tell you is privileged."

Remus was still uneasy with it but waved his hand in a request to continue. In all honesty, he was curious what the usually quiet Kelly wanted to bring up with them.

"When was the last time Harry had a haircut?" she asked him.

Remus blinked at the unexpected question. "I have no idea. Before this month, it's not like I've lived with him."

"He told me a story about his aunt cutting off his hair. He re-grew almost all of it overnight. He figures it was unconscious magic of some kind. Since then, he hasn't had a haircut. Based on how he told it, it sounds like this story took place before Hogwarts."

"No haircuts in at least six years?" Tonks asked in interest.

Kelly shrugged. "That's how it sounded to me."

"Hmm, I'll have to talk with him."

Remus looked at Tonks blankly.

Instead of answering directly, she morphed herself into a recognizable likeness of a feminine Remus.

He blinked before nodding in comprehension. "You really think he could be a metamorph?"

She shrugged and reverted back to her more common form. "No telling until I talk with him." A slow grin formed. "Oh, this could be fun. I've never tried to train another morpher before."

"Assuming he is one," Kingsley warned her. He turned to his wife. "You said there were two things he told you?"

"Yeah, he indicated that there was a witch he fancied."

Remus gave a half-smile. "This is news?"

"I'd not heard directly from him that there was anyone he was actually interested in. He says that she doesn't know yet. The reason I bring this up is twofold. First is his protection."

"Doing our job for us?" Kingsley asked in amusement.

"He's letting me live here, too, Kay. The least I can do is to help in whatever way I can. What I was thinking was not only his - well, their - physical protection, but also their privacy. With the whole Boy Who Lived thing, you know the press will be all over it if they get wind of anything."

"True," Kingsley said pensively. "Well, we'll just have to play that one by ear. Privacy Spells and Glamour Charms if needed. If he turns out to be a metamorph, that'll cure the problem."

"He'll have to go out occasionally as himself," Remus pointed out. "He IS a high profile individual. Sooner or later he would have to be seen in public or they'd accuse us of some nefarious kidnapping and brainwashing scheme."

"Okay, so any business outings he can go as himself, but if he goes on any dates, he goes in one disguise or another?" Kingsley summed up.

"This is getting convoluted," Remus said half-jokingly.

Now that you've actually given him permission to go out," Kelly said dryly, "we can discuss my second point. Has anyone actually talked to the young man about dating?"

Remus and Kingsley looked at her blankly. "He took one of the Patil girls to the Yule Ball during his fourth year and went on a date with a Ravenclaw last year." Remus said. "He HAS dated before."

She rolled her eyes. "Clueless," she muttered. "Male, rich, famous, good looking." At their continued blank look, she added, "Sixteen year old libido."

The two men's eyes widened before they both winced.

"You two clearly haven't had to deal with dating a teenaged wizard," Kelly said with a truly wicked grin directed at her fidgeting husband. "Do you two see where I'm going with this?"

Kingsley, seeing an out, asked Remus, "Has anyone given him the little wizards and witches talk?"

"Why are you asking ME?"

"You're basically his uncle, Remus."

"You're a parent."

"Of a six year old girl! He's closer to you, and you know it."

"Yeah, but . . ." The Shacklebolt couple watched in amusement as Remus fumbled for a moment. "His relatives would have already covered this, wouldn't they?"

"Considering what you know of them and his upbringing, can you really imagine Vernon Dursley having that conversation with him?" Godric asked pointedly.

"You! He's your grandson! Why don't you give him the talk?" Remus was clearly grasping at straws, much to the amusement of everyone else.

"I've been dead for a thousand years. What I knew is more than a little out of date, Remus."

"Come on, Lupin. Find that famous Gryffindor courage and admit that you're the only reasonable choice," Kingsley goaded.

Remus just groaned and cradled his head in his hands.

Tonks, face solemn, stood and came to a formal pose. She addressed Kingsley in a quiet voice, "Kingsley, I hereby request exemption from the guard duty during his . . . social outings."

Kingsley blinked up at her in incomprehension. He suddenly realized that she'd been very quiet during the talk since it had turned away from potential metamorph training. "Oh, Tonks . . ." he said in mixed concern and dread.

She turned to Remus and gave a humorless grin. "I'd offer to give him the talk for you, Remus, but the things I'm more interested in showing him wouldn't be the same kinds of things a responsible parental figure should be teaching him." She turned back to Kingsley. "I feel capable of performing all my other guard and tutor duties in a professional manner, but I would feel better, personally, if I could be excused from this."

"He's our boss, Tonks," Kingsley said quietly, eyes asking a question.

She shrugged. "I've been fighting this for some time, Shack. With luck, I can keep this from him. If it gets in the way, we'll deal with it then." When she saw that nobody had any more comments, she quietly left and went up to her room.

"Oh, hell."

"I assume you heard all that?"

"Hmm?"

"I saw the Extendable Ear."

Embarrassed silence.

Chuckle. "You are the son of a Marauder."

"Yeah."

"So . . ."

Sigh. "Yeah."

"I won't ask you what you will do about Tonks. Just be very, very careful whatever you decide."

Quiet. "Yeah."

"Master of the monosyllabic answers this evening?"

A twisted grin. "Yeah."

"Very funny. Remus will be along soon. What's your plan?"

A wicked grin. "Guess."

Remus knocked on the door, half-hoping Harry was asleep. The light under the door had indicated otherwise and was born out when Harry called out, "Come on in."

Remus did so. "You're still awake?"

"Yeah. I was going to go to sleep but couldn't. Too much on my mind after the day I just had, I guess. Doing some revision instead," he waved a hand at the open books on the workspace in front of him.

"Yeah, good idea." Remus paced back and forth before stopping abruptly and looking at the open books. "Defense?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Looking through Dad's sixth year textbook. Between you and Tonks, you've already taught me most of the dueling information in there. Some of the other stuff is interesting, though."

"Yeah, yeah. That's good." Remus was pacing again.

"I'm planning on using my new knowledge to overthrow the aurors and will use Fudge as my personal training partner. Usually as a target dummy."

"Good idea."

"Then you wouldn't mind being my collector and getting all the Death Eaters together and collecting their brains? I figure it'll be about fifteen grams. I have a nice dark ritual I'd like to try out."

"Sure."

Harry laughed. "Remus, you aren't listening to me, are you?"

Lupin stopped and grinned sheepishly. "No, I wasn't. I apologize. What were you saying?"

"Never mind. What's on your mind, or did you just come up here to check if I was asleep?"

Remus rubbed the back of his neck. "Kelly and Kingsley pointed out that I needed to have a talk with you."

"Really? About what?"

Remus closed his eyes and visibly braced himself. "Witches."

"Witches?"

"Witches. Female magicians."

"I know what they are, Remus," Harry assured him in amusement. "I know several. Three even live here in this house."

"Yes, well, I didn't want to talk about witches so much as WITCHES. Er, the difference between wizards and witches." In his agitation, he didn't notice Harry was losing his fight against the impending grin. Remus reached into a pocket and pulled out an object that resolved itself into a thin magazine once he'd reversed the Shrinking Charm. He thrust the item into Harry's hand.

Harry looked down at what appeared to be an informational pamphlet. [What Wizards Should Know About Witches](#) .

Remus was speaking. "I'm sure you've long since noticed that witches are built differently than wizards, Harry."

Harry nearly rolled his eyes and did his best to block out Remus's voice. His pre-Hogwarts education may not have been the best, but it did cover the basics, which included health and sex education. Besides, Dean's magazines were very educational in their own right. He opened up the magazine and was moderately surprised that it had a picture of a witch in her mid thirties completely starkers. She was standing and did a slow turn with an impressive lack of modesty. The text along the sides told of all the physical differences in dry terminology. The next pages went on to describe some of the venereal diseases that could affect wizards. The last page admitted, somewhat grudgingly, that there WERE preventative methods available to both witches and wizards, but it didn't go into any kind of detail what they were. Instead, it preached the benefits of abstinence.

". . . very sensitive and can easily be hurt if . . ." Remus was still going on in a monotone voice. His eyes were closed, and he looked to be in pain as he recited what almost sounded like a prepared speech.

With his Mage Sight, Harry noticed a tight swirl of magic on the last page. Visually, there was nothing to mark the spot. Curious, Harry

surreptitiously tapped it with his wand, thinking it was a trigger of some sort.

It was. Before Harry's eyes, the magazine changed. Beginning at the first page again, Harry skimmed the pages on contraceptives and protection spells, potions, and devices available. Reaching the end of the short pamphlet again, Harry saw that there were now two "buttons". Making a guess, he pressed the lower, new one.

The magazine again changed. It now had information on tips, techniques, and positions.

Remus finally let out a gusty sigh and opened his eyes. "I'm sure you have questions, Harry. I'll answer what I can or you can speak with Madam Pomfrey if you'd prefer."

Harry looked up. "Actually, I do have one question, Remus." He turned the magazine around and handed it to the werewolf. "Is this position even possible?" He tapped one moving picture and looked at Remus with an expression of naïve curiosity.

Remus goggled and blushed to the roots of his hair. He cleared his throat. "Um, yes. I believe they had to remove all the bones in her hips first, but it's possible to do. Harry, did you even listen to a word I said?"

Harry laughed. "Remus, I had the sex talk in school when I was ten. Once I got to Hogwarts, one of my roommates has some magazines that proved that witches aren't any different than muggle girls. At least in this way. The second version of that magazine in your hand told me about what magic can do differently for preventatives. That third version, though . . ."

Remus cleared his throat again. "Yes, well you weren't supposed to be able to SEE the second or third versions until I told you about the triggers."

"Mage Sight," Harry answered the unspoken question with an impudent grin and a shrug.

Remus rolled his eyes. "Figures. Okay, the short version. Abstinence is best for a whole variety of reasons, not the least of which is that Ginny isn't sixteen yet."

Harry's expression soured. "Remus, you've consistently teased me about Ginny and Hermione. Why?"

Remus paused in surprise for a moment. "Well, I assumed your interest was in one of the two of them."

"You know the saying about the word 'assume'." The line was delivered calmly enough, but Harry's tone told tales of its own.

The werewolf nodded slowly. "My apologies. Who, if anyone, are you interested in?"

Harry sighed and looked down. "I'd really rather not say."

"Why?" he asked in surprise. Before he could say another word, a whole host of little clues slotted themselves into place in his mind. "Oh, I see. It's Tonks, isn't it?"

Harry's eyes shot up and looked with fear and shock at Remus's amused expression. "How'd you guess?"

"Little things. You enjoyed her tutoring sessions just a little more than could be explained by your fascination with the subject matter. You don't release her immediately when you catch her from one of her falls. You called her good-looking just this evening."

Harry looked uneasy. "You're not . . . upset, are you?"

Remus frowned. "Upset? Not at all. The age difference will cause comment, but she's immature - or at least she acts immature - for her age, and you're too damn old for yours. Personally, I think you two could make a good couple."

"No, that's not what I meant. I was worried you'd be . . . angry with me. For fancying Tonks," Harry explained to Remus's continued blank look.

"I'm obviously too old to understand what you're getting at, Harry. Would you just tell me what you're worried about? I promise not to be angry."

"I thought you might fancy her yourself," Harry admitted.

Remus stared at him for a moment before beginning to chuckle. Harry's look of confusion and slight hurt elevated the chuckles into full laughter. After nearly a minute, Remus composed himself. "Whatever made you think THAT, Harry?"

"You two get along really well, and she IS the only unattached witch I've seen you spend any time with."

Remus shook his head in amusement. "I assure you, Harry, that I'm not interested in Tonks in that way." He paused and gave a strange, little smile. "In point of fact, I'm not interested in witches that way."

That tidbit of information caused Harry to pause for a moment. "Ah."

Now Remus looked wary. "You're not angry or disgusted with me for the fact that I like guys more than I like girls, are you?"

Harry shook his head. "So long as you don't tell me that you dated Dad, Sirius, or," he shuddered, "Snape."

Remus made a disgusted sound. "No. I wouldn't date Snivellus on a dare. Your dad and Sirius were as straight as it got."

Harry was silent for a moment. "You know, if Tonks and I DO get together, that would leave you kinda on the outside here. Listen, if you had

someone you wanted to invite -"

Remus raised a hand, stopping Harry's suggestion. "Thank you for the offer, but there's nobody right now." He tilted his head and peered at Harry. "What makes you think you and Tonks might get together?"

Harry grinned. "I'm the son of a Marauder, Moony. I heard your conversation earlier."

"You . . . And you let me . . . ARGH!" he sputtered out. "I can't believe you let me almost die of embarrassment when you KNEW what I was going to say before I even entered the room! Do you know the look Dobby gave me when I asked him to pick that magazine up? I won't be able to look that elf in the eye for a week!"

Harry laughed. "There IS good information in here, Remus. I didn't know about some of these charms or potions, so it wasn't a wasted trip."

"Hmph. Hey, you heard us?"

Harry nodded.

"And you're interested in her?"

Harry nodded again, this time shyly.

"As much as the Marauder in me wants to have fun with this, it wouldn't be fair to NOT tell her, you know."

Harry nodded, but he looked scared. "I know."

"Enter," Tonks called, not looking up. She didn't bother to look to see who entered the room. Her auror-trained subconscious noted that they took a seat at her desk, though she never slowed her furious pacing. "Come to tell me what an awful person I am? How about threatening my job? I KNOW it's a bad idea, but that doesn't change the facts." She stopped and flopped down on her bed and rested her forehead on her upraised knees. "Come on, Shack, spit it out. You think I want to seduce a child, don't you?"

"I could probably be talked into it."

Tonks's head shot up, and she stared at Harry in horror.

He raised a hand. "Please calm down. First, you need to know that I overheard everyone's conversation downstairs."

Tonks blushed and buried her face again.

"Next, you need to know that I think I'm falling for you, too."

Her head came back up. She studied his expression for a moment. Quietly, she requested, "Harry, please, PLEASE don't tease or joke about this, okay?"

He shook his head. "I'm not." He gave a sudden wry chuckle and ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up more than should have been physically possible. "*Falling for you* makes it sound recent, doesn't it? It's not, though. I was fascinated by you when we first met. Since learning more about you last summer and especially these past couple weeks, I've found out that there's a big heart attached to a quick wit and a quicker tongue and mind buried beneath that flamboyant personality of yours." He finished quietly, "I've never been more than infatuated with anyone before. Damned if I know how or why this is happening now."

She almost smiled. "Someone wise once said not to try to examine your heart. It doesn't need to make sense and very rarely tries."

"Sounds reasonable. Who said it?"

"I did, about ten seconds ago." She appeared to be composed but Harry could see her hand tapping rapidly.

Harry laughed nervously before sobering again. "Now what?"

She gave it some thought. "We could ignore it."

"We could," he agreed, "but we'd be miserable. Well, I know I would."

"Me, too. It may be the wise move, but I vote against that one."

"Same here. Okay, what's the next option?"

"Sooner or later we'll need to have a long discussion, but not after such an emotionally trying day. So for now what we should do is kiss each other goodnight and go to bed."

Harry momentarily considered making one of several lewd and suggestive responses to that but decided to let it go without comment. Besides, he didn't know HOW he would want her to respond to any of them. Instead, he nervously stood and walked over. She sat up on the bed and leaned upward as he bent down to give her a light, tentative kiss.

Harry made a pleased noise as he straightened back up. "That's something you'll have to teach me."

"What's that?"

"How to kiss properly. My previous experience was brief and soggy."

She blinked before she began to laugh. "You'll have to tell me that story some time. Though I understand that actually **LIKING** the person you're kissing helps immensely." She grinned up at him as he chuckled and nodded. "Meanwhile, get out of here. We both need our sleep."

"Your wish is my command, my lady. Goodnight."

Scion of Gryffindor 17 - Everyone Else's Reaction

Harry timidly came down the stairs early the morning after speaking with Tonks. He remembered everything that he and Tonks had talked about, but he was concerned that in the cold light of morning that she would want to be "just friends".

"What's this?" Godric asked, coming upon Harry who was standing uncertainly outside the door to the dining room.

"I don't know if I want to go in there," Harry admitted.

"Ah, you and young Nymphadora spoke last night?"

"Yeah. We agreed to give it a try." Harry frowned. "At least I think we did."

"So why are you standing out here like a frightened puffskein? You're a Gryffindor, Harry. You should stride boldly forward, remember?"

Harry gave him a crooked smile. "So I should hold my head up, stride forcefully in there, throw her on top of the table, and ravish her?"

"Based on what she said last night, I don't think she'd object." He ignored the strange sounds coming from Harry's throat as the young wizard seemed to be trying to simultaneously cough and swallow his tongue. "As entertaining as that scene might be to an old ghost like me, I think a bit more tact might be called for if you're actually trying to court her, Grandson."

Harry finally got his voice under control. "I'd appreciate some advice. I'm rubbish at this dating stuff."

"Young, rich, powerful, good-looking lad such as yourself? I find that difficult to fathom."

Harry sighed. "Oh, I've had witches ask me out. The problem is that they're not trying to date Harry Potter but rather the Boy Who Lived."

Godric nodded pensively. "Yes, I see what you mean. I can advise you, of course, and probably even win the young lady's hand for you. I was rather good at it in my day."

Harry frowned.

Godric raised a hand to calm his heir. "Please try to remember that it was a different age, Harry. I did nothing immoral. Now, as I was saying, I probably could help you win Nymphadora's heart, but then it wouldn't be YOU. I can advise you in the generalities, as can Kingsley and Remus if they're willing. I think you'll agree with me that I shouldn't - what's the phrase? - spoon feed, hand-hold, script it out for you. You get the idea."

Harry deflated just a little. In the abstract, having a script to follow sounded like a wonderful idea, but he understood what his ancestor was saying. "You're right. Okay, so do you have any GENERAL suggestions?"

Tonks timidly came down the stairs late the morning after speaking with Harry. She remembered everything, of course, but was concerned that in the cold light of morning that he would want to be "just friends".

"What's this?" Kelly asked, coming upon Tonks who was standing uncertainly outside the door to the dining room.

"I don't know if I want to go in there," Tonks admitted.

"Ah, you and Harry spoke last night?"

"Yeah. We agreed to give it a try." She frowned. "At least I think we did."

"So why are you standing out here? You're a Slytherin. You know what you want, and you go and get it, remember?"

Tonks gave her a crooked smile. "So I should walk in there, throw him on top of the table, and ravish him?"

Kelly laughed. "As entertaining as that scene might be, I think a bit more tact might be called for."

"Spoilsport," she muttered just loud enough for Kelly to hear. Tonks was rewarded with another laugh from the other woman. "I'd appreciate some advice, Kelly. I'm rubbish at this dating stuff."

"Young, powerful, good-looking, auror, and a metamorphmagus? I find that hard to believe."

Tonks sighed. "Oh, I've had wizards ask me out. Many, many wizards. The problem is that they're not trying to date Tonks but rather the

metamorph."

Kelly nodded slowly. "Yes, I see what you mean. My advice? Be natural. If you're not honest, the relationship is doomed in the long run. Also, remember that you're the older one in the relationship by a fair margin, so that could mean some problems."

Tonks looked distressed. "You think this is a mistake, don't you?"

Kelly shook her head. "Not at all. I'm Kingsley's senior by three years. You're, what, seven years older?"

"Six and a half."

"Six and a half, then. I'm just pointing out that at your ages, six years is a lot. In all honesty, though, he's more mature than his years would indicate."

"And I'm not?" Tonks asked with a crooked grin.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. Tell me honestly, though, do you think I'm making a mistake?"

Kelly let out a breath. "Personally, I don't see what you see in him, but then I'm not you."

Tonks sighed and seemed to nod to herself. In an apparent change of subject, she asked, "What do you know about metamorphs? I mean REALLY know?"

"Honestly?" Kelly shrugged. "Nothing beyond your shape changing abilities."

"Most don't. I didn't until well into my training with Tim." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm going to tell you something about metamorphs that I'd appreciate you never repeat. None of the aurors, including Shack, knows this."

Kelly was intrigued. "Agreed."

"The reason metamorphs exist at all is the same reason any characteristics exist in any species. Namely, it makes them better, or at least more successful, members of that species. In the males, this permits them to be more able to defend his mate and children. Male metamorphs can do more to change their musculature than females. They can literally become stronger. It's not all that much, and in this day and age it's mostly irrelevant, but it's there."

"Fascinating, but where is this going?" Kelly asked.

Tonks continued as if she hadn't heard the question. "In female metamorphs . . . Well, one of the primary goals of any animal is to make itself more attractive and desirable as a mate, right? A female metamorph takes this to the extreme. Under certain conditions, we can LITERALLY make ourselves to be more desirable to potential mates."

"I'm afraid I'm lost," Kelly admitted.

"Under certain conditions, I can KNOW the precise form that any given man would find the most desirable. Thirty-six triple-D's? Here you go. Hair color and style, skin tone, facial structure, eye color, even fingernail length; I can become EXACTLY what any guy finds the most mind-numbingly attractive, even if he isn't consciously aware of it." She smiled without humor. "I can put any veela to shame."

"Okay . . ." Kelly said slowly.

"This is why I have such a hard time dating. I learn what the guy wants even before he says anything about it. And he'll usually tell me before long."

"Oh, Tonks . . ."

Tonks was staring off into space and speaking absently. "I've been attracted to him for quite some time, actually. Not only is he growing into a handsome young man, but between the prophecy and what I know of what he's done since coming to Hogwarts, he's very considerate and brave."

Tonks shook her head. "I'm off track again, aren't I? Anyway, the knowing thing happens when I'm held by someone for more than two seconds. I tripped and fell into him last summer. Do you know what form I got the impression of?"

Kelly silently shook her head. Her presence wasn't even really needed, she knew. Tonks just needed to say all of this, and she happened to be there.

"At that moment, the image he found the most attractive was the form I was wearing right then."

Kelly looked confused.

Tonks smiled slightly. "I was confused, too. Then yesterday when I tripped and fell into him," she rolled her eyes, "AGAIN I got another image from him. It was how I looked at that point."

Kelly was still confused. "You tend to look the same from day to day, Tonks."

Tonks shook her head. "Last summer I was wearing pink hair and eyes. Yesterday it was purple and pale blue. My face was mostly the same but I do tend to alter the structure just a little. You, Shack, Remus, Harry - you all don't see it because you spend so much time around me. I looked

different both times, and his image was the SAME different both times. Do you know what this means?"

"He loves you?" Kelly half asked and half guessed.

Tonks's smile brightened the hallway. "He was attracted to ME. Not to any specific form, but to ME!" She almost sounded giddy.

"So explain to me again why you're out here and not in there staking your claim on him."

Tonks's giddiness evaporated as if it had never existed. She started ticking off points and became increasingly upset as she did so. "I'm six and a half years older, I'm an auror, I was a Slytherin, he might have changed his mind since last night, he could have realized -"

Kelly rolled her eyes as her friend worked herself into a panic. "Tonks! Stop. Take a deep breath."

Tonks did so. She immediately looked better and nodded at Kelly sheepishly. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now go in there, and go get 'im, girlfriend."

Giving a short laugh, Tonks turned to the door, took another steadying breath, and entered the dining room.

Everyone else in the household was there. Harry and Remus were nursing cups of tea while talking to Godric, whereas Kingsley and Laura were eating breakfast.

Harry stood the instant he saw Tonks enter. He gave her a nervous smile.

She smiled back and made for a chair.

When he saw which chair she was going after, he moved toward it and held it out for her.

She sank into it gratefully and as gracefully as possible.

"Good morning," Kelly said dryly as she took a seat next to Kingsley.

"Huh?" Shack asked, looking up from his bowl. "Oh, morning."

"Good morning," Harry said quietly to Tonks as he took his seat again. "Sleep well?"

"Yes, actually. You?" she asked in return.

"More pleasant dreams than usual, thank you for asking."

Remus made a noise that quickly degenerated into a coughing fit.

Dobby entered the room from the direction of the kitchen and placed a stack of pancakes in front of Tonks. She smiled a thank you at the little elf before looking down at the food.

Her sudden laugh caused everyone to look over at her. The pat of butter on top of the pancakes was in the shape of Harry's lightning bolt scar.

Harry groaned. "Dobby, you're not exactly being subtle here."

The look Dobby gave him back made it clear that he felt Harry was being obtuse. "Dobby is knowing what is being best for Master Harry and Mistress Nimma."

Despite being a Gryffindor (figuratively and literally), Harry found that he didn't quite have enough courage to ask exactly WHAT the elf thought was best for them.

Remus carefully set his teacup down before breaking into laughter. This caused the other adults, minus Harry and Tonks, to do likewise.

Laura looked up from her cereal and looked around. "What are they laughing about?" she asked Tonks.

"They're laughing at Harry and me," Tonks answered, seeing the humor in the situation.

"Why?"

"We're nervous around each other."

"Why? You weren't nervous yesterday."

"We talked last night. We're thinking of going out."

Laura was still confused. "You went out yesterday. You went to Hogwarts."

"No, I mean going out on a date."

Laura looked over at Harry.

He nodded shyly.

Laura turned back to Tonks. "Does this mean you're going to get married?"

Remus, Kingsley, and Godric's laughter renewed.

Kelly managed to calm herself down. "Dear, people date before they decide if they want to get married," she explained to the girl.

"Oh." She thought about it for a moment. Then she leaned toward Tonks and whispered conspiratorially and low enough that only Tonks and Kelly heard her, "Ask him to give you a fast ride. He's good at that." She leaned back and nodded solemnly to Tonks's wide-eyed look.

Tonks looked to the again-laughing Kelly for an explanation. Kelly shook her head while she chuckled and explained the animated chair of the previous day.

The male laughter died down enough that they heard Laura excitedly ask, "If they get married, does that mean Harry and Tonks will have a baby that I can play with?"

Harry,

Percy and Peeves? Now you've got my curiosity up. If you're in Diagon Alley, we'll be school shopping on the thirty-first, and you can tell me that story then.

You aren't coming back to Hogwarts? How dare you! Don't you know that means I have to be Seeker again instead of Chaser?
[smile]

Seriously, if you think you need to do it and you've thought it through, then I say you have the right to make that decision on your own. Besides, this way you get out of dealing with Tall, Dark, and Greasy.

What'd you say to Hermione in response to that howler she sent, anyway? She took the note from Pig, read it, and just huffed. I asked her later, but she refused to admit what you told her.

You asked for suggestions on where to look for a witch worth wooing? Actually, I do. No, you egotistical prat, it's not me. My crush is gone, thank Merlin, and now you're just another brother. Well, okay, maybe more than that considering the former crush and the whole diary and basilisk thing. Dating you would just be too weird, though. I'll tell you my idea for your dream witch when I see you next if you haven't figured it out before then.

Nothing much more going on here. Most of the folks around here are looking decidedly unhappy when your name comes up, but that can't be news to you.

As for Hermione snitching on you . . .

I'm sorry I didn't tell you. Ron and Hermione made me promise not to.

I tried to tell them not to tell the headmaster, Harry. I really did. They just ignored my advice. "It's for his own good," they said.

And, Morgana help me, I didn't fight them. What they didn't tell me was that you were just going to Gringotts. They made it sound like you four were going out somewhere else. They didn't tell me where, exactly, but they certainly didn't say it was just to Diagon Alley. I've had words with Hermione about that since then, I assure you.

Why I haven't told you since it happened, you ask?

Maybe I'm not the Gryffindor you are, but I was afraid, Harry. Once I knew how badly I'd abused your trust, I hoped you wouldn't find out.

Please forgive me.

Your (hopeful) friend,
Ginny

Scion of Gryffindor 18 - Visit to Hogwarts

Ginny,

You all will be school shopping on the thirty-first? I plan on being there, then. No promises, though.

This may sound odd, but I'm glad it isn't you that you had in mind for my "wooing". While I don't quite see you as a younger sister (never having had one, I don't know what THAT feels like), but . . . No offense, but I don't feel "that way" about you, Ginny. I'm therefore relieved to hear that you don't feel that way toward me. Not that I wouldn't be honored if you did, of course. Oh, bollocks. You know what I mean.

By the way, I think I found "a witch worth wooing" on my own. I'll let you know if it works out.

Hermione's snitching. I kinda figured the answer was something like that. You're forgiven, Ginny. You were just holding a promise you made to them. I can't blame you for that.

And you, Miss Weasley, are as much a Gryffindor as I am, so stop saying otherwise. I know you don't like thinking about it, but holding off Tom's memory for as long as you did as an eleven year old shows incredible strength and bravery. So I don't want to hear you putting yourself down anymore, you hear me?

Your friend,
Harry

Tonks frowned at Harry a week later, breathing heavily. "This isn't going to work."

"What do you mean?" he asked through his own panting breaths.

"This," she said in aggravation. "You, me, here, doing this! And stop doing that," she added in a growl.

"What?"

"THAT! That thing you do with your wand. You know that drives me mad."

"You mean this?" He duplicated the maneuver that he was very well aware she was talking about.

"Yes," she hissed after a little jump, "THAT. Stop it."

"Yes, Nymph," he agreed cheerfully.

"And don't call me Nymph."

"Why not?" he asked, finally straightening up after a particularly difficult dueling session. That little wordless shocking spell he'd been using to distract her forgotten as he realized there was a real problem brewing.

"Actually, that might be the problem," she said thoughtfully.

"Now what are you talking about?" he asked. He absently conjured a towel and started wiping his face off.

"Us dating is a problem for your training."

Harry's face started to close down.

"I am NOT talking about breaking up with you, you prat, so stop doing the turtle thing. No, I mean how you view me during the training."

"I rather enjoy viewing you during the training," he admitted, grinning at her. Her shorts and sleeveless training shirt showed off her petite and feminine frame.

"You can enjoy viewing as much of me as you want during your free time, Harry, but it's distracting you during our lessons."

His eyebrows rocketed. "Just how much is *as much as I want*?"

"Which word didn't you understand?" she asked sweetly, grinning in a truly disturbing manner. "Just remember that I have reciprocal rights."

Harry goggled and blushed simultaneously.

She laughed. "Poor, naïve little Gryffindor. You'll never be able to win these fights against me, Harry, and you know it. No, what I was getting at is that while we're dating, you're not taking me seriously as an instructor."

He frowned at her, putting aside their secondary conversation. "I do take you seriously. You're an auror, and you're teaching me loads."

"But you're unwilling to duel me properly. You're more likely to take a painful curse than curse me in return. That's no way to teach you to duel."

Harry's face contorted, but he had no real answer. She was right, and he knew it.

"How about this? During lessons I'm Tonks, and you're Potter. You were willing to duel Tonks last week."

"True. Okay, I can try that, but what do I call you when we're NOT in lessons?"

"I'm sure I'm going to regret this," she lamented toward the ceiling. "Give me some ideas," she finished warily.

"Oooh, I can come up with nicknames?"

She gave him a withering look.

Grinning in a totally unrepentant fashion, he said, "Nymphadora and Nymph are too obvious. What'd your parents call you, anyway?"

She frowned. "My mother INSISTS on calling me by 'Nymphadora' despite how much I ask her not to. Dad calls me 'Tonks'."

"Hmm. I don't like Nimma. Dora or Nim, maybe?"

"'Dora' is my unofficial name among co-workers and the Order. That's what Shack and Remus sometimes call me. I guess I don't mind that, but it's not exactly romantic to me."

"Oh, you're looking for romantic?"

"From a boyfriend? You bet your cute little arse I do."

He managed to ignore her comment regarding his posterior. "'Nim', then? I can't think of anything else that we can derive from your name."

"Nim," she tried the name out. "Maybe. Go ahead and use that for now. I'll let you know if I don't like it. Meanwhile . . ." She pulled him back to his feet and gave him a quick, hard kiss before leaning forward and resting her forehead to his. "You understand that I have to be kinda mean to you to train you, right?" she asked quietly.

He sighed. "Yes, Nim. I'll make you a deal. I won't take it personally if you don't. Good idea on the Tonks and Potter versus Nim and Harry, by the way. This way we can separate work from play."

She chuckled. "I thought I was the older one here. That sounded almost profound."

"You ARE the old one. You can't keep up with me, old-timer," he challenged with an impudent grin.

"'Old-timer'?" she asked in mock outrage. She took five quick steps back and raised her wand. "Okay, Potter, you asked for it!" Without a sound, spells started pouring from her wand.

Harry conjured a shield and threw himself into the duel with a grin.

Hours later, Tonks dropped into a chair in the dining room with a grunt.

Kingsley looked up. "You okay?"

"Yeah, Potter is finally starting to duel me again."

"You're calling him Potter suddenly?"

She explained their name deal and ended with, "We've been almost-dating for a week, and his dueling has suffered the whole time. I finally got him past that."

He nodded and sighed. "This is a dangerous path you're walking, Dora."

She scowled. "We've been over this before, Shack. He may be sixteen, but -"

He waved that off. "I'm not talking about your ages. I'm talking about the fact that he's your boss, AND he's Baron Black. You know how the Prophet will treat that if they hear it."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, he's my boss. Yes, he's my family Patriarch. Neither of those points has come up. Can you really see him ever trying to

use either of those against me?"

"No," Kingsley freely admitted. "I'm just worried what everyone ELSE will think."

"Screw 'em," she answered bluntly. "I know the truth. He knows the truth. Everyone living here does. Who else matters?"

"Public opinion matters to Lord-Baron Potter even if Harry hates it."

"You think we should break up?"

Kingsley raised a hand in a calming motion. "I didn't say that. I'm just saying that you two need to consider the image you're presenting to the world."

Tonks was getting upset. "We shouldn't break up, but we shouldn't be seen together? Is THAT what you're saying?"

"I don't know WHAT I'm saying, Tonks. It just . . ." He sighed. "It just looks bad."

"He doesn't care, and I don't care. Do we need a third vote?" she repeated her opinion.

"No, I'm just trying to warn you two as a friend. You'll get a lot of howlers out of this if it becomes public."

"Yeah," she agreed with a resigned sigh. "Anything in the paper?" she asked.

He allowed her to change the topic. After all, he'd said his piece. "Voldemort struck against a muggle hamlet overnight. Fifteen victims. Fudge is giving his same old excuses."

Nearly a week later, Harry and Tonks apparated to Hogsmeade shortly after the Shackbolt family had flooded out. The two groups met outside the Three Broomsticks and started walking toward Hogwarts.

Laura spent her time looking around and chattering excitedly.

"She's looking forward to seeing Hogwarts?" Harry asked Kelly dryly.

"How'd you guess?"

"Maybe because she hasn't stopped talking about it since I got that owl from Professor Flitwick?"

Kelly gave Harry an aggravated look. "It was a rhetorical question, Harry. While you two are having fun wandering around the grounds with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, Kay and I have to try to keep our daughter under control in the most interesting castle in the world."

"Have fun," Tonks cheerfully offered.

Kelly glared at the younger magicians.

"Hmm. I don't think she's terribly happy with us," Harry observed to Tonks.

"Apparently not."

Kelly gave them a half-hearted growl. In truth, she was happy for the young couple. They were both noticeably happier and more easy-going since they had started dating.

If "dating" was the right word. So far, it wasn't anything more than hugs, some light kissing, and long talks over butterbeer in the parlor, but under the circumstances, that was as close as they could get without exposing themselves.

"Dora, have you two talked yet about your extra training?"

Harry and Tonks exchanged a confused glance. Harry answered, "We train three times a week, Kelly."

Kelly shook her head. "Not that." She turned to Tonks, deliberately tapped her hair, and then pointed to Harry.

Tonks's eyes brightened in understanding. "Ah. That. No, not yet."

"What are you two talking about?" Harry asked.

"Meet you all later, right?" Tonks asked the Shackbolts, ignoring Harry's question.

Kingsley waved her off. "We're fine. Just try to keep him out of trouble, would you?"

"I'm not the one getting INTO trouble," Harry objected, grinning back at the teasing. "Trouble seems to find me without my help."

"Sure, sure. Just go cast some wards or something, would you?"

Laughing, Harry and Tonks broke away from the other three and headed toward where they could see Professor McGonagall and the diminutive

Professor Flitwick standing near the lake. "What extra training?" Harry asked.

"Kelly seems to think you might be a metamorph," Tonks answered casually.

Harry almost tripped. He turned to stare at her.

She laughed. "I thought *I* was the clumsy one."

"Me? A metamorphmagus?" Harry asked.

"You. I thought you said you heard that conversation."

"Oh, was that what you were talking about first? I only heard the part about you fancying me."

"Egotistical git," she answered with a grin as they came up to the professors. "Yes, you, a metamorph. You haven't had a haircut for six years plus, correct?"

McGonagall raised an eyebrow at Harry.

Flitwick looked absolutely delighted. "Is this true, Mr. Potter?"

"Uh, yes. More like ten years, actually," he answered cautiously, looking between the three.

"That is often a sign of someone who does very well in self transfiguration, Mr. Potter," McGonagall explained. "Specifically, a metamorphmagus." She nodded in Tonks's direction.

"Fascinating, and from such a young age," Flitwick said, looking at Harry in interest.

"I showed the same signs before coming to Hogwarts," Tonks told Harry. "I didn't come into my full powers until thirteen or so, though."

"Good luck to you, Mr. Potter, if you decide to pursue this. In the meantime, I believe we are here to reinforce the wards?" McGonagall brought them all back on track.

Tonks said, "Unless you object, I'll just follow along quietly. I promise not to get in the way."

"Not at all, Miss Tonks," Flitwick agreed. He turned to Harry. "Imagine my surprise when Min told me of your line, Mr. Potter. I'm so very glad that you're available and willing to help with the wards. Now, the first step is to prepare the wards for a recharge of their power. We begin by waving our wands thusly . . ."

Flitwick looked at Harry suspiciously. "What was that last spell you cast, Mr. Potter?"

Finished with the last wards, Harry chewed on his lip for a moment as he put his wand back in its holder. "Let's just call it a preventative measure, Professor." He turned to McGonagall. "Deputy Headmistress, I strongly recommend you have professors and some aurors stationed at the ward boundaries on September first. I'm afraid you'll find several students will have an . . . adverse reaction to crossing the ward I just put up." He winced. "Damn, I forgot to ask. Is Snape here?"

"Professor Snape is scheduled to arrive earlier on the first," McGonagall answered, peering at Harry in that "Explain yourself before I turn you into a newt" expression she had spent decades perfecting.

"Then you may want to get him inside the wards and keep him quarantined until AFTER the students arrive, Professor. Specifically, I don't want him warning certain other parties ahead of time." Harry did his best to match the stare he was receiving from the stern Deputy Headmistress. Though he did not know it, his recent confidence boost and magical power made his expression much more intimidating than it had been before the end of the previous school year.

"Oh, dear," Flitwick said quietly as he put the information together.

McGonagall was only a moment behind her colleague in figuring out what Harry had planned. "'Oh, dear' indeed. Are you sure you want to do this, Harry?"

"I think we've established that the headmaster and I disagree on several things. Allowing Death Eaters into the school under the guise of being students is one of them. Merlin knows I'm not doing this for the publicity. I'm doing it to make the school safer. Surely you two can understand that goal."

McGonagall let out a long breath. "I applaud the goal, Harry, yes. It's just . . . They're children," she finished almost sadly.

"Children who have willingly agreed to follow a dark lord," Harry corrected.

McGonagall winced but didn't try to deny that.

Surprising him, Flitwick gently said, "This is not the first time we've spoken about this, Min. You may agree with Albus that they can be redeemed. They might. I do not know. But do we really want to gamble the safety of the rest of the school on that?" He sighed. "Besides, like it or not, Lord Gryffindor DOES have the right to do this and demand our silence and obedience."

"I would never demand anything of either of you," Harry immediately objected.

"I know that, dear boy. The fact stands, however, that you legally can do this."

McGonagall slowly nodded. "And quarantining Severus gives him the excuse he needs to not report it. Very clever."

Harry almost smiled. "Despite my Gryffindor tendencies, I've been told that thinking things through can have its benefits."

The head of Ravenclaw laughed delightedly. "Indeed, Mr. Potter, indeed."

McGonagall's lip twitched. "It shall be as you say, Lord Gryffindor. As I suspect what his reaction will be to this development, I shall not inform Albus until after . . . After."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, both, for everything."

Flitwick nodded back. "Certainly. Do come and visit us sometime, Harry. I'm quite curious to see the focus that I suspect Hector is crafting even as we speak."

Harry and Tonks took their leave of the two professors and headed toward the castle and the meeting they'd arranged with the Shacklebolts.

"You'd have made a good Slytherin, Harry," Tonks commented.

"Coming from a former Slytherin, that's quite the compliment. Thank you. Alistair said the same thing."

"The Sorting Hat?"

Harry nodded.

She chuckled as they passed through the entrance hall. "Wouldn't that have twisted Severus's tail? Harry Potter as one of his Slytherins."

Harry chuckled along as he imagined the head of Slytherin's reaction to that scenario. "Maybe. I'm just as glad I wasn't under his control, though."

A yawn escaped him. "Excuse me. Damn, but that was hard work. Now I'm glad for those power throughput exercises Grandfather has been putting me through."

Tonks nodded. "None of those looked particularly difficult; it was just the scale of putting them over something the size of this castle. I didn't recognize most of them, though."

"Neither did I. I thought Grandfather had been giving me a good education in the old magics, but some of that stuff was REALLY ancient. I'm surprised the headmaster wasn't part of it."

"So was I. I asked Professor Flitwick while you and Professor McGonagall were working. Apparently Professor Dumbledore said that you, being from a founder bloodline, would do more good than he could, and so he wasn't needed."

Harry scowled. He wasn't sure he believed that argument, but he couldn't find fault with it. Besides, despite their working compromises and information exchanges, they were still trying to avoid each other.

"Explain to me again why we're here," Tonks requested as Harry led her into a seldom-used room.

Harry looked hurt. "We hardly get any time to ourselves, Nim, what with a half dozen people living with us. Here I go, find a place that hardly anyone visits, and you question me?"

Tonks looked amused. "You consider a condemned girls' loo to be a good place for some private snuggle-time? I think we need to talk about your taste in romantic locations."

Saving Harry from having to come up with an appropriate response, a tap on the door preceded Kelly poking her head into the room. Spotting the two, she waved her husband and daughter in.

Laura, clearly more tired than she had been at the beginning of her tour, still managed to look around from her place in her father's arms.

Kingsley was also looking around the room but with a distinct lack of appreciation. "Well, we're here on time as you requested. Please explain to me again why we're here," he requested as he put Laura down.

Harry laughed. He raised a hand and concentrated for a second. His face clearing, but his hand staying up, he said, "Nim said the very same thing just before you got here." He turned his head and hissed, "*Open* ." The sink obligingly moved aside to reveal the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

As the adults were staring at the newly opened hole, the three school brooms that Harry had summoned zipped through the swinging door and came to a halt beside him. Harry swung a leg over one of the brooms. "Godric asked me to check the Chamber of Secrets. It's potentially a security threat to the school. I doubt it - Voldemort would've used it by now if he knew about it - but it's worth checking out. Also, Kingsley, there is a huge basilisk corpse down there. Do you think you could use some of it for potions ingredients? Or at the least could you prepare it so we could sell them?"

Kingsley started to look excited, or at least as excited as the normally unflappable former auror ever got, and grabbed one of the brooms.

"Only three brooms?" Tonks asked.

Harry shrugged. "I can't imagine Kelly and Shack would be happy if Laura came along -"

Laura pouted.

Smiling at the child, Harry continued, "So someone has to stay up here unless . . ." A slow grin formed, and he turned to Kelly. "Unless you'd accept Myrtle as a minder?"

Kelly blinked before giving a chuckle. "Thank you, no. I think I'll stay up here."

Tonks grabbed the last broom. "Dead basilisk? Now I know why you didn't want Remus to come along."

Harry nodded and led the three fliers into the nearly vertical tube slowly. "*Lumos maximus* . I imagine it won't smell all that good. With his canine nose . . ."

Kingsley promptly cast a Bubble Head Charm over himself in implicit agreement.

Laughing, Harry and Tonks followed suit before moving further down into the bowels of the castle.

The next morning at breakfast, an owl brought a letter with the ministry seal to Harry.

Mr. Potter,

You are hereby summoned to appear as a material witness in the investigation of the events in and around the Shacklebolt residence in the early hours of August 11.

Know that you may be required to submit to veritaserum and charges may be brought against you if evidence comes to light that would require it.

Failure to appear at the Ministry of Magic courtroom 5 at 10:00 in the morning of August 29 will result in charges being brought against you.

**Sincerely,
William Fitzhugh, bailiff**

Scion of Gryffindor 19 - The Trial

Harry stared at the court summons he held in his hands.

"What'd you get, Cub?" Remus asked.

Confused, angry, and scared, Harry handed the parchment over. Curious at his reaction, Godric and Tonks read it over the werewolf's shoulders.

Godric sighed as the page was handed to the adult Shackletons. "I was worried about this."

Harry looked at Godric, silently asking for an explanation.

"Despite the fact it's about a criminal act, it's really politically motivated."

"I'm the only one to get a summons," Harry said in understanding.

Godric nodded. "For that reason, we can challenge it if we wanted to. Their easiest counter to that would be to summon the rest of the rescue squad and question them as well. There is no harm done from their point of view, and it would STILL get you into a courtroom with veritaserum in your system."

"But it said that veritaserum only MAY be used, not that it would!" Harry objected.

Tonks joined the discussion in an official tone. "Mr. Potter, why did your Blasting Curse destroy the barricade whereas former Auror Tonks's Blasting Curses did not?"

Harry's mouth opened before he frowned and closed his mouth again in thought. "The answer is something I don't want to come out. Namely my status as Godric's heir," he admitted.

Tonks nodded and went on in her normal voice. "Right. That refusal to answer would be enough to justify the use of veritaserum."

"Damn."

"Right," Shack agreed. "As your potions and occlumency teacher, I think I can help you to some degree, though."

Godric nodded. "Your status as Lord Gryffindor isn't earth-shattering if it comes out. This is secondary, though. As I said, this is a politically motivated move. Therefore, Fudge has more moves planned."

Harry was frowning. "Fudge's involvement also explains why Madam Bones said I wouldn't have to testify, yet here is a summons. She was overridden, wasn't she?"

Everyone nodded to the very unhappy student.

"Dammit," he muttered, still thinking. "Fudge didn't even violate our agreement, so I can't directly retaliate."

Remus was unhappy. "Harry, just because he's making your life difficult doesn't mean you have the right to shoot back."

"Making my life difficult? I think it could be a lot worse than that, Remus. I know entirely too many secrets. Godric's existence is important to the Potters specifically and the light side in general. I don't want him hunted down by a necromancer working for Tom, after all."

"Me, neither," Godric offered.

Harry went on, "His loss would also be a blow to the morale of the light side. Also, how much do I know about the Order of the Phoenix? Ginny and Mr. Weasley could be hurt, socially and politically, if everything about the Chamber of Secrets comes out without proper explanation." He sighed. "I don't think I'm being egotistical when I say that there's no end to the damage it could do, Remus."

"Besides, politicians like Fudge only respond to certain things," Tonks said. "Appealing to his humanity, assuming he has any, won't work nearly as well as a sufficiently large political threat."

Remus frowned. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Harry admitted. "However, can you see another way around the problem? Turning the other cheek will just get the second cheek slapped with him, and we all know it."

Harry didn't sleep well the night of August twenty-eighth. There were several reasons for this.

It was Remus's first transformation using Snape's "mercenary" Wolfsbane Potion after Kingsley retrieved it for them. Everyone in Gryffindor Keep had strong and mainly negative opinions of Snape, but he WAS one of the best potion brewers in the U.K. Despite the apparent success of the potion, Harry couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong with that whole situation.

Next on the list of distractions was that Hogwarts classes would be starting up again in a few days. Not going back to the castle hurt in a way he couldn't quite verbalize, though he recognized it had more to do with his friends than the building itself.

The Weasleys (and Hermione) would be shopping in Diagon Alley soon, and he had agreed to meet up with at least Ginny. He couldn't see a way around a confrontation with Hermione. Not that he wanted to avoid her, really, but he didn't want to do further damage to their relationship.

Last, and certainly not least, he had the hearing with the ministry of magic the next morning.

No, Harry was doomed to have a night of restless tossing and turning. He admitted defeat at one in the morning and went down to the parlor, hoping to find some diversion. Between the crackling fire and inconsequential conversation with Godric, Harry finally nodded off at three.

The eastern sky was just beginning to brighten when he was awakened by warm breath and an equally warm tongue on his face.

Privately, Harry later blamed his reaction on the dream that had been interrupted. "Nim," he objected groggily, "isn't it still early in our relationship to be waking me up like this?"

It took several seconds before Harry woke up enough to realize that he couldn't understand what she was trying to say to him in response. He cracked an eye open to see what the problem was.

Instead of the metamorphmagus he was dating, he saw a werewolf rolling on the floor in the throes of what could only be lupine laughter.

"I didn't know it was you, Remus!" Harry objected.

Again.

"I know, Cub," the battered but cheerful now-human Lupin answered, taking a sip of his breakfast tea.

"What was it he said again?" Kingsley asked.

"Isn't it still too early in our relationship for you to be waking me up like this?" Remus mimicked.

Again.

Kingsley, Godric, and Remus broke into fresh laughter.

Harry just sighed.

Tonks leaned over and breathed into his ear, "I'll have to keep that method in mind." Before pulling back, she managed to lightly brush behind his ear with her tongue.

Harry jumped and gave a convulsive shudder. Tonks looked smug. The three men just smirked.

Kelly, leading Laura by the hand, walked into this scene. Looking at the five, she asked, "Okay, what'd I miss?"

Harry groaned as the ever-more-cheerful Remus launched into the story.

Again.

"The last witness I would like to call is Harry James Potter."

Harry stood and walked as calmly as his knees allowed toward the witness seat in front of the panel of Wizengamot Elders. Unlike his own court appearance, this one had only three members of the Wizengamot presiding. He didn't recognize any of them. The nine surviving Death Eaters were magically silenced and shackled in place side by side with an auror in attendance for each. Three barristers had been fighting a losing battle to get the charges dropped against their clients.

And now the Interrogator (a man by the name of Dewey, Shack had told him with a frown) had called his final witness.

Harry tried to keep the anxiety off of his face. Godric and Kingsley had spent a lot of time preparing him for any of several possible directions the proceedings could go in.

"Please state your full name, occupation, and residence."

"Harry James Potter, I'm a student, and I don't know where I live."

Dewey blinked in surprise at that. "I'm sorry? You don't know where you live?"

Harry shrugged. "I inherited it from my parents' estate. I don't know where it's physically located."

"What is it called?"

"For the sake of my privacy, I'd rather not answer that."

Dewey frowned and jotted something down on a parchment before continuing his questions. "Please describe the events as you recall them on the morning of August eleventh."

Harry reported all of the events at the Shackbolt home after he'd apparated in.

Everyone in the public spectators' box, which included a fair number of reporters, listened in rapt attention. Surprisingly, Fudge was not in attendance. Dewey and the three defense barristers made rapid notes the entire time he was talking. The Wizengamot Elders gazed at him impassively.

After he finished, Dewey started his questions. "You claim you apparated in."

"Yes."

"But you are not yet seventeen," the barrister objected delicately. At that point, Harry was absolutely certain that this whole mess was politically motivated. They were trying to find things to charge him with. Fortunately, they hadn't done their homework.

"I received my apparition license on August tenth," Harry calmly answered.

The man stared blankly for a moment. "But you're not yet seventeen," he repeated.

Harry shrugged. "Correct, but that does not change the fact that I had my license already." Harry carefully kept his face blank and his voice even. He didn't want to antagonize the man by making him look more of an idiot than he was doing to himself.

Apparently realizing how he sounded, the man went on. "You claim your Blasting Curse destroyed the barricade the Death Eaters had erected, correct?"

"Yes."

"Were you aware that both Miss Tonks and Mr. Lupin had already hit that same barricade with Blasting Curses before you did?"

"I was told that later."

Interrogator Dewey paused for a moment in aggravation. Harry was answering the questions readily enough, but he wasn't leaving him openings to move to his next point. "So how do you explain that your spell destroyed it when theirs, two fully grown and powerful magicians, had had much less effect?"

Harry again shrugged. "Perhaps their curses weakened it sufficiently for mine to finish it off. Perhaps they'd been somewhat drained before casting that spell. Perhaps they were distracted - they WERE in the middle of a firefight, remember - when they cast their spells."

"You're aware that one," he checked his notes, "Zack Forsum died?"

"I knew one of them had died, but I hadn't heard the name," Harry said tightly.

"You killed a man, yet were not even interested in hearing who it was?" Dewey asked in surprise.

Harry's fist clenched. "I care that he died, if that is your insinuation, Mr. Dewey. I care and have had occasional nightmares about it. Implying that I'm so heartless that I didn't even bother to notice is not only incorrect but also very insulting."

A sparkle, visible only to Harry, appeared in Dewey's eye. "Was that a challenge, Mr. Potter?"

"No. I simply stated that your question was insulting to me."

"But isn't that grounds for a challenge?"

"Do you WANT me to challenge you? It also strikes me that we've strayed from the *stated* purpose of this inquiry, Mr. Dewey." Harry's emphasis on "stated" was very light but didn't go unnoticed by Kingsley, Tonks, or Dewey.

"I would remind you, Mr. Potter, that it is my job to decide what is within the scope of this inquiry and what is not. As such, please stop questioning my professionalism," Dewey returned.

"Then please stop questioning my humanity."

As Harry and Dewey engaged in a brief glaring contest, one of the three Wizengamot Elders cleared her throat. "Interrogator Dewey, Lord-Baron Potter is correct. You have strayed a bit afield of the events in question. Please restrict yourself to that topic."

Dewey pulled his gaze up. "As is my right as ministry Interrogator, I demand that this witness be given veritaserum."

Harry allowed one eyebrow to rise. So he finally thought he had reason?

"On what grounds?" the presiding Elder demanded.

"The witness is clearly hostile."

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Tonks and Kingsley were under no such restriction.

"That is hardly grounds to use veritaserum," the Elder pointed out.

"He has also evaded several questions. If we are to get to the bottom of the events in question, we must have answers."

The stately witch was clearly unhappy. "It is your right to demand such," she grudgingly admitted. She signaled one of the aurors standing along the wall. He stepped forward, pulling a small vial out of his robe as he advanced.

Harry raised a hand. "May I make a short statement before being dosed?" With his hand up, he silently and wandlessly cast several revealing and detoxification spells at the vial. It wouldn't interfere with the veritaserum itself, but it would reveal any treachery. To his mild surprise, nothing seemed amiss.

"Very well, young man."

"I'd like to point out that Mr. Dewey was the one who CAUSED me to be hostile despite the fact that I'm an eyewitness he's called for the prosecution. Secondly, he has already stated - as I'm the last witness he wants to call - that I'm the ONLY one he planned on calling among the five adult magicians who weren't arrested. I'm also the one of the five who arguably saw the least. That strikes me as somewhat . . . curious." His implication was not lost on anyone in the room, causing the reporters to nearly bounce in excitement and Dewey to flush.

Harry then willingly took the dose of veritaserum from the stony-faced auror.

Dewey waited a minute before he asked his questions, keeping an eye on his watch with an expression of barely contained anticipation.

While the calm, floating feeling slowly settled over him, Harry spent the time ordering his mind and building his occlumency shields. Kingsley had been very informative about veritaserum. As an above-average brewer, master occlumens, and former Senior Auror, he had a unique appreciation and knowledge of the substance. In short, it forced one to honestly answer the question asked.

This didn't sound like news to Harry the first time around, and he said so in a tone that was probably embarrassingly whiny. After a few seconds further explanation by his tolerant teacher, he saw the older man's point.

"Where are you living?" Dewey snapped out.

"The Keep," Harry honestly answered. That was the trick. He had to answer honestly but not COMPLETELY. A sufficiently powerful occlumens (and his immunity to the Imperious Curse helped here) could keep his wits about him enough to keep a check on his tongue.

"Where is this keep?"

"I don't know." And he really didn't.

"Whose keep is it?" Dewey asked, trying to get at the information from a different direction.

"Mine."

"Interrogator Dewey," one of the Elders interjected sternly, "we have already covered this. Move on."

"Yes, sir. I apologize to the court," he added in a completely insincere tone. He turned back to Harry. "On the morning of August eleventh, you apparated to the Shackbolt residence, correct?"

"Yes."

"Did you have a license to do so?"

"Yes."

"Had you ever been to that residence before?"

"No."

"Did someone give you the apparition coordinates?"

"No."

"Then how did you apparate there? I can't apparate somewhere I've never been without coordinates."

"Then I must be more powerful than you are." Harry was pushing his limits on how he answered that question, but the opportunity was too perfect to pass up.

Almost the entire audience laughed. Even the three Elders had to fight to keep expressions of amusement off of their faces.

Dewey, however, got an ugly look on his face. "How did you apparate to the Shacklebolt residence without any of the information usually needed?" he restated his question.

"I was told that I could apparate to a person instead of a location if I concentrated hard enough and had enough power. I attempted it, and it worked."

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, Remus Lupin, and Nymphadora Tonks were all already there. Who told you that you could do that?"

"One of my teachers." The beauty of it, Harry reflected distantly, was that that answer was not only honest, but it also threw all of the Hogwarts professors into the possible pool of answers.

"Which one?" Dewey nearly growled.

"It doesn't matter which one."

"Interrogator Dewey," the chief Elder said sternly, "this is your last warning. Keep to the STATED purpose of this inquiry instead of going on a fishing expedition against Lord-Baron Potter." The chief Elder was beginning to realize that there is something underhanded being attempted and wasn't about to let it happen.

"Yes, madam. Mr. Potter, did you cast a Blasting Curse at the barricade?"

"Yes."

"Did it destroy said barricade, resulting in the death of Mr. Forsum?"

"It destroyed the barricade," Harry agreed.

Dewey waited, and so did Harry.

"Did it result in the death of Mr. Forsum?" Dewey finally snapped out.

"I don't know what killed him." After all, Kingsley didn't actually tell him the cause of death.

"The barricade YOU caused to explode killed him!"

Harry remained silent.

"Well, answer my question!"

"You didn't ask me a question."

"Did you kill him?" Dewey was clearly getting very upset at the answers he was receiving.

"You just said that I did."

"Admit it! You killed him!"

This was finally too much for the chief Elder. "Interrogator Dewey, that is enough! Lord-Baron Potter is not on trial. The unfortunate death of Zack Forsum while engaged in Death Eater activities is not in dispute. Now sit down, and be silent. I will finish the questioning of this witness."

She proceeded to hit several of the key points in Harry's earlier testimony, getting the same answers while Harry was under veritaserum as he gave previously. Harry easily answered all of her questions, as they didn't stray into uncomfortable territory.

The defense barristers only asked him a few questions. They clearly had nothing to work with and were just going through the motions of a defense.

The Elders conferred for five minutes behind an Obscuring Charm before sentencing all nine to life imprisonment in Azkaban. The defendants, now prisoners, understandably didn't take this well. They had to be stunned and floated out of the courtroom.

Dewey spent the whole time fuming and glaring at Harry.

Scion of Gryffindor 20 - Trial Reactions and Metamorphs

Harry and Godric entered the dining room of Gryffindor Keep, continuing their conversation from the magical theory session just ended.

"But why is the older version of the Anti-Apparition Ward any better than the newer one? The recent version uses less power and seems to produce the same effect. Hi, Nim." Harry absently hugged Tonks from behind as she was reading the paper at the table.

She folded the Prophet and followed the conversation taking place across the table.

"On the surface, yes, they're the same. There are actually two differences, however. If you wanted to key someone into the wards, yourself for instance, the older version allows exceptions with fewer adverse affects on the integrity of the overall ward. The second difference is that the older one, if cast by the owner of the property, is more resistant to being brought down by an attacker."

Harry thought about that for a moment as he sat down. Dobby silently brought out his sandwich and chips before Harry asked his next question. "It's a blood-linked ward?"

Godric nodded.

"So do you think I should recast the anti-apparition ward on Gryffindor Keep?"

Godric smiled. "I'm glad you asked. Yes, I think you should. Actually, you should redo all the wards. They'll be stronger that way."

"I thought you put them up?" Tonks asked.

"I did. A thousand years ago. Unsurprisingly, they've weakened a bit since then. Besides, who says Harry here isn't stronger than I was?"

Harry boggled.

Godric sighed. "Why does everyone assume I was so powerful?"

"Um, because you helped found Hogwarts and were the one who fought Slytherin to a standstill?" Harry offered as if it were obvious.

"As to the first, that only means I had enough galleons and that I saw a business opportunity. As for Salazar, who says HE was all that powerful?"

Tonks blinked. "For the sake of my house pride, please don't say he wasn't."

Godric smiled toothily at her. "Okay, I won't." He sighed again. "Modern magicians seem to have iconized the four of us. We were just as human as the next wizard, with all the faults that that implies."

Tonks appeared to think that one over for a few seconds before picking her paper up again without a word.

"She just doesn't want to hear about the scandal Salazar was in about inappropriate charms and a couple of boa constrictors," Godric stage-whispered to Harry.

Biting his lip to keep silent, Harry watched Tonks's knuckles whiten. Looking toward Godric, Harry tallied a point in the air for the ghost.

Godric smiled and bowed back.

"Nim, anything interesting in the paper?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

"Headline is an article on your testimony at the deez trial."

"Deez?" Harry asked.

"Auror slang. Death Eaters. Dee Ees. Deez. Anyway, it doesn't mention the apparation since they either can't explain how you have a license, or if they can, the ministry told them to keep it quiet."

"Apparently, Dewey and his two partners were accused of accepting ministry funds illegally and investigated a while back. There wasn't enough evidence - read, 'a bribe headed off the investigation' - and the charges went away. Now the Prophet is pushing for another investigation. Seems he didn't go after the defendants as hard as they thought he should."

Harry snorted. "He was too busy coming after ME to be bothered with trying to convict the defendants."

Exactly. The Prophet reporter saw that and asked the Wizengamot Elders what they thought. Elder McComb is a real stickler for honesty, and she said they were going to put his barrister license up for review. The reporter upped that one and is calling for an investigation into the law firm and Dewey specifically."

"Did they even bother to report the case?" Godric asked.

"Yep. Right at the end they mentioned what the case was about. Most of the story is about Harry and Dewey."

"Do I want to know what they're saying about me now?" Harry asked in dread.

"Nothing bad. You handled the questioning with quote, 'unusual calm and poise,' end quote. You have your own keep, though nobody seems to know where it is. Short re-iteration of your history. Eligible bachelor, rich, Boy Who Lived, and all that. Says you're not dating anyone currently, though you've had a few girlfriends in the recent past." She looked over her paper and asked teasingly, "Is there anything there I should be told about?"

He rolled his eyes and answered the somewhat rhetorical question. "I took Parvati to the Yule Ball a year and a half ago. I took Cho to one - ONE date not quite a year ago. The paper seems to think I dated Hermione somewhere along the line, too."

"At least you have good taste in women," Godric said innocently.

Harry smiled at Tonks and winked at her. "I think so."

"Good answer, Harry." She folded the paper and said, "Eat up, Potter. We got training this afternoon."

"Yes, Tonks."

"You're still predictable, Potter."

"Ouch," Harry eloquently replied, rubbing his ankle.

"You handle just about any spells correctly except anything that's green. I suppose with your history that makes sense, but it's still something you need to work on. You always, ALWAYS dodge to your right. If anyone else besides me notices that, it'll get you killed."

"You made your point, Tonks," Harry grouched, still holding his ankle.

"Have I?" she asked quietly. "It's Tonks's job to train Potter until he's as good a dueler as she is. On a more personal level, I'm kinda fond of you and don't want you to get killed."

Harry grinned impudently. "Well, I can't let a lovely lady down, now can I? So I just can't get killed."

She rolled her eyes. "Prat."

Harry gave her a mocking half-bow before he winced in pain.

"How's your ankle?"

"I twisted it pretty good. I'll have to have Remus look at it."

Tonks raised her wand and a small, silver form shot out of it and flew out of the room.

"What was that, anyway? I saw you use one at Kingsley's place, too."

"Messenger Spell. It's a derivation of the Patronus Spell, actually - completely secure but visually obvious."

"Hmm. Could you teach me that one?"

"Sure thing," she answered as Remus entered.

"You called?" he asked. He saw Harry sitting on the ground and went over to him, pulling out his wand. "She finally convinced you that your dodging green spells is predictable?"

Harry looked at her in surprise as Remus was muttering spells over Harry's ankle.

She smirked at him. "I told you so."

"I'm no Madam Pomfrey, but that should do it," Remus announced. "Just no running around for the rest of the day." The werewolf glanced sideways at Tonks before adding, "Or any other physically strenuous activities."

Tonks stuck her tongue out at him.

"Thanks, Remus," Harry said, testing the ankle gingerly, completely oblivious to the innuendo.

"Remus, are you available later?" Tonks asked. "Potter here wants to learn the Messenger Spell."

"Sure. I'll be in the library."

Tonks nodded, and Remus left. She turned to Harry. "Well, with that ankle we can't finish the dueling lesson. How about the first morphing lesson?"

Harry nodded eagerly. Ever since being told of the chance of his being a metamorphmagus, he had been intrigued by the possibilities for anonymity and disguise. Not to mention that it would be really cool to be able to do.

Tonks conjured a couple of chairs and seated herself in one, waving her student into the other. "Okay, let's start with some basic information first. I, obviously, am a metamorphmagus, metamorph, or morpher. There aren't all that many of us around. I'm only the third one I'm aware of in the UK. My teacher, Tim, and an old witch in Glasgow are the other two. The metamorphmagus skill doesn't seem to follow genetics - I'm the only known morpher in the Tonks or Black lines - nor is there any other known common factor. It is not an unlimited ability. I can't change my mass or my current nervous system. So no growing another eye out the back of my head, for instance."

Harry blinked at that mental image. "Well, of course not. Think about how strange the sunglasses would look."

She rolled her eyes. "Funny. No, looking out the back of my head would be a nice skill to have for an auror. Only Mad-Eye has that one, though. You've seen me change my hair color and length, eye color, and nose shape. I also subtly alter the lines of my face, but you may or may not have noticed that."

"Your cheekbones are slightly lower today and the chin is just a shade more rounded," he promptly answered.

She just stared at him.

Seeing her reaction, he squirmed uncomfortably, not knowing how she took his close observation.

Her smile put him at ease. "Very good. I'm not upset with you, Potter. In point of fact, I'm rather impressed. Okay, I generally do that by altering the muscles, cartilage, and fats in my face or nose. Glamours can change my appearance in the same ways, of course, but a morph won't be reversed by a Finishing Spell. I can also affect the length of fingernails and make slight changes to my height. I can change body shape by manipulating the muscle and fatty tissues." She peered at him threateningly. "And not one smart word out of you if you know what is good for you."

He managed to avoid any of the several dozen thoughts racing through his mind, ranging from sexist to snarky to downright perverted. Instead, he asked, "You said you couldn't add or remove mass, right?"

She nodded.

"Then how do you grow your hair out? That's adding mass, isn't it?"

"Good question. I don't actually change the mass. Just move it around a little. In the case of hair, it's so slight that it isn't obvious."

He frowned in thought for a second. "Please don't take this the wrong way, Tonks, but is this the cause of your clumsiness?"

She smiled at him and nodded. "Again, very good. All of this shifting keeps me from an intuitive understanding of where my center of mass is like everyone else has. Just changing the shape of my face wouldn't alter it much - you wouldn't think - but it seems to be just enough. When I keep to one form for a couple days and when I'm recuperating from an injury, for instance, I'm not clumsy anymore. Well, as clumsy anyway."

"So why not pick one form and stay with it?"

"Aside from this skill being the main reason I was an auror? When I'm asleep, I revert to my base form."

"So to keep the same form for days means you'd have to stay in your base form?"

She nodded.

"Why not just do that, then? I understand needing to change appearance for auror or Order duties, but why not just let it go while we're all here?"

She frowned. "Honestly? I don't like my base form. Only my parents and a handful of healers and nurses have ever seen it."

He nodded slowly. "Okay, I guess I can understand that." He gave a mirthless chuckle. "Merlin knows I'd change my appearance anytime I got the chance. Between this bloody scar and hair, everyone in the entire wizarding world recognizes me in about three seconds."

She reached over and ruffled his hair playfully. "I like the hair. It's cute."

He gave out a little noise of irritation.

She just smiled back. "So let's start with that, then. We still don't know for sure that you're a morpher, remember. Let's experiment a little and see what we can do."

She conjured a standing mirror. She then stood and walked around so she was standing behind him. Meeting his eyes in the mirror, she said,

"First, concentrate on changing the length of your hair. Based on the haircut story, you've already done it, so this is probably the easiest one for you to accomplish. We'll move on once we get this one figured out."

"Okay, concentrate and imagine your hair growing longer. Say to your shoulders . . ."

"Whatcha writing?" Remus asked as he sat down across the table.

"A letter to the Prophet. I'm telling the real story of Tom Riddle and the opening of the Chamber of Secrets," Harry answered.

Remus's eyes widened before he slowly nodded. "Telling the story of the origins of Voldemort."

Harry nodded. "And Hagrid getting expelled originally and arrested the second time around."

Remus thought that one through. "You're going to make the ministry look bad without pointing it out that way."

"Yup."

"What will Ginny think of this?" Harry had long since told Remus the full story, and so the former Marauder knew who the players were.

Harry tapped another parchment laying next to his elbow. "I asked, and she's okay with me telling the world about it. She was only eleven and was duped into it by Malfoy and Voldemort."

Remus whistled. "And a third fish falls into the net. Very clever."

Harry didn't look up. "Yeah, having a Slytherin girlfriend is having SOME affect on me."

Remus looked at him closely. "Harry, what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're an awful liar."

"Proving I'm a true Gryffindor. Too damn honest for my own good."

"And you're even worse at trying to avoid a question. What's wrong?"

Harry sighed and laid his quill down before looking up at Remus. "Nim. We were talking about metamorphs, and she mentioned that she doesn't like her base form."

Remus frowned in confusion. "Okay."

"She said that the only time she is in her base form is when she's asleep."

"Harry, I don't see where -"

"I WANT to see her, Remus," Harry quietly interrupted. He closed his eyes and finished in a whisper, "Preferably while she's asleep."

Remus was quiet for long enough that Harry finally dared to crack his eyes open.

Remus was smiling slightly at him. "What're you so embarrassed about, Harry? It's perfectly normal for a teenager to want to . . . see his girlfriend." His grin raised a touch. "Or so I'm told."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Funny. No, it's just that I don't want to ask her for something she doesn't want." He sighed. "I don't even know what the hell I'm doing, Remus. I've never really dated, let alone going any further than that."

"You two have had more than one late night spent talking in front of the fire," Remus observed.

Harry snorted. "I mean a real date. Like it or not, I'm one of the most recognized wizards in the country. I can't go on a date in the wizarding world, Remus. On top of that, I know even less about the muggle world than the wizarding one. So we just sit here, in the same house as my ancestor, my godfather, her former partner, and his six year old daughter. Yeah, real romantic environment."

Remus tilted his head in acknowledgement. "So think creatively. Put up proximity wards somewhere here in the Keep or the grounds if you want some time alone with her. Learn some Glamour Charms or perfect your metamorphing skills so you can go to Diagon Alley with her without the entire world knowing. You're smart, Harry. Just put your mind to work for you."

Scion of Gryffindor 21 - Aug 31 pt 1

Ten o'clock in the morning of August thirty-first found Harry Potter in the outdoor seating area of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor hovering over the remains of a chocolate malt while reading the Daily Prophet. There were multiple articles that caused the grin he was sporting.

First was a verbatim copy of Harry's letter to the editor (they had even printed the word "Voldemort"), giving the true and complete story of Tom Marvolo Riddle and his Hogwarts career. This included opening the Chamber of Secrets and the death of Moaning Myrtle. After the history lesson, Harry went on to explain the more recent opening of the Chamber and his subsequent rescue of Ginny. He had gone far out of his way to depict her as a victim of not only Voldemort but also Lucius Malfoy. The article ended with the Daily Prophet's promise to investigate and their demand of explanations from the ministry for Hagrid's relatively recent imprisonment.

Article number two was an investigative piece on Barrister Dewey and his law firm. It noted, again, that Dewey seemed more interested in attacking Harry than he did in convicting the nine Death Eaters that were actually on trial. As it turns out, the firm had a long association with dark and suspected dark families, including Lestrangle, Malfoy, and Black. One of the partners was also a former business partner of Fudge.

The third article that caused Harry's ebullient mood was a letter from the editor. In it, the Daily Prophet renewed its demands for an investigation of Fudge. This included a prominent picture of Fudge and Malfoy shaking hands and looking like the best of friends at some event or another. The picture was less than six months old.

"You can stop gloating any time now," Kingsley's disembodied voice said in amusement from behind Harry.

"Why would I want to do that?" Harry asked without looking up.

A chuckle answered him.

Before the conversation could degenerate any further, a large owl, a shocking purple color, landed on Harry's table. Harry raised an eyebrow at it. The owl's return hoot sounded resigned to his fate even as he held out his leg with parchment attached. Suspecting who it was from, Harry examined the parchment carefully before satisfying himself that there were no spells on it.

As he reached forward, the owl visibly braced himself. Now moving cautiously, Harry retrieved the letter. The owl promptly turned a shade of neon green that threatened to burn Harry's eyeballs out. The owl, surprisingly, seemed relieved by this. One strong beat of his wings, and he flew off.

Dear ~~Co-Conspirator~~ Partner,

It has come to our attention through our vast and intricate spy network (we looked out the window) that you are currently in Diagon Alley.

You are cordially invited to the first annual shareholder's meeting of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. The festivities meeting will commence at three o'clock this afternoon. If you cannot make that time, feel free to show up whenever the heck you want.

**Obnoxiously Sincerely,
Gred and Forge**

"So we have plans this afternoon after you see Ginny?" Tonks asked from beside him, her head still craned as she read the parchment.

Harry smiled over at her unfamiliar face. "Yup." Seeing her inches away, he leaned over and kissed her cheek.

A flash was followed moments later by, "Hiya, Harry!"

Harry sighed and pulled his hand back from his wand. "Hi, Colin."

The spunky soon-to-be fifth year Gryffindor, totally unaware of the messy end that he'd just narrowly avoided, plopped himself down in the seat across the table without invitation. Once seated, he looked at Tonks in curiosity.

"Colin Creevey, meet -"

"Ingrid Kinsfire," Tonks interrupted, leaning forward to shake Colin's hand. Once she released his hand, she wiggled under Harry's arm and did her best to mold herself to his side.

Colin raised his eyes even further at this. "Um, Harry? What about -"

"Hiya, Harry!" Ginny Weasley dropped into the remaining chair at the table.

Harry smiled. "Hi, Ginny."

Ginny looked at Tonks who now appeared to be trying to burrow under Harry's skin. "You must be the girlfriend he has written me about." She extended her hand. "Ginny Weasley."

"Ingrid," Tonks said. She giggled. "Call me 'Innie'."

Harry, seriously concerned about the wide-eyed, agog look that Colin was sporting, attempted some damage control. "Now, Ingrid, no need for that act. Colin and Ginny are friends."

He had to hand it to her, she was an excellent improvisation actress. Instantly gone was the air-headed, wide-eyed look, and in its place was a serious, calculating expression. "Very well, Harry." She turned to the two fifth-year Gryffindors. "Forgive me, but I'm rather protective of our relationship and privacy."

"No problem," Ginny said easily. Harry saw the amused expression she wore, though.

Colin looked lost. "But Ginny, I thought you and Harry . . ."

Ginny shook her head. "It's true that I had a crush on him years ago, Colin. He knows about it, but it was never more than that. If he wants to date someone else, I'm happy for him."

"Thank you," Tonks said. "Harry's told me a lot about you, and your approval means a lot to the both of us."

"Yes, thank you, Ginny," Harry said. He turned to Tonks. "Dear, if you're so protective of our relationship, then perhaps you shouldn't have picked quite so . . . public a location to prove we had one."

"You kissed me first."

"So I did. I'm not about to apologize, though."

"I didn't ask you to. Not for anything up to and including snogging in public. Anything beyond that, though, better not be in public."

"We might get arrested, after all."

"Exactly, gorgeous man o' mine."

"Uh, Harry?" Colin asked. The poor boy's eyes appeared likely to roll out of their sockets at any moment.

"Sorry, Colin. We sometimes forget ourselves. Did you need to talk with me about something, or did you just want to stop and say, 'Hi'?"

"Yes. I mean, no. No, I didn't need anything. Look, what did you want me to do with this picture?" He was clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

Harry slowly shook his head. "Sorry, Colin."

Nodding, the young man stood. "I won't even develop this one, then. See ya, Harry." He made his escape.

Once he was far enough away, Ginny broke into laughter. "Hi, Tonks," she finally said through her fading laughter.

"Ginny," Tonks acknowledged, scooting back from Harry just enough that they could both comfortably sit.

Ginny looked back and forth between them. "Was that an act, then?"

Harry smiled and kissed Tonks's cheek again.

"Good," Ginny decided.

Harry turned to Tonks. "That WAS kind of over the top, though, Nim."

She shrugged. "We talked about it. I'm not supposed to be a consistent person in public, remember?"

Harry nodded.

Ginny was confused. "What?"

Harry said, "To keep the public from knowing we're dating, she's going to be someone different every time we're seen in public together." He turned to his girlfriend. "I wish you didn't have to do that."

"I know. It doesn't bother me, though. You know it's me under here, and that's all that matters."

Ginny smiled at the couple before frowning. "If she's going to have a different look everytime you're on a date, why did you ask Colin to destroy that picture?"

"Because we want to APPEAR to be trying to hide our relationship," Tonks answered immediately.

Ginny thought that one through for a moment. "Very Slytherin."

Tonks smiled. "Thank you, but it was Harry's idea."

Ginny turned an incredulous expression to him.

He just shrugged.

"You're full of surprises, Mr. Potter. By the way, was that Owl?"

"Owl?" Harry asked in slight confusion. "There was an owl here, yes."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "My insane brothers named their owl Owl. They think it's funny. Anyway, I was asked to tell you that they were looking for you when I saw you today."

"I got their message," Harry assured her. "How's your summer going, Ginny?"

"Really well. We -"

"May I have a word, Baron Black?"

The unexpected voice jerked Harry's head around to find Draco Malfoy standing a polite distance away and looking very uncomfortable.

Realizing how he'd been addressed, Harry stood and faced the other student. "How may I help you, Baron Malfoy?"

Draco's eyes flicked toward Ginny and Tonks. "I'd prefer to speak of our business privately, Baron Black."

Struck by the overly formal tone, Harry glanced over at Ginny. "Ginny, would you mind?"

The younger Gryffindor looked back and forth between the two standing men. "Very well, Harry. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Thank you, Ginny."

"Yes, thank you," Malfoy quietly echoed, causing surprised expressions from Harry and Ginny.

When Ginny had left, Draco glanced at Tonks again, a question clear in his expression.

Harry shook his head. "She's a member of the Black family. She stays."

Draco looked incredulously at her.

"I'm the daughter of Andromeda Black-Tonks," she answered the unspoken question.

Draco nodded. "Nymphadora, the auror." He turned to Harry. "Is she Lady Black?" he asked bluntly.

Harry's eyebrow rocketed, knowing what Draco was actually asking. "No, but if that changes, I'll be sure to let you know."

Draco shrugged unconcernedly. "Very well. I pass along a message from my mother, Baron Black. She has decided to take the opportunity that the former Baron Black made to her."

Harry nodded, not really surprised. "And you, Baron Malfoy?"

Draco grimaced. "I am still undecided." He shifted uncomfortably. "Look, it's no secret that I don't like you. To just denounce my father and join your family . . . I know my father has made poor choices, but don't know if I can just abandon him. Incomprehensible as it may be to you, I DO love my father, Potter."

"I will inform my solicitor about your mother then. I'll hold your offer open until Christmas holidays." Harry paused and added in a quieter tone, "Escape Voldemort while you can, Draco. You KNOW what will happen to you if you stay."

Malfoy was silent for a moment before answering in a whisper, "It wouldn't be for the Dark Lord or my sake that I'd stay." Straightening, he gave a stiff half-bow. "Thank you for your time, Baron Black."

Harry nodded back. "Good day, Baron Malfoy."

As Malfoy was walking away, Tonks quietly marveled, "Don't that beat all?"

"He's scared out of his mind, but he doesn't want to abandon his father," Harry observed, his eyes still following the youngest Malfoy.

"Everything okay, Harry?" Ginny asked as she reappeared with a small dish of ice cream.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I think everything will be." He relaxed and took his seat again.

"Ginny! There you are!" they all heard. The Weasley matriarch walked up to the table with Ron and Hermione in tow. She nodded tightly to Harry before turning a piercing stare onto Tonks.

"Hello, Molly," Tonks said in her normal voice, allowing her eyes to flash pink for a moment before going back to their previous blue.

Molly's eyes narrowed. "Oh, it's you. And I suppose you've been trying to seduce poor Harry, here?"

Harry was immediately angry at her treatment of Tonks. "Not that it's any of your business, Mrs. Weasley, but no, she hasn't."

Without averting her eyes, Molly nodded once. "Good, he's entirely too young and innocent for the likes of you."

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry snarled, "I would appreciate it if you wouldn't speak to Tonks like that."

Molly's entire demeanor changed when she turned to Harry. "Now, Harry, dear, I didn't mean to insult you. Not at all. I can understand you wanting to hang onto the memory of Sirius as long as you can, even if it means spending time with that Lupin person and pretending you're dating . . . her."

Harry stared at her in shock. "Mrs. Weasley -" he began again.

"Oh, you can call me Mum if you'd like."

Harry glared, realizing that she was trying to get him to abandon his current course through a combination of promised safety (which in reality was closer to imprisonment) and emotional blackmail. His response, therefore, was harsher than it needed to be. "Mrs. Weasley," he ground out, "you are not Lily Potter, nor will I ever pretend that you are. Now, about my friends and presumed dating habits: I don't know why you think you have any say over them."

She blinked at his tone. "I'm just looking out for you, dear."

"I can look after myself just fine," he replied flatly. "A fact that I wish you and certain meddlesome headmasters would understand."

"Oh, you can't mean that, Harry. If Sirius would have been a better role model to you -"

"Stop!" Harry barked, causing everyone around the table to flinch. "You have constantly belittled Sirius, and it will stop RIGHT NOW! Have you considered that your constant barbs at him about being a poor parental figure may have contributed to his death? No? Well, perhaps he took it to heart. When he heard I was at the Department of Mysteries and could be in trouble, do you think he might have thought about your comments about being a bad parent and Snape's comments about hiding? Could they have pushed him to do something a bit more reckless than he otherwise would have? Hmm?"

He dropped the light, mocking tone and glared at her, eyes smoldering. "You don't have the right to talk to me about Sirius, so STOP IT."

Molly's eyes flared, but she kept control of her temper. "I am looking out for your best interests, Harry. I want you to stop all this nonsense and move back into headquarters where you will be safe and away from . . . bad influences."

Harry simply stared at her for a few seconds. Her absolute refusal to acknowledge what he was saying was staggering. "Go away, Molly Weasley, and don't try to contact me until you understand what you're talking about and come to beg my forgiveness."

"Really," she huffed, "there is no need to be this way, Harry."

Harry ignored her. "Ron, Hermione, I think we need to talk."

"Why are you treating her like that, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Because she's treating me like a child. I never asked her to do my thinking for me."

Molly made a rude noise of exasperation. "If anyone is interested, I'll be in Madame Malkin's." Ron, Hermione, and Ginny nodded to her, and she stomped off.

"That was uncalled for, Harry," Ron repeated angrily.

Harry snorted in disgust. "If she treated me as an adult, capable of making my own choices, it wouldn't have happened. Since she's treating me like a ten year old imbecile . . ." He trailed off with a shrug.

"It was still rude to treat Mum like that."

"Yes it was. So what?" Harry asked challengingly.

"Now you're angry with me?" Ron asked, getting angry himself. "What've I done to you?"

Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I don't want to get into this with you, Ron. A fight with one Weasley was bad enough. I don't want to have to yell at a second one."

"Oh, this is rich! You think you have the right to yell at me? Okay, come on, let's hear it. What do you think you have the right to yell at me about?"

Harry sadly shook his head. "What's Dumbledore told you not to talk with me about in the short notes you've added to Ginny's letters?"

Ron frowned at the unexpected question. "Just headquarters and the group from there, why?"

"So the fact that you and Hermione are dating is somehow protected information? Or did you think it wasn't relevant to tell me, supposed best

friend to the both of you?"

Ron turned pink. "What makes you think -"

"Oh, grow up!" Harry yelled, causing a few heads around them to turn. He lowered his voice and continued, "I have secrets, and so do you, Ron. So don't go and try to play it off as if you're the injured one, here."

Looking thunderous, Ron leaned forward over the table, trying to tower over Harry.

Harry just looked up at him. "I understand that you tried to talk Hermione out of snitching my Diagon Alley visit three weeks ago, and I appreciate that." Hermione's gasp was ignored. "Don't think that that excuses the attitude you're displaying without knowing the first thing that you're talking about, though, Ron.

"One last thing you may want to think about. You don't want to do anything rash, here. You're going to lose any fight you start. Very painfully."

Ron's jaw clenched a few times as he slowly stood up. "I'm leaving. Hermione, Ginny, come on."

Harry spoke quietly in a vain attempt to remove the sting from his words, "They are not yours to order around, Ron. You need to realize that. Ginny is welcome to stay, and I think Hermione and I have a few things to discuss."

Looking ready to explode, Ron spun around and left.

Harry's head fell forward onto the table. "That couldn't have gone worse."

"Yes, it could," Ginny said.

"You could have been forced to send him to the hospital," Tonks agreed.

Harry just sighed.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said quietly.

"For what?" Harry asked without moving his head.

"For not telling you we are dating and for telling the headmaster about your trip to Gringotts."

Harry looked up at her. "Anything else?"

"What else is there for me to be sorry about?" she asked as if it were a ridiculous question.

"If you don't know, then I don't see the point in explaining it to you," Harry answered, fed up with the whole situation.

Hermione colored. "That is unfair, Harry. How can I apologize for something if you've never told me what you think I did wrong?"

"Ah, but I did. After your howler, what did I reply with?"

"Next time, listen instead of just hear."

"Exactly. You yelled at me for sending a howler to you. You didn't listen to what it actually said, did you? You were just mad at what you saw as my attempt to embarrass you, weren't you?"

Curiosity and surprise momentarily overcoming her mounting anger, she simply nodded.

"I admit that sending that howler to you was over the top, but I was angry at what I saw as another person attempting to control me."

"I never tried to control you," Hermione objected.

"You did, Hermione. Among other things, you told me to get professional counseling. You didn't ask me to do it, you TOLD me. It may be a minor distinction to you, but that is the core of the problem. You, Mrs. Weasley, the whole bloody wizarding world, and especially Dumbledore don't ask me to do anything. You all keep TELLING me what to do, like I'm some idiot child who doesn't know anything. Yet you all expect me to save you from the big, bad, dark wizard. Interesting dichotomy, don't you think?"

Harry sighed. "Hermione, you're one of my oldest and dearest friends. I don't want to lose that. I have precious few true friends. But you need to think about what I just said before we talk again."

Harry stood from the table and offered his hand to Ginny as Tonks stood and tucked her hand into his other elbow. "I'm going to visit your brothers. Care to come along?"

Ginny's eyes went from Tonks to Harry's offered hand to Hermione's stunned expression. "Thank you for the offer, Harry, but not this time. I'll send you an owl after school starts, okay?"

Harry nodded. "Have a good year." He grinned. "Tell me how the house points are going, okay?"

Ginny looked at him curiously. "What do you know?"

Harry tried to look innocent. "Me? I don't know anything. See ya."

"Hear ye, hear ye."

Harry looked at Fred incredulously as the Weasley pounded a rubber chicken on the table as if it were a hammer. "What in the name of Merlin do you think you're doing?"

"Saw it on the muggle telly. I thought it would be a good way to start our meeting."

"You're certifiable; you do know that?"

"Why, Harry, that was the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

A strange sound - half snort and half laugh - came from Tonks.

Fred smiled winningly at her.

"Not to change the subject, but I'm going to change the subject. You two wanted to see me about something?"

George nodded and turned to the shelf. "I solemnly swear to tell the whole truth," he said while tapping one of the large books with his wand. After pulling it down and glancing at the cover, he handed the book to Harry.

The first page was an accounting summary sheet, detailing current debts and assets. Harry glanced over it before paying a lot more attention to the number at the bottom of the page.

"As you can see, we're doing pretty well for ourselves. As the board of directors, we need to decide what direction to go."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. I don't know anything about business, guys. Besides which, I GAVE that money to you. I didn't expect a partnership for it."

"Too bad. You legally and officially own one third of the business."

"If you're a partner, you really should learn, Harry," Kingsley mentioned, pulling the invisibility cloak off of his head.

Neither twin even flinched.

Harry sighed, remembering all the businesses he'd inherited stock in. "You're probably right. I know you two could teach me," he smiled briefly at the twins, who preened, "but you're busy running this place."

"Mum could probably teach you," Tonks offered.

Harry stared at her in surprise.

Tonks shrugged. "Before she was disinherited, she was taught all the ins and outs of business. Not all pureblood families teach their daughters very well, but the Blacks certainly did."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "I think I would like that."

Kingsley grinned in a truly disturbing manner. "You're going to ask the potential mother-in-law for lessons?"

Harry paled.

Fred and George laughed at his expression. "I didn't realize you two were dating," one of them observed.

"Neither did your mother, Ron, or Hermione. Or Ginny, for that matter. If you see them, could you ask them to keep it quiet?" Tonks requested.

"They're unlikely to listen to us," Harry agreed. "After all, I'm a child who doesn't even know what's best for himself."

"And I'm the older harlot corrupting his young, impressionable mind."

"For what it's worth, you certainly have made an impression on my mind."

"Sweet Merlin, they're sappy," Fred groaned.

"Are they always this bad?" George demanded of Kingsley.

"Usually they're much worse," Kingsley deadpanned.

"Aw, Shack, I didn't know you cared," Tonks said.

Fred shuddered theatrically. "We'll warn them to lay off of our financial investor, then. If only to get this sickeningly sweet scene to end."

"Thank you," Harry sincerely said to the twins.

They nodded. "Now, as you can see, we have a fair amount of capital available. You're entitled to take your dividends whenever you want, but there are several other things we can do instead. We could open another store, we could try to buy out Zonko's or maybe Gambol and Japes, we could diversify, we could expand our store space here, or we could add production capacity by hiring more workers."

Harry frowned. "I don't need the cash, so me taking my money out - which I still disagree that I deserve, by the way - won't be happening. Do you guys own this place, or are you renting it?"

"Renting from Gringotts."

Harry nodded. "We can talk about me giving you a new place down Knockturn Alley later. If you have the backlog, expanding your production makes sense. If not, removing competition would seem the best move to me. You also get their patents, if any, when you buy them, don't you?"

Fred, George, and Tonks stared at him.

Kingsley chuckled. "You seem to have some of the business instincts down right."

"What was that about Knockturn Alley?" Fred requested.

"Didn't I tell you? It's privileged information, but it seems that I inherited all of Knockturn Alley from Sirius."

Fred and George glanced at each other for only a moment before they both fell to their knees in front of Harry. "We're not worthy!"

Tonks laughed. "I saw that one. You have a telly back in your apartment, don't you?"

Climbing back into their chairs, they nodded happily. "Yep, sure do."

"Getting back to the topic at hand," Harry drawled out, "what was that you were saying about diversifying?"

The twins immediately got serious again. As serious as they ever got, at any rate. "We've had some ideas that we think could be useful to people like the Order and aurors. Extendible Ears are like that, but that's only the beginning. A drop of veritaserum in a sweet, invisibility dust, a scrying stone that looks like a marble, all sorts of things. We only need the financing to develop them."

Harry nodded. "With this war heating up, that sounds like something that could be useful." He propped his chin in a fist. "What do you have in mind?"

"Those two are downright scary," Tonks, again in the Ingrid disguise, said later.

"You only had three years at Hogwarts with them, didn't you? Trust me, they've gotten worse as they grew older. More brilliant and directed, but no less crazy."

Harry held the door for Tonks and together they entered Ollivander's.

"Thank you for the courtesy, but as your bodyguard, I should hold it for you, not the other way around."

"Would 'Innie' hold it for me, or the other way around?" Harry asked with a grin.

Tonks just nodded in acknowledgment and took station near the door.

"Mr. Potter," Mr. Ollivander said as he entered the room.

"Mr. Ollivander. How are you today, sir?"

"Very well, thank you. You are here for your special project, I presume?" he asked, his unblinking eyes fixed on Harry.

Harry nodded and pulled out the nearly dozen little vials he had used to collect the various hairs.

Ollivander hummed happily as he looked over the hairs, raising an eyebrow at a few of them. "Quite a variety you have here, Mr. Potter. Metamorphmagus, lycanthrope, animagus, both parents, half-giant. House-elf and phoenix? Great Merlin, is this from a centaur? My, my, Mr. Potter, you have the most unusual range of friends." He clearly wasn't expecting any kind of answer because he was already at work. Waving a wand over the lot of them, his eyes lit up when all of the items began glowing. Now humming happily, he pulled out the armband that Harry had commissioned and began a series of spells on it and the hairs.

After five minutes with little visible progress, Harry asked, "Is everything okay, Mr. Ollivander?"

"Oh, heavens yes, Mr. Potter. Everything is going quite well." He looked up. "I'm terribly sorry for not saying something earlier. I must commend you on your choices of donors. Very good choices, all of them. I daresay this will be a very powerful focus when I am done with it. You're welcome to stay and watch, but I suspect it will be dreadfully dull to watch. If you prefer, you could simply return in an hour."

Harry nodded, already bored with watching what was an incomprehensible process to him. "Thank you again, sir. We'll be back."

Harry headed back out and toward Gringotts. "While I'm talking with the goblins, you may want to get your new armor, Tonks."

"What new armor?"

Harry frowned at her. "Your body armor was damaged in the fight at Shack's. I ordered a new set for you a couple days later."

Tonks sighed. "It still works, Harry. You didn't need to get me a new set."

"Yes, I did. After one hit, they're not as effective ever again, remember?"

"They only lose fifteen percent of their effectiveness."

"And if that fifteen percent can save your life, I'd cheerfully spend much more than a new set costs."

"Accept that your boyfriend is filthy rich, Dora," Shack's disembodied voice said.

She grimaced in his general direction. "I will have you know that he is not filthy in any sense of the word."

"What, you helped wash his back this morning?"

Harry flushed, and Tonks grinned.

"Oh, dear Merlin," Shack groaned.

"NO!" Harry objected. "She did NOT join me in the shower."

"Not for lack of trying," Tonks grumbled, just loudly enough for Shack and Harry to hear.

Harry groaned, and Shack laughed. "Careful, Harry. She's a very tenacious witch."

"Don't I know it. Anyway, you have armor waiting on you, Tonks. Why don't you get it and join me at Gringotts after that?"

"Take care of him, Shack. I want another shot at scrubbing his back." Without waiting for a response, she broke off from Harry and headed toward Abernathy's Armourers.

"Her teasing is going to be the death of me at this rate," Harry moaned without rancor.

Shack held his tongue on his opinion on whether or not she actually was teasing. Instead, he said, "Helluva way to go, though."

"You're not helping."

"Oh, you wanted me to try to talk the two of you out of something?"

"Well . . ."

"You're an adult; she's an adult. Where's the problem?"

"I'm her Patriarch."

"So? You saw the Malfoy boy's reaction to that. None of the purebloods will care. Taking a mistress from within the family was common practice if they aren't too closely related."

"Mistress? That makes it sound so . . . dirty."

"You have to remember that this isn't the muggle world, Harry. Nobody will even blink at a wizard in your position having a mistress, especially one as young and good-looking as Dora."

Harry growled. "She's not some bloody trophy for me to show off."

"Don't get your boxers in a wad, Harry. We know that. I'm just telling you what the rest of the wizarding world will view it as."

"What if I marry her instead?"

Shack was silent as they entered the Gringotts building. In the quiet lobby, he removed the invisibility cloak without breaking stride. There was only one human in the room, and she had her back turned. "Are you serious?" he finally asked as Harry got in line.

"Not right now, but it's something that's been on my mind."

"Brave man," Shack quietly said. "Just think about it before you do something permanent, okay? You need to think politically as well as personally, now."

Harry turned to glare at him.

Shack raised a hand. "I know you don't like to think about it, but you need to. That's all I'm saying."

Harry sighed. "Yeah. You're right. Sorry."

No problem," Shack said as the witch in line ahead of them moved out of the way.

"I'd like to speak with Snargtooth, please," Harry said to the goblin sitting at the desk.

The Gringotts employee nodded immediately. "Yes, Lord-Baron. Please follow me." He got down from his stool, signaled for a replacement, and led Harry and Shack down a hallway. "If I may, Lord-Baron, in the future you're welcome to go directly to Snargtooth's office without waiting in line."

Harry grinned. "And incidentally not bother you in the lobby? Thanks, I'll remember that."

The goblin smiled. Without a word, he stopped and rapped sharply on the door that had a plaque announcing it as Snargtooth's office and opened it. Shack slipped in and waved Harry forward moments later.

Before entering, Harry nodded to their guide. "Thank you for escorting me."

The goblin bowed back and left silently.

Harry entered the office and closed the door behind himself. Once Harry was seated, the goblin said, "Lord-Baron, welcome to Gringotts. How may I serve you this day?"

"Several things. Narcissa Malfoy will be accepting Sirius's offer. I understand that you needed to know."

Snargtooth nodded thoughtfully. "In that case, may I suggest we owl Lady Malfoy and Mr. Wordsmith and get it accomplished as rapidly as possible? There are certain elements that would . . . frown heavily upon her actions. Her physical safety would be better served if she were to leave Malfoy Manor immediately."

Harry frowned. "You're right. How quickly can you make the arrangements?"

Snargtooth pressed a long finger to a crystal globe that rested on his desk. He uttered a long string of what Harry assumed was Gobbledegook. He looked up again and said, "Urgent, express owls will be going out within two minutes. Unless they have something pressing, they will likely both be here within a half hour."

Harry was impressed.

Snargtooth's smile would have been frightening if he didn't appear honestly amused. "Your next item of business, Lord-Baron?"

"The Black accounts concern me. Based on what I know of the history of the family, the members of that family, and their attitudes, I'm concerned that there is a history to this account that I should be warned of."

Snargtooth cocked his head. "Are you accusing Gringotts of something, Lord-Baron?"

"Not at all," Harry assured the goblin. "I'm more concerned that, for instance, Bellatrix Black-Lestrange has withdrawn monies or items for her Death Eater activities."

Snargtooth nodded. "Ah, I see your concern. We here at Gringotts do not concern ourselves with wizarding politics to any great extent. As long as the individual has legal access to the account, we do not limit what they can do with it."

Harry nodded. "From a business point of view, that is a perfectly reasonable thing for you to do. However, I have concerns over the history of the account. Therefore, may I have the transaction history for, oh, the last two and a half years?"

Snargtooth again pressed a finger to the crystal on his desk and spoke. He leaned back in his chair a few seconds later. "The records will be available momentarily."

"Thank you. I'd like to visit the Potter vaults as well, so might I do that while we're waiting on the records and Mrs. Malfoy and Mr. Wordsmith?"

Before Snargtooth could answer, the door opened and a younger goblin entered the room and placed a stack of parchment onto Snargtooth's desk. The elder goblin pushed the records across toward Harry with an amused expression. "Here are the records you requested, Lord-Baron. Griphook will escort you to the Potter vaults. I suspect Lady Malfoy and Mr. Wordsmith will be here when you return."

Shrinking the papers and tucking them into a pocket, Harry said, "Nymphadora Tonks will be here soon, looking for me. She will be welcome to sit in on the meeting later, so would it be possible to have her here as well?"

"Certainly."

Harry turned. "It's good to see you again, Griphook."

Both goblins started slightly and shared a glance. "You as well, Lord-Baron," the younger goblin answered. "This way, please."

A long ride later, Harry and Shack began packing every book they could find into the trunk they'd brought along for the occasion. "I LOVE those cart rides!" Harry enthused.

Kingsley's normally dark skin was a few shades off. "Speak for yourself."

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Back at ground level, Griphook escorted them to Snargtooth's office. Entering, Harry found more people there than he was expecting. Tonks was suspiciously watching her mother talking with Narcissa. Mr. Wordsmith and Snargtooth watched all three of them in amusement. Everyone looked up at Harry's entrance.

"Erm, hi," Harry said.

Narcissa stood first and moved toward Harry. "Lord-Baron, thank you for what you're doing for me." Taking both hands in hers, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Harry heard Tonks growl. He looked over at her in amusement. "Easy, Nim."

Narcissa and Andromeda glanced at each other. Narcissa turned back to Harry, and Andromeda turned to her daughter. "Nim?" the sisters chorused, mouths twitching into smiles.

Harry groaned.

"Oh, bloody hell," Tonks muttered.

"Is there something I should be told about, dear?" Andromeda asked.

Harry sighed. "Could someone seal the room, please?"

Between Snargtooth pressing a series of points on his desk and Max Wordsmith and Kingsley Shacklebolt throwing privacy and sealing spells around, the room took all of five seconds before it was more private than Cornelius Fudge's office loo. Everyone except Tonks looked at Harry expectantly. She appeared to be amused at everyone's actions.

"Thank you," Harry dryly said. He sighed again before turning to Andromeda Tonks and unconsciously straightening his shoulders. "Nim and I are seeing each other romantically, if that's what you're asking."

Andromeda let loose a squeal more appropriate to her daughter than a woman of her age and buried Tonks in a hug.

Narcissa smiled at Harry. "Despite my . . . estrangement from them, I feel you've made an excellent choice, Lord-Baron."

"Please call me Harry, Lady Malfoy."

"Ms. Black, and call me Cissy. Despite the history I know you share with both my son and soon to be ex-husband, I do hope that we can be friends or at the least friendly acquaintances."

Harry looked at her in surprise. He recognized that he knew very little about her, but an offer of friendship wasn't something he was expecting. He was only moving forward on the offer of pulling her back into the Black family because that was what Sirius had wanted. "I . . . would like that, I think," Harry finally admitted.

Mr. Wordsmith coughed politely. "There are still a few matters to attend to, Lady Malfoy," he pointed out.

"Of course," she agreed. "Do you have a preference on how I should phrase the anti-dark oath?"

Wordsmith pulled out a parchment for her to read, and then he started gathering the divorce papers together.

"Harry?" Nim's voice pulled him over toward her and her mother. When he was close enough, she pulled him into a hug. "Thank you for giving me an aunt."

Harry smiled sadly. "I know what family is worth, Nim. I'm just glad that I can help yours." He turned to Andromeda. "I'm afraid that I can't help you reclaim your remaining sister, Mrs. Tonks, though Draco may or may not come around."

"I thought I told you to call me Andy," the older woman chided him gently. "I'm hopeful that my nephew will choose the right path. Don't fret over Bella. The girl I grew up with is long gone. What's left in her place is . . . just another Death Eater." She shook her head and smiled at her daughter. "I'm overjoyed to hear about you and Nymphadora."

"Tonks. Please call me Tonks," Nim muttered in a resigned tone.

"Of course, Nymphadora," Andy humored her.

Tonks just sighed.

Harry laughed at the pair. "Say," he said to Andy, "not that I don't want you here, but why are you here?"

"I invited her," Tonks said. "When Snargtooth mentioned Aunt Cissy was coming, I wanted Mum here to welcome her sister back into the family. I hope it's okay that I invited her."

"That's fine," Harry assured her. Remembering something Tonks had said earlier in the day, he asked Andy, "Ma'am?"

She gave him a pointed glare.

"Andy," Harry corrected himself. When she smiled and nodded, he continued, "Nim mentioned that you had some business training? Do you think you could help me out with that? I have inherited two large estates, and I've no idea how to manage them."

Andy's eyes lit up. "I would be happy to help you, Harry. Cissy was the family genius on the social scene of the pureblood families, though."

"And Andy was better on the administrative side of things," Cissy said without looking up. Andy smiled at her sister and didn't disagree.

"Andy could probably help you go through the account information you already have," Shack mentioned to Harry.

Andy and Tonks looked curiously at Harry, so he explained, "At my request, Gringotts gave me the transaction history on the Black family account for the past two and a half years." Harry handed the papers to Andy, and she started to shuffle through them.

Cissy looked over. "Since the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

Harry nodded. "I'm hoping to go through it and make sure nothing questionable went on since then. I'm mostly concerned with someone who had access, Bellatrix for instance, withdrawing money for Voldemort and that bunch."

"And me?" Cissy quietly asked.

Harry met her eyes. "Forgive me, but yes. I do not know you, Cissy. Until this morning, you were married to Voldemort's head Death Eater and the mother of my biggest irritant at Hogwarts. I have no reason to trust you."

She nodded. "Good. Until you know me, you shouldn't trust me. A healthy Slytherin attitude."

Harry smiled ironically. "Alistair nearly put me in Slytherin. Said I'd do very well there." At the confused expressions of most of the room, he explained, "The Sorting Hat spoke with me at my sorting."

"You're on a first name basis with the Hogwarts Sorting Hat?" Wordsmith asked slowly.

Harry just shrugged. "My time at Hogwarts was . . . interesting."

He shook his head and changed the subject. "So you were a Slytherin, Cissy?"

She shook her head, much to his surprise. "Ravenclaw. Lucius and of course Draco are Slytherin, but I wasn't. Much to my family's disappointment." She turned back to Wordsmith.

Harry glanced over at Andy. "Your family is confusing."

Tonks barked out a laugh. "YOUR family, my Patriarch," she teased before kissing him quickly.

"By the by," Cissy said without looking up, "do you intend to take Nymphadora as Lady Black or just as a mistress?"

"Why does everyone assume I want a mistress?" Harry asked the ceiling. "For the moment, we're simply dating," he answered the question.

Cissy looked over at him. "That answer, while honest, is politically naïve, Lord-Baron. You are politically powerful. Whom you choose as your wife matters a great deal in magical England."

He just looked at her. "Are you suggesting, Lady Malfoy, that I should wed for political reasons rather than love?"

She flushed before nodding. "My apologies. You're right, of course, Harry. Forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive. You were just trying to point something out to me. Andy was right; you're better at this pureblood social scene than I can ever hope to be. Would you consent to giving me some pointers?"

She slowly smiled. "Oh, the irony. Lord-Baron Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, asking the ex-wife of Lucius Malfoy for social guidance."

Harry's face darkened. "If you don't want to help me -"

She raised a hand. "No, My Lord, that wasn't my intention at all. I was just recognizing the irony of the situation. I would be honored and overjoyed to help you out. In fact, you will probably need someone to deal with your social correspondence soon. I'm sure you've received a great deal of such posts that requires responses."

Harry looked momentarily confused. "No . . ." he said slowly.

Cissy frowned. "As the Black Patriarch, you should have received at least three invitations or announcements in the past month. I know exactly what they were because I received them for Lucius. The Ministry's Equinox Ball, the eldest Greengrass daughter's thirtieth birthday party, and the Confederation's September meeting announcement."

Wordsmith turned to Harry. "Wherever you're living, is it unreachable by normal owl post?"

Harry, who'd recently redone all the wards over Gryffindor Keep, knew exactly what wards were there now as well as the ones he'd replaced. He nodded. "For the most part, yes. At least in the way you're meaning, I think. Three specific owls are unaffected, but only the Daily Prophet deliveries and ministry owls were allowed through the ward. At least until a few days ago, anyway."

Cissy looked impressed. "That is some powerful and ancient magic."

Tonks muttered something that Harry chose to ignore.

Wordsmith said, "If you're normally unreachable, the owls addressed to Baron Black would have gone to the ancestral Black home."

"Which is under the Fidelius Charm," Harry said.

This wasn't a real surprise to the solicitor. "In THAT case, the accumulated mail is piling up in the Ministry Department of Owl Post. Just announce yourself there, and they'll hand it all to you for a modest storage fee."

Harry frowned. "I can do that, but there has to be a better way of handling this."

"Ask them to re-direct the drop off point. There is a post drop station in Hogsmeade and another in Diagon Alley that specialize in doing just that."

Harry nodded and turned to Shackbolt. "Another place for us to stop today."

Shack shrugged. "If you're willing, I can do that in your name. I'll just need the Black signet ring."

"Really?"

Shack chuckled. "The rings are magical, Harry. If I'm freely carrying yours, it's universally recognized that I'm acting on your behalf."

Harry thought that one through for a moment. "Not that I don't trust YOU, Shack, but what happens if the holder starts acting irresponsibly or loses the ring?"

"They're tied to you. You can summon them back to you with a thought."

With a nod, Harry pulled the Potter ring off of his hand and handed it over. He also fished the Black ring out of his pocket and handed that one to Shackbolt as well. "Thanks, Shack."

He nodded. "If you're not here, I'll just meet you back at the Keep?"

At Harry's agreement, he left.

"You've surrounded yourself with loyal retainers, it seems."

Harry looked at Cissy coolly. "Kingsley is my friend, my teacher, and THEN my employee. He is NOT a lackey."

Cissy blinked once. "Please forgive me, Lord-Baron. I'm . . . not used to your ways."

"Our Harry's one of a kind," Tonks said with a forced cheerfulness. It was clear that she was trying to lighten the mood.

Harry let her. He gave a half-grin. "Well, I'm apparently the Patriarch of a family that contains a metamorph, a Ravenclaw out of a family of historical Slytherins, and the previous Patriarch was a wrongfully imprisoned animagus. If I'm one of a kind, Nim, that just means I'm fitting in with the rest of the Blacks."

"Did he just accuse us of being a family of freaks?" Andy asked Cissy.

"I think he did."

Their smiles took the sting from their words.

Harry, however, was wincing anyway. "I was trying to make a small joke," he said quietly. "I'm sorry if it was in poor taste. I would appreciate it if nobody EVER uses the word 'freak' when it comes to me, okay?"

Nim wrapped her arms around Harry from the side. "Hey, if anyone understands how much that word hurts, it would be me." She leaned in to rest her forehead on his temple and whispered into his ear, "We'll talk later, okay? Right now, you need to sit up and be all Patriarchal."

Harry took a deep breath, nodded, and straightened himself up again.

Andy looked horrified at the reaction her words had caused. "Baron Black, please accept my apologies for -"

Harry waved it off. "Don't worry about it, Andy. There is a lot of personal history that the rest of us don't know, so I expect this won't be the first time one of us has bruised feelings.

"Now, what have you found in the account transactions?"

Andy took the change of subject with a nod. "Nothing out of the ordinary is in here. Not much activity, just some housekeeping withdrawals, until the last couple months. Then it was all Mr. Wordsmith's fees and you taking items out, Harry."

Harry nodded and turned to Snargtooth, who had been watching everything silently. "Who currently has access to the Black vault?"

"Only you, Lord-Baron, or those who are demonstrably working on your behalf. Mr. Shackbolt with the signet ring or your house-elves, for instance."

Cissy signed a parchment with a flourish and laid the quill down. "There," she stated in satisfaction.

Harry saw a pale blue burst of light radiate out from the parchment.

"Congratulations, Ms. Black," Wordsmith said, shuffling the parchment into a stack.

"Thank you, Mr. Wordsmith." She pulled a different parchment toward her and drew her wand. Reading aloud from the parchment, she said, "I, Narcissa Aludra Black, do hereby swear to not knowingly aid in any way, shape, or form any evil wizards or their followers; nor will I perform any evil acts from this day forward. By my magic and life, I so swear." The pulse of violet light was much brighter this time.

She put her wand back away and took a breath. "That is that."

"Indeed," Wordsmith agreed. He turned to Snargtooth. "Are there any issues with opening a private vault for Ms. Black and transferring the galleons she now qualifies for?"

Snargtooth shook his head. He leaned forward and again spoke to the communications crystal on his desk. When he was finished, he said, "The new key shall be available to you shortly, Ms. Black."

Cissy nodded to the goblin and turned to Harry. "Do you have any orders for me, Lord-Baron?"

"What?"

She almost smiled. "I am no longer under the protection and control of the Malfoy family. By rights, you can give me instructions for family business."

Harry's face closed down. "I didn't do this to get another retainer, as you phrased it."

"That's not what she means, Harry," Andy interjected. "She is free, make no mistake about that. By the way she phrased it, she's looking for something to do. It was just a very formal way of doing it."

Cissy nodded. "My apologies. Just a little joke. As you can probably guess, Lucius didn't give me a great deal of freedom, so I have nothing taking up my time. I could, for instance, sort through your Black family post."

Harry tilted his head and a ghost of a smile formed. "Are you asking to be my social secretary?"

Tonks started coughing violently. Snargtooth's smile widened a notch.

"I suppose that I am, aren't I?" Cissy admitted after a moment's thought. She watched in amusement as her niece regained control of herself. "Yes, it is a bit beneath my previous . . . social station. However, this is the only thing I know how to do and that I enjoyed during the entire time I was married to Lucius. Besides, I need something to fill my days until I find something else to do."

"You're a lot less formal than I would've expected," Harry observed.

She laughed before sobering quickly. "The wife of Lucius Malfoy was expected to exhibit a certain level of decorum in public. He ruthlessly enforced that. Nothing could happen that might make him look bad."

Harry snorted. "Except that whole backing a Dark Lord thing."

"Indeed. How about this? I will act as your social secretary, as you call it, for two months without payment. It will take at least that long before we know enough about each other to determine if we want it to be a permanent arrangement."

Harry nodded slowly. "Don't accept or reject any invitations until you've spoken with me."

"Very well. At least for the moment, I'll likely be staying at the Leaky Cauldron. How -"

"No, you'll be staying with us," Andy corrected her. She flicked a glance at Nim. "As my daughter has . . . other sleeping arrangements, you're welcome to stay in her room after she clears it out."

Nim groaned. "What, precisely, are you implying, Mother?"

Nothing at all, dear. Is there anything about your sleeping arrangements that I should be told?"

Tonks mumbled, "Why do I even bother? I'm never going to win."

Cissy fought the expression of amusement off of her face. "Thank you, Andy, I accept." She turned back to Harry.

Before she could say a word, however, the door opened and Griphook entered, placed a key in front of Cissy, and departed. While the door had been open, Shack also entered the room.

"Here's your mail, Harry, for both families." The former auror dropped a small pouch on the table and handed Harry the two rings. "Future post has also been redirected to the owl station here in Diagon Alley."

Harry placed one ring back on his hand and put the other in his pocket. He then pushed the pouch toward Cissy. "Any personal stuff, please don't open. Anything else is all yours."

She nodded. "How shall I contact you?"

Shacklebolt's eyebrow was riding high. "I would strongly discourage you from giving that information out."

"She just became my social secretary, Shack."

"More importantly, she just accepted you as her Patriarch," Wordsmith put in. "Add to that the oath she swore. It would be in her best interest to help you and impossible to hurt you in any significant way."

Harry gnawed on his bottom lip. "My apologies, Cissy, but that isn't information you need right now." He sighed. "I'm sorry, but even Andy doesn't know where we live."

"Ah, so Nymphadora IS living with you, then?" Andy asked. Harry appeared to ignore her words, but his slight blush was all the reward she needed.

Harry, grateful for Cissy's apparent acceptance of the information restrictions he was placing on her, continued, "One of us could apparate to Andy's place every other day or so. Would that work?"

Cissy frowned. "In the short run, yes. I really should be living in your household, however."

Harry briefly entertained a daydream of telling Draco that his mother had asked to move in with Harry. He shook off the thought and responded, "Perhaps eventually, but for the moment I have to think about my physical security. Even if I trusted you with it, I can't expect you not to talk with your son, and until I have some assurances about him . . ."

"Very well." She didn't seem particularly upset by Harry's answer. "Communication crystals like that one," she pointed to the one on Snargtooth's desk, "are also possible."

"We could probably enchant something like that easily enough," Tonks thought aloud.

"Let's do that, then. Cissy, we'll get something to you within a few days, okay?"

She nodded.

Harry turned to Wordsmith. "Did you send a copy of the revised lease agreement to Madam Bones?"

"What's this?" Andy asked. Cissy simply smirked.

"Baron Black owns all the land of Knockturn Alley," Wordsmith answered after Harry's nod. "He asked me to re-write the lease contracts for the shop owners for when they expire."

"If she's going to be helping me with the business end of this, she should probably know what it says."

Andy's eyes were wider than normal. She took a deep breath. "Harry, you really do need a business manager, don't you?"

Harry looked at her but tilted his head toward Snargtooth. "Isn't that what Snargtooth is?"

"Not precisely," Snargtooth answered. "I'm simply the Gringotts representative to your accounts. I handle the banking paperwork but nothing else."

Harry groaned.

"You've had me doing some of your business dealings already, Harry," Wordsmith mentioned. "While I'm perfectly capable of doing it, frankly I'm over-qualified and over-priced to do such things."

"You think I need a business manager, too?"

Wordsmith shrugged and nodded.

Harry sighed. "Andy, do you want a job?"

Historically, the Patriarch has kept all the business dealings in his own hands," she said.

Harry grinned. "I'm not your typical Black Patriarch."

The women made rude noises, and Shack laughed. "There's an understatement if I ever heard one," Kingsley said.

Andy pulled out her wand and held it up. "I, Andromeda Polaris Black-Tonks, do hereby swear to act honorably, confidentially, and in the best interests of, and under the direction of, Baron Black in any business dealings I do on his behalf. On my magic I so swear." Another pulse of violet light came at the end of her words.

"I'll take that as meaning you want the job," Harry said dryly.

"Yes," Andy acknowledged. "We'll discuss payment later."

"Joy. Something for me to look forward to."

Most of the people in the room laughed.

"What is it about Blacks and astronomical names, anyway?" Harry asked.

Cissy and Andy shrugged. "That's just the way it's been for generations."

Shaking his head over the vagaries of the family he just inherited, Harry turned to Wordsmith and Snargtooth. "Okay, I suppose that any business dealings should go through Andy, then. She'll need access to the accounts. I'm still available if either of you need me, however."

Both solicitor and goblin nodded. Snargtooth filled out a form rapidly and slid it across for Harry and Andy to sign. He then handed two keys, smaller than the family vault keys but similar in appearance, to her.

Harry looked around the room. "Anything else?"

"Isn't that enough?" Shack asked in amusement. "You just brought the Potter fortune back into an active status, and you've totally restructured the Black family over the past twenty minutes."

"What can I say? I was bored." Harry tried for a flippant answer. "Seriously, if any one of you, who now seem to be almost all of my major advisors, have any suggestions, please say something. I may be a Lord-Baron, The Boy Who Bloody Lived, and all that rot, but I'm also an under-educated and scared sixteen year old."

"For what it's worth, I think you're doing marvelously," Shack offered.

Tonks nodded agreement when Harry looked at her. Looking around the room, Harry received encouraging smiles and nods from everyone except the goblin. Snargtooth held a blank expression.

"What do you think, Snargtooth?" Harry asked, honestly curious about what he was thinking.

"I think," the goblin answered slowly, "that I'm watching the beginnings of potentially the most powerful wizarding family in the world."

"Talk with Remus about the communications crystals," Harry suggested to Tonks.

"Remus? Why him?" she asked.

"My dad and Sirius used to have a pair of communication mirrors. From what I understand, they made them themselves. Remus probably knows how they did it. Heck, if you can figure it out, you could start marketing the things."

Tonks slowly grinned. "Now there's a thought. I'll talk with him about it, then."

"Did you get your armor replaced?"

"Yep. You can strip search me later for it if you want," she offered.

As he started stammering a reply, she laughed and held the door to Ollivander's open for him.

Harry shook his head, resigned to her teasing. He was tempted to call her bluff but couldn't quite dig up the bravery to actually do it.

"Ah, Mr. Potter. Welcome back. Your item is ready." The storekeeper held out the etched, silvery band to him.

Harry took it and examined the armband. Perhaps an inch and a quarter wide, it had both the Potter and Gryffindor crests etched into it as well as what looked like a grim, a werewolf, a lily, and a stag. The silvery-grey material, Harry knew, was not silver but rather a platinum and mithril alloy. It had also been hugely expensive to commission, a fact that had delighted the jeweler.

"It is a marvelous item, is it not?" Ollivander whispered.

Harry absently nodded his agreement and slipped it over his right wrist and up until it was on his forearm, just below his elbow. The armband resized itself until it fit snugly but wasn't in the least uncomfortable. With his robe or sweater sleeves down, it was completely covered.

"Please try it," Ollivander invited.

Harry thought for a moment then held his hand up and said, "*Lumos globus* ."

Normally, the Light Globe Charm produced a small ball of light in front of the caster's wand. It hovered in place and lasted perhaps an hour. It was the precursor to the Everlasting Torch Charm. Harry had never been able to get the charm to work wandlessly, which is the reason he picked that particular spell.

Two balls of light burst into existence over Harry's hand. Though they were small, each one was putting out enough light to put a muggle torch to shame.

Ollivander shielded his eyes. "Oh, very good, Mr. Potter! I'm so glad it works so well for you."

"*Finite* ." Harry blinked at the purple splotches in front of his eyes. "Yes, it does seem to work, doesn't it?"

He thought about it for a moment and then pulled out his wand. "*Lumos globus* ." One normal-looking ball of light appeared two inches in front of his extended wand.

Harry frowned at it. He turned a confused look onto Ollivander.

The storekeeper just chuckled. "As I'm sure your . . . ancestor has been trying to teach you, intent is everything in spell casting. As you had your wand in hand, only that focus was being used."

"So what would happen if I intended to use both at the same time?"

Ollivander immediately raised a hand. "Please do not do that, Mr. Potter. The last time such a thing was attempted, I was forced to replace your grandfather's wand and most of my wall."

Harry laughed and put his wand away. He then wordlessly cancelled the ball of light that was floating in front of him. "Thank you for your time, sir. What do I owe you?"

Ollivander waved a hand in denial. "As I said before, nothing. It was an honor and a joy to craft such a marvelous item. That is all the payment I require."

Harry nodded. "In that case, sir, I thank you. If there is anything I can ever do for you, please -" He abruptly stopped as a thought came to him. "Tell me, sir, could a wand be produced from a basilisk fang?"

Ollivander raised an eyebrow before he slowly nodded. "Yes it could. A most powerful wand could indeed be produced. However, I would categorically refuse to craft such a thing for the wand would only be good for the dark arts." He tilted his head to the side. "If you have such a fang, Mr. Potter, I implore you to keep it away from any dark wizards."

"Very well, sir. As I was saying, if there is anything you ever require of me, please do not hesitate to ask."

"Have a good day, Lord Gryffindor."

Scion of Gryffindor 23 - Sep 1, pt 1

"I should be boarding the Hogwarts Express right about now."

Remus lowered his paper and gave Harry a confused look. "It's 10:59. It leaves the station in one minute, Harry. Shouldn't you have been onboard already if you were going?"

Harry smiled sadly. "I usually spend the end of the summer at the Weasley's. They always, ALWAYS run late getting to King's Cross. But we - I mean, they always manage to make it on time."

"It's okay to miss them, you know."

"Yeah." He sighed and went on in what appeared to be a change of topic, but Remus knew that it really wasn't. "I didn't like saying what I did to Ron and Mrs. Weasley."

"Wasn't it true?"

Harry nodded.

"Then I don't see a problem."

"I know it had to be said. I just wish it hadn't been me who had to say it."

"You're an adult, Harry. Sometimes we have to do things we don't enjoy."

"Yeah. Doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

"There are some good points to being an adult, though," Nim said as she entered the room. She walked over and kissed Harry. "That for instance."

Harry gave her a goofy grin.

Remus rolled his eyes. "Merlin, you two are sappy."

"Gred and Forge mentioned that yesterday, I think."

Remus just shook his head and turned back to his paper. "Good article on the Malfoys in here."

"What's it say?"

"The thrust of the article is her divorce of him. It also repeats the current charges against Lucius. Draco isn't mentioned at all."

Nim nodded. "Well, he has until Christmas to say something. Assuming the Head Deezer doesn't, do something to him before then."

"Head Deezer? Wouldn't that be Lucius and not Voldemort?"

Tonks shrugged. "Head Deezer, Moldywart, Dark Tosser. Whatever you want to call him."

Remus choked on his tea. "WHAT? Where'd you get those names?"

"I've learned that the aurors have a very twisted sense of humor," Harry put in.

"She would have to be pretty twisted to date you," Remus said with a teasing grin.

"There's twisted and then there's twisted," Harry said. Feeling unaccountably brave, he said, "As far as my girlfriend goes, the only twisted I'm interested in seeing is a few pretzel shapes." Harry stood and left after a quick kiss on Nim's cheek.

Remus watched him go with a confused expression. "I don't get it." He turned to Dora.

She was blushing, which was the first time he'd ever seen her do that. "Um . . . yes, well . . . it goes back to our discussion the other night. I was teasing him about some of the things I learned when I read Godric's copy of the Kama Sutra . . ." She trailed off, head lowered in embarrassment.

Remus was laughing so hard he couldn't breath. "Oh, he's finally teased you back, Dora."

"Who said I was teasing?" she muttered so softly that Remus wasn't sure she'd even said it.

In a louder voice, she went on, "So, Harry recommended I talk to you about a pair of mirrors James Potter and Sirius had? He thinks that between you and me, we can create something similar to use to communicate with Mum and Aunt Cissy."

Calming himself, Remus nodded. "Lily was the one who did all the research for them, but I think I remember most of what was cast. Now, what did you have in mind?"

Nymphadora Tonks apparated to just outside her parents' house. One second later, Harry Potter appeared beside her. He immediately stumbled and fell into her.

"Hey, you okay?" she asked. "I thought it was floo travel that did that to you, not apparating."

Using her shoulder, Harry pulled himself upright and said, "Apparating is fine. Chasing apparition, on the other hand . . ."

"You followed her?" Cissy asked as she joined the two.

Harry nodded, finally standing under his own power again.

"Impressive," she commented, waving a hand in an inviting gesture back toward the open door.

Entering the door, Tonks nodded and said, "Mum. Dad."

"Nymphadora, how are you?"

Tonks rolled her eyes. "I'm doing fine, Mum. How're you?"

"Quite well, dear. Thank you for asking."

"Hey, Cami," Ted Tonks greeted his daughter, but his attention was on Harry. "Lord-Baron," he greeted Harry stiffly.

"Mr. Tonks," Harry returned respectfully, confusion evident on his face. The man had treated him much better when they met at Sirius's Will reading.

"Ted, be nice to the poor boy," Andy chided her husband.

"That 'poor boy' is dating our daughter and employs all three of you."

That explained the new attitude, Harry realized. "Yes, sir, I am," he agreed politely.

Ted Tonks didn't say anything; he just stood there and stared at Harry. For his part, Harry kept his face composed and looked mildly back. If this man thought he could intimidate him, he was sorely mistaken. After five years of Snape and various meetings with Lucius Malfoy and Voldemort, Ted Tonks simply wasn't frightening enough to be intimidating to The Boy Who Lived.

"Oh, grow up, Ted," Cissy admonished her brother-in-law after a few more silent seconds.

Mr. Tonks relaxed his stance. "Mr. Potter, I suppose I should apologize. You're dating my daughter. I hope you understand that I had to learn whether you're worthy of her."

"Oh, Morgana," Tonks said, face in hands. "I'm twenty-two, and Daddy is STILL trying to intimidate my boyfriends."

Harry half-grinned. "Please don't take this the wrong way, Mr. Tonks, but after Snape in classes; death threats from Lucius Malfoy; facing acromantulas, dementors, and a Hungarian Horntail; and dueling against Voldemort, meeting my girlfriend's parents isn't exactly a terrifying experience for me."

The older man laughed. "I suppose I can't argue that one." He stuck out his hand, which Harry immediately took. "Call me Ted. Just know that if you hurt my daughter or use any of your positions against her or my family . . ."

Harry nodded respectfully at the implied threat, subtly releasing a breath. Honestly, he was more nervous than he'd expected to be. There really was a major difference between physical danger and emotional danger, he reflected.

Frowning suddenly, he turned to Tonks. "Cami?"

She groaned.

Ted laughed. "I gave her that nickname shortly after she started playing with her morphing skill. I caught her trying to change her skin color to match a bookcase in the library. Hence, 'Cami', short for chameleon."

"Thank you so much, Daddy," Nim said dryly as Harry laughed.

"I think it's cute," Harry said, grinning at her.

"You would," Nim grumbled, much to the amusement of the rest of the room.

Not to break up the scene, but I believe we had some business to discuss, Lord-Baron," Cissy observed.

Ted nodded. "That's my cue to leave."

Nim looked to Harry with a question in her eyes.

"Stay or go as you wish," Harry said. "Both of you. You're family, right?"

Both looked tempted, but Nim slowly shook her head. "It's not my place to know my Patriarch's business. Give a shout when you're ready to leave." She quickly left the room, her father following closely behind.

Harry frowned and turned to the two sisters. "Did I just do something wrong?"

They glanced at each other, but it was Andy who answered. "No, Harry, you didn't. Technically, she is correct. What you say to any one of your advisers is not for anyone else's ears. By that token, I should leave, so you and Cissy can discuss your business with her."

Harry stopped her. "Please stay. I'm coming to trust your opinion on a lot of this stuff as well, Andy. Besides, I can't see either of you telling me anything all that confidential today."

"As you wish, Lord-Baron," Cissy formally said. She turned and spoke over her shoulder, "Please follow me to the den, and we shall conduct our business."

Harry followed her and quietly asked Andy, "Is she always this formal?"

"Only in situations where she isn't comfortable."

Following the two sisters into a small but comfortable workroom, Harry pulled what looked like a small, crystal paperweight from his pocket and placed it onto the desk. The sunlight from the window struck it and threw rainbows all around the room.

"Pretty," Andy commented. "Is that our communications crystal?"

Harry nodded. "Tap it with your wand and say, 'Contact,' followed by the name of who you need to talk to. Remus, Kingsley, Nim, and I will all be able to be contacted with it after we finish making the rest of them. A simple Finishing Spell will end the link. When someone is trying to get in touch with you, it'll glow and give off a soft chime. Tap it and say, 'Accept.'"

"When will they all be done?" Andy asked, looking at the crystal curiously.

"Couple days."

"You could market these things, you know," Andy mentioned.

Harry nodded. "I mentioned it to Nim and Remus. You may want to talk with them. They didn't believe me when I suggested it."

"I'll do that, then."

Cissy said, "I believe my discussion will be quicker, so perhaps you'd prefer that before the business?"

Harry nodded again.

"As I mentioned, there were three invitations in your post in addition to the usual piffle."

Harry nearly snorted in amusement at that.

Oblivious, or at least ignoring his reaction, Cissy continued, "First, the Greengrass birthday party. Unless you know the girl in question, you can decline without any problems."

"I know a Daphne Greengrass from school but hardly know anything about her, let alone what I'll assume is her older sister."

Cissy nodded and made a notation. "Second, the International Confederation of Wizards September meeting, which will be the twenty-fourth through the twenty-sixth. The Potter name isn't on any committees presently, so your personal presence isn't required. There are no hugely important votes scheduled, so your personal presence isn't really necessary. However, I would highly recommend you at least send a proxy for your vote. If for no other reason than to let everyone know that you're alive and taking an active interest in the state of the wizarding world."

Harry frowned. Phrased that way, he could hardly ignore it. "Where is it? It moves around, doesn't it?"

"Indeed it does. This session is in Geneva, Switzerland."

"Could I send Remus?"

Andy grinned. "Sending a known werewolf?"

Harry shrugged and grinned back. "It would make quite the statement, wouldn't it?"

Cissy's mouth quirked into a grin. "It would," she agreed, "however, he is not eligible for exactly that reason."

"Damn. What's the requirement?"

She shook her head. "Just a witch or a wizard. No sending your house-elf. If you don't want to go, you could sign your proxy over to any of a number of families."

"I'll think about that one. What's the last invitation you mentioned?"

"The ministry Equinox Ball."

Harry made a face.

Cissy leaned forward and spoke intently. "Lord-Baron, this really IS something you need to attend. This is a very high-profile event. Even if you dislike all the political maneuvering, it is important that you appear at these events. If you do not, you will not even have any passive support in the future. The wealthy and important personages seeing you and recognizing you at this event and others like it will go a long way toward cementing your place among the important and influential wizards of Britain."

Harry still looked rebellious.

Cissy pulled out her trump. "Besides, it's a perfect excuse to take my niece on a date."

Harry's face changed expression. "Ooh, you fight dirty."

Cissy tried not to smile.

"Fine, fine."

Cissy leaned back in her chair again. "Two more things. You want to start thinking about who you want to invite and what event you may want to host." She held up a hand at his returning rebellious look. "I am aware you dislike all the pomp and circumstance. Simply hosting a birthday party and inviting two dozen people will be sufficient, but a Patriarch in your position MUST hold some events if you wish to hold your social position."

"My social position as pureblood society views it, you mean," he said with an edge in his tone.

"Your social position as the powerful and influential view it," she corrected firmly. "I am well aware of your views on the blood purity issue and so will not even attempt to insinuate you into that group."

"Not that I qualify. I'm a half-blood after all," Harry said sarcastically.

To his surprise, she merely nodded. "Not that you take stock in such things, but yes, you are." She closed the folder in her lap. "The last thing you need to think about is rather . . . delicate. A decision is not needed immediately, but you should start thinking about who you wish to be Lady Potter. Your current age allows you to date a bit, but you should not be . . . indiscreet. You've already made your opinion clear on marrying for love above any other concerns, so there is no need to speak with you about mistresses at this point. However, if you change your mind, I would be happy to answer any social questions you may have."

Fighting his blush, Harry nodded. "You, both of you, were brought up in this culture. I was not. I will be relying on you both for advice for some time, I'm sure." He sighed. "Frankly, any society that considers mistresses to be normal and acceptable is somewhat foreign to me."

"A common attitude among the muggle-born and muggle-raised," agreed Cissy.

"No doubt. Okay, I'll think about all of that. I'll let you know about the Confederation proxy. When do you need to know?"

"I need to send a reply of whether someone will be there or not within a week. I need a name a week after that."

"Okay. Anything else we need to talk about?"

Cissy shook her head. "Not at this time. I will contact you with any further issues." She turned to Andy.

Andy nodded and took over the conversation. "I've reviewed the high points of the Potter and Black finances and businesses. In short, you're a very wealthy wizard, Harry."

Harry raised his hand. "I know. I thumbed through some of it last month."

"Well, I only have two major questions. First, please explain the reasoning behind the stock purchases you had Max perform for you. Second, do you have any objection to combining the Black and Potter accounts?"

Harry settled himself for a long, boring, and necessary conversation.

Scion of Gryffindor 24 - Sep 1, pt 2

Harry and Cissy apparated to Hogsmeade early that evening, timing their arrival shortly before the Hogwarts Express usually arrived. They headed toward the train station at a leisurely pace.

"Are you sure, Cissy? You know full well that I can afford -"

"Harry, how many times do Andy and I have to say it? We do not want you spending your money on guards for us."

"At least let me put some wards up."

She arched an eyebrow at him. She somehow managed to not be condescending, but it was close. "What wards can you put up that Andy and Ted have not?"

He sighed. "Okay, I'm not trying to be egotistical, but weren't you the one that was impressed with the wards on my Keep?"

"The anti-post ward you mentioned? Yes, but I thought it was there -" Her eyes widened. "Morgana, are you saying YOU put that ward up?"

Harry shrugged modestly.

Cissy was now considerably more impressed. "Well, in that case, yes, please put some wards up for us."

Harry nodded his acceptance. "How's Draco taking all of this?" he asked, changing the subject.

Cissy looked at him in surprise. "Forgive me for saying so, but I was under the impression that the two of you didn't get along."

Harry laughed. "'Don't get along' is an understatement, as you're well aware. As for why I'm asking . . ." He thought for a moment. "Well, two reasons, I guess. Ever since Sirius's Will reading, he's gone out of his way to be polite. I'm trying to do the adult thing and let the past remain in the past with regards to my attitude toward him in return. Second and more importantly, I know you're concerned, and I take care of family."

She nodded acknowledgement of his points. "He is . . . confused. His life - and mine, come to that - were under Lucius's absolute control for so many years that Draco was never given the option of thinking for himself. Now that Lucius is in Azkaban, his entire world has been turned upon its head. The Malfoy name is still powerful in certain circles, but Draco is recognizing that that means very little at the moment. For all of his supposed allies, Lucius is still in prison, after all. Draco, now that he is permitted to think for himself, is realizing that following the Dark Lord may not be in his best interest."

"Hence you wanting to speak with him before the beginning of the school year."

"Yes. That, and I simply miss him."

"Not to gloat, but the fact that it's me is part of the problem, isn't it?"

She let out a long breath. "Yes. Lucius and Severus have reiterated for years what a foolish Gryffindor you are. The fact that you've been proven correct over and over and his father is now in prison . . . Well, as I said, poor Draco doesn't know which way to go."

"Get him away from Tom, Cissy. One way or another, it'll end up killing him."

She sighed and frowned in worry. "I am aware of that, and I am trying."

"For what it's worth, good luck," Harry said in sympathy. He turned back forward just as they got within sight of the train station.

Coming from the direction of the castle, a large form was leading the first in a string of thestral-drawn carriages. "Arry!" Hagrid's ready smile flickered a little when he turned to Harry's companion. "Cissy."

"Hi, Hagrid," Harry greeted his first magical friend.

"Hagrid," Cissy greeted him with a bit more reservation. She saw the confusion on the half-giant's face. "I simply wished to greet my son. Baron Black was kind enough to walk with me." She turned to Harry. "If that is all, Lord-Baron, I shall take my leave." She made a half-bow, half-curtsey movement that included a very stylized hand gesture. Getting Harry's polite, if slightly confused, nod in reply, she turned and headed toward the station.

"Wha' was tha' all about?"

Harry turned around watching her. "You heard that I inherited the title of Baron Black from Sirius?" Hagrid nodded. "Cissy divorced Lucius Malfoy yesterday. Technically, I'm her Patriarch, as she's a Black again."

"Well, don't tha' beat all?" Hagrid said with a shake of his head and a laugh.

"The entire past month has been surreal, but that is one of the stranger parts," Harry agreed.

"Ah, before I forget, Perfesser McGonagall said to tell ya tha' they're all ready." Hagrid frowned. "Come to tha', how did she know I'd see ya 'ere before the train arrived?"

"I set up an appointment with her when I was here a couple weeks ago. Thanks again for letting me have one of your hairs, Hagrid," Harry added in an attempt to sidetrack the conversation.

It worked. Hagrid laughed again and ran one hand down his huge beard. "It's not like I don't have enough o' me own, 'Arry! Besides, I know ya won't do nothing wrong wi' it."

Harry smiled up at the big man, touched by the absolute faith he had in him. "No, I won't do anything wrong with it." A shrill whistle in the distance was heard by the both of them. "I'd better let you get those carriages to their places. Great talking with you, Hagrid."

"Take care, 'Arry!"

Harry hurried back toward the castle and was pleased to see a small group standing at the gates. As he neared, he recognized Madam Bones and Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Flitwick, plus a knot of what he assumed were aurors.

Dumbledore's face lit up when Harry approached. "Ah, Harry! I am heartened to see that you have changed your mind about attending Hogwarts this term."

"No, I haven't, Headmaster," Harry replied coolly. He turned to McGonagall. "Is everything ready, Professor?"

She flicked a glance in Dumbledore's direction before nodding to Harry. "Yes. I invited Madam Bones along, as we will probably have need of a few of her aurors. To get her to come at all, I had to explain . . . one or two things."

Amelia Bones left the group of aurors and approached, looking at Harry curiously. "Is what Minerva told me correct?" she asked quietly.

Harry, not knowing what she'd been told, looked to McGonagall with a raised eyebrow.

The professor discreetly tapped her hand where her own family ring sat.

Harry nodded and raised his hand so the Gryffindor ring was visible, careful to keep it invisible to the aurors behind her. Knowing that he was going to be at Hogwarts that afternoon, he'd worn it on the hand opposite his Potter signet ring.

The head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement looked at it for only a few moments. "I see. Very well, Lord Gryffindor. What is this all about, then?" Fortunately, she kept her voice down.

"When I was helping Professors McGonagall and Flitwick -"

"Minerva and Filius," Flitwick piped up, attempting a stern expression and waving a finger at Harry.

Harry laughed. "When I was helping MINERVA and FILIUS," he stressed to Flitwick's pleased smile, "renew the wards over Hogwarts, I added one. Everyone crossing this line," he moved his hand over the ward boundary line that he could faintly see, "that has a Dark Mark will have a very visible reaction. I have every reason to believe that several students are already Marked."

Dumbledore, looking ashen, stepped forward. "Harry, please think about -"

"I thought I previously asked you to refer to me as 'Lord-Baron'?" Harry interrupted. He knew he was being rude toward a very powerful and influential wizard, but he also had to make the man realize he had no control over him any longer.

Dumbledore hardly slowed down. "Lord-Baron, then. Please think about it. What kind of message are you sending if you have these children arrested?"

"Maybe that I would like to protect the REST of the children from Death Eaters?" Everyone winced. Harry went on relentlessly, "No matter their ages, they ARE Death Eaters, and you know that, Headmaster. They are going to be arrested shortly. The only question is whether you want to take the credit for it or if you want to announce to the world that I, and all of my various but largely useless titles, are at odds with the Headmaster of Hogwarts." Harry hated to use his celebrity status in this way, but he had to get Dumbledore to back down.

Cornered, the Headmaster bowed his head in acceptance. "Very well. What ward did you cast, Lord Gryffindor?"

"Don't call me that," Harry hissed with a head jerk toward the fortunately oblivious group of aurors. Calming himself, he answered the question, "Their Dark Mark will flare with pain. I think."

"You think?" Bones repeated.

"The ward I used will react to the Brand of Ownership Spell that the Dark Mark is derived from." Flitwick looked impressed at this bit of information

as Harry continued, "Unfortunately, from what I know about the ward, it doesn't react to all ownership spells the same way. As we know, the Dark Mark is used to signal or punish his servants. My best guess is that it'll react in one of those two ways. Again, unfortunately for them, even the signal mode is painful."

Bones was looking at Harry in clear surprise and admiration. "I'm curious on how you know so much about this, Lord-Baron. Even accounting for the rumored mental connection you share with You-Know-Who . . ." She trailed off in a clear question.

"Lord-Baron Potter has been privy to a great deal of Order information over the years, Amelia," Dumbledore whispered.

Harry was surprised, not having known she was an Order member.

McGonagall answered his unspoken question. "Amelia isn't a formal member, but rather an informal associate of our group."

Harry nodded.

Flitwick, who had been quiet for the past few minutes, pulled out his wand and started casting spells. Harry watched him put up what appeared to be a Silence Wall Spell at the ward boundary and then conjure waist-high hedges and fieldstone walls on the path that the thestrals had to take to get to the castle.

Harry would have asked Flitwick what he was doing, but the first of the carriages was coming up the path. Once the carriage started following the newly-created path, Harry saw what the wily professor had done. A carriage would let the students out right at the gated entrance. The students in the next carriage couldn't see what happened at the gates - and the ward boundary - until the previous carriage had moved out of the way.

Stepping back into the lengthening shadows, Harry watched McGonagall and Dumbledore greet the first group of students (some fourth year Hufflepuffs if he recalled correctly) after they crossed past the gate and headed toward the castle.

Bones finished speaking with her aurors, and they moved so as not to be visible from the carriages but still have good lines of sight in almost all directions.

Bones and Flitwick joined Harry in his out-of-the-way location. "Very clever," Harry grinned at Flitwick, waving at the path the professor had created.

Flitwick nodded, accepting the compliment before his face took on a sad, serious expression. "I happen to agree with your actions, Lord-Baron. I just wish we didn't have to make them."

Harry sighed. "I don't want to sound cynical, but wishes haven't gotten me anywhere in life, Professor. And call me Harry, please. Both of you."

They both nodded acknowledgement as all three watched a group of young Slytherins pass the ward without incident.

"Oh," Harry said a minute later. "Professor, you asked to see my new magical focus?"

Flitwick brightened. "Indeed, but I'm quite certain I asked you to call me Filius not five minutes ago."

Harry laughed as he rolled his sleeve up. "You did," he acknowledged. "However, after five years in your class, it's kind of hard to break a habit." He pulled the band off of his arm and presented it to the Ravenclaw professor.

"Exquisite," he murmured, turning it over and over in his hand and peering intently at the carving. "I recognize the crests, but what are these other designs?"

Harry took the band back and gazed sadly down at the etching of a large dog. "My family," he whispered, too quietly for the other man to have heard him. He shook his head and answered as he slipped the band back on his arm. "That's a very long story, Filius. Perhaps sometime I'll tell you, but I honestly don't feel up to it at the moment."

Flitwick nodded his acceptance of that answer, and they all looked forward again just in time to see Cissy, Draco Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle step out of a carriage.

Harry and Bones tensed. Flitwick muttered, "Oh, dear."

Draco hugged his mother and crossed through the gate without any problem, looking at Dumbledore and McGonagall oddly as he did so.

Crabbe and Goyle, following on his heels, made it one step onto the Hogwarts grounds before they both clutched their left arms and fell to their knees. Aurors moved forward at the same time that Draco spun in place to face his two followers. From thirty feet away and the other side of a Silencing Wall, Harry watched Crabbe and Goyle get stunned and then levitated off out of his line of sight. Draco and Cissy had watched the whole thing in shock.

Dumbledore looked over at Harry, a sad look in his eyes. Harry kept his face expressionless and shook his head slowly.

Cissy stepped forward and hugged her son again, speaking first with him and then Professor McGonagall momentarily before turning around and walking out. As the carriage moved out of the way, she spotted Harry, Filius, and Bones and headed toward them. She addressed herself toward Madam Bones. "Very clever ploy, Madam Bones."

Bones shook her head. "I didn't think of it. I believe it was the headmaster who did. I'm just here to provide the aurors."

Cissy slowly shook her head as she faced Harry. "I don't believe the headmaster would do such a thing. He is far too . . . trusting and forgiving of those who have proven they do not deserve such."

Harry let the comment pass. "Did you or Draco know about them?" he asked instead.

She shook her head again. "I did not know for certain, and Draco has not indicated one way or another." After a moment with no further questions, she gave him a curt nod. "Lord-Baron." She nodded to the other two as well. "Professor, Madam." Without another word, she turned and walked back toward Hogsmeade.

"That was . . . unexpected," Bones said.

Harry laughed. "The entire last month has been one unexpected event after another, Madam Bones."

"Amelia, Harry. Call me Amelia."

"Severus," Flitwick suddenly said.

Harry looked at him in amusement. "No, I'm Harry, you're Filius, and she's Amelia."

Amelia giggled, briefly resembling her niece.

Flitwick gave Harry a sour look for the joke. "No," he said in mock aggravation, "I meant I had news about Severus. I didn't see him arrive, but Min said she's locked him in his rooms until the welcoming feast. He apparently recovered quickly after crossing the ward."

Harry nodded at the news and flicked a glance at Amelia.

"I know," she said simply. "Remember, I'm an 'associate' of the Order, so I know of Professor Snape's position."

The three of them idly chatted about classes and their times at Hogwarts as students continued arriving.

Harry's only moment of tension came as one carriage disgorged Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville. Ginny spotted him and waved cheerfully. Ron turned his back and sulked off. Hermione didn't follow either extreme but looked pensive instead. Neville, not understanding everyone's reactions, cast Harry a confused look before following the other Gryffindors.

Flitwick looked a question at Harry, but Harry was reluctant to admit how strained his relationship with his two best friends had become.

By the end of the night, Theodore Nott, Pansy Parkinson, two seventh year Slytherins, sixth year Ravenclaw Michael Corner, a seventh year Hufflepuff girl Harry didn't know, and seventh year Gryffindor Jack Sloper all ended up being arrested in addition to Crabbe and Goyle.

As the last carriage was pulling away, Flitwick turned to Harry. "I'm not sure that thanks are in order, Harry, but despite it all, I'm glad you did what you did."

"Yeah," Harry quietly agreed. "I wish we didn't have to do that, either."

Harry, standing at the back of the Great Hall under a Disillusionment Charm, listened to Dumbledore's post-sorting announcements.

"Before we eat, I have two announcements to make that bring me a great deal of sadness. As many of you have already noted, Mr. Harry Potter is not sitting with us and will not be joining us this year." He raised his hand to the increased volume of muttering. "Please, please. Now, I understand that the reason that Mr. Potter is not coming back to Hogwarts is because he wishes to have a more directed education than we here at Hogwarts can provide."

The reactions to this were varied. Most of the professors Harry knew took the news with visible sadness. Snape, his expression very sour since before Harry had entered the room, suddenly looked almost gleeful. A new professor, a corpulent man Harry didn't know, looked very upset by the news. Among the students, it was taken about as he expected. The DA members were nearly rioting, the Gryffindors were depressed, the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs looked vaguely saddened, and the Slytherins were varied between indifferent and happy.

"Lastly, I'm sure many of you have questions regarding the slight change of procedure with your arrival at the castle gates. This bit of subterfuge was unfortunately necessary. We have identified nine students carrying Voldemort's Dark Mark." He waited for the shudders to subside before going on. "Those nine students are currently under arrest by the Ministry's Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The staff will have no information that will not be reported by the Daily Prophet, so please refrain from asking us for more information than we have.

"Now that the unpleasant news is out of the way, I have only a few more words for you. Rutabaga, spleen, and calcium." He clapped his hands, and the welcoming feast appeared on the tables, effectively diverting the attention of all the students.

Across the hall and through his disillusionment, Dumbledore's eyes met Harry's.

Harry gave him a single nod and turned, leaving the Great Hall.

Thumb absently rubbing the Gryffindor signet ring, Harry walked down the path toward Hogsmeade. "I'll be back, girl. Don't worry about that. I'll be back eventually."

Death Eater Students Arrested

Last evening as the Hogwarts Express carried all the students to Hogsmeade station to begin another year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore had a surprise awaiting them.

Apparently adding another ward to the already formidable set over the school, the headmaster used the school's magic to identify Death Eaters as they arrived. Four sixth year Slytherin, two seventh year Slytherin, one sixth year Ravenclaw, and a seventh year from each of the remaining two houses were exposed as Death Eaters and immediately arrested.

"I dislike the necessity of what has been done, but it was decided that we cannot allow Death Eaters free reign in the school to wreck havoc upon the innocent students," Headmaster Dumbledore said.

Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Amelia Bones had this to say, "We of course cooperated with the leadership of Hogwarts last evening, resulting in nine arrests. Their ages will not come into play as they're all confirmed Death Eaters."

**Scion of Gryffindor
25 - Equinox Ball**

"Lord-Baron Harry Potter and guest," the doorman announced. To give the man credit, his tone and volume were exactly the same as the hundreds of other guests he'd announced that evening.

It didn't matter.

All conversation in the Ministry Grand Ballroom stopped, and every eye in the room turned to stare at Harry and Nim. Fighting the blush back down, Harry gently steered the very tense Nim toward the side to make room for the next couple entering the room.

"Merlin, I hate that," Harry muttered, mentally running through a relaxation routine that Shack had taught him. Fortunately, it didn't take long for the rest of the room to return to normal.

Nim spoke through a smile. "I know you do, Harry. For good or ill, you ARE a very famous wizard, though." She patted his arm. "I'm sure I can find some way of relaxing you later, though."

Harry gave her an embarrassed smile. "One of these days, I'm going to call you on one of these teases."

Her smile turned the slightest bit predatory. "I look forward to it."

Harry just sighed and shook his head in helpless resignation.

Amelia Bones approached with a drink in her hand. "Harry! So good to see you." She turned to Nim and stuck out a hand. "Amelia Bones."

Nim, currently wearing the face and body of a muggle supermodel, flashed her eyes pink for a fraction of a second. "Yes, Director." She smiled politely and took the offered hand.

"I believe you already know my escort for the evening," Harry said dryly.

"I do now," Bones said with a grin. She turned back to Harry. "I saw your reaction to the entrance and figured you wanted a friendly face to start the evening out."

A genuine smile flowed over Harry's face. "Thank you, Amelia. I appreciate that. Merlin knows that Cissy has drilled enough instruction into my head over the past two weeks that I SHOULD be able to deal with this," he gestured around at the party, "but having at least one person in the room who doesn't want to use me politically is a relief."

She looked momentarily sad. "Don't count your diricawls before they hatch. I did have an ulterior motive for speaking with you."

Harry sighed and then smiled sadly at Amelia's hesitant look. "I guess that shouldn't surprise me. You wouldn't say something unless you thought it was in everyone's best interest, though. What's on your mind?"

"Cornelius said you would attend a press conference?" she asked carefully.

Harry nodded, to her relief. "Yes. Once he introduces legislation to the Wizengamot to help out the werewolves, I promised him that I would attend a press conference with you, stating that we're working together to combat Voldemort."

She nodded. "That is more or less what I was told. Just so you know, such legislation is on the schedule for the November meeting."

Harry nodded back. "I shall plan on attending, then. Thank you for letting me know, Amelia."

Her smile was more relaxed. "The pleasure was all mine, Lord-Baron. Have a good evening." Her voice dropped. "Give a shout if you need rescuing from someone."

Harry and Nim laughed and headed deeper into the room after bidding her a polite farewell.

As they walked, Nim leaned in and whispered, "Did you see everyone watching your interaction with Director Bones?"

Harry shook his head. "No, but it doesn't surprise me. After all, I have this insanely gorgeous woman walking around with me. She even looks pretty."

Nim, blushing slightly, snuggled into his arm just a little tighter. "Personally, I think it's your snazzy new dress robes."

"Yeah, well my girlfriend has better taste in clothes than I do."

"Dear Merlin, you're sappy, Potter," a voice said from behind them.

Harry half-turned, only to find Nim had already taken a defensive position in front of him. He placed a hand on her shoulder but spoke to the man. "Malfoy." He nodded and smiled at his date. "Miss Greengrass. I apologize for missing your sister's birthday party."

Daphne Greengrass slowly raised one elegant eyebrow. "You're not what I was expecting this evening, Lord-Baron."

"Our Harry is unpredictable," Nim said with slightly forced cheerfulness.

"Yes, I'm beginning to see that," Daphne mumbled, examining the couple in front of her.

Harry turned to Malfoy. "I must commend your choice of escorts, Baron Malfoy."

Draco broke off his study of Harry to look at Daphne with what could almost be called affection. "Thank you, Lord-Baron. Without . . . external influences, I chose the most intelligent and interesting witch I could find."

Harry almost smirked. "And you called me sappy?"

Draco ignored the nearly lighthearted comment. Instead, he turned back and looked at Nim in amusement. "And you, too, seem to have found a beautiful escort for the evening." Without waiting for a response, Draco led Daphne toward the dance floor.

"Well, that was interesting," Nim observed.

"It certainly was," another new voice intruded into their conversation.

Harry stifled a groan - were they ever going to get some peace tonight? - and turned to the newest interruption. "Headmaster."

"Lord-Baron," Dumbledore said pleasantly. Harry was distantly thankful that he hadn't tried to call him Gryffindor again. Dumbledore continued, twinkling at Tonks, "And -"

"My guest," Harry interrupted.

Dumbledore got the hint that she should remain nameless. "And guest," the headmaster agreed. He turned back to Harry. "If I may, one of my professors has a problem that I believe you could shed some light upon, Lord-Baron."

"Oh?" Harry asked. "As I'm no longer a student at Hogwarts, what makes you think I may know of any problems there?"

Dumbledore's pleasant smile tightened just a fraction. "Yes, well it is my hope that you have some relevant information. It seems that one of my professors is complaining that the point system is biased against him."

"I did nothing to bias the point system against anyone if that's what you're accusing me of."

Dumbledore stared at Harry. Harry, his Occlumency shields up, did his best to allow Dumbledore to only sense the truth of what he said and nothing more.

"Very well," Dumbledore eventually said. "Due to your . . . unique status, I would like to invite you to Hogwarts for a Halloween Costume Ball. Miss Granger and Miss Weasley were both most insistent that I inform you of it. In the circumstance that you wish to speak with one of your friends, the first Hogsmeade visit will be October 5th."

Not knowing what to make of the unexpected information, Harry simply inclined his head.

"Good to see you two are getting on so well," another voice entered the conversation.

Harry, stifling a curse, turned to the latest person annoying him. "Minister."

"Cornelius," Dumbledore greeted him.

"Albus, Harry."

"Please, Minister, I prefer Lord-Baron," Harry said, again trying to smother his anger.

Fudge's eyes flared for only a moment before his politician's smile came back. "Of course, Lord-Baron. My apologies. I saw that you spoke with Amelia. I trust everything went well?"

"As well as can be expected at this stage," Harry agreed. "We'll see how things go at the November Wizengamot meeting."

Dumbledore's eyes were darting back and forth, clearly trying to discern what was being talked about.

"Very good," Fudge said jovially. "In the meantime, feel free to owl me or come and see me if you have any problems you need help with, Lord Potter."

Harry, acutely aware of the gaggle of reporters and photographers surrounding the three of them, said, "If I ever have a situation that requires your . . . particular skills, Minister, rest assured that I will let you know."

Fudge smiled, nodded, and moved off, his entourage following docily along in his wake.

Harry kept his eyes on the Minister of Magic and said, "Please excuse us, Headmaster. I promised my date a dance, and we have yet to make it to that far into the room."

Without looking for a response, Harry led Nim toward the dance floor and pulled her into a formal dance that more or less matched the others moving around. After a moment of thought, he stopped and cast a one-way Privacy Sphere around them before resuming their dance.

"Nice spell," she praised him. "You handled Fudge and Dumbledore well."

Harry let out a breath. "I hope so. What was that invitation to Hogwarts all about?"

She shrugged and moved closer to him. "He knows your curiosity will bring you to it, especially as he made such a deal out of the invitation. Personally, I think he wants you where he can keep an eye on you, at least part of the time."

Harry frowned, thinking it through as his legs automatically moved through the steps that Cissy had beat into him. "That makes sense. Remind me later to talk with Cissy and Andy about the Wizengamot meeting. Meanwhile," he smiled down at her, "I believe we have a date to enjoy."

Her brilliant smile and tinkling laugh caused Harry a warm feeling.

"Hey," he said suddenly. "Not that I mind in the least, but how come you're . . . How should I phrase this?"

"Not clumsy?" she asked in amusement, knowing that Harry's spell would keep their words away from prying ears.

"I would have phrased it as 'more graceful than usual', but essentially correct."

"Ooh, you're getting better at flirting."

"I learned from the best. Now stop avoiding the question."

"I balanced myself."

Harry blinked hard and nearly stepped on her foot.

She laughed. "Hey, I thought *I* was the clumsy one. What I mean is that the morph I did was tweaked until my center of gravity is in the right place."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Okay, but why don't you usually do it that way?"

She blushed in embarrassment. "Until I explained to you WHY I was usually clumsy, it didn't occur to me that I could fix it."

Harry managed to keep his expression bland. "I'll keep that in mind for my training, then."

"Yeah. Now that I know about it, I'll try to balance myself as a matter of habit. And I'll train you to do the same."

Harry nodded before he sighed in frustration. "I just wish my training was going better."

She actually had the audacity to smirk at him. "Harry, you've only been working on it for a month. Hair color and length are amazing progress for the timeframe."

Harry blushed at the praise.

The song ended and the dancers clapped politely for the small group of musicians. Instead of dancing again, Harry and Nim decided to grab a few drinks and sit down for a few minutes.

They hadn't been sitting for long before a couple of roughly Remus's age stopped at their table. "Lord-Baron, my name is Marcus Abbott, and this is my wife Emily. May we join you?"

Harry half stood and waved his hand in invitation. "Might you be the parents of Hannah?" he asked as they sat.

Emily smiled. "Indeed we are. Hannah has told us a great deal about you. She credits you with her O.W.L. score in defense but won't tell us why, exactly."

In vague terms, Harry explained the circumstances and that he'd run a study club. By the end of the explanation, three more couples were standing around them.

"That explains it, then," one of the women said. "There's no other way Parvati could have gotten an 'E' in defense unless her instructor was that good looking."

Harry flushed, and everyone else laughed.

"You must be Mrs. Patil," Harry observed, trying to sidetrack the teasing.

"Forgive my manners," the clearly Indian man beside her said. "I am Amit Patil, and my wife is Krupa."

"Actually, that was my fault for not introducing everyone," Marcus Abbott said. He pointed around the circle and gave the names of the remaining four, "Alfonzo and Desiree Zabini and Fred and Helen McCarthy."

Harry stood and shook hands around. He glanced at Nim. "Forgive me, everyone, but I'm afraid my guest must remain nameless, at least as much for her protection as any other reason."

"Call me Tee," Nim said in a London accent and smiled around at the group.

Marcus, apparently acting as spokesman for the group, said, "Forgive us approaching you at the Ball, Lord-Baron, but we, as a group, wanted to meet you and get your mettle, so to speak." They all nodded, still looking at Harry.

Harry tilted his head a little. "Your group?"

Abbott almost smiled. "We are the businesspeople of the wizarding world, Lord-Baron. The Zabinis run a chain of high-end restaurants, the McCarthys are food distributors, the Patils run the biggest import-export business in the British wizarding world, and I own half the greenhouses providing potions ingredients."

"Is this some kind of business contact, then?" Harry asked, thinking he had finally figured out what they wanted with him.

Emily Abbott laughed. "Morgana, no. Well, not primarily. It is true that you own substantial percentages of many of our businesses, but that is not why we wanted to talk with you. No, this is a purely social greeting. Hannah suggested we begin inviting you to events. When I mentioned it to Krupa, she said that both of her girls said much the same thing. When we brought it up to more people, well . . ."

"Though I don't have any children in Hogwarts, Lord-Baron," Mr. McCarthy said, "I was also curious to meet you." Correctly interpreting the look Harry gave him, he laughed and said, "I treat the Daily Prophet with a great deal of skepticism. I've been burned by them myself far too many times."

Harry nodded slowly. "I certainly can't speak to specifics, but I'd be willing to meet with more of the businesspeople in the wizarding world. Please owl my business manager and we can meet sometime if that's where this conversation is going."

Marcus shook his head. "That's only part of it. Instead of talking with Andy Tonks, how about I send a letter to Cissy Black and invite you to our Yule Ball?"

Harry and Nim merely stared in shock.

The eight people laughed. "No need to be so worried," Mr. Abbott said. "They haven't tried to hide who they're working for, and the fact that Harry Potter has hired both Andromeda Black-Tonks and Narcissa Black - formerly Malfoy - went through the rumor grapevine a week ago. I knew them when I was at Hogwarts. Good choices, both."

"Thank you," Harry managed to say.

Marcus stood and helped his wife to her feet. "Have a good evening, Lord-Baron," he said with a respectful nod before leading his wife off toward the drinks table. The other three couples made similar noises before Harry and Nim were alone again.

"How about that?" Nim said in wonder. "Looks like someone wants to be your friend."

"So long as it's actually friends and not more of the Boy Who Lived shite."

"It's probably honest," Neville Longbottom said as he took a seat at the table. "Hiya, Harry."

"Neville? Mate, don't take this the wrong way, but what are you doing here?"

Neville raised his hand which held a signet ring. "Baron Longbottom, at your service," he said in a pseudo-pompous tone and a self-deprecating smile.

Harry smiled back. "Good on you, Neville. What'd you mean, by the way?"

"The Abbotts, Patils, Zabinis, and McCarthys. They probably DO only want friendship with you. The Potter name has long been part of our clique, and they're just inviting you back in." Neville tilted his head. "Honestly, maybe they also do want some closer economic ties with you. This early in your life and political career, they don't know if they want to be politically affiliated with you, so that's not a concern yet."

Harry blinked at him.

Neville laughed. "Harry, my gran's been training me to take over the Longbottom name and duties since I was seven. That includes meeting all the appropriate people, despite my near-squib magical power."

"Hey, now. I don't want to hear that, Neville. You did well in June."

"If you say so, but I just wish we could've saved Mr. Black." Neville's eyes widened and he turned to look at Tonks in horror. "I'm sorry, Harry," he squeaked.

"No worries, Neville. Tee here knows the truth about Sirius."

Neville relaxed. "Say, what did you do to Malfoy?"

"What do you mean?"

"I won't say that he's been nice to us all, but he's at least been . . . well, less nasty, I guess."

Harry nodded, not really surprised. "I'm afraid I can't answer that, Neville. Once I can tell you, I will, okay? Your news doesn't surprise me, though."

Neville shrugged. "Whatever you did, thanks." He grinned. "Now could you do something about Snape?"

Harry laughed. "What's he done to you now?"

"He keeps trying to take points, but it never seems to stick. I have no idea why."

Harry's eyes sparkled, but he asked, "You're in potions, then?"

Neville shook his head. "Nope. Snape's teaching defense this year. Potions is being taught by some old friend of Dumbledore's named Slughorn. He tried to recruit me into some kind of club, but at the gatherings all he does is ask everyone about you."

Harry looked very concerned, but Nim said, "Don't worry about him. Slughorn is mostly harmless. His little club is for him to have the ear of as many influential witches and wizards as he can. He's no deez as far as I know."

Neville shrugged and changed the subject. "Hey, have you heard about the Halloween Ball?"

Harry nodded and the two spent some time trading gossip and information. Harry learned that Ginny wasn't dating Dean Thomas as expected and was instead not seriously dating anyone. Ron and Hermione had ended their short relationship after a spectacular row in the Gryffindor common room. Ron was apparently making eyes at Lavender Brown now.

In exchange for information on all his friends, Harry told Neville some of what he was doing, including the deal he'd made with Fudge about the werewolf laws.

"I'll be sure to attend the November Wizengamot meeting, then."

Harry stopped, again, in surprise. He sighed. "Okay, someone PLEASE explain the Wizengamot to me? I thought it was the full Wizengamot who tried me after those damn dementors. Now I learn I have two seats there and Neville also does? What's going on?"

Nim laughed. "Mum would be better at explaining this, but the short version is this: As Lord and Baron Potter, you have one seat on the International Confederation of Wizards. That's where you're sending Mum in a couple days, right? Potter and Black each have a seat on the British LEGISLATIVE Wizengamot as opposed to the judicial group. It was the judicial group that tried you a year ago. Most every other family that qualifies as Baron or Lord also has a seat on the legislative portion. Something like a hundred and fifty seats last I heard, but not everyone actually exercises their vote. The judicial seats are set by vote of the legislative group."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "A signet ring would indicate what, then? A family with a Wizengamot seat?"

"Head of the family," Neville answered with a nod. "The eldest wizard over sixteen and in the direct line, otherwise, the eldest witch over sixteen. A signet ring is only legal to wear for Baron or higher entitlement."

"McGonagall is a Baroness?"

"Lady, actually," Nim answered. "I think she was entitled after helping Dumbledore defeat Grindewald."

"She is, Miss Tonks?" Neville asked.

"Yes, she -" Nim stopped and stared at Neville. "How'd you know my name?"

Neville laughed and started ticking off points on his fingers. "The term 'deez' is something I only hear aurors using. The people living with Harry are generally known. You aren't acting like a casual date with him, so you're someone else, like a metamorphmagus who knows him. Your answer about the makeup of the Wizengamot sounded like a teacher's answer. Andromeda Tonks is one of the obvious, if somewhat controversial, choices for him to send to Geneva, and you referred to whoever is going as 'Mum'."

"He's got you there, Nim," Harry said in amusement.

Tonks groaned. "Moody would have my hide if he knew I slipped up like that."

"You two actually are dating, then?" Neville asked, eyes on their intertwined arms.

"Yep," Tonks said happily.

"Please don't mention that to anyone, though, okay?" Harry asked.

Neville shrugged. "Anyway, back to the first conversation. Hannah's dad just was trying to be sociable with you, Harry."

"Did someone mention my name?" Hannah Abbott said, sitting down next to Neville.

Harry looked between Neville and Hannah before breaking into a huge grin. "Something you forgot to tell me, Neville?"

Neville flushed and started stammering.

Hannah smiled at Neville before placing a hand on his shoulder. "Deep breath, Nev." Neville immediately took a breath and calmed down. He nodded to her gratefully. Mission accomplished, Hannah turned to Tonks and offered her hand. "Hannah Abbott."

"Tee," Nim answered, taking the hand.

"I got the latest juicy gossip from Gryffindor tower, Hannah. Anything from the Hufflepuffs?"

"Rumor has it that Zach Smith was . . . uh, hurt by Ginny Weasley."

Both Neville and Harry looked at her in amazement.

Seeing their looks, she unaccountably colored and explained. "He isn't saying anything, of course, but one of his roommates said something about Zack having a . . . LITTLE problem that he was going to Madam Pomfrey for, starting the day AFTER he had a date with Ginny."

Harry muffled a snicker. "Let me guess. He made some sort of improper advance and she hexed him?"

Hannah shrugged. "Wouldn't surprise me. It wouldn't be the first time that he's had to forcefully be told, 'No.'"

Harry and Neville both looked angry. "You're saying that he's tried -"

Hannah held up a hand. "He hasn't - quite - done anything illegal or forced anyone to do something they didn't want to. I'm just saying that he has a habit of pushing the boundaries of acceptable first date behavior."

"I can't believe I let that git into the D.A.," Harry growled.

"Speaking of the D.A., what's the plan with that this year? People are starting to ask."

Harry shrugged. "I can't lead it as I'm not there. If someone else wants to take it on, be my guest. Hey, Neville said Snape has the defense job. How's he doing at it?"

Both students frowned. "Well," Hannah said, "he's knowledgeable and competent with the material. His teaching style is still as awful as ever, though."

Neville shrugged and nodded agreement when Harry looked to him for his opinion. "I heard from Professor Sprout that he's being kind of arrogant that so many of his students are picking up the basics of dueling so quickly." A wicked grin that was totally out of place on the normally even-tempered wizard split his face. "Amazingly, all his good students seem to be former D.A. members. We've decided to wait until the dueling tournament at the end of the year to mention it to him, though."

All three students laughed. "Oh, to be a fly on the wall when he hears that," Harry said with a smile.

"I'm sure you could attend if you wanted to," Nim mentioned, giving Harry a significant look.

Harry grimaced. "Probably," he acknowledged.

"What's wrong?" Hannah asked.

"Harry and Dumbledore are . . . not getting along very well," Neville answered, eyes on Harry. At Harry's surprised look, Neville smiled. "I hear all the rumors, Harry. It doesn't take Hermione's mind to figure out some of it."

Harry nodded to acknowledge the point. "Well, I'll probably be attending your family's Yule Ball, Hannah."

Her face lit up. "That'll be great! The ones in our generation get together in the early afternoon, well before the formal, stuffy party starts. I'll make sure Mum invites you to that, too."

Aside from one or two "Boy Who Lived fan" moments, the rest of the evening passed pleasantly for Harry in lighthearted banter, dances, and stolen kisses.

Scion of Gryffindor 26 - Hogsmeade Weekend

The Playboy Who Lived?

Harry Potter, dubbed the Boy Who Lived after surviving a Killing Curse at fifteen months of age, has long been held up as an icon for the Light. Throughout five years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, rumors ran rampant about his repeatedly thwarting He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named; killing basilisks, trolls, and acromantulas; winning quidditch matches and Tri-Wizard Tournaments; and unraveling more than one mystery.

But has it all been an attempt to gain yet more fame?

In the past two months, Harry Potter has been spotted in public no less than six times, the most recent instance being two weeks ago at the ministry's Equinox Ball.

"What is wrong with this?" the reader may ask.

Nothing, on the surface. However, Mr. Potter had a lovely young lady (presumably a witch, though that is not confirmed) on his arm each time. Moreover, it was not the SAME young lady who was Mr. Potter's escort each time.

In fact, during the Equinox Ball, this reporter noticed that the lady (a brunette known only as "Tee") took a drink supplied to her by Mr. Potter more often than once an hour. As many of our readers will no doubt know, this is the maximum length of time that Polyjuice Potion holds its effects.

Whether it's been the same individual under polyjuice or whether Mr. Potter is "playing the field" with regards to his dating habits, one is forced to wonder about the moral fiber of someone who forces these kinds of choices upon any person (presumably female(s), but that is also yet to be conclusively determined) he wishes to date.

What is next for the Boy Who Lived? Flesh golems? Demands for a personal harem?

"What the hell?" Harry yelled. Throwing the Daily Prophet to the table and standing, he snarled, "They're calling me some sort of sexual deviant now? What's next, another Dark Lord in training? Assassin going after Fudge? Do they MAKE THIS SHITE UP?"

"Yes, they do," Tonks answered calmly. "You already knew that."

"Better not mention to the Prophet that Dark Lord in training or assassin thing. They'd probably quote you as saying that was your intention," Remus added, unruffled by Harry's anger.

Harry just growled at the werewolf.

"There is an easy way to refute these rumors," Tonks said, still reading the article.

"What, leveling the Prophet building?"

"Not a bad idea, but not what I had in mind. No, I meant taking our relationship public."

"Dammit, Nim! We've talked about this before. It's just too dangerous, and you know it."

Remus and Kelly both winced, though neither Tonks nor Harry saw them.

Tonks's eyes narrowed. "Well, excuse me for thinking I actually had any choice in the matter. Silly me, I thought this was supposed to be a relationship and not just you having the chance to live out every adolescent male's fantasy!"

"You know that isn't what's going on, Nim. I'm not dating you just because you're a metamorph."

"That's not what I meant, you bloody idiot. I meant - You know what? Nevermind."

"Whatever. I'm just trying to keep you safe, Nim."

"For Morgana's sake, Potter! I'm an auror. I know how to handle myself, so stop trying to keep me safe! I know what I'm doing."

Harry just stared at her for a few seconds. "I'm not going to talk about this right now. Remus, Shack, you coming?"

Tonks gave an inarticulate scream of frustration as she stormed out of the dining room.

Harry, with Remus and Shacklebolt following, headed toward the parlor. "The Three Broomsticks," Harry growled out. Rolling back to his feet after the floo system spit him out, he stomped over to an empty table and dropped down into a seat. Remus joined him less than thirty seconds later. Kingsley, under Harry's invisibility cloak, took up an overwatch position in a corner of the room.

"Can I offer a bit of advice?" Remus asked.

"No," Harry snarled.

"Good morning," Madam Rosmerta cautiously said, eyeing the fuming young wizard.

"Morning, Rosy," Remus cheerfully greeted her. "Hope you don't mind, but Harry has arranged to meet a few friends here later."

She nodded. "No problem. The students should start arriving soon. Would you two like something in the meantime?"

"I'd like some tea. Do you want a butterbeer, Harry?"

A grunt was all the answer that Madam Rosmerta heard, which she took as an affirmative. As it was still before the lunchtime crowd, service was quick.

"What the hell's wrong with her? I'm just trying to keep her safe," Harry eventually said.

"She doesn't want you to keep her safe, Harry. If she wanted to be safe, she never would have agreed to be your bodyguard, let alone your girlfriend."

Harry didn't answer the comment, but he did appear to calm down a bit.

The first student to spot him was Hermione. She sat down across from him without invitation and said, "I'm sorry."

Remus unobtrusively left the table and took a seat nearby.

Somewhat expecting Hermione to find him at some point that day, Harry raised an eyebrow at her opening. "For what?"

"For ordering you around when I should have been asking you."

Harry nodded and relaxed a fraction.

"Even if I was being inconsiderate to you, I didn't deserve the high-handed treatment you gave me, though," she grumped.

"You're absolutely right, Hermione," he said to her visible astonishment. "I apologize for ordering you about like I did. Not much fun, is it?" He spoke gently, trying to avoid rubbing salt into any wounds.

She flushed. "You've made your point, Harry."

He nodded, satisfied. "There, now that THAT issue is dealt with, how're you doing?"

Her face fell a little bit. "Not very well," she admitted. "Ron and I broke up."

Harry nodded sympathetically. "I heard. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, not really," she said. "Please don't take this the wrong way, Harry, but it was because of you that we got together in the first place."

Harry blinked rapidly. "How do you figure that?"

"You were a . . . buffer between us, Harry. Both of us in orbit around you - we were drawn together. Without you there to buffer us, well, we annoyed each other so much that it couldn't work. He refuses to take his schoolwork seriously enough, and according to him, I take it too seriously. Between that, quidditch practices, his refusing to help with prefect duties . . . Well, the list is long. After our big fight, we agreed to step back from each other. We both know it can't work out, so we aren't even trying."

Harry leaned forward and laid a hand over her small, ink-stained hands that she'd folded primly on the table. "I wish there was something I could do."

She shook her head. "Don't. We recognized the problem before it got too bad. At least we're still on speaking terms." She managed a small smile.

"Oooh, Harry. You recruiting for your harem?" A widely grinning Lavender Brown, trailed closely by the Patil twins, walked up to the table.

Harry grinned up at them. He'd expected the question to sting, but strangely, the way Lavender asked it only amused him. "Why, Lav? You jealous that I asked Hermione first?"

Hermione and Padma laughed at Lavender's gobsmacked look. Parvati smiled at him. "You're getting much better at flirting, Harry. Who do we have to thank for that?"

"You'll no doubt meet her eventually, Parvati."

"Oh, pooh. I was hoping for a name today."

Padma rolled her eyes at her twin's words. "Harry, what's the word on the D.A.? Neville said you gave us your permission to continue without you?"

Harry nodded, to her and Hermione's relief. "Definitely. Just because I'm not there, that's no reason to not learn everything you can. I heard Snape's not gotten any better in his teaching methods?"

All four girls got disgusted looks on their faces.

"Oy, Potter! What're you doing to put that look on my girlfriend's face?" Ron walked up and wrapped his arms around Lavender's waist from behind.

She immediately snuggled back into him, to Hermione's vaguely nauseous look.

Harry ignored the byplay. "I asked about Snape's teaching methods."

"That slimy git!" Ron snarled. "It's obvious he knows the material. He demonstrates it once and then tells us to practice. If we don't get it right the first time he just yells at us instead of actually TEACHING us anything."

Harry nodded, not really surprised. "Sounds like the D.A. is definitely needed again. That'll give you all practice time."

"Who do you want to lead it?" Padma asked.

"That's not my choice to make," he responded.

"Yes, it is," the Ravenclaw calmly pointed out. "Even if you don't have the final say-so, your opinion will be asked."

Harry's lip twisted when he mentally acknowledged the point. "I would hope that everyone doesn't blindly accept my recommendations, though. Okay, how about this? If you took me out of the equation from last year, who does that leave?"

"Hermione doing the research for new spells and her, Ron, and Ginny doing the teaching."

"There you go. You could start there and see how it goes. If you need to make changes, then make changes."

All five of them appeared to take the recommendation well and were nodding.

"If this time is convenient, may I have a word, Lord-Baron?" Malfoy asked from a position between two nearby tables.

Ron's face turned red instantly. "Sod off, Malfoy. You're not wanted here."

Draco's eyes didn't shift from Harry. "I do believe that's Lord-Baron Potter's choice, not yours."

"Leave before I turn you into something that's only fit for Peeves to use as a chew toy, not that you're much beyond that right now," Ron snarled.

"I heard a rumor that you were attacked and seriously hurt by brains, Weasley. How ironic is that?" Draco asked in return, voice level.

"Why, you -" Ron went for his wand.

"ENOUGH!" Harry bellowed, freezing Ron in his tracks. Draco and the girls hadn't moved. "If you can't be civil to each other, then you'll just have to avoid each other."

Draco nodded and turned his head, ignoring Ron completely. "I have a bit of private business to discuss with you, Baron Black. Is this time convenient?"

"You can stop with the formalities, Ferret. We know you have money and an important sounding title. Is that supposed to make up for being a prick without a personality?"

"That's enough, Ron! If you can't behave like an adult, then leave," Harry demanded, out of patience with his friend's bigotry.

Parvati, Ron, and Lavender looked shocked. "I can't believe you're siding with the ferret, Harry. Or should I bow and call you 'My Lord Potter'?" The sarcasm was registering in the tons.

Harry sighed. "Ron, whether you want to admit it or not, he IS acting more like an adult than you are."

"I should've expected this," Ron said with a disgusted look and a shake of his head. "Effing rich Potter sides with bloody Malfoy of all people. To hell with you both. Come on, Lav. The stench in here is getting ripe."

Ron stalked out. Lavender followed after glaring at Harry. Parvati looked at him in confusion before following the other two.

"My apologies for inciting that scene," Draco said quietly.

Harry sighed. "You didn't, Draco. That blowup was a long time in coming. He just doesn't understand that I would gladly give up my version of rich

for his."

Draco nodded, much to the surprise of the remaining two girls.

"I'll owl you," Hermione said, standing and leaving with a pensive look on her face.

Padma looked from Draco to Harry to Hermione. Turning back to Harry, she said, "I'll see you at the Yule Ball?"

Harry smiled and nodded.

Nodding back, Padma moved toward a table filling with upperclass Ravenclaws.

Draco took the seat that Harry waved him toward. "What can I do for you, Baron Malfoy?"

Draco cast a Privacy Sphere around the table, blocking not only sound but also vision. Once out of sight of the rest of the bar, he shook his head. "I won't be a baron for much longer. I've decided to take you up on the offer."

Somewhat surprised, Harry asked, "May I ask what changed your mind?"

Draco sighed and slumped in his chair, a surprising action for the usually very formal Slytherin. "Many things. My mother vouches for you. You fought Aunt Bella to a draw, which is no mean feat. You've found some way of neutralizing Snape this year. I'd love to hear how you managed that, by the way." He looked up hopefully and grunted at Harry's smile and head shake. "Didn't think so. Anyway, my father is still in prison despite all the allies he thought he had. However, the most important thing that changed my mind is what happened three nights ago." He looked up and stared into Harry's eyes. "Malfoy Manor was burned to the ground by the Dark Lord."

Harry stared in shock. "I'm sorry."

Draco frowned down at the tabletop and idly picked at it with a thumbnail. "It was almost empty, and what happened was kept out of the news. Anyway, it wasn't your doing, was it? It was mine. When I didn't jump at the chance to join him this summer . . ." Draco shuddered. "Well, among other things he warned me that I'd have to choose soon. I guess I didn't choose soon enough." He was silent for a few moments. "Bastard."

"I don't know about that, but he is an evil arsehole."

Draco grunted in something close to humor. "True." He looked up at Harry. "Let's get something straight. I'm not going to join your side of noble, foolish idealists, Potter. I'm just using you and Black's money to get away from that insane half-blood."

Harry nodded, not really surprised. "Fair enough. Should I warn Snargtooth to expect you over Christmas holidays?"

Draco sighed and nodded. He stood and started to pull out his wand before he suddenly frowned. "What did Patil mean by the Yule Ball? Hogwarts isn't having one this year."

"The Abbotts. I'm surprised you didn't know they throw one. The Blacks - and the Malfoys based on what your mother mentioned - seem to get invited to all the big events."

Malfoy shook his head. "The pureblood group has our own Yule festival, of course, but Patil wouldn't have known about it. I doubt you'll be invited, considering your . . . family line." He held up a hand to Harry's frown. "That wasn't meant to be an insult, Baron Black. Merely a statement of fact. So you're being integrated into the economic block with Abbott, Patil, Longbottom, and that crowd?"

Harry slowly settled back down when it was clear he wasn't being insulted for no reason. "It seems so," he answered the question.

Nodding once, Draco dispelled his Privacy Sphere, to Remus's visible relief. "Thank you for your time, Lord-Baron," he said, reverting to the hyper-formal mode he usually displayed around Harry. "I shall be staying at the Leaky Cauldron over the holidays if you need to contact me."

Harry nodded. "Very well."

As Draco was leaving, Professor McGonagall appeared at Harry's table. "May I speak with you for a moment, Harry?"

Harry smiled at his latest visitor and waved toward the chair across from him. "Please, Professor."

"Harry," she chided him with a trace of humor, "I know you've been told to use my given name."

"I doubt you'll be anything except 'Professor McGonagall' to me," he answered with a smile. "Unless you'd prefer 'Lady McGonagall'."

She sighed and looked at her signet ring. "Not that it does me much good, mind you."

"But you have a seat on the Wizengamot. That reminds me, I'd appreciate if you attended the November meeting. Some of the legislation that will be introduced may be of personal interest to you." His eyes slid to Remus for a moment.

Her own eyes followed before coming back to him. "Is that a fact? I shall make a point of it, then." She straightened her already erect posture. "However, I have a school related matter to discuss with you." Her voice dropped and she whispered, "What did you do to the point system, Harry?"

Immediately casting his own Privacy Sphere, Harry let a feral grin form. "I made it fair, Minerva. Nothing more."

She looked confused and gestured to him in a request to continue.

"Let me guess. Slytherin is far behind in points, despite you and most of the other professors doing nothing different. Better still, Snape is complaining almost daily about it and the point system not working. Right?"

"Right in one. What did you do?" she repeated her earlier question.

"I just put a review in place. Anytime a professor tries to take or give more than three points to any single student within twenty-four hours, the headmaster portraits vote on whether it's justified. So if, for instance, Snape tries to dock Neville points for some petty reason, it won't happen because it isn't justified. Or if he docks Hermione ten points for 'being a know-it-all Gryffindor', those points will be GIVEN to Gryffindor because it's a made-up rule. Similarly, his trying to give points to Slytherin for the most asinine of reasons won't help because, again, they're unjustified."

McGonagall's lip twitched. "As Deputy Headmistress, I should be angry at you."

"What for? The same rules apply to all the professors, not just Snape. Is it my fault that he's the only one running afoul of the 'unjustified' portion of the rules?"

Her lip twitched again.

Harry's grin disappeared. "That bastard has been terrorizing students for far too long, Minerva. The headmaster won't take him to task for it, no matter how blatant it is. This is the only thing I can think of to do to help out the rest of the school." He sighed. "Just please don't mention this to anyone, especially Dumbledore or Snape."

She frowned but slowly nodded. "Very well. May I at least inform Filius and Pomona? According to the Hogwarts bylaws, a majority vote of house heads can override the headmaster on some items if it becomes necessary to do something about this situation." Her grin reappeared and turned mischievous. "Besides, Filius will find it incredibly amusing."

Harry laughed. "Minerva McGonagall has a vicious, mischievous streak? What happened to my former head of house?" he asked teasingly.

She relaxed and smiled honestly at him, an expression he'd never seen before. "She was humbled by one of her former student's actions, well within the laws and rules, to bring an injustice to heel. Well done, Harry. Well done indeed."

"Why, thank you. I do hope you have a good school year, Minerva."

She stood and dispelled his Privacy Sphere. She stepped over and laid a hand on his shoulder. "You, too, Harry. You, too."

Harry smiled at her as she walked away, which was how Ginny found him. She placed another butterbeer on the table in front of him.

"Hi, Ginny. Thanks."

"Don't mention it. How're you doing, Harry?"

He ignored her question. "Do you have plans for the Halloween Ball?"

She let it go for the moment. Instead, she smiled flirtatiously. "Are you asking me on a date, Harry? What will the press make of that?"

He gave her a sour look. "I see you read the paper this morning. No, it's just that I have a plan, and I need another woman to help."

"So now I'm the other woman?"

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head ruefully. "I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

She laughed. "Yep. What'd you have in mind?"

Harry explained his idea, keeping his voice below the increasing pub noises.

"Sneaky," she said with an approving smile.

"Why thank you. Comes from constant exposure to Slytherins, I think."

She laughed. "Sounds like a plan. I'll get my costume put together. Just remember to let me know how to act, okay?"

He nodded and looked down into his drink, his temporary good mood evaporating as other concerns came rushing back.

In a soft voice, she asked, "What's wrong, Harry?"

He sighed. "I know you read the Prophet this morning."

She nodded, looking annoyed.

"She suggested we go public."

"That'd fix the problem," Ginny agreed.

He stared at her. "But it'd be dangerous for her!"

She rolled her eyes. "Morgana give me strength," she pleaded to the ceiling. Her brown eyes pinned Harry in place. "Let me guess: You did your stupidly heroic and noble thing and told her that it shouldn't go public because it's dangerous, right? Or did you go one better and try to break up with her for 'her own good'?" She put air quotes around the last phrase with a mocking expression on her face.

Harry looked slightly angry. "No, I didn't try to break up with her, but I did mention how dangerous dating me would be if it were publicly known."

"Do you TRY to martyr yourself, you git?" Ginny asked in genuine curiosity.

"WHAT?"

"You're not only hurting HER by acting like you're ashamed of her, but you're hurting yourself in so many ways I won't bother to list them."

"I . . . But . . . That's not what I meant!"

She went on as if she hadn't heard. "If you did something like this to me, I think I'd first hex you six ways from Sunday and then yell at you for a while. Purely out of curiosity, did you talk with her and ASK her about this, or did you decide this like some pronouncement from Merlin?"

He just stared, mouth hanging open.

"Prat," she said, smiling at him with affection. "So bloody noble that you're hurting everyone. Now, listen to me carefully. Do you want to fix this?"

He nodded vigorously.

"Then do exactly what I say. First, go buy her favorite chocolates from Honeydukes. Second, go to her, give her the chocolates, and tell her that you know you're acting like an insensitive cad, promise to try to change, and beg her forgiveness. Understood?"

He nodded again.

"Then why are you still here?"

"We'll talk later about letting someone like Malfoy cast a Privacy Sphere around you!" Remus called after the retreating back of Harry Potter.

Harry barely heard him, so intent was he on getting up the stairs and to Nim's bedroom. He knocked.

"What?" Kelly Shackbolt opened the door. "You're back early. It's only been -" She stopped herself as she took in his expression and the box in his hand. She nodded and whispered, "Hurt her, and I'll string you up by your gonads." She stepped aside to allow him past before she left, closing the door behind her.

Tonks looked up from where she was sitting, cross-legged on the bed, and froze at the sight of Harry standing there. She had clearly been crying. Her eyes were bloodshot and her hair was an untidy mess, blues and browns mixing in no apparent order.

"I'm sorry," Harry blurted.

She didn't say anything, simply continuing to look at him. The fact that she hadn't tried to hex him was a good sign. He hoped.

He stepped forward and held the box of chocolate out to her. "Look, I know I was . . . what was the phrase? 'An insensitive cad.' That's it. So as a poor attempt to make it up, I got you some chocolate. I didn't know what kind you liked, so it's an assortment. I mean, I could have asked Shack, but as he wasn't supposed -" He stopped so suddenly his teeth clicked. "Sorry. I got you some chocolate."

He put the box down on her dresser and took a step away from her.

"Look, I know what I said earlier was rude, high-handed, and an all around bad thing to say aloud. I just want to keep you safe. I should have talked with you instead of . . . well, what I did. I'm sorry. I'll try not to do it again. Please forgive me."

She continued to stare at him.

"Please say something," he asked in a worried voice after two minutes of silence.

She looked over at the box for a moment before looking back up at him. "Who called you an insensitive cad?"

He blushed. "Ginny."

Tonks snorted in amusement. "I knew I liked that girl." She leveled her best 'I'm an auror, and I will gut you where you stand if you piss me off' stare at him. "So what are we going to do about this?"

Harry thought for a moment. "I'm going to take out a full page ad in the Prophet tomorrow stating that I'm dating the most forgiving metamorphmagus in the world?" he offered.

She made another noise of amusement. "You're trying too hard, Harry."

He smiled hesitantly. "Does that mean I'm forgiven?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

His smile vanished.

"Oh, stop looking like someone cursed your pet kneazle." She gave a chocking laugh and held up her arms like a toddler asking for a hug.

He picked up the smaller woman and held on for dear life.

Scion of Gryffindor 27 - Halloween Ball

Ginny Weasley stood in the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. With being a redhead from a family of redheads, all of which had been Gryffindors for generations, she felt very out of place wearing a formal black robe with yellow trim.

Neville, with Hannah on his arm, came up the steps from the direction of the Hufflepuff common room. Spotting her, the couple came over.

"I like the colors you're wearing," Hannah said with a grin.

"Hey, you're not defecting, are you?" Neville asked humorously.

Hannah turned to him. "What's wrong with Hufflepuff?"

"Nothing, dear, but if she changes houses, we'll lose our seeker," he answered calmly.

Ginny laughed. "Sorry, Hannah, I'm not changing houses. This is part of my costume." She looked at the outfits that the couple in front of her were wearing. "Robin Hood and Maid Marian?"

Hannah smiled while Neville blushed.

"So who's Little John and who's the Sherriff of Nott?"

Hogwarts main entrance opened, drawing the eye of everyone in the Entrance Hall.

First to enter was Merlin. He wore a plain gray robe, leaned on a walking staff that was capped with a brilliant sapphire, and had an owl perched upon his shoulder.

Next in, head held high and stride purposeful, was Godric Gryffindor. He wore scarlet robes with gold trim. A sword swung at his hip.

Rowena Ravenclaw glided in, wearing midnight blue with bronze trim. Her face bespoke calm and intelligence.

Lastly, Salazar Slytherin entered, wearing jade green robes with silver at the cuffs. His only ornamentation was a highly detailed, snake-shaped brooch done in silver.

Godric, Salazar, and Merlin all drew wands and flicked them at Ginny. As she was warned about this beforehand, she suppressed her initial impulse to dive to the side and pull out her own wand. Within moments, she had seemingly grown several inches and her hair had grown out and turned black.

Godric bowed before her. "Lady Hufflepuff, it would honor me to escort you to Hogwarts All Hallow's Eve Ball."

Suppressing the urge to giggle, Ginny curtsied to him. "It will be my honor, my Lord Gryffindor."

Arm in arm, Godric and Helga entered the Great Hall, followed closely by Salazar and Rowena.

Merlin turned a benign smile upon the dumbstruck students. "What, have none of you ever heard of the Founders of Hogwarts? Go on. Shoo. Go in there and enjoy the party." Not getting any reaction aside from some stunned blinks, Merlin shrugged. Leaning heavily upon his staff, he went toward the Great Hall and could be heard muttering to the owl on his shoulder, "What do you think, Archimedes? Are those four kids worth keeping out of trouble?"

Five minutes earlier, in the Great Hall.

Albus Dumbledore was enjoying himself.

He wore a set of very dark blue robes that he'd added twinkling lights to. He'd introduced himself to Professor Sinistra as "Night Sky". At first, the astronomy professor snorted in amusement, but shortly she was studying his robes in fascination.

The house-elves were busy preparing a feast fit for a king. As, indeed, there was more than one king in attendance. Kings, queens, knights, Amazon warriors, historical figures, and current pop stars took the place of the former student body. They were arranged around the room in tables that could seat ten. A stage that would eventually hold the live band (he'd booked The High Jinx) stood in front of a dance floor.

The last few students were straggling in, so Dumbledore stood. The Hall quieted as everyone turned to him. "Good evening, everyone. I would first

like to thank Professors Flitwick and Hagrid for the marvelous decorations." He led the students in a round of polite applause. "Next, before we begin the feast that has been prepared for us, I would like to announce that there will be a costume contest. Please see Professor McGonagall," he gestured to the stately witch dressed as a high Victorian lady, "to register your votes, beginning after the first dance. Now, we -"

He stopped, his attention totally caught by the four magicians entering the Great Hall. They were clearly dressed as the Founders and, as a group, were radiating magic of all kinds. It was nearly dazzling. He blinked his eyes clear as a fifth, dressed as Merlin he presumed, joined them.

Dumbledore's reaction was spotted by everyone in the room. Almost as one, the students turned and stared at the newcomers, ignoring the remaining students sneaking into the room from behind them.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "It seems we have a few guests. May I inquire as to your names?"

Godric laughed a booming laugh. "Headmaster, are not the Four Founders welcome in this, our school?"

Merlin harrumphed.

"Ah, yes. And the surly curmudgeon, Merlin the Great, as well?" Godric added as an afterthought.

Merlin rapped his staff upon Godric's head. "Insolent upstart." Archimedes hooted as if scolding Godric as well.

"I . . . Well, yes, of course," Dumbledore stammered, his usually unflappable countenance shattered.

Rowena frowned prettily at one of the large tables. Taking her wand in hand, she waved it and muttered a few words before the table shrunk and five of the chairs disappeared. Godric held a seat for Helga and then for Rowena. Merlin dropped himself into a seat with no fanfare. Salazar, after waving his wand around for a few seconds, slid into the remaining seat. All five turned toward Dumbledore expectantly.

"Ah . . . yes. Yes, tuck in!" Dumbledore belatedly said.

Food appeared on all the plates, but most of the attention of the Hall was still on the five sitting by themselves in the back.

Filius Flitwick, dressed as a court jester, handed McGonagall a sickle. Her sparkling eyes matched his wide grin.

Albus Dumbledore suddenly wasn't enjoying himself anymore.

"Who are they?" a voice hissed in his ear.

With the dinner over and the band beginning to tune up, Albus looked over at his defense professor. "I am uncertain, Severus. Presumably Harry and his three friends. I know that Miss Weasley was spotted earlier dressed in black and yellow, so I am confident that she is Lady Hufflepuff. I will presume that Lady Ravenclaw is therefore Miss Tonks. Mrs. Shacklebolt is possible, but less likely I believe. I am uncertain as to the specific identities of the remaining three, but they must be Harry, Kingsley, and Remus."

"Potter is likely Gryffindor," Snape spat. "His ego would absolutely demand it."

Dumbledore kept silent on the speculation. He didn't dare admit Harry's lineage. There was no telling Severus's reaction to that news. "I have been unable to access any of their minds beyond Miss Weasley's, and she does not know their identities either. She is certain that one of them is indeed Harry, but beyond that . . . Are you able to determine which is which from here?"

Snape grudgingly shook his head. "No. Even their wands all look the same. I've no idea who is which, and I would love to know how they managed it. Potter was an abysmal student, so it can't be occlumency." Snape stood and stalked straight through the room, heading toward the five in question. When he got to within ten feet of the table, he stumbled and turned himself around, heading back toward the staff table. He'd only gone one step when he stopped and spun in place with a snarl.

Recognizing the effects of a Stay Away Charm, Albus crossed the room to stand beside his upset professor. Even the band had stopped what they were doing to watch. Calling across the open space, Dumbledore said, "I am heartened that you decided to attend, Lord-Baron Potter."

They all ignored the headmaster. Instead, they were watching the former potions professor silently fuming.

"Mr. Snape, you seem to have something on your chest," Merlin observed.

"So, please speak it," Godric invited.

"Potter, what'd you do to the point system? My Slytherins are being unjustly punished!"

"Your Slytherins?" Salazar asked quietly. "Funny, I was under the impression that they were MY Slytherins."

Snape's face contorted further. "You imbecile, you know what I mean. You aren't Lord Slytherin anymore than Potter there is Lord Gryffindor," he finished with a sneer and gesture at Godric.

"My, you are upset, aren't you?" Merlin asked with a smile. "Perhaps you need some Blood-Pressure Reducing Potion?"

"A nice Calming Draught, perhaps," Helga suggested.

Please, let us all act as adults," Dumbledore implored.

Godric looked at him in amusement. "We are. Is it our fault that Mr. Snape cannot control his anger?"

"A good laxative would do you wonders," Rowena said to Snape.

Snape gave a wordless scream of aggravation before fuming, glaring, and fingering his wand.

Godric sighed and raised his wand. "*Accio* Sorting Hat." The seven magicians were silent until the Sorting Hat flew into the room and landed his hand. He placed it onto the table and said, "Greetings, Hogwarts Sorting Hat."

Alistair the Sorting Hat replied in a tone of grand amusement. "Lord Gryffindor. It has been quite some time since I've spoken with you or your companions. How may I help you?"

"Professor Snape has accused one Harry Potter of manipulating the point system to work against Slytherin house," Salazar replied. "I'm concerned that anyone may have biased the points against my house."

Merlin said, "As you're the most direct link we have to the magics of Hogwarts, we're hoping you could clear up this little mystery before Mr. Snape pops that pulsing vein in his forehead."

Alistair seemed to turn in place to address the angry professor. "I assure you, Professor Snape, that the point system is totally fair and completely unbiased. You are working under the same rules set that the other professors are."

"You're lying," Snape stated flatly.

Alistair seemed to sigh. "Albus, we have warned you and warned you. He's now refusing to see the truth that's laid before him. You need to control him, for his own good."

Eyes flaring, Snape started to draw his wand before he suddenly froze in place.

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry, please release him."

"Lord-Baron Potter," Alistair the Sorting Hat emphasized slightly, "did nothing. Hogwarts herself is protecting me. He's brought this upon himself, Albus."

Dumbledore looked old and tired by this point. "If he promises to leave you in peace, will he be released?"

Snape snapped back into motion. Glaring malevolently at Godric and Alistair, he turned around and stalked away.

Dumbledore looked sadly at his departing professor. He turned and looked toward Godric. "Lord-Baron, may I speak with you privately?"

Without warning, Godric had a powerful and blatant version of the Trust Me Charm radiating out from him. He made no effort to hide what he'd done as the magic caused ripples of reaction in the sea of silently watching students. "Lord-Baron Potter only wishes to enjoy a Halloween Ball this evening, Headmaster," Godric said with a level stare, challenging Dumbledore to accuse him of using a spell that Dumbledore himself always had active.

Albus Dumbledore bowed his head in acknowledgement of all the points that had been made. He turned and left without a word.

Godric let the charm evaporate. After a few moments, the students turned back to their own tables, now chattering excitedly. After a few more moments, the band resumed their setup.

"Well, this has been fun," Helga said ironically.

"Indeed," Alistair said. "Incidentally, Lord Gryffindor, you should be informed that Professor Snape has resorted to using detentions in place of points. As there are no checks against him doing so . . ."

Rowena shook her head. "Why doesn't that surprise me? How petty can he get?"

"Never ask a question that you do not wish to hear the answer to," Alistair wisely said.

"I think we already know the answer to the question anyway," Merlin noted dryly. "As to the detentions, I predict that THAT little loophole will be closed shortly."

Rowena looked at him in amusement. "Merlin the Great Seer has spoken?"

Merlin looked highly affronted. "Respect your elders, young lady. I can still put you over my knee if I need to."

Alistair and Helga just laughed.

As the applause after the last dance died away, Professor McGonagall stepped onto the stage. "I have here the results of the costume contest." A rustling of robes was heard as everyone turned to look at her. Her eyes sparkled in mirth. "Unfortunately, the first two places were won by non-students. Namely Godric Gryffindor and Merlin." She nodded toward the back table, still holding the unapproachable quintet.

Godric and Merlin smiled. Rowena looked very put out that she hadn't won. Helga and Salazar merely looked amused. Snape's teeth were grinding audibly.

"Therefore," McGonagall went on, "the award goes to Ginny Weasley and companions."

The four sitting with her broke into applause, joined immediately by most of the students.

As Ginny / Helga walked toward McGonagall, Merlin passed a knut to Salazar.

After Ginny accepted a small trophy with a harlequin mask on it, she smiled out at the sea of applauding students with visible embarrassment. Once the clapping had died down, she said, "In the spirit of our esteemed headmaster, I have only a few words: nitwit, blubber, oddment, tweak."

At the last word, every male in the room, minus Salazar, Godric, and Merlin, abruptly transformed into an animal.

After one stunned moment, Godric stood and said in a Sonorus Charm enhanced voice, "That, I believe, is our cue to leave. Fear not, my fine fellows. The transformations will fade in five minutes." Godric led the other three out the door.

They heard Ginny trying to explain to McGonagall that she honestly HADN'T know about the prank beforehand as the four exited the castle.

The sound of feminine laughter from within the castle carried much further than that.

Back in Gryffindor Keep and dressed in casual clothes, the four pranksters were describing the end of the evening to the remaining two adults.

"Dumbledore turned into a giant albino bug of some kind."

"A bumblebee, of course!"

Laughter. "I should've expected that!"

"Did you see Snape? He was a BAT."

"Probably a vampire bat."

Laughter.

"Let's see, I think Ron was a weasel, Draco became a hippogriff, Seamus was a zebra, and Filch was a mutt dog. Who else?"

"Flitwick became a lion of all things. Hagrid was a mantichora."

"Must've made him happy."

"Probably. I think I saw Zack Smith become a baboon."

"Slughorn became, unsurprisingly, a giant slug with a horn."

"I also saw an ostrich, an elephant, a giraffe, and least three bunny rabbits in that mélange."

"Regular zoo, wasn't it?"

"Wish I coulda been there to see it!"

"Great job on the occlumency potion, by the way."

"I'm so envious of YOU, especially."

"Well, not all of us could be Lord Gryffindor."

"Yes, it takes a special person to pull it off properly."

"Indubitably. Style, panache -"

"Overblown ego . . ."

"Hey!"

Laughter.

"That transformation powder was great. Remind me to write Fred and George tomorrow to tell them that they're geniuses."

"Remind me to never get on their bad side!"

Scion of Gryffindor 28 - A Day of Training

"Harry."

Harry kept pacing.

"Harry!"

Harry kept pacing, muttering to himself.

"I guess you're not interested in watching me do a striptease, then? Oh, well. Maybe I'll see if Godric is busy."

Harry stopped pacing. After blinking a few times, he focused on Nim and gave her a lopsided smile. "I'm sure I can come up with some really disgusting comment about necrophilia, but I'll be nice and not go there."

"Thank you," she said dryly but with a sparkle in her eye. "Are you finally calm enough to listen?"

Harry sighed. "It's the attack last night. A hundred and twenty-three muggles dead, and I'm here doing NOTHING about it. I'm -"

"- frustrated. Yeah, I figured that out all on my own."

Harry grinned in embarrassment before turning it back on her. "That's what I love about you, Nim. Your razor-sharp mind."

"You only love me for my mind? Don't get me wrong - I'm happy for that - but finally getting you to bed will be REALLY boring if we all we do is talk about magical theory."

Harry, flushing slightly, sighed. "Nim, I'm sorry, but I'm not in the mood for the teasing right now."

"Why do you keep thinking I'm teasing you, Harry?" she asked in genuine curiosity.

Instead of waiting for him to find his tongue after this comment (his wide-eyed, gob smacked look indicated that it might be awhile), she said, "I know you're angry and frustrated about the deez attack. There's nothing you can do about it now, though. Reading between the lines, neither the Order nor the aurors were there in time to do any good. If their intelligence didn't help, then we sure had no hope of knowing about it. There's no reason to beat yourself up over it."

"Now," she said in a tone of changing the subject, "how about we do another morphing lesson to take your mind off of things?"

Harry sighed and nodded agreement.

She conjured chairs for the both of them and dropped down in one. Waving her hand in invitation toward the other, she said, "You've proven you can change the length of your hair. You'll eventually be able to affect the length of your fingernails for the same reason, specifically because it's just 'dead' material. Similarly, since you finally managed to change the color of your hair last week, you should be able to change the color of your eyes. We'll work on that next."

"But it takes me forever to affect my hair," Harry said in just short of a whine.

She looked at him sternly. "All things improve with practice, Potter. Even that annoying tone of voice, but if I ever hear it again, I'll rip your vocal chords out through your ears. Do you understand me?"

Harry blinked. "Yes, ma'am."

She sighed. "Don't ever call me ma'am. You're an adult, and I'm trying to treat you like one. Whining like that is counterproductive, so don't do it. Got it?"

Harry nodded, recognizing her point. "Got it."

"Good. Now, back to changing your eye color." She turned and conjured a standing mirror, so Harry could look at his own face.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, they're real."

Harry paused for only a moment. "Good to know, but that's not what I was going to ask."

"Oh, sorry. February second; five-six; nine stone; in natural form: thirty-five, twenty-six, thirty-five; C cup. Did I answer whatever it was?" She smiled winningly at him.

Harry blinked at the onslaught of information, not understanding all of it but filing it all away for later research. "On the subject of metamorphs," he said, dragging the conversation back to topic, "you said I could change eye color. What about skin color? For that matter, you're sure I can change fingernail length, but how about facial structure or height? Heck, could I fix my eyesight?"

She slowly settled back into her chair with a thoughtful look. "You know, that's a good question. The one about the eyesight anyway. We'll study that one later. As for skin color, yes. Facial features, yes, eventually. Height, no. Well, yes, but only by about an inch, and I never bothered to practice it." She took pity on his confusion and said, "I'll explain a bit, THEN we'll practice your eye color, okay?"

"Now, height. Bones cannot be morphed. Period. It's hard, living material and, so, can't be fiddled with. I suppose if some morpher were truly crazy, they could try, but while you're my student, you'll do no such thing. Without being able to adjust the length of the bones, height is limited dramatically. In theory, we could fiddle with the joints a little and add or subtract fractions of an inch in height per joint that way, but that would be a lot of work for only an inch or two at most.

"Skin color. Yes, you can change it, but that takes a lot more work than eyes or hair. Unless you want to end up looking like a zebra, anyway." She grinned and stared through him for a moment, apparently reliving a memory.

She shook her head and went on. "Facial structure. That's actually two separate things. Muscles and cartilage. I'm pretty good at it, but mostly I work with cartilage. As a male, you'll probably be more inclined to do it using muscle. Size and shape of the jaw and lines of the cheeks, for instance.

"Body structure is muscle and fatty tissues. Again, you'll probably be more likely to do it with muscles, whereas I tend to do it with fatty tissues."

"The reason I'm more likely to use muscles in my changes goes back to the fact that female metamorphs exist to attract mates and males to defend, right?" Harry asked, trying to keep it all straight in his head.

"Right. Tim - Tim Joye, my metamorph trainer - had an easier time moving muscles around than . . . damn, what was her name? Something about horses. The morpher witch I mentioned in Glasgow." Tonks frowned and shrugged. "Can't remember. Anyway, she and I can do cartilage and fats easier than Tim can. Did I answer all your questions?"

Harry thought about it. "What about other tissues? Organs and like that?"

She tilted her head and smiled slightly. "What, you want to grow another lung?"

He gave her a sour look. "I was thinking more along the lines of healing damage taken, actually."

She thought about it for a moment. "I've never tried consciously. Subconsciously, I think I do something since I seem to heal a lot faster than healers and nurses ever seem to expect. Incidentally, barring fatal injury the life expectancy of morphers is something like fifty years longer than average, too."

"Nerves?"

"Sorry, Harry, you can't grow a second brain." She laughed at his expression before saying, "Surface nerves can move a little bit, mostly moving with the new skin surface. That reminds me; skin can't be added or removed except in very small amounts, which effectively limits us, too. I can't add a couple inches of tissue to the tip of each finger to increase my reach, putting webbing between my fingers, or anything of that sort."

"Try gillyweed. That'll give you webbed hands."

She stared at him. "How in the name of Merlin would you know that?"

"How do you think I completed the second task in the Tri-Wizard Tournament?"

"Oh, is that what you did? I heard it was a Bubble-Head Charm."

"Cedric and Fleur did that. Anyway, what was that about fixing my eyes?"

She chewed on her lip. "If it's just nearsightedness, maybe. That's caused by the shape of the eyeball, if I remember my basic anatomy correctly."

"While you're thinking about that one, how about night vision?"

"You've been reading too much fiction. Sorry, that's a nerve function."

"Hearing, touch, taste - all the same thing?"

"Morgana, you're full of questions!" she said in feigned exasperation before grinning at him. "Your hearing is already as good as it can get for you. Your innate magic already saw to that one as you were growing up, which is the same for all morphers. Touch and smell are nerve functions. I know you already have wonderful taste. You're dating the most charming witch in the world, after all."

He laughed. "Can't argue that point."

She smiled and privately congratulated herself on shaking him out of his bad mood. Waving her hand at the mirror, she got her student back to

work.

"Merlin, you're bad at this, Harry."

Harry gave Shack an aggravated look. "Thank you for your wonderful words of encouragement, teacher mine."

He shrugged. "Hey, I just call 'em like I see 'em. Look, the same thing has been going on for months. When I give you a set of brewing instructions, you're pretty good at it, but when I quiz you on the theory of WHY something works, you stuff it all up. What's up with that?"

"How in the name of Magic I would know why dragon nail clippings react badly with hippopotamus tears?"

Shack just stared at him. "That is one of the most obvious -" He shook his head. "No. Okay, let's back up. What do you know about the reagent table?"

"The what table?"

Shack groaned and put his head into a hand. "That deranged spawn of a mentally diseased flobberworm never even SHOWED you the reagent table?"

Harry laughed at the description. "No, he didn't. Why?"

"Because it's the basis of why you should or shouldn't mix ingredients." Shack sighed. "How the bloody hell did he expect anyone to learn anything?"

"Aside from his Slytherins, I don't think he really did want us to learn anything."

"I believe it." Shack rummaged around in one of the advanced potions manuals before pulling a poster out, unfolding it, and sticking it to the wall. "Okay. Here is the reagent table." He gave Harry a few minutes to look it over before he went on, "Now, if you look where two categories intersect, you'll see a reaction index and also the category or categories of neutralizing agents. Let's take the case in point. If you cross the categories of mammal tears with draconian claws. . ."

"So how's your day been?"

Harry dropped tiredly into a chair in front of Godric and sighed. "That article this morning . . ."

Godric nodded sadly. "According to what my portrait has overheard, it was part training and part morale building for the new Death Eaters. You already know what their idea of morale building is."

Harry shuddered and forcefully changed the subject. "Well, to answer your question, I changed my eyes to purple and learned that Snape is an INTENTIONAL bastard rather than simply an incompetent teacher."

"And you had any doubt of that after your occlumency lessons?"

"Good point. Well, okay, I have more proof now. He didn't show us the reagent table."

"That's something that the kids raised a wizarding household would know already."

"And this is somehow supposed to help the muggle-raised in his class?"

"You don't need to convince me, Harry."

"Yeah." Harry let out an explosive breath. "Sorry for venting on you."

Godric laughed.

"So what's the plan today?"

"How're you doing with wandless levitation?"

Harry pointed his hand at a book on the table. "*Tomeardium leviosa* ." The book floated up about a foot and then held steady.

Godric smirked. "Give me that armband."

Harry grinned. He calmly rolled up his sleeve and removed the armband before handing it to Godric. The book continued to placidly float the entire time.

Godric laughed. "Okay, NOW I'm impressed." He waved a hand at the book, breaking Harry's spell. The book fell to the table with a thump. "How about wordlessly?"

Harry imitated Godric's hand motion, and the book floated back up to its previous position.

"Show off. You've been practicing, haven't you?"

"Yep. Practicing wandless spells is more fun than playing with Shack's potions that contain such wonderful ingredients like pickled rat brains and virgin camel tears."

Godric stared silently for a moment before he shook his head. "I don't want to know. Back to the subject of charms and defense: now that you've got this spell figured out, I'm going to show you another one. It's called the Deflecting Charm. The incantation is 'deflecto'. With a wand, it's just a flick in the direction you want to deflect the item away. In addition to changing the direction of the object you're focusing on, it'll also lose a lot of its momentum. I'll start with throwing pillows at you for you to deflect. Then you'll do it wandlessly then wordlessly. Then we'll go up to heavier objects coming at you faster."

"What's the limit on the spell?" Harry asked in curiosity.

"It's limited to your reflexes and the power you can put into it. A thrown rock is easy to deal with. An arrow or something moving faster is easy IF you spot it coming early enough. Something REALLY heavy, boulders for instance, are probably too heavy." Godric waved a hand and conjured a small pile of pillows. "Okay, draw your wand and move over in front of the door. For the moment, deflect them in any direction you want. We'll work on aim later. Okay, ready? Here we go."

Harry grinned and brought his wand up into a guard position. The first pillow came at him in a gentle flight. "*Deflecto* ."

"So how's your day been?"

"Eventful. Learned a lot, though. One of my teachers is a real slave driver. She -" Harry's words were cut off when she stuck her tongue out at him. He laughed at her.

"Slave driver," she muttered in amusement. "I'll show you slave driver."

"I didn't know you were into that kind of thing," he continued to tease her.

Her expression caused him to gulp. "Instead of pursuing that," he hurriedly went on, "let's talk about . . ." He trailed off, clearly at a loss.

She took pity on him. "I know the teasing makes you uncomfortable, Harry. I just don't want you to think that I'm not interested." He blushed. She smiled and went on, "So instead, let's talk about what we're doing here."

Harry looked around in confusion. They were on one of the flat roof areas of Gryffindor Keep. Dobby had put a small table in place and had prepared an exquisite meal just for the two of them. Between the starlight, moonlight, and the single candle on the table, there was just enough light to see each other, but they could also see thousands of twinkling stars. A few Warming Charms kept the temperature much more comfortable than November would otherwise be. "We're just having dinner, aren't we?" Harry asked innocently.

She stared at him. "One of the most romantic settings I've ever even HEARD of, and he calls it 'just dinner'! I swear, you're -" She stopped herself when she spotted the grin he was losing control of. "Oh, you," she huffed, slumping back in her chair. Then she smiled.

Deciding to enact the next part of his plan, Harry looked over at the wizarding wireless set and waved a hand at it. Soft music flowed out. He stood and offered her a hand in silent invitation.

Smiling, she took it and stood, allowing him to lead her a couple steps from the table. He gently pulled her unresisting form into his arms, and they began dancing under the moonlight.

Scion of Gryffindor 29 - Wizengamot Meeting

"Hiya, Harry."

Harry turned as he was walking through the hallway on the fifth floor of the ministry. "Neville! Hi, mate. How's everything?" Harry saw movement over Neville's shoulder and looked over to see Professor McGonagall and Draco Malfoy walk up.

"Lord-Baron Potter," McGonagall greeted him. "I was just escorting Barons Malfoy and Longbottom to the meeting."

"Lady McGonagall," Harry said with a smile. "I'm heading that way myself." He waved an arm. "Please, lead the way. I don't know where I'm going, so I'd appreciate the guidance."

She nodded agreeably and led the three silent young men through two hallways and then a set of double doors.

Harry was moderately impressed with the room on the other side of the doors. Tiered, ornate seating moved up from a central spot. It reminded Harry vaguely of a muggle cinema he'd seen pictures of, if somewhat smaller and more ornate. At a desk in front of the door and at the front of the room, Albus Dumbledore smiled over at the arriving foursome. "Minerva! I was unaware you were planning on attending this meeting."

Her eyes shifted to Harry for a moment. "Lord-Baron Potter mentioned that one of the items on the agenda would be of personal interest."

Dumbledore looked momentarily confused.

"Minister," Harry let some sarcasm creep into his words at the title, "Fudge has promised to introduce legislation at this meeting."

"Ah, is that what Cornelius wished to speak with us about this afternoon? I had wondered." He shifted his attention to the other two. "Baron Malfoy and Baron Longbottom. Welcome."

"Headmaster," Neville said with a little bow.

"Lord Dumbledore," Draco greeted him correctly but with a noticeable lack of warmth.

Dumbledore ignored the tone of Malfoy's greeting. "Please, take any seats you wish. We shall be starting shortly." He turned to greet the next person coming through the door.

Draco walked off without a word, taking a seat in a relatively empty area. McGonagall headed immediately toward a group of witches that appeared to be about her age. Harry looked around at the few dozen faces in the room, recognizing Elder McComb from his day in court in late August. He nodded to her politely and continued scanning the room until he came across Marcus Abbott. Harry immediately headed toward a seat close to him and was unsurprised when Neville followed close behind.

"Harry, Neville," Marcus greeted them with a smile.

"Mr. Abbott," Harry said taking the older man's hand.

"Mr. Abbott," Neville repeated, smiling nervously.

Abbott shook his head at Harry. "I insist that you call me Marcus." He turned to Neville and smiled. "Neville, how many times have I asked you to call me by my first name? If you're dating Hannah, it's only reasonable."

Harry laughed as he took a seat. "Neville? I didn't realize you'd been dating her all that long."

Neville, flushing fiercely, dropped into the next seat. Coincidentally on the other side away from Marcus.

Marcus was grinning. "Since summer before last, actually. They've tried to keep it low-key, but after the Equinox Ball . . ." He trailed off with a shrug.

"Good on you, mate," Harry said with a smile at Neville. He turned to Marcus. "He's a good bloke. A real asset in the D.A. and at the ministry fight in June."

All humor fled from Abbott's face. "I'd heard rumors, Lord-Baron, but I'm afraid the full details haven't been released. Are you saying that Baron Longbottom was one of the students there?"

Harry nodded and spoke quietly. "I wasn't aware it was still being kept quiet. Yes, Neville was there. He made a good showing for himself, too. Fought even after getting wounded and took a Cruciatus Curse from Lestranger."

"Harry," Neville quietly asked his friend to stop without actually saying the words.

"Neville, if the story isn't out there, it SHOULD be. If everyone learns that six school kids fought a dozen deez to a standstill, then maybe more would fight back. If everyone would stand up to them, you KNOW that the deez would fold up."

"Six of you stopped a dozen of them?" Marcus asked with a very impressed look.

"Yes, sir," Harry said firmly.

"With what Harry taught us," Neville added, trying to throw more of the spotlight back on his friend.

"Well . . ."

Abbott laughed. "I never quite believed Hannah when she said how much you dislike the spotlight, Harry."

Harry looked very sour. "I don't go looking for all the attention, sir."

"The Prophet , Witch Weekly , and all the others are concerned with selling issues." He shrugged. "Stories about you sell." He got a thoughtful look. "However, you DO deserve some sort of recognition for what you did."

"No, I don't. I just did what had to be done."

Surprising Harry, Neville laughed along with Marcus. "Proving you DO deserve the recognition," Marcus observed.

Harry just shook his head.

A thumping sound came from the front, and everyone turned forward to see Dumbledore rapping a large, wooden object upon the table. "Lords, Ladies, Barons, Baronesses, and guests, I call this, the seven hundred and fifty-third meeting of the British Wizengamot to order. Be advised that all magic is tracked in this room and duels are not permitted to be issued during the course of our meeting. Only those wearing a signet ring or carrying one by proxy are permitted to vote." All of this was said calmly, but the bored expressions of everyone told Harry that this was just the rote opening of the meetings.

Dumbledore shuffled some of the parchment on the table before he pulled one out and said, "Our first item of business today is the assignment of Mr. Mercini to the post of Ambassador to the Magical Ministry of Italy. Does anyone wish to make testimony for or against?"

A middle-aged witch stood and made her way to the floor.

"He's an honest man from an honest family of ambassadors," Marcus said quietly. "Nothing interesting will happen with this vote. He's going to win easily."

Neville nodded agreement as the witch stood in front of the desk and started droning about what a fine job she was sure Mercini would do.

"Merlin, she's as bad as Binns," Harry whispered.

Marcus laughed quietly. "The assignments are always the boring part of these meetings."

Indeed the vast majority of the attendees weren't even paying attention. One even looked like he was settling down for a nap.

"So what DOES happen at these meetings?" Harry whispered to Marcus.

"Ambassador assignments like these and then the legislation part, usually after lunch. During that, we can nullify any of the laws that Fudge has written in the past year - those Ministerial Decrees you occasionally see in the Prophet . If we don't nullify a Decree, it becomes official law after a year. Or we can pass any laws ourselves, though we don't do that much."

"But those Decrees are enforced immediately, right?"

Marcus nodded.

"So what happens if some Decree is inhumane and needs to be nullified before the next Wizengamot meeting?"

"An emergency meeting can be called with the signatures of thirty voters. I think the last time that happened was during You-Know-Who's uprising before you were born."

The three were silent for a few minutes, listening to the witch drone on about Mercini.

"Are you allowed to tell me about this fight in June?" Marcus asked eventually.

Harry looked at Neville for permission. Neville frowned for a moment before he shrugged, so Harry told the story, omitting the prophecy and the fact that Harry had originally gone in order to rescue someone who didn't need rescuing. As he was speaking, Harry briefly wondered how his friends would react to his telling the story to Mr. Abbott. He carefully didn't name the other four in an effort to protect them.

At the end of Harry's story, Abbott sat back and thought for a bit. "You left more than a few things out of that, but I don't blame you. Well done, both of you."

"Thank you, sir."

Harry settled back in his chair and observed the proceedings. Abbott was right, the assignments were quite boring, but they had to be done.

A half-dozen votes - and three hours - later, Dumbledore rapped on the table. "We will take a half-hour lunch break and then move on to new business."

A piece of paper appeared, floating in front of Harry. He blinked but realized what was going on as he heard Marcus order his lunch. After Harry had read the menu and ordered his sandwich, it arrived on top of a small table that also magically appeared.

"Wizengamot members do get some nice perks," Harry observed.

Abbott shrugged. "Maybe, but mostly it's just boring meetings two days a year." Lunch conversation centered around Hogwarts and the differences between Marcus and Harry's school years. Neville was mostly quiet, only adding his opinion when one of the other two directly asked him.

When the last plate had been cleared, Dumbledore again rapped the table. "Minister Fudge wishes to speak with us in a half-hour. Does anyone wish to challenge any of the recent Ministerial Decrees?"

Harry frowned. He was tempted to speak against the Werewolf Restrictions, but they DID serve one useful function. The either forced the Fenrir Greybacks of the country to come in or make them live under an effective death sentence. It was cruel to the neutral and good werewolves, but Harry couldn't see a way of trying to curb the bad lycanthropes otherwise.

While Harry was thinking, Dumbledore was looking around the silent room. "No? Then does anyone have any new business they wish to present before Minister Fudge speaks with us?"

Marcus Abbott stood, and Dumbledore indicated he could speak. Unlike most of the previous speakers, Marcus stayed where he was, his voice carrying easily. "Witches and wizards, greetings. For those who don't know me, I'm Baron Marcus Abbott. Originally, I didn't intend to bring any business forward, but I was just told a story that I think this body needs to act upon."

"Oh, bloody hell," Harry muttered. Neville's expression mirrored his own.

Abbott didn't change expression even though he'd heard Harry's words. "We've all heard the rumors of a fight in the ministry of magic in June. We know eleven Death Eaters were arrested. What we haven't been told is who they were fighting. According to the story I just heard from Lord-Baron Potter, it was six STUDENTS, including two of our own Wizengamot members, who fought an even dozen Death Eaters to a standstill. After a long, running fight, both sides of the conflict received reinforcements, culminating in a duel between Chief Warlock Dumbledore and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

A rumbling started in the room as many voices began whispering with their neighbors. Dumbledore sat at his table and simply twinkled.

Abbott continued, "Therefore, I would like to propose the British Wizengamot award the six students in question the Order of the Griffon." Finished, Marcus took his seat again. He carefully did not look in Harry's direction.

More excited chattering broke out.

One of the other wizards stood and spoke. "Far be it from me to question the honesty of Lord-Baron Potter, but perhaps we should conduct an investigation as to the facts of the matter before awarding anyone with anything."

As he sat down, Dumbledore stood. "I agree, Baron Parkinson, that this body should get all the facts before making any awards. However, as Baron Abbott has stated, I was a personal witness to many of the events in question. Lord-Baron Potter, Baron Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Ginevra Weasley, Ronald Weasley, and Hermione Granger did indeed fight a battle in June. The eleven accused Death Eaters plus Bellatrix Lestrange were fought to a virtual standstill until I and some comrades, including a few active aurors, were able to come to their aid. Unfortunately, in the resulting confusion Mrs. Lestrange and Voldemort both escaped."

Parkinson shuddered, as did nearly everyone else. "That may be, Dumbledore, but we need an independent -" he said stubbornly.

"As such," Dumbledore went on smoothly, "I would like to propose that the Wizengamot vote on provisionally awarding these six named individuals the Order of the Griffon, the provision naturally being confirmation of their standing up to the tyranny of Voldemort." He beamed up at Harry.

Harry, meanwhile, was glaring at his former headmaster. He was caught in a box, and he knew it. Any attempts to downplay his part could easily be explained by his well-known aversion to public attention. McGonagall and Neville would testify to that innocently enough at Dumbledore's urging. Most anything else he could do - like insisting that the adults get this award, too - would result in public exposure of the Order of the Phoenix. Much as he disagreed with Dumbledore personally, he didn't want to endanger the other Order members. He wished that Dumbledore hadn't named the other students, though. He hadn't told Abbott the other four names in an effort to spare them the infamy; as much of a media circus his own life was, he didn't wish that on his friends. As for the Death Eaters, he wasn't worried about them becoming more of a target; Bellatrix would've seen them all, and with Wormtail viewing a pensieve memory of hers, all of them were likely known to Voldemort.

Not realizing that she was helping to trap her former student, McGonagall stood and said, "I second the motion by Baron Abbott."

The vote was taken quickly. Harry, Neville, Parkinson, and Malfoy all voted against. Harry was perversely thankful to Malfoy for this. With everyone else voting for giving the awards, the motion quickly passed.

Rules be damned, Harry was seriously considering casting Ginny's patented Bat Bogey Hex at a certain meddling master. Even knowing Harry's aversion to the public spotlight, he STILL did that in an attempt to turn Harry into even more of a symbol than he already was.

Fortunately for him, Fudge chose that moment to enter the room. He pompously strode into the room and planted himself in front of Dumbledore's desk. The guards that entered with him stood at the doors.

"Cornelius," Dumbledore greeted him cheerfully. "We just finished with a piece of business, so the floor is yours."

"Thank you, Chief Warlock. As you're all no doubt aware, in the interests of public safety, I recently signed a Ministerial Decree regarding lycanthropes. The Daily Prophet called them the Werewolf Restrictions, I believe. Upon further review and with some truly excellent advice from Lord-Baron Potter, I would like to present some legislation for your review." He handed a sheet of parchment over to Dumbledore and then folded his arms across his chest, trying to look important.

Adjusting his spectacles, Dumbledore read aloud, "While Ministerial Decree 1874 remains in effect and so long as they purchase Wolfsbane Potion from the ministry of magic, no lycanthrope shall be required to inform their employer, if any, of their condition. Further, they may not be fired for missing work the day before or day after the full moon due to the check-in requirement with the ministry."

Harry clamped down on his emotions. THIS is Fudge's idea of increased rights for werewolves? After doing a quick calming mental exercise, he stood. "Minister Fudge, I am heartened that you listened to my concerns for the rights of the individuals suffering from this awful curse. However, I would wish to add a few items to this proposed law."

A flicker of doubt showed up in Fudge's eyes. "I am listening, Lord-Baron."

"Thank you. One of my major concerns is for the werewolves themselves. I would like to remind you that the day before a full moon, they are irritable and short tempered. The day after, they are exhausted and in a great deal of pain. This is when they have access to the Wolfsbane Potion, which, as I'm sure you're aware, is quite expensive. Without this potion, I understand the side effects are even worse. What I would suggest is that a ministry employee, one of the aurors perhaps or even the person the werewolves should be checking in with anyway, be assigned the task of going to each werewolf before and after the full moon instead of forcing the werewolf to check in with the ministry. I'm sure that with a list of names and previously agreed locations, this job isn't insurmountable for one auror to accomplish."

Fudge's eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid that pulling an auror from their assigned duties would be a waste of resources, Lord-Baron."

Surprisingly, one of the auror guards that had followed Fudge spoke up. "I would be willing to volunteer some of my free time those two days a month, Minister." He looked up from the glaring Minister of Magic and gazed at Harry. "My brother was recently bitten by a werewolf, Mr. Potter. On his behalf, I thank you for what you're trying to do."

Harry smiled. "One of my best friends is a werewolf. He also was the best defense professor I've had in five years." He glanced at Dumbledore's smile and Fudge's frown before turning back to the auror. "After seeing the hell he goes through every month . . . Well, I'm just trying to help him as well as all the others."

He turned his full attention back to the Minister of Magic. "That's the first one taken care of. Second, I mentioned how expensive Wolfsbane Potion is. Your law would require them to buy it from the ministry. However, one of the provisions of Sirius Black's Last Will and Testament provides for Severus Snape, arguably one of the leading potion brewers in the country, to produce enough Wolfsbane Potion for every werewolf who asks at no cost to them. So, I would like to amend your law to include not only those who buy Wolfsbane from the ministry but also those who choose to accept the free potion that will be distributed via this avenue."

Fudge chewed on his cheek for a moment. "We will have to send an observer to check that Mr. Snape is brewing the Wolfsbane correctly for the first few months. In the interest of public safety, you understand."

"Of course," Harry agreed. It might be amusing to hear how Snape reacted to the ministry watching over his shoulder as he brewed it, after all. "Lastly, your version states that they are not required to tell their employer that they're a werewolf. I agree with this. However, I would like to extend it to preventing an employer from firing a werewolf simply because they have the lycanthropic curse."

Fudge frowned for a few moments. "I have no objection to your proposed amendments," he eventually said.

"What do you hope to accomplish, Potter?" an anonymous voice asked.

"I hope to give the werewolves a chance to be productive, law-abiding citizens. If they have no other recourse, I'm worried that many of them will turn to Voldemort."

Fudge shuddered, as did almost everyone else in the room. Harry was gratified to note that Neville was not one of them.

"Yes, well your goal is laudable," Fudge said grudgingly.

Satisfied, Harry took his seat. He didn't bother trying for an amendment along the lines of "you can't NOT hire them because they're werewolves." Such an amendment was completely unenforceable. The werewolf registry was public, and an employer could give any reason at all for not hiring someone.

Various Wizengamot members quibbled over the wording of the new law for nearly an hour before it was called for a vote. Parkinson voted no. Malfoy, surprising everyone except Harry, abstained. Everyone else voted yes. Harry felt that most of the votes were as much due to sympathy for the werewolves as any other reason, but he'd take the votes no matter the reasoning.

"Is there any other business?" Dumbledore asked. When nobody spoke, he said, "The seven hundred and fifty-third meeting of the British Wizengamot is hereby adjourned." Most of the attendees stretched before slowly moving toward the door.

Harry bid a polite farewell to Mr. Abbott after promising to attend his Yule Ball. Harry quickly followed Neville and caught up with him at the same time he was approaching the waiting McGonagall and Malfoy. "Baron Malfoy."

Draco turned. "Lord-Baron Potter?"

Most everyone in earshot, including McGonagall, turned to watch in concern. Draco was one of only two not to vote for both items that affected Harry. Though personal duel challenges were forbidden during meetings, historically more than one duel had been called before everyone was out of the room.

Surprising them all, Harry smiled and said, "Thank you."

Though his mouth did not show it, Draco's eyes smiled a little. "You're most welcome. Good day." They nodded politely to each other before Draco followed the bemused deputy headmistress out of the chamber.

Fighting the flow of people, the young auror who'd spoken earlier came toward Harry. Once in front of him, he stuck his hand out, which Harry immediately took. "Mr. Potter, I'm Chris Drake. I'd like to thank you again for what you've done. I know that Rob will appreciate it." His face closed down. "Honestly, though, I don't know how much good it will really do. He'll still have an awful time finding work."

Harry nodded. "I know. Remus has had a lot of trouble finding employment in the past."

"I just wish . . ." Drake frowned as he trailed off. "Well, I just wish."

"Me, too. If you can think of something I can do to help, please let me know."

Drake nodded. "I will. Incidentally, there are more aurors and other ministry personnel like me. Sympathetic to the werewolves, I mean. I'll quietly spread the word, and we'll offer you help and ideas if we can."

Harry nodded back. "Remus and I appreciate it. Well, nice meeting you, Auror Drake. Have a good day."

Scion of Gryffindor 30 - DMLE Press Conference

Dear Ginny, Luna, Hermione, and Ron,

I'm sorry.

I'm sure you've all already read today's Prophet. I didn't mean for your names to get out into the open media.

Now before you think I'm pulling a Lockhart, Neville and I weren't trying to hog all the attention for ourselves. I was mostly worried about all the bad publicity you four will get out of this. You know what I'm talking about, Hermione, from what happened after Skeeter's articles after the Yule Ball.

The good news is that we'll all be awarded the Order of the Griffon after the Wizengamot gets their collective act together. From what Neville tells me, that's only one step short of the Order of Merlin. Not bad for a bunch of fifth and sixth years, huh?

Again, I'm sorry for the press firestorm that will be hitting you all if it hasn't already.

Harry

"How do I look?" Harry asked Nim while looking at his reflection.

"Sexy."

Harry started and blinked at Nim in the mirror for a moment before he responded, "I was going for distinguished, actually."

"Oh. Well, that too."

"Because, you know, Madam Bones may not appreciate me looking sexy at her press conference."

"Who cares what she thinks? I think you're sexy."

Harry smiled at her reflection in nervous amusement. "You're incorrigible."

"Oh, big word. Did you take a Thesaurus Potion this morning?"

"Dora, leave the poor lad alone," Shack said from the doorway. "He's enough of a mess as it is. Any more of your teasing and he's going to be a total wreck."

"Thanks." Harry paused. "I think."

"You're welcome. Now, are you ready to go and give a press conference before the entire wizarding world?"

Harry sighed. "Shack, anymore of your encouragement and I WILL be a total wreck."

"I know what you need," Nim announced.

Harry turned in his seat to look at her but didn't voice the obvious question.

She stood and walked around to behind his chair. Her strong hands started massaging the knots out of his shoulders.

Harry felt his nervous tension evaporate as his shoulders melted under her touch. "Ooh, that feels good. I'll do anything you ask if you don't stop."

Before Nim could say anything, Shack spoke up, "Harry, you need to be very careful saying things like that. This IS Dora we're talking about."

It didn't take long for Harry to realize what Shack was warning him about. "True."

Nim chuckled as she stopped rubbing his shoulders. "We'll discuss payment later. Now, up. We need to get going."

Harry rotated his shoulders and stood. "Thank you," he said to her with a smile.

She just smiled back.

Harry nodded to his two bodyguards for the afternoon. Already keyed into the wards, all three apparated straight out and to the ministry's incoming apparition zone. Like all public apparition zones, this one had charms preventing people from splinching themselves by apparating into others who were also arriving.

Moving quickly, all three got through the security check and went to the public conference room in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Amelia Bones was waiting for them near the doors. "Harry, I'm glad you made it on time. Tonks, Shacklebolt, good to see you two again. How's life been treating you?"

"No complaints, Director," Tonks said. "Thank you for asking."

Shacklebolt nodded agreement before the two moved to convenient spots along the wall, near where aurors were already stationed.

Bones watched in satisfaction. "They're working out for you, then?" she asked Harry out of the side of her mouth.

Harry smiled and looked at Tonks in affection. "Definitely. They're both good friends and teaching me loads besides."

Bones nodded sharply. "Good. They're both fine people." She herded Harry toward the front of the room as reporters started filling the available space. "Now, I'm going to say a few words indicating that you and I are working together to combat the Death Eaters. I'll then introduce you. After you say a few words, go ahead and open it up for questions. If they ask anything you're uncomfortable answering, feel free to defer it to me or just not answer. Any problem?"

Harry shook his head, so she stepped behind the podium. A low level Sonorus Field Charm that Harry could barely see was already working, and her voice easily overrode the chattering people in the room. "Good afternoon, witches and wizards. If you'll all settle down, we can get this press conference started, so we can end it quicker."

Harry found himself liking her more and more.

"Thank you," she went on as the last reporter found a seat. "You're all aware that two weeks ago the Wizengamot voted to provisionally award the Order of the Griffon, which is the highest award that body can bestow without the Minister's endorsement, to the so-called Ministry Six. I'm pleased to announce that the D.M.L.E has delivered the reports that Wizengamot Chief Warlock Dumbledore requested of it.

"Between that event in June and an event on August eleven, Harry Potter was instrumental in securing the capture of a total of twenty Death Eaters. As embarrassed as I am to admit it, that's better than any single auror has done in the same time frame. Fortunately for all of us, Harry and I will continue to work together to secure peace for the British Wizarding population.

"Harry, would you like to say anything?"

When Harry approached her, she held out her hand, and he automatically took it.

Every magical flashbulb in the room seemed to go off at the same moment. Blinking the purple splotches from his eyes, Harry smiled at the apologetic and wry expression Amelia shot him.

He took a place behind the podium. "Thank you, Director Bones. Before you start giving me too much credit for the twenty arrested Death Eaters, please remember that I had help in both situations. Five fellow students were with me in June before the cavalry showed up to finish the fight, and three adults, two of them former aurors, did most of the work in August.

"To be honest, I didn't want to be awarded with the Order of the Griffon." The reporters gaped at him, but he continued, "Both Neville and I voted against the awards for us. Upon reflection, though, I realized that if I didn't accept, then the other five with me wouldn't receive the award either. As I feel they deserve the recognition, I suppose that I must accept it.

"As Director Bones has mentioned, she and I will continue to work together to bring down Voldemort and his -" He cut himself off with a scowl as most of the reporters shivered. "Oh, grow up. It's just a name a psychopathic half-blood made up for himself. I know you all read the letter I wrote to the Prophet in August. His real name is Tom Riddle."

He took a breath to rein in his anger. "As I was saying, I hope to continue to work with Director Bones and her Department of Magical Law Enforcement to stop Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Who, if you think about it, are nothing more than a band of terrorists following a murdering psychopath convinced of his own superiority.

"That's all I have prepared. Are there any questions?"

One of the reporters was quicker than the others and got his question off before the others. "Mr. Potter, you just referred to Tom Riddle as a half-blood. Does this mean you believe in blood purity?"

Harry shook his head. "No, not at all. I'm a half-blood myself. My mother was muggle-born. One of my best friends at Hogwarts is muggle-born. I only pointed out Voldemort's blood status because I wanted to show how hypocritical he is in his stated position of pure-blood superiority."

"There are rumors that one of the attackers died in the August attack at the Shacklebolt home. The rumors state that you killed him. Are they true?"

Harry's throat refused to work for a moment. Fortunately, Amelia was already speaking. "One of the Death Eaters, Zackary Forsum, did die of his wounds at the scene. The cause of his death was NOT spell damage, however. Neither Lord-Baron Potter nor any of his comrades are going to be charged with his death."

Harry, are you dating anyone?"

Inordinately thankful for a question that got away from the death he'd caused, even if the topic was something else he didn't generally like to discuss, Harry answered, "Yes. Let me guess, you're from Witch Weekly."

"Teen Witch Weekly, actually. Who's the lucky girl? Or girls? Or is it even a witch?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I heard about the article that implied all sorts of things about my dating habits. For the record, I categorically deny asking anyone to take Polyjuice Potion. As for who I did or am dating, I'm afraid that I'm not going to answer that."

"Why not? Afraid of limiting who else you can ask?"

"No," Harry growled, "I'm trying to keep her name away from Voldemort. He's been known to go after close friends of his targets, after all."

"So it is one witch, then?" the reporter asked with a smug grin.

Harry almost screamed. Trust a reporter to ignore the message he was trying to get across. "Next question," he said in a low voice.

"Mr. Potter, you have withdrawn from Hogwarts. What, if anything, and where are you studying?"

The doors at the back of the room crashed open, interrupting the evasive answer Harry was about to give.

Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge pompously strode through the doorway and planted himself at the back of the room. He already had a full power Sonorus Charm upon himself, and his voice boomed out, "Ah, thank you for delaying the press conference until I arrived."

Harry's flash of anger was quickly smothered. He couldn't afford to be seen attacking Fudge, no matter how much of a lying idiot he actually was. "We weren't delaying the conference until you arrived, Minister. In fact, I think we were about finished. Director Bones?"

Before she could speak, Fudge interrupted, "Now, Harry, I know how much you dislike the public spotlight, but I wanted to thank you before all these people for all of your help. Together, we can get through this troubling time."

Harry ground his teeth together at the man's incredible audacity. "Sir, I'm afraid I must point out a flaw in your thinking. I'm not backing YOU, sir; I'm helping Amelia and the D.M.L.E.

"Also, I have repeatedly asked you to call me Lord-Baron Potter. I respectfully reserve my first name for my friends' use."

Harry ignored Fudge's attempt to interrupt and kept speaking. "Now, as I recall, you promised me that you'd allow an investigation into Dolores Umbridge, one of your senior undersecretaries and formerly Hogwarts High Inquisitor by YOUR decree, on charges of setting dementors loose on me, attempted use of an Unforgivable Curse, and use of a torture device. How's that investigation going?"

The reporters had watched the two men speaking, heads swiveling from the front to the back of the room, until this point. At Harry's question, they all exploded into shouted questions.

Harry glared at Fudge, who glared right back. Amelia finally quieted the room by repeatedly casting Canon Blast Charms.

Before she could say a word, though, Fudge, still with the Sonorus Charm active, cleared his throat and said, "Director Bones, you are ordered to investigate these . . . allegations." He looked around the room at the reporters. "Thank you for your attention. This press conference is concluded." He spun on his heel and left, his auror guards following silently.

Some of the reporters bolted after him. The rest of them started shouting questions at Harry and Amelia.

Bones grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him out through a concealed door in the back of the room, Tonks and Shack barely slipping through behind them before the door closed.

Once into a quiet corridor, Bones released Harry. "I'm sorry," she said immediately. "I had no idea he was going to do that."

Eyes still flaming, Harry nodded at her. "Apology accepted. If I know how he thinks, it's not your fault anyway. It doesn't surprise me that he would do this, though. I TOLD him that I wasn't going to support him. I agreed to this press conference in exchange for the changes in the werewolf laws he suggested the other day."

Amelia held out an arm to indicate a direction and fell into step with Harry. "That makes sense. I'd wondered why he suddenly changed his attitude on werewolves."

The four were silent until they got to Amelia's office. Once the door was closed, Harry bellowed out, "That pompous arsehole! Why do that and force me to publicly go against him? Is he THAT blindly stupid?"

Tonks moved in front of him and pulled Harry into a scorching kiss. This effectively derailed his rant.

Amelia laughed as she dropped into the seat behind her desk. "Well, that answers one of my questions. I remember you two at the Equinox Ball, but I didn't know how serious you were."

Harry, now wearing a slightly goofy grin, sat down in the guest chair. Tonks, looking smug, moved to beside the door. Shack just shook his head, a grin threatening to erupt.

Congratulations, by the way," Amelia added. "I can see why you're keeping it quiet.

"Now, about these allegations. What can you tell me?"

"Do you have a pensieve?" Harry asked, shaking himself back to reality. "I think that'd be the quickest way to let you know what happened."

She nodded and turned her chair toward the wall behind her. She waved her wand in an intricate pattern and muttered under her breath. An opening appeared in the wall, through which Harry could see a variety of instruments and parchments. Amelia pulled a small, empty pensieve out and placed it onto the desk.

It was much smaller but more ornate than the one he'd seen in Snape's classroom. The number of runes along the bowl was so high that it looked more like decorative carving than distinct runes. To his Mage Sight, it was absolutely glowing with power.

While he was studying the pensieve, Bones had closed her security vault, returning it to physical and magical invisibility, and turned back to him. "This is a specialty pensieve. It's used in court where the person giving the memory may be trained in occlumency or other mind arts." Her gaze shifted to Shack for a moment before turning to Harry. "Please understand that it's not that I don't trust you, but as I'm collecting legal evidence, I must follow strict guidelines." She made an inviting gesture to the pensieve and looked at Harry expectantly.

Harry had studied pensieves earlier in the summer after having seen them in use by Snape and then Dumbledore. Therefore, he knew how to use one without anyone showing him how.

He pulled the first memory he wanted Amelia to view to the "front" of his mind and used his wand to pull the silvery thread out of his temple and deposited it into the bowl. He repeated the process with two more memories before sitting back in his chair.

Amelia nodded. "For the record, do you agree to my viewing the memories that you have placed into this pensieve, Lord-Baron Potter?"

"I agree, Director Bones," Harry replied, deducing from her tone that this more legal requirement.

"Do you mind if I also watch?" Tonks asked unexpectedly.

Amelia looked at Tonks apologetically. "I'm afraid I can't permit that." She raised a hand to Harry's gathering question. "It's not a confidentiality issue - I gather you'd agree to her request - but keeping the memory unimpeachable. I can't permit another non-ministry person into the memory while I'm in there. I'm sorry, Tonks."

Tonks's expression showed her displeasure, but she nodded her acceptance. With no further comment, Bones entered the memory, becoming immobile, leaning over the bowl on her desk.

Harry looked around the room, silently chastising himself for not having taken in his surroundings before this point. Aside from the door behind him and the security vault behind Bones's desk, the left hand wall had three magical windows, currently showing a sun-drenched, grassy field. The last wall of the relatively small room contained about a dozen photographs. Most of the pictures were reasonably small and contained in simple frames. Each image showed Amelia shaking hands with someone. The only two that Harry immediately recognized were Margaret Thatcher and the Queen. In the center spot was a large image of Amelia and Susan, sitting on a bench and pointing and laughing at something off camera. Harry sighed sadly at the image of his now-dead classmate.

Trying to find a happier subject, Harry turned in his seat and said, "The occlumency is helping, Shack. Bringing the specific memories up was almost easy."

Shacklebolt nodded. "One of the benefits. Purely out of curiosity, what memories are you showing her?"

"First D.A.D.A. class, first detention with that damn quill, and when the Inquisitorial Squad had caught us trying to break into her office."

Kingsley, having seen all the scenes in question through his training with Harry, merely nodded.

"We'll have to find another pensieve. I'd like to know exactly what you're talking about," Tonks said.

Shacklebolt raised one eyebrow at her. "He could transfer the memory over."

Harry looked at him blankly.

Shack explained to Harry, "Legilimens her and instead of searching for something, push your memory over to her. If she were a legilimens, she could pull it out, but since she isn't . . ." He shrugged after trailing off.

Tonks looked excited by the possibility, but Harry was leery. "I don't have any real practice with something like that. I can barely connect to your mind, Shack. What if I hurt her?"

"I received enough occlumency training through the aurors that you wouldn't hurt me unless you seriously tried," Tonks assured him. "Just come on over, drop the memories, and leave. No big deal, right?"

Before Harry could answer, Bones leaned back in her chair, looking absolutely livid. "The absolute nerve of her! How dare she . . . But then she was going to . . ." She took a deep breath and looked up at Harry. "Yes. Well, I can see why you wanted an investigation of her actions. May I see the back of your hand, please?"

Harry presented the back of his right hand to her.

She looked at it carefully before pulling out her wand and casting several detection spells. Nodding in satisfaction, she leaned back in her chair. "You may have your memories back, Harry. I'm through with them for the moment." As Harry was putting the memories back into his mind - a very unusual sensation to him, to be sure - she stared at the photo-covered wall pensively. When he was done, she gave one decisive nod and turned to him. "This will take some time. Especially as Cornelius is no doubt warning Dolores about what he just oh-so-grudgingly ordered me to do. Don't expect anything to be done until after the new year at the least. Do you know of other students who underwent detentions with her?"

"Lee Jordan that I know of. I don't know any more for sure."

"Well, that's something I can request from the headmaster. I'll owl you once I know something more. Thank you for bringing this to me." Her posture shifted and she went on, "Again, I'm sorry about how the press conference went."

Harry shook his head. "Not your fault." His sudden grin had a wicked edge to it. "Tell you what: If you put Umbitch away, we'll call it even."

Amelia nodded, looking determined and angry. "THAT will definitely be my pleasure."

That evening in the parlor, Harry studied Tonks's eyes intently. At the moment they were a green that matched his, but they were still clearly hers. The humor and affection he saw directed at him was something his own mirror rarely showed.

"*Legilimens*," he whispered.

Not encountering any resistance from her, he was immediately into her mind, finding only a quiet, blank space.

Harry brought forth the memory of the first D.A.D.A. lesson and then tried to push it outward, toward the patiently waiting presence he could feel.

A few moments later, he received back a burst of annoyance, but he could tell it wasn't directed at him. After a few seconds, the emotional waves stopped, and it became quiet again.

Gathering the memory of the beginning his detention, stopping after the first dozen or so lines, he pushed that out as well.

The emotional reaction from Nim was much more pronounced this time. Horror, murderous rage, sympathetic pain, and sadness were all mingled together. Once that initial burst was ended, a comforting wave of love enveloped him. This wasn't the kind of love he felt from his mother's memory or Mrs. Weasley, but it was much more a romantic love of an equal offering him comfort.

The unexpected and largely unknown feeling caused Harry to momentarily lose control of his emotions. Ignoring the implications of what he was feeling, it took him a few scrambling seconds to bring his mind back under control. Nim, surprised by his reaction, retreated to a calm, waiting state.

Harry finally pulled himself together and pushed the last memory, the Inquisitorial Squad capturing him, her aborted Cruciatus Curse, and Hermione's quick-talking escape, to her. Before she could react, he broke the mental connection.

Harry found himself looking into Nim's eyes again, but this time they were gray and tears were giving them a shimmering appearance.

Kingsley, standing by as his occlumency coach, whispered, "Did it work?"

Harry cleared his throat. "Yeah, it worked. Thanks. I hate to ask this, Shack, but could you . . ."

Harry didn't have to figure out how to finish his request. Kingsley nodded and left without a word.

Tonks took a deep breath and bit her lip. "Okay, I can understand why you hate her so much now. What I don't understand is your reaction."

She didn't have to specify which reaction. "I didn't know how to deal with it."

The unspoken confusion in her expression requested an explanation.

"Nobody's ever loved me before," he whispered, looking away from her gaze.

Her hand gently pushed his chin back around. "That's why . . ." She trailed off, not sure how to finish the question.

He laughed quietly and bitterly. "Everyone I love dies, Nim. Mum, Dad, Sirius. I'm AFRAID to love you, but it's happened anyway." He took a breath. "As for why I haven't tried to go further with you? I don't know HOW," his admittance came out as a whisper.

She smiled sadly. "Nobody gave me instructions, either, Harry."

He shook his head. "No, that's not what I mean. I mean, what if I . . . don't do it right?" He blushed vividly.

She looked momentarily confused before her expression cleared. "Ah, so that's it," she said gently.

Harry flushed and looked down. "You probably think I'm a git now, don't you? The Boy Who Lived, the Great Harry Potter," he spit out the titles sarcastically, "doesn't know the first damn thing about women. How pathetic is that?"

"It just proves you're an honorable and noble git." She giggled quietly at the aggravated expression he gave her. She calmed and went on seriously, "I'm honored that you're even thinking about me in those terms."

He let out a breath, calming back down. "Yeah, I guess I am."

She leaned forward and gave him a slow kiss. After she broke it, she pulled him into a hug and whispered, "We'll move forward together then?"

She felt his miniscule nod and the tightening of his hug.

Pulling from his hug, she ran one hand down his cheek and smiled at him. "As much as I look forward to that, tonight is probably not a good time to start. It's been a long day and, to be honest, I'm beat."

Forcing himself to be honest, Harry nodded agreement. Reliving the worst moments with Umbridge, twice, a confrontation with Fudge, and now this emotional wringer had wiped him out. His body was crying out for rest despite not having done much of any serious physical activity.

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and retreated before her resolve wavered.

She went to the dining room, hoping to calm her frazzled nerves before she even attempted sleep. She found Kingsley, Remus, and Godric sitting around the table. When she took a seat, a cup of her favorite tea appeared in front of her without a word spoken.

"Thank you, Dobby," she whispered, before taking a quick sip. "What's up?" she asked the three men in a casual voice.

"Kingsley was telling us about the meeting with Director Bones," Remus answered, looking at her closely.

"I didn't expect to see you again tonight," Kingsley mentioned.

She shot him a poisonous look that was ignored.

"Ah," Godric said simply.

Emotions flickered over Remus's face for a moment. "Just don't hurt him," he requested. Not saying anything else, the werewolf stood and left.

Kingsley stood and rested a hand on her shoulder for a moment. "And don't get yourself hurt, either." He also left without waiting for a response.

Godric nodded to her solemnly. "For what it's worth: good luck."

Letting her face twist in semi-amusement at the ghost's words, Nymphadora stared down at her cooling tea for a very long time.

Scion of Gryffindor

31 - Yule Ball teen party

"What is it about floo travel, Harry?"

"I have no idea," Harry forced out through gritted teeth.

"I mean, I've heard of it causing motion sickness in a few cases, but you're fine on a broom."

"I know, I know. I have no idea why I'm so bloody incompetent at floo travel." He gave a sudden yelp of pain.

"Personally," a new voice entered the conversation, "I think it's so we know that you're a mere mortal like the rest of us." Hannah Abbott entered her family's parlor with a smile. When her eyes took in the scene, she stopped with a blink of confusion. "What happened?"

Harry looked up at her with a pained smile. He was sitting on the floor in front of the Abbott's fireplace, holding his knee. "Hi, Hannah. Happy Yule."

"Happy Yule," she said back, eyes on the young, gorgeous witch fussing over Harry's injury. Nim was kneeling beside him and waving her wand at the bloodied knee exposed by his torn jeans.

Shaking off confusion over the unexpected scene, Hannah asked, "Harry, seriously, what happened?"

Nim grunted in humor. "This great oaf stumbled out of the floo and cracked his knee on your floor." One final wave of her wand and the seeping wound healed. Two more waves and the blood disappeared and the denim material mended itself. Giving a nod of satisfaction, Nim smoothly put her wand away and stood. She then turned to the other woman and smiled. "Hello. I'm Tonks, Harry's date."

"Hannah Abbot," Hannah introduced herself with a cautious handshake. She turned to Harry and raised an eyebrow.

"Hey, you did say I could bring a date, didn't you?"

Hannah waved that off. "Yes, yes. That isn't what surprised me. I was expecting . . . someone I recognized."

Harry smiled and turned to Tonks.

Tonks grinned and morphed herself into the form of "Tee" that she'd been wearing at the Equinox Ball. "Is this better?" she politely asked Hannah.

Hannah squeaked and jumped backwards, her wide eyes on Tonks.

Neville laughed as he entered the room behind her. Like Hannah, he was wearing jeans and a casual shirt for the informal party Hannah was throwing for the teens. Neville wrapped one arm around Hannah's waist and said to her, "Dora is a metamorphmagus. She can change her appearance easily." He smiled at Tonks. "Hi, Dora. Scaring Hannah with your trick already?"

Tonks shrugged unrepentantly, changing back to her earlier face and bubblegum pink hair.

"I thought your name was Tonks?" Hannah asked her in confusion.

Harry interjected, "I suspect Neville can call her Dora because of his parents. It's an auror thing."

Finally regaining her mental equilibrium, Hannah asked with a teasing grin, "And what do YOU call her, Harry?"

Harry quirked a grin but refused to say a word.

Tonks answered, "Many things, only some of which I'll ever tell. Even fewer of which I would admit to my mother."

Neville raised an eyebrow at them as he deciphered what she meant.

Instead of pursuing that line of conversation, Hannah asked, "Why did you introduce yourself as Tee at the Ball?"

"We were trying to hide our relationship at the time," Harry answered. "She's convinced me that it will be easier on us if it's out in the open."

Hannah looked at him strangely. "Why wouldn't it?"

"As my girlfriend –"

"And live-in teacher and bodyguard," Tonks added.

"- and teacher and bodyguard," Harry agreed, "she'll move to the top of Voldemort's hit list."

"Oh, what I wouldn't give to have the right to guard that body," Parvati Patil, wearing gold and crimson to distinguish herself from her sister, cooed as she entered behind Hannah. She was looking Harry up and down slowly, eyes sparkling.

Harry blushed spectacularly.

Megan Jones laughed from her place among the group of teens suddenly in the room. "He does look scrumptious, doesn't he, Parv?" She, too, looked at Harry appreciatively. "Whatever you're doing, Harry, keep doing it. You're looking GOOD."

"Stop it," Harry protested.

Nim rubbed his arm in a comforting gesture. "They're just appreciating the view, Harry." She raised herself to her tiptoes and gave him a short but fiery kiss before turning around so her back was pressed against his chest. Taking his arms and wrapping them around herself, she communicated without words, "Lookie but no touchie."

The message was clearly understood by all. Hannah, taking up her hostess duties, introduced Tonks to the newcomers. Harry already knew almost everyone from Hogwarts except two older guys. Surprisingly, Ron Weasley was there, but he stayed well in the back.

One of the older teens, Bob Alyxand, suddenly snapped his fingers and pointed to Tonks. "Now I remember you. You were class of . . . ninety-two; Slytherin, weren't you?"

Tonks nodded as everyone else stared at Harry, who was still wrapped around her.

"Harry?" Parvati asked hesitantly.

Harry shrugged slightly. "Not all Slytherins are bad, Parvati." He tightened his arms just a little, eliciting a low, purring sigh from Tonks. "Some are even more cuddly than others."

There was some general laughter at that, and everyone slowly drifted back out of the room. Harry and Tonks followed the crowd and found themselves in a comfortable living room containing lots of squashy armchairs that sat one. Harry was momentarily stymied until Tonks pushed him down into one chair and promptly seated herself crossways on his lap.

Thoroughly enjoying the seating arrangements, he found that he now he had a different problem, namely what to do with his hands.

As if reading his mind, Nim whispered, "Relax, Harry. I'll tell you if you put them somewhere I don't like."

Seeing that most of the other couples were comfortably snuggling up with each other without reservation, Harry hesitantly rested one hand on her leg just above the knee and the other hand went around her back to come to rest against her ribs. She sighed and reclined with her head resting against his shoulder, one hand absently playing with his shirt.

For the next half-hour, the conversation flowed around the room, touching on many subjects. It quickly became apparent that all of the magicians here were more aware of the social and political world than he would have suspected based on the conversations in the Hogwarts Great Hall. Even Parvati and Lavender were more or less keeping up with the conversation; though, they seemed to be paying more attention to their boyfriends (Parvati on John Pelli, the other one of the slightly older boys, and Lavender on Ron) than anything else.

"So, Dora, you're one of Harry's teachers?" Neville asked in a lull in the flowing conversation.

She nodded.

"What's he learning?" Everyone else broke off their own conversations to follow this one.

"Oh, this and that," Tonks said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Apparition, potions, some transfiguration, all the regular stuff."

Neville grinned at Harry. "Potions?"

Harry shrugged. "Without Snape, it's not all that bad. Speaking of the great greasy git, how's he doing teaching defense?"

All of the students frowned. "Well, he's showing us loads, but he isn't teaching it very well," Padma said diplomatically. "The practice we're doing on our own helps, but if he could TELL us some of these things during class time . . ."

Harry sighed. "I'm glad you've re-started the D.A. again, then."

"So are we," Hannah said. "Neville is turning out to be a really good teacher."

"Really? Good for you, Neville," Harry said. He glanced at Ron, expecting him to have taken over the teaching duties, but Ron resolutely did not meet Harry's eye.

A house-elf popped in and addressed herself to Hannah. "Mistress? Lunch is being ready for Mistress Hannah's guests."

Hannah nodded. "Thank you, Poppy." She stood and waved everyone toward one of the doors. "Let's go have lunch!"

This met with general approval, and everyone stood and made their way into a large dining room. Harry, Neville, and Terry Boot were the only three to remember to hold the chairs for their dates. The rest of the girls were moderately irritated by this. Ron was oblivious, already working on a handful of crisps.

Tracey Davis, sitting with Anthony Goldstein, said to Tonks, "I see someone is finally beginning to train him right." Anthony smiled at her sheepishly.

"Oy!" Harry objected good-naturedly. "I may not be the most sensitive bloke around, but was I really that bad?"

Parvati cleared her throat and gave him a pointed look. All of the students in the room smirked or snickered.

Harry looked abashed. "Okay, that's true. I do apologize, Parvati." He ducked his head in embarrassment. "As you could probably tell, I was worried for Hermione at the Yule Ball as well as crushing on Cho. That's not an excuse, but it is the reason I ignored you."

After a moment, she nodded at his apology.

Hannah said to Tonks, "Oooh, you HAVE taught him well. Not only is he acting more mature, but I've also noticed that he's more demonstrative with you than he ever was at Hogwarts."

"In my defense," Harry spoke up, "it helps that I love her instead of just having a crush."

Half the girls sighed. Ron made an indecipherable noise. Harry shot him a questioning look that was ignored.

Tonks answered Hannah's comment, "Yes, well, I've been training him for some time now." She sighed dramatically and gave Harry a speculative look. "I hope he'll be worth the effort."

"Lot of work, is he?" Neville asked in amusement.

"Keeps me up all hours of the night, he does," Tonks agreed with a straight face.

Several jaws dropped open. Ron appeared to be choking on something. Neville casually reached behind Lavender and slapped Ron's back.

Su Li, a plain girl in Harry's year from Ravenclaw, slowly asked, "Did you just imply -"

"Me?" Tonks asked, her expression a study in innocence.

This time, Ron snorted.

"Do you have a problem, Ron?" Harry asked, tone somewhere between annoyed and resigned.

"No, no problem," Ron said without looking up.

"How is it that you know Tonks, Nev?" Hannah asked abruptly, clearly trying to diffuse the suddenly tense situation.

"You all know that my parents were aurors during the first war, right? Well, I still have a lot of contact with the auror corps." He blushed. "I guess they sort of adopted me when I was a kid. I've attended their informal reunions for years."

"So you knew Auror Moody before he taught us?" Padma asked in interest.

Neville shook his head. "I knew WHO he was, but I'd never met him. He was and still is very much a legend among the aurors."

"Another bloody legend. Who the hell needs 'em?" Ron muttered, just loud enough for everyone to hear him.

Harry sighed and rolled his eyes.

Most everyone was frowning at Ron. Tonks and Lavender were openly scowling.

Megan hesitantly spoke up, "Miss Tonks? I don't mean to be rude, but if you were Slytherin class of ninety-two and Harry is . . . or was, or whatever, Gryffindor class of ninety-eight, don't you two think that there is a little too much . . .uh, difference between you two?"

Harry smiled at his Hufflepuff classmate. "What are you asking, Megan? The six years between us?"

"Harry acts older than he is," Tonks answered the question.

"And Tonks acts younger than her age," Harry completed her point.

Slightly surprising their audience, she grinned slightly and nodded her acknowledgement of his comment.

"So," Harry continued his thought, "between the two of us, we're about the same maturity level."

"Or are you worried about a Slytherin dating a Gryffindor?" Tonks asked.

Harry nodded to Tracey and Anthony and Neville and Hannah. "What's wrong with cross-house dating?"

"Well, nothing, of course, but . . ." Megan trailed off, clearly uncomfortable.

"Maybe it's the fact that it's Slytherin and Gryffindor?" Harry asked with an understanding smile.

Grimacing, Megan nodded.

Harry sighed. He couldn't blame her for her opinion. He'd been told what evil, slimy people the Slytherins were from the first day he'd known magic was real. "Do you think Tracey," he nodded over toward the Slytherin sixth year, "is evil?"

Megan's eyes went wide. "Of course not."

"So why shouldn't Anthony or I date a Slytherin if we want to?" Tonks cleared her throat, and Harry hurriedly added, "And if they're kind and generous enough to agree."

Anthony wiped an imaginary bead of sweat from his forehead and shared a smile with Harry. Everyone else laughed lightly.

Megan thought about what he'd said for a moment. "No reason, I guess, it's just . . ."

Harry nodded. "It's exactly that dogma, that unthinking belief that we need to get out of our heads. Slytherin? Oh, evil, dangerous person. Don't trust them. Gryffindor? Honorable but hot-headed to a fault." Harry sighed. "There are many good people from Slytherin house. There have been Death Eaters come out of Gryffindor house. Stop thinking in stereotypes and start thinking about individual people."

"And THAT is why I invited Slytherins into the D.A.," Neville said to Megan in the resulting contemplative silence. He turned to Harry. "Even when you're not at Hogwarts, you're still teaching us, mate."

"It's holidays!" Lavender objected. "Quit making me think." She lobbed a roll at Harry with a teasing grin. Unfortunately, her aim was off.

Tonks caught the roll before it hit her in the face. She quickly chuckled it back with a returning grin.

The next sequence of events took perhaps five seconds to unfold.

Tonks's throw hit Ron, who had his head down and was diligently working on his sandwich instead of paying attention to the conversation. His immediate reaction was to jerk upright, hands flying. His sandwich sailed across the table and into Padma's hair. One hand knocked his pumpkin juice glass over, spilling it over the table and soaking Terry Boot. The other flying hand jostled Parvati, causing her to spill her own drink all over herself and her date, John Pelli. Terry and John, each having a cold drink suddenly dumped into their laps, yelped and stood up without first scooting backwards. This caused the table to buck and shift quickly in multiple directions, kicking food up into the air all up and down the table. Almost everyone ended up wearing at least one item of food.

The resulting moment of stunned silence was broken by a mayonnaise covered tomato slice dropping free from Neville's cheek and falling onto his lap with a wet splat.

Neville's lip twitched.

Hannah tried to stifle a snicker, and it came out as a series of hiccups.

This set Lavender off into laughter which everyone else joined.

Later, after Bob Alyxand had magically cleaned her off, Padma whispered to Harry, "I noticed something strange."

"What's that?"

"You're the only one who didn't get any food on you."

Harry smiled at her. "Just lucky, I guess."

"Uh, huh." She nodded with a clearly skeptical expression. "Sure." A small smile formed and she said, "Next time, just deflect more toward Ron and less toward me, okay?"

Harry looked at her with a blank expression.

She just laughed. "I AM a Ravenclaw, Harry."

Scion of Gryffindor 32 - Yule Ball

"You look very smart."

"Thank you. Could it be the snazzy new dress robes? Or is it the signet rings? No, no; I got it. It's the gorgeous creature on my arm, isn't it?"

Nim smiled brilliantly at him.

"Dear Merlin that was sappy," Neville complained as he and Hannah joined them where they'd stopped just outside the Abbott ballroom.

Hannah smacked his shoulder. "I thought it was sweet!"

Neville muttered something under his breath, rubbing his shoulder.

Harry laughed. "How DID you two get together, anyway?"

Neville flushed, and Hannah smiled at him.

"Oh, there HAS to be a good story in there," Harry observed with a smile.

Neville gave a resigned sigh. "Harry, I know you're muggle-raised. Dora, I'm not sure how much of wizarding traditions you know . . ."

"Lots. My mother was originally a Black, remember."

Neville nodded. "Then you'll understand me when I tell you that my gran is a Matcher."

Tonks stared at him blankly for a moment before she looked impressed.

Harry, confused by the unfamiliar term, looked from Hannah's calm expression to Neville's slightly embarrassed, sheepish grin. Neither of them gave Harry any kind of explanation, so he turned to Nim. "What's a Matcher?"

"Someone who makes matches."

Harry sighed. "Nim," he prompted impatiently.

"Seriously. For some reason, some people can match up couples. A couple who were Matched have a much higher likelihood of getting married and staying happy together. Nobody's quite sure how a Matcher does it, but the leading theory is a specialized form of empathy. Anyway, such people are highly regarded among the middle, lower, and muggle-born classes."

Harry frowned. "Why not everyone?"

Hannah answered, "The upper-upper class tend to be the purest of the pure. They have marriages of convenience for political or blood alliances. They don't marry for love."

Harry guessed, "Malfoy, Nott, Parkinson -"

"Until this generation, the Blacks," Nim added.

Hannah nodded. "Yep, that crowd. Anyway, outside of them, a Matcher is well regarded. They're also very well paid."

"Arranged marriage?" Harry asked in confusion. He couldn't imagine that was the case with the two of them. Neville had never mentioned such a thing, and he'd taken Ginny to the Yule Ball two years previously.

Neville shook his head. "Not at all. From what Gran has told me, she needs to meet the people after they're . . . past puberty." He flushed slightly. "So working through her and arranging a marriage when the two are just babies can't happen. Most of the people who come to her are the families of seventh year students or young adults after graduation. For lack of a better explanation, she can just sense if two people of her acquaintance, each not already in a relationship, would be good for each other."

Tonks said, "Most people don't go to a Matcher. There is something of a sense of . . ." She frowned, trying to come up with the correct phrase.

"Inability to do it on our own?" Neville supplied.

Hannah nodded. "Yeah, that's a good way of phrasing it." She saw Harry's confused look. "It isn't a stigma, Harry. The young adults in question

usually dislike the implication that they can't find a good partner on their own." She gave a humorless smile. "In my case, it's the truth, though. After the mess I'd made of the Yule Ball with Ernie in our fourth year, I was very frustrated. Seeing that I was doubting myself, my father asked if I wanted to go to a Matcher. So we went."

"Imagine my surprise when Gran called me into the room and then explained WHY," Neville said with a grin and a far-away look.

Hannah squeezed his arm and smiled at him.

Neville shook himself back to the present. "Anyway, that was the summer before our fifth year. We've been seeing each other since."

"Well, good for you," Harry congratulated them, still trying to absorb this bit of wizarding society.

"Thanks," Hannah said. "Hey," she said suddenly, "would you know about a certain prank that was played on Hogwarts recently?"

"Maybe. What prank are you talking about?"

Hannah looked from his unconvincing innocent expression to Tonks's smirk. "Well, I WAS going to ask about the end of the Halloween Ball, but now I'm thinking there's more than just that."

"Did Ginny mention that I was there?" Harry asked, ignoring the second half of her unasked question. He'd let Ginny know that he didn't care if she told that much, so he wasn't surprised that she'd mentioned it.

"Yep. Nobody knows which part you played, though. So were you Merlin or Gryffindor?"

"Why couldn't I have been Slytherin or even Ravenclaw?"

Neville's lip twitched. "Uh, Harry? I must admit to having watched Lady Ravenclaw." He glanced at Tonks fleetingly before turning back to Harry. "She was moving like a woman, not a man."

Tonks laughed. "Body language?"

Neville nodded.

She smiled. "Good eye. Yep, I was Ravenclaw."

"So who were the other three?" Hannah asked.

"Gryffindor, Slytherin, and Merlin," Neville teased.

She smacked his shoulder again.

Harry laughed. "Sorry, Hannah, but I'm afraid that's a secret."

She sighed. "You're no fun."

"I disagree," Tonks said. She squeezed Harry's captured arm and said, "With the right motivation, he can be a LOT of fun."

"Dear Merlin you two are sappy," Neville observed.

"More like flirting, teasing, or perhaps even frisky." Hannah smiled at Harry's spectacular blush. "I think it's cute."

"I think SHE'S," Harry started, tilting his head toward Tonks, "very cute, but I can't see how I would qualify."

"Handsome, then," Hannah allowed.

"Stunningly gorgeous?" Nim suggested.

"It's those green eyes that get me," Hannah admitted to Nim.

"Those are nice," the other woman agreed, looking at the increasingly embarrassed Harry critically. "That wind-blown hair is pretty good, too. I have to admit that it's that luscious body that I noticed first, though."

"You do know I'm right here, right?" Harry asked the two, face a brilliant red.

"Of course, dear," Nim patted him absently on his arm, her attention still clearly on her conversation with Hannah. "I'm talking with your friend, though. It's rude to interrupt."

Harry groaned and closed his eyes as if in pain. "Neville, would you please help me escape?"

"You're on your own, mate," Neville choked out, trying to control his laughter.

"Can we PLEASE change the subject?" Harry asked.

Hannah and Tonks laughed, having succeeded in mortally embarrassing the Boy Who Lived. Hannah took pity on him. "That dress and your hair

look gorgeous, Miss Tonks."

Nim turned, showing off the muggle style dress. It was a sleeveless black outfit that hugged her shapely figure before flaring out at her hips, flowing down to the sparkling black shoes that peeked out. A starburst pattern centered at her waist was made of small, magically twinkling sequins that matched the edging of Harry's black dress robes. She was wearing her hair long, as black as Harry's, and done in a loose braid that fell down her back almost to the waist. She'd even charmed small silver, glittering pinpoints into it somehow. "Thanks. Harry's elf made the dress and Harry's dress robes, too. A friend helped me with my hair."

"You're not getting out of it so easily," Neville said with a grin.

Dragging his attention away from Nim, Harry looked at Neville quizzically, trying to guess what the other young man meant.

"Prank at the end of the Halloween Ball? You've basically admitted you were there. Gryffindor, whoever he really was, was obviously in on it." Neville mock pouted. "Did you HAVE to turn me into a lemur?"

Harry and Tonks broke into laughter. Even Hannah was fighting a grin.

"Moving on," Harry said, "why isn't Hermione here? Considering who all is here -"

Hannah shook her head. "Yes, it's composed mostly of my friends and classmates. However, Dad did the invites according to his business associates. I could only invite those already coming, or their children. As Hermione doesn't fall into either category . . ." she trailed off with a helpless shrug.

Harry thought about that for a few moments. "Someone will have to let me know about the web of associations. As I know Mr. and Mrs. Weasley aren't in any businesses, the Browns would have to be. I can't even begin to guess some of the other couples."

Nim slipped her hand into his elbow. "I'll let you know, Harry. Mum's kept me up to date on the major business families."

After a moment, Hannah nodded in recognition. "Andy Tonks. Right." She grinned at Harry. "Sorry, it'll take me a while to think of you as really being part of this group."

Harry laughed. "You and me both!"

"How do you keep all these things straight?" Harry asked Nim later. She'd just identified the seventh couple to approach Harry, told him what business they were in, their major competitors and allies, and helped him carry on an intelligent conversation with people he'd never even heard of before.

She shrugged. "How do you keep the differences between Aidan Lynch and Victor Krum straight? Seeking is just something you're interested in. Mum is always telling me about these people, so the same thing applies."

"Well, I've actually talked with Victor, but I understand what you're saying."

She blinked at him for a moment before shaking her head. "Tri-Wizard Tournament." She gave a little laugh. "Only you, Harry, would be on friendly terms with an international quidditch star AND on a first name basis with the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Don't forget that I also have Fudge and his repeated attempts to paint me as a raving lunatic."

"First name basis with two of the most respected professors at Hogwarts."

"Ongoing feud with the headmaster of Hogwarts," Harry countered with a grin.

She put her hands on her hips and turned to glare at him. "Friendships with Bones, McGonagall, and Flitwick; great trainers in Shackbolt and Lupin; some of the best friends anyone could ask for at school; a great ancestor; friendship with several quidditch stars; your own bloody CASTLE; more social contacts than anyone else on the planet; several very recognizable family names; and a whole huge, bloody PILE of galleons."

Privately, he thought she looked glorious standing like that, eyes flashing with petulant anger. Deciding to just be contrary, he said, "You forgot a few things: a permanent enemy in Fudge and Umbridge because I refuse to lie; a fight with Dumbledore because I want a little independence; an insane Dark Lord trying to kill me because he didn't manage it the first time; and an annoying bug that is trying to pass herself off as real reporter carrying a personal vendetta against me." Smiling winningly at her glowering expression, he said, "On the plus side, though, I'm dating the most charming former auror I know."

Her ire, steadily rising as he listed his perceived problems, evaporated at his last words. "You, Mr. Potter, are incorrigible." She graced him with a dazzling smile.

Harry smiled back and leaned in for a quick kiss. As he was straightening back up, he was suddenly aware of a deafening silence and looked around. Everyone at the party, adult and student, was staring at them. Expressions ranged from highly amused to starry-eyed to indifferent with everything in between. "Oh, bloody hell."

Marcus Abbott, fighting his twitching lip, stepped forward. "So, are you enjoying yourself tonight, Harry?"

Given an out from the embarrassing situation, Harry immediately grasped it. "Yes, it's a great party so far, sir. Thank you for inviting us."

Not at all. Your parents attended one year, and I remember James's parents coming for years. As a Potter, you would have been invited anyway." He raised a hand to Harry's darkening expression. "Since getting to know you to some degree, you yourself are also earning a much higher place in my estimation."

Harry relaxed a fraction at Marcus's words, further when the entire room stopped staring at him, and even further when Nim rubbed a hand up and down his back. "Thank you, sir."

Abbott smiled and nodded. "Now, if you have a moment, Amit and I would like to speak with you."

Harry was on his guard but allowed Mr. Abbott to lead him toward the Indian couple standing by the large fireplace that contained the traditional Yule log that was crackling merrily.

"Mr. Potter," Amit Patil greeted him as they approached. He turned to Nim and smiled at her charmingly. "And Miss Tonks."

Nim raised an eyebrow at him.

Krupa Patil laughed. "You two individually and as a couple have made quite the impression upon our children. The fact that Harry Potter is dating a former auror, and a metamorphmagus on top of that? The story ran through the rumor mill within minutes of everyone arriving."

Harry smiled sardonically. He glanced at Nim. "Well, you wanted the relationship to become public."

Emily Abbott, stepping to her husband's side, looked at Harry with a disapproving expression.

Harry saw her reaction and sighed. "As my girlfriend, I'm afraid she's going to be targeted by Voldemort." Everyone except Harry and Tonks shuddered.

Moving to a different topic, Harry addressed Amit Patil, "Mr. Abbott said you wanted to speak with me?"

"Yes. I believe that at our introduction Marcus told you what I do?"

"An import business, I believe?"

"The East India Trading Company," Tonks mentioned.

As the other four nodded, Harry was looking at her in confusion. "Didn't that company go under over a hundred years ago?"

Amit laughed. "The muggle side of the business did indeed go out of business. No, we became an exclusively wizarding company when several families, the Potters among them, invested in E.I.T. I inherited the leadership of the company shortly before the girls were born. I must admit that I had originally entertained thoughts of trying to arrange a marriage between one of them and yourself, Mr. Potter."

Harry blushed spectacularly. The Patil twins were widely regarded as being among the prettiest girls in Hogwarts. On top of that was how poorly he'd treated Parvati at the Yule Ball their fourth year.

The Abbotts and Patils laughed. "Your father wouldn't hear of it," Amit continued. "Upon reflection, I admit that he had the right idea. Choosing for our children is doing them a disservice. If I love them, I must give them the freedom of choice."

"Terry Boot is a good bloke," Harry offered.

Amit made a non-committal gesture. "Perhaps. They are young yet."

"At any rate, the reason I asked to speak with you was due to a labor shortage I have. Much as it pains me to admit it, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is recruiting from among my workers. His promises appeal to the . . . baser natures and urges among my general laborers."

"You're down on help because Voldemort's been recruiting them?"

Amit twitched but nodded.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I don't see why you're telling me instead of Madam Bones."

"Ah, you misunderstand what I'm after, I'm afraid. I was mentioning it to you because you're sitting on top of a phenomenal yet untapped labor source. I'm referring, of course, to the modifications to the Werewolf Laws you recently pushed through."

Harry tilted his head quizzically. "I hardly have any kind of authority over them. I was just trying to make life easier on them."

Emily Abbott said, "It's for exactly that reason that we're coming to you. If I may make a suggestion?"

Harry looked from Mr. Patil to Mrs. Abbott in confusion. "Please, suggest away."

"Start a sub-contracting labor company. Companies like East India Trading and Abbott Greenhouses -"

"We have our own labor problems," Marcus Abbott interjected.

"- or any other company who wants semi-skilled or general laborers for inconsistent time frames can contract them through you. We pay slightly higher than the going rate, but we get a more stable supply of workers. Due to your recent actions, I believe you will have many people willing to

work for you."

Harry's eyes unfocused as he thought about what they were saying. Unspoken, of course, was the presumption that most of Harry's workers in this theoretical company would be werewolves. Truthfully, getting them employed even part time at minimum wage jobs would be a huge improvement for them. "An interesting suggestion," Harry said eventually. "I'll think about it and talk with Andy."

Marcus nodded. "That's all that we can ask." He gave Harry an abbreviated bow. "Lord-Baron." Nodding to Tonks, he added, "Miss Tonks. Have a good evening." Marcus and Emily moved off and greeted another guest almost immediately.

Krupa smiled at Harry and Tonks. "You do make a lovely couple. Congratulations on that, by the by." She sighed. "Well, if one of my daughters didn't manage to snatch you up, at least you -"

"Mother!" Padma interrupted in an exasperated tone as she and Terry happened to be walking past.

The four laughed as the Ravenclaw couple kept going, not even bothering to stop.

"On that note, I believe that we, too, shall take our leave," Amit Patil said with audible amusement. "Lord-Baron, Miss Tonks, have a good evening."

Once the other two had left, Harry moved behind Tonks and wrapped his arms around her. "Interesting idea," he commented, staring at an Abbott family portrait without seeing it.

"More interesting that they brought the idea to you first instead of Mum," Nim said, snuggling back into Harry's embrace and absently running one hand over his arm. "They're seeing you as an equal, not someone to work around."

Harry pondered that for a few seconds. "Hmm. That's comforting."

"As it should be. Keep acting like an adult and everyone will treat you like one. We're at a high-class ball, though. Let's find something else to talk about."

"Fair enough. What do you think of the party?"

"It's been grand so far. I'm having lots of fun. Too bad there isn't a dance floor."

"Hmm," Harry absently agreed. "I'm going to get a drink. Would you like anything?"

"A cold drink sounds good. I'm too close to this fire; I'm hot."

He nodded into her hair and pulled away before he turned toward the drink table. As he walked away, he called over his shoulder, "I think you are, but I admit that I'm biased."

Scion of Gryffindor 33 - Christmas Day

On Christmas morning, shortly after first light, Harry woke up when Hedwig returned from her nightly hunt. As he groaned and stretched, Hedwig hooted softly as if apologizing for waking her master.

Harry luxuriated in a jaw-cracking yawn, not yet bothering to open his eyes and vaguely wondering what it was that he smelled. "Don't worry about it, girl. Time for me to get up anyway."

Harry blinked his eyes open.

Only to find a pair of pink eyes staring at him from a distance of three inches.

Harry let loose a blood-curdling shriek, raised his hand to cast a spell, and used his other arm and legs to propel himself away from the apparition in front of him, all in the span of one second.

Harry had the satisfaction of seeing the intruder's eyes widen in surprise before he felt something behind him, and he fell into unconsciousness.

"Ennervate."

Harry's eyes snapped open. He immediately heard Kingsley's voice. "Relax, Harry."

Trying to remember what happened, Harry shook his head. He immediately stopped the movement and gingerly brought his hand to the back of his sore head. Remus, howling in laughter, wasn't helping his burgeoning headache. "What happened?"

Godric handed Harry his glasses. "Apparently, young Nymphadora did."

"Huh?" Harry asked fuzzily.

Kingsley answered, "Your shout roused the house. We got here and found you unconscious on your bed and Dora on the floor at the foot of your bed."

Harry slowly crawled down and looked over the foot of his bed. Someone, who he assumed was Tonks, was sprawled on the floor. Her mid-length hair was black, shockingly offsetting her very pale skin tone. Her features clearly spoke of the Black heritage, looking more like her Aunt Narcissa than her own mother. She was not beautiful in the classical sense, the pale to the point of glowing white skin tone and slightly too squared off features prevented that, but she wasn't what one would call bad-looking, either. Harry waved his hand. *"Ennervate."*

Tonks's eyes opened and Harry caught sight of the pink irises for only a moment before her entire appearance rapidly shifted to something more recognizable as her normal look. Her eyes took in Harry, Kingsley, and Godric smiling down at her as well as the still laughing werewolf. "Uh, hi?"

Kingsley's eyes were dancing in merriment. "Next time you want to surprise your boyfriend in bed, Dora, I'd suggest doing it differently." He turned to Harry. "If you didn't want her in your bed, Harry, you may want to tell her calmly instead of scaring the entire household into storming your bedroom."

Harry, fearing exactly what Shack meant, looked over at his door, only to see it reduced to splinters. Kelly and Laura arrived at this point and looked around the room in mystification.

"Playing kinda rough, Cub?" Remus choked out.

"Hey," Harry tried to defend himself, "what would you have done if you found a woman in your bed unexpectedly?"

"No idea, Cub. I've never had any women, strange, unexpected, or otherwise, in my bed," Remus answered with a grin.

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Hey, are you calling me strange?" Nim demanded of the werewolf.

Kingsley and Godric broke into laughter.

Kelly hesitantly asked, "What happened?"

Chagrined, Nim answered, "I was trying to . . . uh, surprise Harry this morning. I guess I kinda startled him. He scrambled backwards on his bed

and stunned me."

"You stunned me, too!" Harry objected.

"No, she didn't." Kingsley pointed to the smear of blood on Harry's headboard. "You knocked yourself unconscious."

Kelly moved forward and examined the back of Harry's head for a moment, gently probing the forming bump. Finally giving a satisfied nod, she pointed her wand and muttered a healing spell. Harry's headache dissipated rapidly. Grinning, Kelly turned to the embarrassed former auror. "Dora, next time you try to seduce this poor boy, give us a little warning, huh? I think you scared a couple years off of Kay and me."

Threading through the resulting laughter from several directions, Laura's young voice spoke up, "Mommy, what does 'seduce' mean?"

"Happy Christmas," Harry greeted everyone as he entered the parlor.

"Happy Christmas," Shack, Kelly, and Remus chorused back. Nim smiled at him as he took a seat next to her.

"NOW can we open presents?" Laura asked her mother in exasperation.

"Ask Harry, honey. This IS his house."

The six year old looked at Harry pleadingly.

Harry said, "I thought we'd just sit here and admire the tree for a while first. Doesn't that sound like fun, Laura?"

Laura looked horrified at his words.

Nim smacked his shoulder. "Git. Let the poor girl open her gifts."

Harry rubbed his shoulder with a wounded look. Remus chuckled.

"Go ahead," Harry said to the girl.

Letting loose a shrill squeal, she immediately dove into the pile of presents and started tearing the paper off of them with abandon. Bouncing from one adult to another as she opened individual gifts, she thanked each of them with a hug while alternately giggling and smiling widely.

In the time the young girl took to go through her entire stack, the adults had only opened two gifts each.

"I thought I heard a whirling dervish in here," Godric said as he entered the room and observed the colorful chaos Laura had produced.

"Happy Christmas, Grandfather," Harry called, looking up from the multi-volume compendium, The Unabridged and Current Guide to Battling the Dark Arts, that Remus and the Shacklebolts had gone together to get for him.

"Happy Christmas, Harry." The ghost looked around with a smile. "It's been a very long time since this old Keep has seen such a happy Christmas."

"Hopefully just the first of many," Remus said.

"Hear, hear," Shack agreed.

Later, as they tucked into a roast pheasant that Dobby had procured from who-knew-where, Harry reflected that it had been a successful day thus far. Various books from his friends and close acquaintances formed a stack next to a small pile of sweets near the Christmas tree.

All of the gifts he'd selected had been well received.

He'd had the most fun picking out some age appropriate magical toys for Laura. On advice from every adult living at his home, he had passed on the trainer broomstick, though.

For lack of a better idea, he got Remus a credit line at Flourish and Blotts.

Kelly received the magical equivalent to an upright piano. Harry knew that she missed playing when their old one had been destroyed by the deez in August.

To Kelly's mock exasperation, Shack got a pair of tickets to Puddlemere's next game.

In addition to a dozen mismatched socks, Dobby got a credit line at an out-of-the-way clothier in Diagon Alley that carried robes as well as muggle clothing. Harry was honestly curious on what Dobby would pick out for himself in the way of clothing.

Harry was seriously tempted to pick out something suggestive to give to Tonks for her to wear, but he wasn't comfortable with the way he felt it would look from her point of view. Instead, he got her an arrangement of roses with an Everlasting Charm.

Most of the Weasleys (at least those Harry was currently getting along with) had received Honeydukes sweets the previous day, with one

exception. After lunch, Harry sat down to rectify that.

Dear Ginny,

Happy Christmas!

Hope things are going well for you and the rest of the Weasley clan.

Christmas here has been a blast. Shack's daughter has an absolutely HUGE pile of magical toys. I'm tempted to go and start playing with some of them myself. They wouldn't let me buy her a kid's broomstick, though. Spoilsports.

Thanks ever so much for the book. Did you pick it up yourself or did you con one of your brothers into picking up a copy of Ways to Woo Witches ? I'll have to look through it later, but I'm sure there will be loads of useful tips in there. So far I've managed to hide it from Nim (she'd tease me mercilessly if she knew I got this from you). Hopefully I can keep it hidden until I've at least read it properly and can try out some of the tips.

Thanks again for the bit of advice you sent me in your last letter. I wimped out and got her an everlasting flower arrangement instead. I'll keep your suggestions in mind for her birthday, though.

As you've no doubt noticed, I didn't include anything for you in the box of sweets I sent to the Burrow. It's not because I didn't want to get you anything, but rather because Remus and I needed to finish my gift to you.

If you don't recognize the enclosed piece of parchment, ask your brothers, the twin Masters of Mayhem, for their version of its history.

Don't read this next part aloud. The new password to activate it is, "Honorable Pranks Forever," and to deactivate, "Pranking accomplished." Each is accompanied by a wand tap. The password has been changed (and this text is readable only by you), so it's available to you and you only. Like I said, the two Creators of Chaos had it before me. Ron knows about it as well. If you want to clue them back into the passwords, that's fine, but for the moment you're the only one to know them. It's only really useful at Hogwarts, so pass it along to a likely student before you graduate.

I don't know if I've mentioned this to you, but I have some of Mum and Dad's journals from when they were students. Most of it's pretty bland stuff, and most of the rest I'd already heard from Remus and Sirius. One thing I did learn, though, was that Mum and Snape were potions lab partners.

In her own words:

"He is a brilliant potions student, no doubt of that, but he's not too bright otherwise. How many ways can I say, 'I'm not interested,' before he actually starts to listen?"

or

"If I hear about how he's a legitimate prince one more time, I'm going to hex his hair with a Permanent Slick Jinx!"

or

"Just because I'm muggle-born, that doesn't mean I should be 'honored' that he's paying attention to me!"

Apparently he just couldn't take a hint. She states several times that he never did anything inappropriate, so I'm not worried about that. I've heard rumors that they dated or that she was sweet on him. After reading her opinion of the greasy arsehole, I'm not going to believe THAT any longer!

Anyway, enough about my mum and her non-existent crush on Snivellus. Any juicy gossip from around school?

Always,

Harry

After that letter had been sent off, Harry picked up the Prophet that had been delivered at breakfast.

Things had apparently been calm in the wizarding world over the past few days. The first page covered some feel-good stories about the Christmas season. It wasn't until the beginning of the society section that anything of personal interest showed up.

Harry Potter's Dating Habits Revealed

Within the past few days, the mystery of Harry Potter's ever-changing escort has been resolved.

It is none other than the former auror and true metamorphmagus Nymphadora Tonks.

More than one aspect of this revelation concerns this reporter.

The obvious one is that as a true metamorphmagus, she can take the form of nearly anyone she wishes. This is clearly how she kept changing her appearance to be his public escort for Diagon Alley shopping trips and the Ministry Equinox Ball, but what does it say about young Mr. Potter?

With merely a thought, she can transform herself into any image that she wishes.

Is she doing so to hook the powerful and affluent Potter heir? Is he using her shape-changing skills for his own personal entertainment?

To further cloud the issue, Potter was recently named the Patriarch of the Black line. One of the new Baron Black's first actions was to bring Andromeda Tonks nee Black (and by extension her daughter Nymphadora and husband Theodore) back into the Black family from which she'd been disinherited decades previously.

Is he using his position as her Patriarch to force her to do things for his personal gratification? Is she doing this in some sort of repayment for bringing her and her parents back into the Black family?

Similarly, he is in fact her employer. After she retired from the D.M.L.E. Auror Corps, Mr. Potter hired her. Rumors abound about what exactly she is teaching him.

Is he using his position as her boss against her? Is she looking to get a raise by providing "extra" services?

The last issue that concerns this reporter is the age disparity between the two. According to the birth records, Miss Tonks is nearly seven years older than Mr. Potter.

Is she doing this because she wants a significantly younger man? Is he after an older, experienced woman?

Why are they dating?

Would Mr. Potter still be dating her if he were attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as all the other young witch and wizards of his age are doing?

"THOSE UNMITIGATED ARSEHOLES!"

That evening, a light tap on the open door preceded Tonks sticking her head into Harry's room. "Hey, can I talk to you?"

"Sure. Come on in. What's up?"

"Are you calmed down from earlier?"

It was a fair question. His reaction to the article had been pretty bad. Instead of giving in to his childish urge to get angry, he sighed. "Yeah, I'm okay."

She just answered with an arched eyebrow.

"Hey, that article was awful." When she answered with silence, he pleadingly asked, "I wasn't THAT bad, was I?" He just hoped Kelly would eventually forgive him for some of the phrases he'd inadvertently taught Laura. His anger had given him creativity when speculating on the reporter's probable parentage and personal habits.

Answering his spoken question, Tonks dryly commented, "Harry, 'not that bad' is a broken glass or something. YOU, on the other hand, reduced the dining room table to scorched kindling."

He winced. "Okay, so it WAS that bad. Seriously, though, I'm used to the press treating me as their whipping boy. But this time YOU are the one taking the lumps. Depending on how you read it, you're either a whore or after me because I'm rich or simply because I'm a younger man. Better yet, maybe all of the above! How can you not be angry?"

She shrugged. "You and I know the truth. What else matters?"

He blinked for a moment before laughing. At her raised eyebrow and querying look, he explained, "I'm not used to anyone else having the same attitude with regards to the Prophet, I guess. So, what brings you by this evening?"

"You."

"Me?"

"You."

He grinned. "You said that already."

She gave him a sour look. "Git. I was worried about how you were doing. I understand it's one of those girlfriend responsibility things."

He had a ghost of a smile for a moment. "Better, I guess. Whatever it was that I did to the dining room table helped vent some of my anger."

"I'd hope so. Anyway, I also came by to explain what happened this morning."

"You mean when you snuck into my room without warning and nearly gave me a heart attack?"

"Young guy like yourself? I'd think it'd take more than just finding a woman in your bed to give you a heart attack."

"You're avoiding the question, Nim. Exactly WHY were you on my bed?"

She looked down and mumbled something.

"What was that?"

She looked up at him but couldn't quite meet his eyes. "I said, I was trying to give you your Christmas present."

Harry opened his mouth and closed it again a few times. He finally found his voice, but it was a bit higher in pitch than normal. "Uh, just so I don't misunderstand something, you're admitting that Shack was RIGHT? You did come in here to seduce me?"

She flinched minutely, which made Harry feel like a prat until she said, "Among other things, yes, I suppose I did."

Harry, now blushing brightly, cleared his throat. "Purely out of curiosity, what other things?"

Tonks looked up and met his eyes. "I was trying to show you my true form. You mentioned once that you didn't know what it looked like, and I just thought I'd show it to you." She chuckled ruefully. "Maybe waiting until you were aware of me being in the room would've been a better idea?"

Harry smiled back nervously. "Probably," he agreed. "So was that your base form? Pink eyes, black hair, pale?" His eyes widened, and he quickly went on, "Not that there is anything wrong with that -"

She chuckled lightly. "It's okay, Harry. I know that my base form is a little . . . unusual. That's why I don't like it much."

He frowned suddenly. "Hey, you said only your parents and a few healers have seen your base form?" At her nod, he asked, "But if you revert every time you fall unconscious, then how come most of the aurors haven't seen it?"

She nodded to her pupil. "Very good question, Potter. Getting knocked unconscious is different than falling asleep. When going unconscious unwillingly, my magic considers me under attack, which isn't far from the truth if you think about it. Therefore, it tries to hold the disguise, whatever it may be. Falling asleep is a conscious relaxation, so the change releases."

"So you can't fall asleep with any morph on?"

She shook her head.

"But if you get stunned, it'd hold?"

"Yep. Sounds strange, but that's the way it works."

"Weird. Anyway, how did we get onto this topic?"

She grinned at him. "Did you really forget, or are you giving me a way to avoid the conversation if I didn't want to pursue it?"

His mouth twisted into a wry grin. "Guilty." His face fell into an expressionless mask. "My own utter lack of knowing how to proceed aside, I still don't believe I'm worthy of you."

She leaned over to cup his face in one hand and said, "I believe you are. And I'll just have to convince you of that." With a humorous twinkle in her eye, she asked, "Even with that book that Ginny gave you, you STILL don't know how to proceed?"

As Harry flushed crimson and laughed nervously, she turned and sealed the room with a few charms and wards. Setting her wand down next to his on the bedside table, she sat down on his bed. "Honestly, I'm not very experienced at this myself, Harry." Her hand moved, almost hesitantly, to his extended leg. "We'll just have to learn together."

Scion of Gryffindor 34 - Dec 26

Hand in hand and looking happy with the world, Harry and Nim showed up for breakfast the morning after Christmas.

Laura watched Harry hold Nim's chair out and asked, "So does this mean you two are getting married?"

Ignoring the momentary nonplussed looks on the two adults in question, Kelly answered her daughter, "I told you before that they need to date for a while before they decide to get married, dear."

Laura nodded. "I know, Mummy, but they started dating AGES ago." She turned back to the couple. "If you aren't getting married, then how can you have kids for me to play with?"

Remus, eyes twinkling merrily, propped his chin on one fist. "Yes, do tell us how you can have kids without being married."

"Stuff it, you crazy wolf," Nim grumbled without looking up from her plate of waffles.

Shack and Remus weren't being very successful in stifling their laughter. Godric was simply smiling very widely.

Harry was a little flustered as he tried to formulate an answer for the young witch.

Kelly tried to come to their aid again. "It takes months and months to have a baby, Laura."

Laura thought about this for a moment before turning to Tonks. "Well, hurry up and get started!"

The teasing and generally light mood from the beginning of breakfast didn't last.

Azkaban Breakout!

The night of 25 December at approximately 10 o'clock, the prison of Azkaban was attacked by a large group of apparent Death Eaters. Of the 30 aurors on duty, 20 were killed and the rest were wounded to various degrees and escaped.

At 1 o'clock in the morning of 26 December, a massive auror force arrived at the island fortress to discover every prisoner had either been killed or was missing. The unconfirmed yet general theory is that every released prisoner is now a follower of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

The names of the slain aurors will be released later today by Director of D.M.L.E. Bones. According to Minister Fudge, a list of missing prisoners is not available at this time.

In an apparently related move, Minister Fudge has given authorization for immediate execution of captured Death Eaters, saying, "These people are too dangerous to try to hold in custody anywhere. Harry Potter and I have discussed this, and we've agreed that they should be executed after they're captured."

The tense silence was broken by Shack. "Please tell me you didn't actually suggest that to him."

"He's twisting my words. Again," Harry ground out through clenched teeth.

Nim reached over and laid one hand on the back of his neck. Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The feeling of static electricity in the air subsided.

"I have a very bad feeling that the Death Eater Inner Circle was just re-populated," Remus said darkly.

Harry held up his hand. "*Accio* communication crystal." The crystal flew into his hand from the direction of the study. Placing it onto the tabletop, he tapped it with his wand. "Contact Narcissa Black."

After several seconds, Cissy's voice came out of it. "Hello?"

"Hi, Cissy. Everyone's here and we just read the Prophet."

"I'm presuming you're worried about Lucius?"

"Very much so."

"I'm not so worried about my safety here with Andy. The wards are sufficient. I'm more concerned for Draco. I've spoken with him this morning, thank you for the crystals you gave the two of us, by the by, and he's refusing to hide from his father."

"And here I thought it was only us Gryffindors who were stupidly brave," Harry observed with a twisted grin at his grandfather.

Multiple voices raised in laughter came from both ends of the magical communication.

"You are," Andy's voice said. "You're rubbing off on Draco, I guess."

"If you ever say that to him, I want to watch a pensieve image of his reaction, okay?"

Andy laughed. "Deal. One other thing, did you read what Fudge has quoted you as saying?"

"Yes," Harry growled out. "I did say that execution makes sense to me, but I explicitly said after capture of ESCAPED deez AFTER interrogation. He's misquoting me pretty badly."

"You say that like it's a surprise," Shack said. "Also, the way it's coming across is that you're working with him."

"Agreed," Cissy said. "You need to go on record immediately refuting what he's trying to do."

Harry nodded. That made sense. "Cissy, could you write something up for me? I think you're the best writer in the group for something like this. I'll sign it and send it to the Prophet. They'll publish it simply because it will make it look like Fudge and I are at each others' throats."

"Aren't you?" Ted asked dryly.

"Details, details," Harry said dismissively but with a grin.

There was a rustling on the other end of the connection.

"Andy just got an owl with a phoenix seal," Cissy reported. "While she reads that, you'd be interested to know, Baron Black, that my son mentioned that he emptied the Malfoy vault before he renounced the name and took the oath Solicitor Wordsmith wrote up for him."

"That sneaky little snake," Remus said in obvious admiration.

"He is a Slytherin," Narcissa and Nim both said in chorus, causing scattered chuckles from the listeners. Narcissa went on, "He also asked if his gift made it safely?"

"Yes," Harry answered as everyone else looked at him curiously.

"What'd he get you?" Shack asked.

Harry shifted in embarrassment. "A bottle of 50 year old firewhiskey. The note said something about wanting to see me totally pissed . . ."

Everyone chuckled again.

"I just got an information packet from Dumbledore," Andy reported. "He can't seem to send an owl to you, so he sent it here. In his letter, he gave a list of the released prisoners. I can read it out loud if you want, but it looks like the Inner Circle is fully reformed plus various low-level Death Eaters. A bunch of other names, too, presumably more common criminals that joined him in order to get out of Azkaban."

"Great, more deez," Harry said sourly. It wasn't a surprise, but having a definite list was at least helpful.

"Dumbledore also commented on the article this morning. He didn't ask it outright, but he's clearly curious about what you've been saying to Fudge."

"What I'm saying is not the same as what he's hearing," Harry grumbled. "Cissy, if possible, please make that article mildly critical of him, would you? He keeps trying to use me to shore up his image, and I have got to stop him."

"I'll do that," Cissy promised with a slight note of anticipation in her voice.

Andy's voice continued, "Lastly, he mentions that your previous article to the Prophet, the one about Riddle, had an adverse affect on the Death Eater recruiting efforts and fundraising."

"Glad to hear it. Sounds like Dumbledore wants me to write another article, doesn't it? Hinting about a previously successful article?"

"Probably. Most people listen to you."

"He didn't mention anything about yesterday's article of Nim and me?"

"Nope."

"Hmm. Well, how about that? He CAN keep out of my private life."

Shack wore a disapproving frown.

Remus said, "Harry . . ."

"I know, I know. I'll behave. Anything else, Andy?"

"I don't think so. Has Shack opened his present yet?"

"How'd you hear about it?" Shack asked Andy curiously.

"I arranged the tickets. They are owner's box seats."

Shack's jaw dropped, and he turned to stare at Harry. Nim, Remus, and Kelly were all also staring at him.

"What?" Harry asked, trying to look politely confused.

"You own the Puddlemere United quidditch team?"

"Only partly," Andy said, "but he's the biggest single investor."

"On that topic, how goes the purchasing effort?" Harry asked in an obvious effort to redirect the conversation.

Andy let him. "Which one; the big one?"

"Yep."

"Getting there. Late February, probably."

"What's this?" Remus asked.

Harry grinned at him in a manner that reminded him of James. "You'll find out when it's done. Nothing bad for us, I promise."

"Why doesn't that make me feel better?" Remus asked.

Harry,

Happy Christmas back to you.

Christmas here has been good. Definitely better than last year's!

I hope you enjoy that book I gave you. Let me know what Nim thinks of some of the suggestions. As for who got it: it was me, of course. Would I ever con one of my brothers into doing something like that?

On second thought, don't answer that question.

Thank you for the Marauder's Map! Yes, I already knew what it was, so I didn't have to go to my twin brothers for any information.

That didn't stop them from realizing I had it, though.

I caught them in my room later. The Map was on the floor (inactive), and they both had Snape's nose and greasy hair and were repeating in Snape's voice, "I stuck my abnormally large nose where it doesn't belong." It wore off a few minutes later, which was fortunate as I was laughing too hard to go get Mum to cancel the spells.

I think they want to ask you and Professor Lupin how you two set the jinxes on the Map. They were muttering about, "Professor Impersonator Peppermints," when they left.

Interesting to hear about your mother's opinion of Snape. I can't imagine him ever trying to ask anyone out!

I know you did something to keep him reined in, Harry. Whatever you did, it's worked wonderfully. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw are running first and second in the house points, and it's been close all year. Slytherin has barely stayed in the positive numbers.

I know this will come as a real surprise to you, Harry, but this has made Snape angry.

All sarcasm aside, it's starting to get scary. No, let me start at the beginning.

He was reasonably calm for a while after school started. Once he realized that pulling points didn't work, he just gave detentions instead. But then that stopped working. It was very strange. I had one detention just after Halloween for talking in class (I wasn't, but that's about what I expect from him). The thing is, when I went to the detention, the door to his classroom wasn't there. It's like the castle wouldn't let me into the detention. I found McGonagall and together we went back to where the door SHOULD have been. Come to think of it, she didn't look all that surprised that it wasn't available. Anyway, I sat with McGonagall for the next hour. When Snape nearly hexed me the next morning during breakfast, McGonagall vouched for my whereabouts and the fact that his door wasn't visible. Snape nearly popped a blood vessel at this. It would have been funny if his expression toward me didn't make me fear for my safety, at least until it was clear the situation wasn't limited to me. It was limited to him.

With his fangs apparently pulled, he was the target of a prank involving the locked cabinet behind his desk in the classroom becoming suddenly unlocked, an animated statue of a sheep, and someone's Ventriloquism Spell. THOSE points and detentions (it was seventh year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws) stuck.

As you can imagine, Snape is in a consistently livid mood. Some ministry potions brewer was in the castle for some reason back in early December and ended up getting on Snape's wrong side. He escaped the castle with his arms removed from his body, his hair on fire, and three cobras chasing him. Don't know what he did, but Snape sure looked pleased with himself later.

Other than avoiding a very grumpy potions master turned defense professor, Hogwarts has been relatively calm this year.

Of course, the articles over the past couple days may well change that . . . I'll let you know.

Ginny

Letter to the Editor,

In a news article dated 26 December, you quoted Minister Cornelius Oswald Fudge as stating in regards to Death Eaters, "These people are too dangerous to try to hold in custody anywhere. Harry Potter and I have discussed this, and we've agreed that they should be executed after they're captured."

This is an inaccurate synopsis of my words.

We did indeed discuss what to do with captured Death Eaters as the Ministry holding cells and Azkaban prison have both proven to be incapable of incarcerating the individuals in question. I will not speculate here whether the root problem is inadequate funding or some other cause. That question is best put before the investigative agents of Madam Bones of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

As I said, we discussed what to do with captured Death Eaters. I suggested execution of re-captured Death Eaters after interrogation.

Let me repeat that in a different way. It's multiple steps, so please bear with me for a moment.

First, someone must have been convicted of being a Death Eater. Second, they must have been broken out of prison or escaped. Third, they must be re-captured. Fourth, I feel they should be interrogated for any and all strategic and tactically useful information they may have. Then and only then do I feel execution by a humane method is a reasonable action. If we continue to imprison them only for Voldemort to continue to release them, then we are not getting anywhere and merely endangering the lives of our brave auror forces as well as the general populace.

I do not advocate execution of Death Eaters upon first arrest. I do not advocate execution of Death Eaters without first draining them dry of all useful information that can then be properly investigated and used in the continuing fight against the self-stylized Lord Voldemort (really Tom Riddle, Slytherin from fifty years ago) and his merry band of psychotic terrorists.

I had thought at the time of my discussion with Minister Fudge that he understood what I was suggesting. He seemed quite interested in my suggestion, especially after I had commented that this would also have the added benefit of silencing individuals such as Lucius Malfoy and any incriminating or embarrassing information he may hold in his head.

I did not then, nor do I now, speculate on what information Minister Fudge may have been afraid of letting out into the open media.

Apparently Minister Fudge did not properly remember the suggestions I gave him at the time. I'm writing merely to put forth the intent of what I said, rather than the inaccurate way I was quoted.

Thank you for your time.

With a wide grin, Harry signed the parchment that Cissy had written up for him. It was just the right mix of "correcting" and political attack. He almost wished she could have worked in how Fudge was trying (ineptly) to take political and security advice from an underage wizard. Unfortunately that would also make Amelia look bad, and that was something that Harry wanted to avoid.

"Now let's get this sent off to the Prophet," Harry said with quiet anticipation.

Harry heard a hoot.

He looked up to find Hedwig already standing on the perch in his study. If he didn't know better, he would've sworn his owl was smirking at him. Shaking such ridiculous notions out of his head, he sealed the parchment and tied it to Hedwig's leg. After a few moments of attention, he gave her a boost out of the window. She rapidly disappeared into the night sky.

Harry spent a moment just enjoying the quiet. It wasn't often that he had a few minutes to simply listen to the silence.

His quiet moment was shattered by the chiming of his communication crystal.

"Who would be contacting me at this time of the night?" Harry muttered to himself. "Accept," he said, tapping the crystal on top of his desk.

"Hello?"

Narcissa's voice, frantic and breathless, came through the item. "Harry? Draco just contacted me. He's at the Leaky Cauldron, and he's under attack!"

Scion of Gryffindor 35 - Fight at the Leaky Cauldron

At Cissy's words of the danger to Draco, Harry hesitated for only a moment. "*Sonorus* . Tonks, Remus, Shack! Get your armor on. We're going into a rescue mission immediately. Front hall in two minutes. *Quietus* ." By the time Harry finished his orders, he was approaching his bedroom door at a run. He hardly blinked as Nim came rushing out of his room, holding a robe closed with one hand. She spared him a quick smile as she sped past on her way to her own room, a lot of bare leg showing under the Gryffindor Hogwarts robe she was wearing.

Harry threw on his own armor in record time and got to the entrance hall just as Godric floated in. "What's going on?" the ghost asked.

"According to Narcissa, Draco's under attack at the Leaky Cauldron right now."

Godric nodded. "He's family. Go and bring him back. You might consider bringing Miss Black and the two Tonkses as well."

"Good idea," Harry acknowledged.

Harry turned as running footsteps approached. Once the other three, now clad in full armor, joined him, he said, "Cissy just contacted me. Draco used the com crystal and said he's under attack. He's staying at the Leaky Cauldron over break. We'll apparate to Diagon Alley and approach from that direction."

Shack shook his head. "Remus and I will apparate to muggle London. There's an alleyway just around the corner from the Cauldron." He looked at Remus with eyebrow raised. Remus gave a tight nod of acknowledgment. Shack turned back to Harry. "We'll hit them from two directions."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Okay, we'll do it that way. Guys, don't get hurt. Rescue Draco and pull him back here. Questions?"

"Are we taking prisoners?" Shack asked calmly.

Harry frowned. "Stun if you reasonably can, but don't endanger anyone just to get a live prisoner." Like his letter to the Prophet had said, he preferred to get information out of prisoners, but he wasn't willing to take unnecessary risks just to get one.

Shack and Tonks nodded tightly. Remus looked unhappy but didn't argue the point.

Harry glanced at Tonks, and they apparated to the incoming apparition zone of Diagon Alley.

Before his senses fully took in the new surroundings, his instincts put up a shield just in time to intercept an ugly, dark yellow curse.

Tonks had the caster stunned in a blink.

Harry was too busy staring at his right hand, raised in a protective gesture.

Tonks finished binding their newest Death Eater prisoner and summoned his wand. She then looked over at Harry. "What's wrong?"

"I don't remember casting a shield."

She shook her head. "Instincts. Don't knock it. Learn to trust 'em, Potter. Come on, Shack and Remus will need us to do our part."

"No, wait."

Tonks turned to him with a growl and an impatient look.

"I've got an idea."

Marcus Flint and Clifford Warrington were standing in the destroyed seating area of the Leaky Cauldron. They were tasked with guarding the ground floor while their team leader went upstairs with the two other Death Eaters to take care of the Malfoy brat.

Both of the young Death Eaters were feeling good about themselves. The entire group had entered the mostly empty taproom and promptly killed the bartender Tom and the two people eating a very late dinner. The three senior Death Eaters had then gone upstairs quietly to take care of their primary mission, leaving Flint and Warrington behind.

It'd been a few minutes since the spells had started upstairs, so there was no longer a need to remain quiet. With nothing else to do, the two were amusing themselves.

"Hey, Cliff. Watch this one." Flint turned to an only partially damaged part of the room and cast a wide area Blasting Curse. He chuckled at his

handiwork.

To the shock of both young men, Bellatrix Lestrange walked into the room from the direction of Diagon Alley. More shocking still, she was leading a visibly sulking Harry Potter by wand point.

"Idiots," Bellatrix hissed. "We're here to get the Malfoy boy, not to do random damage to a bar."

"Yes, ma'am," Flint squeaked, clearly petrified of the woman.

Cliff, however, wasn't quite so easily cowed. "I thought you weren't going to be on this raid," he said suspiciously.

She shoved Harry toward Flint and advanced on Warrington. Once she was close enough, she backhanded him across his face. "Question me again, and I will make you beg for mercy."

Harry, meanwhile, fetched up against Flint from the force of the shove. Grabbing the former Slytherin quidditch player, Harry held onto his arm to remain upright.

Flint, feeling that he had a dominant position, raised his arm to punch the Boy Who Lived.

Harry, still holding onto Flint's wand arm, cast a silent stunner through his armband.

For no visually obvious reason, Flint collapsed against him, causing both of them to go crashing to the floor.

This, of course, drew Cliff's attention. With too many things going on in the room at once, he made a fatal mistake. He took his full attention away from the witch standing in front of him.

It was less than a second later that it wasn't his problem any longer.

"Are you okay?" Tonks, back to her more normal look, asked as she bound both of their new captives.

Harry climbed to his feet. "I'm fine. That guy's heavy."

"I could say something about how thick he is, but I won't."

Harry rolled his eyes.

Shack jumped into the room, wand raised. Remus followed suit a moment later.

"Hi, guys," Harry greeted them calmly.

Remus looked around the destroyed room. "Well, if you don't need me, I'm going to go back to bed."

A scream of agony came from upstairs.

"Or maybe not," Remus amended with a wince

Harry, Remus, and Tonks immediately moved quickly but quietly up the stairs. Shack stayed below, disillusioned. Fortunately for their peace of mind, the scream stopped shortly after it had started.

The hallway above contained two dead wizards, apparently innocent folk who had been startled out of sleep by the fight and killed the instant they made it out of their rooms. A third doorway was standing open, the door itself lying on the hallway floor. Harry stepped over the scorched and smoldering door and looked cautiously into the room.

Just in time to watch the end of Draco Black's life. "*Avada Kedavra* !" Lucius Malfoy, looking haggard from his time in Azkaban, was suddenly standing over the body of his son.

Harry snarled, stepping into the room. "*Reducto* !"

Surprised by the unexpected voice, Malfoy turned to Harry, giving the younger wizard a momentary view of the eye patch over one eye and the twisted sort of light shining from the other. Before Harry's spell reached him, Lucius vanished from sight.

Harry's spell continued onward, finally intersecting Vincent Crabbe's right shoulder, turning it into a fine, red mist that splashed across the wall. Crabbe collapsed with a howl and started to reach over with his remaining arm but passed out before completing the motion.

Remus and Tonks darted into the room, wands out and looking for targets.

There weren't any to be found.

The room had clearly endured a fight. Scorch marks, small craters on the walls and ceiling, overturned furniture, and blood splashes bore mute testimony to the valiant fight Draco had put up. In addition to Crabbe's unconscious, rapidly bleeding form and Draco's utterly still body, Gregory Goyle was also in the room, apparently stunned.

"Shit," Harry whispered, looking around at the carnage.

Remus stepped over and cast a battlefield cauterization spell in Crabbe, probably preventing the young Death Eater from bleeding to death within the next minute.

Harry sighed. "Cissy, Andy, and Ted need to hear about this. Tonks, I hate to do this to you, but -"

She nodded. "I'll go and break it to them. I'm family, after all. Where will you be?"

"After the aurors finish questioning me, I'll be at the Keep. Try to get them, all three of them, to agree to move there. If Malfoy was willing to kill Draco, he'll want to kill Cissy, too. We can't keep her safe unless she moves in with us, and Andy and Ted are now on his hit list." Harry turned his head. "Remus, go with her. Shack and I will deal with this mess."

Remus nodded and closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them again almost immediately. "Anti-apparition ward," he announced. He and Tonks moved toward the stairs.

Harry also stepped out the door and called downstairs, "Fight's over, Shack. Please contact the aurors. We'll need a medical team, an investigative team, and someone to deal with the bodies. Three more dead up here, including Draco."

Harry heard a muttered vulgarity. "Who's wounded?" Shack asked as Tonks and then Remus flooded out.

"One of the escaped deez, Vincent Crabbe. Remus did some battlefield healing on him, so hopefully he's not in immediate danger of dying, but he'll need a new arm if he ever gets out of prison."

"Understood."

Harry moved back into the room and bound Goyle before floating both deez back downstairs. Laying the two prisoners near Flint and Warrington, Harry righted a chair from the general mess of the room and waited for the aurors to arrive.

It was close to dawn before Harry and Kingsley finally made it back to Gryffindor Keep. They found everyone in the parlor, Laura asleep on her mother's lap. From her expression of relief, it appeared that her daughter was the only thing keeping Kelly from jumping up and running to Kingsley. Instead, he sat down beside her and pulled her into a one-armed hug.

Andy was sitting next to her sister; Ted was in an overstuffed chair by the fire talking quietly with Godric. Harry raised an eyebrow at the two and looked a question to Remus. The werewolf's nod told the young wizard that the newest guests had been told of Godric's identity.

Cissy's eyes were bloodshot, and her nose was red, both clear indications of her grieving. When she saw Harry enter the room, her eyes found his, asking a question that she couldn't bring herself to voice.

Harry sat down next to Nim on a couch. "I'm sorry, Cissy," he whispered.

A sob was choked off before it could completely escape. "What can you tell me, Baron Black?" she asked in a brittle voice.

"The room showed evidence of a good fight. He'd stunned one of his attackers before he was disarmed." Harry took a breath. "I witnessed him receive the Killing Curse."

"Who?" she asked, voice even softer than it had been before.

"Lucius Malfoy."

Another sob nearly made it past her defenses, and her eyes started leaking tears again. "Did that bastard torture him?"

Andy, concern for her sister written all over her face, asked, "Why are you doing this to yourself, Cissy? Why does it matter?"

Cissy's eyes never left Harry. "It matters to me, Andy. Please, Baron Black. I must know."

"Yes, he did," Harry admitted quietly. That's one of the things the investing teams discovered before Harry had left. Evidence of the Cruciatus (as well as more pedestrian cutting and bludgeoning curses) was all over Draco's body.

Cissy screwed her eyes shut. She took several shuddering breaths before opening them again. "Could someone please show me to my room?" she asked, looking like she was going to fall completely to pieces the instant she was alone.

"Dobby," Harry called, his voice still a whisper.

Dobby popped, his sad eyes on Cissy.

The appearance of her former house-elf brought what was almost a twitch of a smile from the woman. "Hello, Dobby. It's good to see you again."

"Mistress Narcissa," Dobby greeted her with a polite nod. "Yous room is being this way, Mistress." The little elf led the woman out of the room.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back on the couch, letting out a sigh. Nim reached over and rubbed a hand along his arm.

"Are you okay?" Ted asked.

Harry half-shrugged without opening his eyes and said, "Well as can be expected, I guess. None of us got injured if that's what you're asking."

"What can you tell us?" Andy asked.

"Five captured deez, but they're all low-level, foot soldier types. Two of them were classmates of Draco, at least until they were arrested at the beginning of this year. Before this yea, I would've called them his henchmen. Lucius killed Draco, saw me enter the room, and escaped by a portkey. Five dead other than Draco: Tom and four guests of the Leaky Cauldron. They probably just got in the way and were killed for it. Aurors showed up reasonably quickly after Shack notified them. Amelia showed up half-way through the investigation. I let her see a pensieve memory starting from the time Tonks and I apparated to Diagon Alley.

"You'll have to go in and make a statement," he added to Tonks in an aside. He turned to Remus. "You probably don't. You were with me or Shack the whole time and didn't fire any dueling spells, so they don't need to question you for the time being. Amelia said she'd let me know if that changes."

He frowned for a moment in thought. In a change of subject, he asked, "Andy and Nim, as the only real Blacks in the room don't take this the wrong way, but why do I care so much about Draco? I mean, he was a pain in the arse at school. Why did I feel so obligated to run off to his rescue?"

Godric answered. "You are - well, were - his Patriarch. The magics involved compelled you to protect the Blacks."

"So when I accepted the title of Patriarch, I also had the equivalent of a magically binding oath placed on me?"

Everyone nodded, looking at him in concern.

He thought it over for a few seconds. He wasn't terribly concerned about the protection portion of that. As Hermione had phrased it, his "saving people thing" would compel the same reaction out of him anyway. "Why didn't I notice anything when it went into effect?"

Nim answered, "You were already the Patriarch of the Potter line, so you didn't have anything new added to your magic at that point."

"Does that mean that my feelings toward you, Andy, and Cissy are only because of the spell?" Harry asked, looking at Nim intently.

"No!" Nim, Andy, Godric, and Shack all barked.

Harry looked taken aback.

"Sorry," Godric apologized. "Your personal feelings toward Nymphadora," he ignored her growl, "and the others are genuine. At the most, the bond will cause you to be protective of the individuals when they're in physical danger. You'll also instinctively protect the family as a whole. A comment directed at the family name without any individuals specified, for instance. Over the long run, it will give the family a reputation that matches the morals of the Patriarch. The downside is when one of the family acts against those morals. That's why you legally and magically have authority over them."

Harry absorbed all of that. "Okay, I suppose that makes sense."

"Now that we've covered your latest lesson in pureblood society," Ted asked in obvious amused irony, "what's the disposition of Draco's body?"

"I asked, actually. As Baron Black, I can take custody or Cissy can. I'll let her decide that one tomorrow. Either way, someone else will have to make the other arrangements. Burial, service, whatever is appropriate. I certainly don't know anything about it."

Andy nodded. "I can deal with that. The Blacks have a family cemetery out near Blackpool. Depending on whether he had a Will, anyway."

"I asked about that, too. Cissy and I will have to go and talk with the goblins about that and his vault."

"I wonder how the school will deal with it," Remus wondered aloud.

Harry winced. "Actually, it is the responsibility of Cissy or me to tell the school since he was still a student. Amelia told me the ministry will keep his name out of the Prophet until one or the other of us officially tells the Hogwarts staff that he won't be going back."

"Albus will know," Godric pointed out.

Harry frowned. "He'll announce it at the welcome back dinner, won't he? 'Three students lost to poor choices,' or some such sentimental and watered down drivel."

"There's only one way to get the honest version out," Godric said.

"What's that?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Tell it yourself."

The evening before the resumption of Hogwarts classes, Harry Potter strode into the Great Hall. Tonks and Shack took up guard positions at the door as Harry continued forward.

Silence fell upon the students as the commanding figure, wearing the Sword of Gryffindor, dragon hide armor, two signet rings, and battle robes with the Black and Potter crests stitched upon the chest stepped toward the head table.

In truth, he was more than a bit uncomfortable with what he was about to do.

Not that he'd admit it, of course.

Once Harry stopped in front of the seated Dumbledore, Snape drawled out, "Arrogant as always, Potter. What do you want with us this time?"

Harry ignored him. In a voice that carried to all the students, he said, "Headmaster, it is with a heavy heart that I officially inform you that Draco Black will no longer be attending Hogwarts."

Dumbledore showed no surprise at this news, nor did any of the professors, but Harry heard multiple gasps from the students.

"You lie!" a female voice accused him from the Slytherin table. Harry turned to see Millicent Bulstrode standing and glaring at him.

Harry shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I witnessed Draco Black -"

"It's Malfoy, you idiot," she snarled.

"It was not," Harry calmly retorted. "I'm sure you read the Prophet article that announced that he abandoned the Malfoy name. He became Draco Black. As I was saying, I witnessed him being murdered by Lucius Malfoy."

Several gasps met this announcement. The most vocal response was from Ron Weasley. The Gryffindor folded his arms, smirked, and announced, "Good. Serves him right."

Angry muttering came from the Slytherin table. Several dark looks came from Ravenclaws and a few Gryffindors. Confusing Harry slightly, Hermione glared at Ron from the Ravenclaw table. Ron ignored them all, keeping his attention on Harry.

Harry was glaring at Ron, the Patriarch bond rising to the fore. "I just told you that he was a Black. I am the Black Patriarch. Did you just tell me that you consider it a good thing that a member of my family was killed, Ronald Weasley?" Harry intentionally used Ron's full name to indicate it was a formal question. He could not afford to act as Ron's former friend; the situation forced him to act the part of his social station.

Ron's look melted into confusion. "But, Harry, he was a slimy git. Ow! What was that for?" Ron suddenly exclaimed as Ginny smacked his arm, hard.

Ginny explained as if to a five year old, "By publicly celebrating the death of a member of his family, you insulted the Patriarch of that family. He could call a blood feud between the Blacks and Weasleys over your idiotic opinion!" She stood and turned so that she was facing Harry. She bowed her head and spoke in a formal tone, "On behalf of the Weasley family, I apologize for my brother's words, Baron Black."

"Accepted, Miss Weasley. Thank you." Harry smiled and relaxed his stance. "Nice to see you, Gin."

Not giving either Weasley a chance to respond, Harry turned back to the room as a whole. "It's no secret that Draco and I didn't get along, but he turned his back on the Dark. He was killed by his own father for doing it. In addition, my friends and I captured five Death Eaters that evening, including Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle."

"What will happen to them?" an anonymous voice asked from the Slytherin table.

It was a fair question. The Prophet had run Harry's letter to the editor on the second page, after the first page was taken over describing the Leaky Cauldron attack (minus Draco's death). Fudge, predictably, had reacted badly and was spending more time doing damage control than actually trying to do his job.

"They are re-captured Death Eaters. My opinion on that subject is pretty clear, I think. Neither Minister Fudge nor the Wizengamot have decided the issue for sure, though," Harry answered the question. He took a breath and continued, "I am not trying to alarm anyone, but Draco is the perfect example of why we must all stand up to Voldemort and his Death Eaters. If Voldemort isn't stopped, more and more people will die. People who simply want to live their lives." He paused for a moment. "Perhaps people like your parents."

Harry turned from the absolutely silent student body. "Headmaster, I only wished to give you formal notice of the death of Draco Black. Thank you for your time, sir."

Dumbledore stood. "May I have a moment of your time before you go?"

Seeing no reasonable way out of it, Harry nodded his head in acceptance and waited as the ancient wizard rounded the end of the table and led the way out of the Great Hall. To Harry's annoyance, Snape and McGonagall joined the small parade.

When the doors to the Great Hall closed to a room full of whispering children, Dumbledore said, "Did you have to alarm all of the students, Harry?"

"Again, Headmaster, I ask you not to use my first name. As for what I just said, I'm painfully aware that you would prefer to keep the truth from everyone under the age of eighteen. I disagree. I think they can't be expected to make a reasonable, informed decision unless they know all the facts, not just those that someone in authority deems to be 'appropriate'."

Walking as he was beside McGonagall, he noticed her lip twitch, but he couldn't decide what that meant from the normally impassive professor.

Dumbledore audibly sighed at Harry's words. Snape, walking beside Dumbledore, momentarily turned to sneer at Harry.

"Great Merlin, is he EVER going to grow up?" Harry asked quietly.

Not quite quietly enough, though. McGonagall made a muffled noise. When Harry turned to her, her face was in her normal, impassive mien.

The group of six continued in silence to Dumbledore's office, the gargoyle jumping aside without a word needing to be spoken. Dumbledore sat at his desk. Snape took to hovering in a corner behind him. Professor McGonagall took a chair to the side, symbolically not taking sides in the meeting. Harry took one of the chairs in front of the desk, and Shack and Tonks stayed flanking the door.

"While we are all here, Harry, perhaps you can explain what happened to the House point system?" Dumbledore ordered in the form of a question.

Harry stared at him for a moment. "Headmaster, how many times must I say the same thing? I reserve the use of my first name for my friends. You are not in that category."

"Of course. I shall endeavor to remember that."

"Try harder," Harry stated flatly.

"Arrogant brat," Snape growled.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Headmaster, if your defense professor can't behave himself and contribute something useful to this discussion, then please remove him."

"I have more right to be here than you do, you insufferable Gryffindor."

Harry laughed outright at the irony of Snape's statement.

Snape glared.

Harry then felt a tickle in the back of his mind. Reacting instinctively, Harry attacked the intruding consciousness. Simultaneously, his right arm came up, and he cast several spells. Snape ended up pinned against the wall, spread-eagle and chin tilted as far up as his neck would allow, forcing his eyes to the ceiling.

At Harry's first movement, Tonks and Shack both drew their wands. Tonks covering Dumbledore and Shack covering Snape.

"Release him immediately," Dumbledore demanded, half coming to his feet.

Teeth clenched, Harry asked, "Why would I want to do that? He attacked me." Harry took a calming breath and looked over at the Headmaster. "Are you going to punish him?"

Snape made an infuriated noise, about all the sound he could produce from his position.

Dumbledore didn't answer but slowly settled back down into his chair.

"I didn't think so," Harry said in disgust. Silently, Harry stunned Snape and let him drop to the floor. Dropping back into his seat, he said, "Fair warning, Headmaster, the next individual who tries to rape my mind will get far worse." He turned his head. "Alistair, can I modify the wards to prevent Legilimency from being performed on any students without their knowledge?"

The tear in the tatty old Sorting Hat opened, and it said, "Yes, Lord Gryffindor, you can. Please place me upon your head, and I shall assist you."

Feeling that summoning the sentient artifact would be demeaning, Harry stood and walked over to the hat. Taking it carefully, he placed it on his head.

It was the work of less than a minute to modify the wards the way Harry wanted. After they were done, Harry heard, "*May I poke around in your mind, Harry? It isn't often that I have the chance to examine a mind so long after sorting.*"

"Go ahead, I guess. Just please keep anything you find to yourself. Dumbledore doesn't need to know any more about me than he already does."

Harry felt Alistair sifting through his mind. It was similar to Legilimency, but with an undertone that was totally unlike any of the other mind touches Harry had ever felt before. "*Oh, I totally agree,*" Alistair communicated as he worked. "*Fear not, Harry. I shall keep what I find in confidence, sharing information only with Hogwarts herself.*" After a few more moments, he said, "*Quite a mind you have, Harry. Thank you for letting me look around in here. As recompense, I give you three memories. There are more memories I expect you'd enjoy, but the others are getting restless.*"

Harry felt the peculiar sensation of three memories being implanted into his mind. It felt similar to re-integrating a pensieve memory. He briefly examined each of them, finding himself with a completely unique point of view of the sorting of eleven year old Sirius Black, Lily Evans, and James Potter.

Grinning, Harry removed the hat from his head. "Thank you," he said to it as he placed it carefully back onto its shelf.

"You're quite welcome, Harry," it said aloud before relaxing back into its immobile state.

Still smiling, Harry looked around at the conscious magicians. Shack and Nim were again relaxed and now fighting grins, McGonagall looked slightly disapproving, and Dumbledore was unsuccessfully trying to hide his hurt look.

Rapidly reviewing what he'd said to Alistair, he innocently looked at Dumbledore. "Sorry, did I say that out loud?"

Nim made a noise of amusement from behind Harry.

Harry's expression dropped into neutral. "Be advised, Headmaster, that Legilimency is only allowed in one room on the third floor. There is a plaque above the door. Alistair and I set that room aside just in case a student wishes to learn Occlumency while at the school. Any attempt to cast a Legilimency Spell outside of that room will have . . . unpleasant results."

"I understand. Now perhaps we could get back to the topic of the House point system?"

A hint of a smile appeared on Harry's face. "I distinctly remember Alistair telling you and Snape at Halloween that the point system was unbiased. What more could you want?"

Dumbledore took a moment before asking his next question, "And would you know why Professor Snape seems to be incapable of giving detentions?"

"Is he incapable of giving detentions, or only unjustified detentions?" Harry asked in return.

"I do not understand," McGonagall said.

Harry turned to her. Based on Ginny's letter, he didn't quite believe McGonagall didn't know exactly what was going on, but he was grateful for her playing the part of the foil so he could explain as little or as much as he wished. "Has anyone asked him or the students the cause of the detentions that he cannot enforce? I'm just wondering if they're unjustified and therefore not being enforced the same way the points are."

"You did do something to the point system and Severus's ability to give detentions," Dumbledore stated in an accusing yet mild tone.

"Of course I did," Harry said in exasperation, finally fed up with trying to play innocent. "Like Alistair and I keep telling you, the point system is now fair. None of the professors can give or take points OR DETENTIONS that are unjustified."

"Justified by whom, Harry? If we use your -"

Harry interrupted him, "Headmaster, you DO realize it is a sign of disrespect not to refer to people by their preferred names, don't you?"

Dumbledore blinked in confusion. "Well, yes."

"Then for the last bloody time, stop calling me by my first name."

McGonagall thinned her lips in disapproval of the language but didn't utter a word.

"Me, too," Nim piped up.

Dumbledore looked sad. "Very well, Lord-Baron Potter. As I was saying, if we used your moral set, that could possibly bias the points and detentions, could it not? No matter how well intentioned you may be?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, if it used my sense of right and wrong, and we'll ignore for the moment that you're admitting that my morals coincide with everyone else's' whereas Snape's do not, the system could indeed be biased. However, we're not using my opinions on the matter at all."

"Then what is being used?"

Alistair spoke up, "Albus, without putting too fine a point on it, as a founder's heir, he legally and magically could do anything he wanted with the school. Just to ease your mind, I assure you that the points and detentions ARE fair, but I will not tell you how it was done."

Harry let the comment hang for a long moment before asking, "Was there anything else, Headmaster? I'd like to get back home in time for dinner."

"Yes. Would you reconsider coming back to Hogwarts? We can help you and keep you safe."

Harry stared at him for a few seconds before giving a grim laugh. "I have tutors in the subjects that are useful and are the most likely to save my life in the battle we both know is coming. I don't have anyone, student or professor, actively trying to injure me. I'm learning more and faster now. I'm safer than at this so-called 'safest place in the wizarding world.' Tell me, why would I want to come back?"

"We can help. No matter what protections are over your home, Hogwarts is safer for you."

Harry shook his head sadly. "You just don't get it. Headmaster, I trust half of the people I'm living with with my life."

"Only half?" Dumbledore grasped at the qualifier.

"The other half I trust with my soul," Harry finished his previous thought calmly, dashing Dumbledore's hopes of finding a wedge in Harry's statement.

"You can trust the staff here with your life," Dumbledore insisted.

Harry looked over at the unconscious Snape just long enough for Dumbledore to get the point before bringing his gaze back to the Headmaster. Aloud, Harry said, "Of the current staff of Hogwarts, I only trust three with my life." He turned his head. "My apologies, Min, but I don't know you well enough to say the same for my soul."

She nodded. "I understand, Harry, and I'm humbled to be included in that three."

Harry stood. "Good day, Headmaster. Bye, Min, Alistair."

Scion of Gryffindor 36 - Trial of Dolores Umbridge

It was after lunch, and Harry had just started running the gauntlet of reporters outside the courtroom. He definitely wanted to watch the rest of the trial of Dolores Umbridge and therefore was willing to put up with the questions they shouted at him.

"Mr. Potter, do you have any comment regarding the trial so far?"

"Mr. Potter, is there any truth to the rumor that you and Headmaster Dumbledore are not on speaking terms?"

"Lord-Baron Potter, how is the Potter Labor Pool business doing? Is it true that one-hundred percent of your current employees are werewolves?"

"Harry, how's Nymphadora Tonks in bed?"

This last one caused Harry to stop short and finally turn to the assembled reporters. Seeing his reaction, they stopped shouting and stood with quills posed, nearly salivating at the thought that he'd actually answer THIS question.

"Who asked that?" Harry asked them in a calm-sounding voice.

Remus and Shack, failing at trying to keep everyone away from their charge, shared a look. They had heard that tone from him before.

A reporter near the front raised her hand. She was relatively young, probably about Nim's age, Harry judged, and garishly dressed. "Sissy Smythe, Teen Witch Weekly," she identified herself primly, happy to have captured the attention of the publicity-shy Boy Who Lived.

Harry gave one short nod. "Thank you for identifying yourself so easily, Miss Smythe." He turned and resumed his efforts to get into the courtroom.

"Aren't you going to answer?" another reporter shouted.

Harry stopped with a sigh. "Who're you?"

"Henry Dunkork, The Stars."

Harry gave him a confused look. "The what? I've never heard of that one."

"The Stars . We started with doing horoscopes seventy years ago and branched out from there."

When Harry continued to look blank, one of the other reporters said, "It's a conspiracy rag. Lots of crazy theories. This week I think their main article was, 'Burning swans seen defending the light side.' Absolute rubbish."

Another reporter, smirk on her face, added, "Last week was, 'Chocolate will lead us to the Dark.'"

A third said, "'The Godric - Salazar feud is still ongoing.'"

Dunkork didn't look happy with all these other reporters mocking his paper, but he didn't interrupt.

After a moment of stunned silence, Harry gave a bark of laughter and shook his head. "You people, all of you, are unbelievable." He turned around again and this time managed to make it through the reporters to the courtroom.

He made his seat just in time for the door behind the bench to open and the Wizengamot judicial panel to enter. While they were seating themselves, Amelia Bones quietly entered and took a seat near the panel. Dolores Umbridge was led in by two aurors and shackled into a chair facing the Elders. Everyone's locations were the same as they had been all morning. The only change was Umbridge's expression. She looked inordinately happy or perhaps smug, now.

Once everyone was settled, the Chief Elder said, "Barrister Maloney, do you wish to present further evidence?"

The ministry barrister who was prosecuting Umbridge, and doing a very poor job of it in Harry's uneducated opinion, stood. "If it pleases the court, due to lack of evidence, we will be dropping all charges with the exception of exceeding ministry granted authority."

The audience made a rumbling noise for a few moments before settling back down.

The Elders that made up the court narrowed their eyes a bit at the barrister. The Chief Elder nodded slowly, clearly unhappy. "Very well. If there is nobody else who wishes to present evidence, we will begin our deliberations."

Sighing at the utter insanity of the wizarding world's court system, Harry stood up. "I wish to speak," he said, using the formal words that he'd

looked up with Andy and Shack's help. They'd spent the past week looking up procedures for just this circumstance. Fudge would NOT bail Umbridge out of this mess if Harry had any say in the matter.

The Chief Elder looked up at Harry, a glint of hope appearing in her eyes. "Identify yourself and what you wish to say," she returned the traditional phrase.

"I am Harry James Potter, member of the Wizengamot," Harry answered, giving the least of the titles he carried that would still give him the freedom to do what he needed. Not just any witch or wizard could stand up and make some of the demands he was about to make. "I wish to present evidence against former Undersecretary Umbridge that Barrister Maloney seems to have . . . misplaced."

Maloney dropped into his seat and started to look slightly green. Umbridge's smug expression turned sour instantly. The seated reporters all twitched. The spectators whispered amongst themselves.

For their part, the Elders looked much happier at this turn of events. "Very well, Lord-Baron Potter," one of the Elders said, identifying Harry by one of his more impressive titles. "As a member of the Wizengamot, you have the right to question the defendant and present evidence. As you are not a barrister or solicitor by profession, please heed any warnings or suggestions we of the panel give you. You have the floor, Lord-Baron."

Harry nodded respectfully. "Thank you, sir. I shall, of course, heed the words of the panel." He moved out into the aisle and slowly walked down toward the front of the room, eyes locked onto Umbridge. He stopped immediately in front of the table she was sitting behind.

She glared malevolently back at him the entire time.

"I request that the defendant be given Veritaserum," Harry announced.

The audience reacted by shifting and murmuring. It was insulting to the witness to demand the most powerful truth potion before the questioning even started.

The panel, on the other hand, didn't appear to be at all surprised. The Chief Elder nodded toward an auror standing along the wall. That auror stepped toward Umbridge, pulling a vial out of his robes.

Barrister Maloney stood. "I must object. Veritaserum is a very expensive potion to produce. Do we want to waste so much money to force the truth from a witness who has been cooperative?"

Harry turned to look at Maloney. "I'm just speculating, but I think she was instructed to admit to exceeding the ministry granted authority. In exchange, you wouldn't try her for her numerous other crimes, even though several students, myself included, can easily give you proof of them. I find it curious that you, the supposed prosecutor of the case, would agree to drop serious, PROVEABLE charges just to get her to admit to such a minor offense. More curious still when you realize that you have a method to ensure we get the truth out of her without resorting to plea bargaining. Did someone VERY high up in the government give you some orders, perhaps?"

Maloney flushed and glared at Harry. "Look here, you insolent child -"

Harry waved a hand, cutting the man off. "Never mind. Back to Umbridge. Given her orders to basically admit to exceeding her authority, you never asked her anything that could make her look too bad. Therefore she has had no reason to lie so far. Just to put the Elders' minds at ease, if I cannot prove that Veritaserum is necessary in her case, I will pay the cost for the one dose." He turned to the panel. "Is this acceptable?"

The Elders had watched all of this with concealed amusement. It wasn't their job to prosecute the case, but they knew what they were watching as the prosecutor refused to charge Umbridge with anything serious. Harry's implications of high level protection weren't lost on any of them.

Nor on the reporters. They were all writing furiously.

The Chief Elder said, "Yes, Lord-Baron Potter. Your suggestion is acceptable. I wish to hear what proof you can bring to the case." She nodded to the auror again.

As she was being dosed, Umbridge smirked at Harry before her eyes glazed over.

Suspicious of what the look was for, Harry started his questioning.

"Have you ever received any Occlumency training?"

"Yes."

Harry frowned inwardly. If she knew the same thing he did about Veritaserum, namely that you had to answer truthfully but not completely, then Occlumency could help her keep from admitting to everything. He adjusted the questions he was going to ask accordingly.

"Okay, let's start with proving that the Veritaserum was necessary." Harry looked an apology toward Remus. This was going to get ugly. "What is your opinion of werewolves?"

"They are subhuman things that should be put down like the animals they are."

"Are you aware of my business, Potter Labor Pool?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware of the rumors that I'm hiring werewolves for this business?"

"Yes."

"So you know that I'm an advocate of werewolf rights. Are you also aware that I'm personal friends with a werewolf?"

"Yes."

"Given the opportunity, would you lie to me in order to make me, and therefore my business, and therefore werewolves in general, look bad?"

Umbridge's face contorted for a moment as she tried to refrain from answering. "Yes," the hissed answer finally emerged.

Harry turned a short smirk onto the barrister before looking toward the panel of Elders. "I believe we all agree that the Veritaserum was needed?"

All the Elders nodded. "Continue your questions," one of them invited.

"Thank you," Harry said to them politely. He turned back to Umbridge and continued. "In the first class of Defense Against the Dark Arts I had with you, in early September of 1995, why did you put me into detention?"

"You were disrupting class."

Harry almost grinned. This was the perfect example of what he was worried about. She told the truth, just not the entire truth. Time to close off her avenues of creative truth-telling. "Unfortunately, I disagree. You and I, in the course of that lesson, disagreed on whether Voldemort had returned. This escalated to both of us raising our voices. This is what disrupted the class. Is my synopsis correct?"

"You were a disruptive influence on the class."

"That is not what I asked, I'm afraid. Did the disagreement between you and me over Voldemort's return disrupt the class?"

"You were a disruption to the learning environment for the other students."

The Chief Elder spoke up at this point. "Madam Umbridge, you are avoiding the question. Please give a simple yes or no answer. I trust that Lord-Baron Potter will phrase all future questions as to be unambiguous with what he is asking." She fixed him with an intent stare.

Harry bowed his head in acknowledgment of the Chief Elder's words. "Dolores Umbridge, wasn't it in fact the disagreement between you and me that disrupted the class in question?"

Umbridge slumped minutely. "Yes."

"So you punished me by giving me a detention for saying that Voldemort had returned. My statement was in direct contradiction to the official ministry position on his return. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"In light of recent information, specifically the multiple eyewitnesses to Voldemort being in the ministry of magic atrium seven months ago, was I correct in my assertion that Voldemort had in fact come back?"

"It appears so."

"I'll take that as a 'yes.' So in retrospect, you gave me unjustified detention, correct?"

"Yes."

"Lord-Baron," the Chief Elder interrupted, "you're proving you got unjustified detentions. While unfortunate, it does not qualify as a criminal matter."

"I understand that, ma'am. My goal here is to prove that she gave many students detentions - at least some of which were unjustified and politically motivated - and that she behaved illegally during those detentions. If you will bear with me for a moment, I'll be getting there shortly."

"Very well, but if you don't prove your allegations, you'll be in a whole heap of trouble, young man."

Harry nodded to her and continued with Umbridge. "Name all the students you put into detention."

"I don't remember."

"That doesn't surprise me as the list is so long." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a scroll. "Last week I asked Deputy Headmistress McGonagall to prepare a list of students who served detentions with you for the entire school year that you were working at Hogwarts." He turned from his position in front of Umbridge and looked toward the spectator seating. "Professor McGonagall, I believe I saw you earlier. Please come forward and verify that this is the same list that you sent me."

Minerva McGonagall stood and approached the front of the room. After a cold look at Umbridge, she accepted the list from Harry and scanned through it. Giving one nod, she rolled it up and handed it back to Harry. "To the best of my recollection, this is the same list that I gave you, Harry. It's my handwriting as well, so I believe this is the same scroll I owed you last week." She turned to address the Elder panel. "The magics of

Hogwarts keep track of all points given and received as well as detentions. The resulting lists are rarely accessed, but the information is available to the Headmaster and his Deputy. That is where I determined that list." She turned back to Harry and rested one thin hand upon his shoulder. So quietly that nobody could hear, she said, "I am sorry, Harry. I didn't know how many detentions she gave you."

Harry put one hand over hers and matched her whisper. "I'm afraid to say that it gets worse, Min. Have a seat and watch her get her due."

With a firm nod, McGonagall headed back toward her seat.

Harry unrolled the scroll and placed it before Umbridge. "Tell me, Dolores Umbridge, to the best of your recollection is this an accurate list of the detentions you oversaw during your one year as a professor at Hogwarts?"

Harry watched the flat eyes flick back and forth as she read the scroll. "I cannot disagree with any of the names on the list," she finally pronounced.

Harry nodded and rolled it back up, placing the list in front of the Chief Elder. "Tell me, are you familiar with an item commonly known as a 'Blood Quill?'"

Several hisses of indrawn breath sounded around the room as everyone reacted to Harry's words.

"Yes."

"Are you aware that it is illegal to force another human being to use a blood quill?"

"Yes."

"Of that list you just read, how many of the students did you order to use a blood quill?"

Her eyes flickered back and forth for a moment. "Not all of them."

Harry smiled grimly. She wasn't going to get away with that kind of a dodge. "Was it more than half of the names?"

"Yes."

"Was it more than three-quarters of them?"

"Yes."

"Was it in fact all but ONE of the names on that list?"

"Yes."

"So of the twenty-three names on the list, you forced twenty-two students to use a blood quill on ourselves, correct?"

"Yes."

"Was I the student with the most detentions with you?"

"Yes."

"How many hours did you force me to write with the blood quill?"

"I don't know."

"Was it, in total, more than one-hundred hours?"

"I believe so."

The hisses of shock from earlier sounded like noises of anger this time around.

"So, you effectively used a torture device upon me for over 100 hours. Do you regret having tortured me?"

Her eyes flickered again. "Yes."

Harry raised an eyebrow in surprise. He didn't for a moment believe the sadistic woman actually regretted it. Thinking about it for a moment, he realized where he'd gone wrong with his question. "Let me rephrase. Would you regret it if you were not on trial?"

She seemed to slump in her chair. Giving him a hateful glare, or at least as hateful as she could under Veritaserum's effects, she growled out, "No."

Harry turned his back on her. "In addition to that list, Chief Elder, I wish to show you the scars on the back of my hand as further proof. Over one hundred hours of a blood quill etching the phrase, 'I will not tell lies,' left its mark." He showed the panel the back of his hand.

While they were examining it, Umbridge suddenly spoke up, "I was under the Imperious!"

Harry, Shack, and Andy had expected this tactic on her part and so had the counter already figured out.

Harry turned to her in mock surprise. Before addressing her, though, he turned to the auror who had dosed her earlier. "Sir, it is my understanding that a person under the effects of Veritaserum cannot volunteer information without prompting. Is that true?"

The man nodded. "Correct, Lord-Baron. The dose she took just wore off."

Harry nodded. "Thank you for your information, sir." He turned to the glowering Umbridge. "Are you seriously claiming that I cast the Imperious Curse on you in full view of the entire courtroom and made you answer my questions?"

She snarled and spat out, "Not that, you idiot. I mean when I," here, her expression shifted to a sad look, "unfortunately was forced to make you use the blood quill."

"You'd rather be thought of as weak-minded than a criminal, is that it?" Harry asked.

She opened her mouth to give a sharp retort, but Harry shook his head. "You haven't bothered to tell anyone about it until now? You, who claim to be a D.A.D.A. expert," his sarcastic tone told his real opinion on that claimed title, "didn't bother to tell anyone that you were under the Imperious Curse all year?"

She took a long time in answering. "No. The Veritaserum must have shaken me out of the grip of the curse."

"So you're claiming you've been under someone else's control since before beginning at Hogwarts and up until moments ago?"

"Yes."

Harry turned to the auror again with a querying look.

The man frowned. "Theoretically possible," he finally admitted.

Nodding in acknowledgement, Harry then turned to Amelia Bones. "I have a question for you, Madam Bones. As head of the D.M.L.E., you are knowledgeable on a wide variety of Dark Curses. If a person is under the Imperious Curse, do they try to justify their actions to themselves?"

Amelia frowned in confusion. "No, Lord-Baron. Due to the nature of the Imperious, the victim would never question any of their actions."

Harry nodded. Turning back to the panel, he said, "I have a memory I would like to present to you all. In it, you will see Dolores Umbridge talking to herself, justifying an attempt to use the Cruciatus Curse upon me."

The audience grew restless again.

Ignoring them, Harry went on. "Based upon Madam Bones's comment, Dolores Umbridge would not be trying to justify it to herself if she were under the Imperious, therefore my memory should prove that she was NOT under the effects of that curse.

"Also within the scene, she is trying to get more Veritaserum from Hogwarts Professor and Master Brewer Severus Snape as she'd used her entire supply in an effort to dose me earlier in the year. Last I heard, doing such a thing outside of a courtroom is illegal." Shack had been very firm that this action, which hadn't struck Harry as all that unexpected at the time, was in fact highly illegal.

"Next, please note the identities of the students, the so-called Inquisitorial Squad, she had doing her dirty work. I believe nearly all of the students' parents are confirmed Death Eaters. As well as three of them, Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson, are confirmed Death Eaters themselves. While I don't believe it is illegal in itself for her to have them as a group under her direction - at least before we knew that three of them were Death Eaters - it does appear suspicious. Add to this the familiar mention she makes of Lucius Malfoy, a now-KNOWN Death Eater, and it strongly suggests, at least to me, that she has ties of some sort to Voldemort's organization.

"Lastly, she admits to having sent the Dementors after me back before my fifth year."

"Objection," Maloney said, standing. "How do we know he's going to give a real memory?"

Harry turned to him. "Actually, I thought you'd be thanking me rather than trying to hinder me. I am, after all, doing your job, here. SOMEONE needs to actually prosecute her," Harry said in an acidic tone.

"Very well, then I object," the oily little wizard seated next to Umbridge said, speaking for the first time since Harry had stood up.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I swear upon my magic that the memory I am about to present to this court, should they agree, is accurate and unaltered." A pulse of magic came out of Harry.

Both barristers shut up and dropped into their seats, staring at Harry in something approaching fear.

"I believe that answers your objection, Barrister Howe?" the Chief Elder asked dryly.

Gulping, Umbridge's lawyer nodded.

Amelia sent one of the aurors out to fetch a pensieve. He returned within a minute and placed it on the table in front of the Chief Elder. When he approached Harry with his wand out, Harry stepped back.

Harry shook his head slowly. "My apologies, but there are very few individuals I am willing to let put a wand to my head."

The Chief Elder nodded and waved the auror back. "Considering your history, Lord-Baron, I cannot blame you. Who would you accept?"

"Remus Lupin or former auror Shackbolt would be my first choices if I am not permitted to do it myself."

The Chief Elder shook her head. "I'm afraid it must be a current ministry employee."

Which left out Min, Harry's next choice of the people available in the room. He looked over at Amelia. "Director Bones?"

Amelia nodded and stood, moving toward him and pulling out her wand. When she was close enough, she whispered, "Thank you for the trust, Harry."

Harry nodded and let her withdraw the memory, placing it with a wet plop into the pensieve.

The Chief Elder said, "We shall review this memory before we make our decision. Lord-Baron, do you have anything further to present?"

Harry shook his head. "I believe I have hit all the high points, Chief Elder. Thank you for your time." He gave her and the other Elders a short bow of respect before heading back to his seat.

Again using the traditional words were spoken. "If there is nobody else who wishes to present evidence, we will begin our deliberations."

This time, nobody spoke. Even Barrister Howe, Umbridge's lawyer, didn't say anything in her defense. The Wizengamot Elders stood and filed through an inconspicuous door behind their table, the pensieve clutched in the Chief Elder's hands.

Satisfied with what he'd done, Harry leaned back in his seat as the room broke into excited buzzing.

"Damn, Cub," Remus said in quiet admiration.

"Well done, Harry. Well done," Shack congratulated him.

"Indeed, Harry. Well done," McGonagall echoed as she slipped into a seat next to him. She sighed. "When you told me that it was going to get worse, I had no idea." She glared at the pale and sweating Umbridge for a moment before turning sad eyes back to Harry. "I am so sorry, Harry. Why didn't you tell me what she was doing?"

Harry spoke in a soft tone in an effort to reduce the sting he knew the words would produce. "I tried, Min. You basically told me to shut up and keep my head down, remember?"

"I didn't mean for you to accept torture!"

Harry shrugged. "Perhaps, but that's the way I took it. Besides, what would you have done? Gone to Dumbledore and eventually gotten yourself sacked. What good would that have done either of us? You'd be gone, and I'd still have to do the lines." A grin came to Harry's face. "Besides, after watching you deal with that hag at my career counseling session and watching you two during her review of your class, I certainly didn't think you were on her side."

McGonagall snorted in a very unladylike fashion. "Please don't say anything, Harry, but most of the staff was about to rebel before those two Weasley rascals took off and set Peeves on her."

Harry's grin widened. "I noticed none of you seemed to try to help her out and control much of anything after that point. All that mayhem the students and Peeves spread sure was something, wasn't it?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Harry, not all the chaos was spread by the children and that annoying poltergeist."

Harry stared at her for a moment before breaking into laughter.

"I always knew there was more to you, Minerva," Remus said with a soft smile.

She graced the former Marauder with a smile.

"I wonder how Fudge will handle this," Shack said pensively.

Harry grunted. "You mean one of his more rabid supporters being thrown into prison?"

"That, too, but I was thinking about the hit he's going to take in popularity when it becomes widely known that it was the Boy Who Lived who put Umbridge away, implying that Fudge told the prosecutor to let her off with little more than a slap on the wrist."

Harry smiled at him innocently. "Did I say that?"

"Did someone VERY high up in the government give you some orders, perhaps?" Remus mocked Harry's words to Maloney from earlier.

Harry adopted a shocked look and placed a hand to the side of his face in a blatantly fake expression of disbelief. "Wow, is THAT what you got out of what I said?"

Remus laughed at him. Shack and Min smiled.

Harry dropped his theatrics. "I'm actually looking forward to tomorrow's Prophet," he said with a hard grin.

"Don't count your dragons before they hatch," Shack warned. "Wait until we find out the result of this trial. Ah, they're coming back out. That sure was quick."

The Elders filed back in and resumed their seats. The room quieted rapidly, everyone waiting for their words with bated breath.

Without preamble, the Chief Elder stated, "On the charge of exceeding ministry granted authority, we find Dolores Jane Umbridge guilty.

"Based on the further testimony and memory provided by Lord-Baron Harry James Potter, we additionally find Dolores Jane Umbridge guilty of the further charges: unauthorized use of ministry controlled creatures, namely dementors; twenty-two counts of use of a torture device upon minors, namely a blood quill; illegal use of a ministry controlled potion, namely Veritaserum; possession of a torture device . . ."

The entire room of spectators were calling for blood by the end of the list. They quieted down when the sentence of life imprisonment was handed down.

Victorious, and feeling a bit guilty for feeling satisfied and smug about it, Harry said his goodbyes to Min and began the long process of getting back out of the room to get home. He had some good news to spread.

Scion of Gryffindor
37 - Nim's Birthday

Harry,

I feel that I must apologize to you.

I had no idea that your detentions with Professor Umbridge were anything of the sort that was just revealed by the Daily Prophet. Had I known, rest assured that I would have done something about the situation, my boy.

In the end, however, it seems that things have worked out satisfactorily.

I have some other news for you, as well. While it does not pertain directly to you or Voldemort, there is nonetheless some information that I feel you need to have.

Considering all the attacks you have been launching against Cornelius, his popularity has been taking a severe beating. I fear that he may soon face a vote of no-confidence from the Wizengamot, of which you are a part. I would strongly suggest you familiarize yourself with the rules and procedures for the case of a vote of this sort, because I feel that such an event is soon to be upon us.

Feel free to come to use the Hogwarts library or see me with any questions you may have on this or any other topic, Harry.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Order of Merlin, First Class
Grand Sorcerer
Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot
Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards

"Can I cast a Fidelius Charm on my first name?"

Godric looked at the fuming Harry in confusion. "Uh . . . technically, I suppose it's possible. Why?"

"Dumbledore seems incapable of NOT using it," Harry spat, handing the letter over. "Despite my asking him to. Repeatedly."

Godric blinked at the venom in his descendant's words before reading the parchment silently. "Hmm, modest as always, aren't you Albus? Used most of your impressive titles and everything." He looked up again at Harry. "To answer your question, yes it's possible. But it's probably more trouble than it's worth."

Harry grumbled about that but didn't argue any further.

"There is some good information in here," Godric pointed out, re-reading the letter.

"Yeah, the no-confidence vote thing." Harry sighed. "Something else for me to look up and worry about."

Harry,

Haven't heard from you for a bit, so I thought I'd drop a note.

Well, that and the Prophet just ran a story on how you put Umbitch in prison. Is what the paper said true? You presented evidence against her, accused the Minister of trying to bribe the barrister, and single-handedly convinced the judges that Toad-Woman deserves Azkaban?

I agree, mind you. I was there, after all, when the Inquisitorial Squad was holding us by her order.

No matter how much of it's true, you're the new hero here at the school.

Anyway, some news from your castle.

Yes, I said yours. I've been thinking, and between your messing with the rules about points and detentions, the costumes we all wore at Halloween, and the fact that you were wearing Gryffindor's sword when you showed up at the start of term (very hot look, incidentally), I have come to the conclusion that you're Gryffindor's heir. I haven't shared this theory with anyone else, but I wouldn't

be surprised if several others, Hermione included, have reached the same conclusion.

Hermione. You may have noticed that she was sitting at the Ravenclaw table when you visited to give the Headmaster the news about Draco Mal Black. She is, in fact, dating one of the Ravenclaws. Kevin Entwhistle, I think. Not a big thing, but they're not making it a secret. She seems happy with him, and she's definitely easier to get along with when we're all in the common room.

Just in case you're interested, my git of a brother is still trying to date Lavender Brown, but rumor has it that she's going to dump him soon. She cooled down the relationship after the hols and was very much NOT impressed with what he said the other day when you were here.

By the way, I'd like to thank you for that. I've gained a bit of notoriety. Not only did I apparently prevent a blood feud between the Blacks and Weasleys (you weren't really going to do anything serious, were you?), the fact that I was the only student you really spoke with has done wonders for me socially. I expect that they're all after me just because they think I have your ear, but in the meantime all of the attention is fun. Before you get concerned, big, not-quite brother, I'm going to be very choosy on who I date.

Because I know you're going to want to know, Draco's death hasn't actually had much effect around here on most of us. He'd been laying low all year, so it isn't much different now. The most affected ones were the little Death Nibblers (I have no idea who came up with the name, but it's stuck) who're either bummed that their former leader is gone or happy that the "traitorous Malfoy is dead." That's a direct quote from Bulstrode, by the way. The other one affected is Daphne Greengrass. I don't know what the thing is, but she's been even more quiet than she was in the past. Do you know if there was something going on between them?

In case you decide to visit anytime soon, I'd better give you a warning. Between the look and sheer presence you had when you visited and what you just did to Umbridge, I think just about every girl over third year (and a few of the guys) want to jump your bones.

Which brings us to Tonks. Harry, those of us who know you (and are being honest about it) feel that she's good for you. You seem happier, more relaxed. Hermione and I both feel that this is a good thing. The rest of the female population of Hogwarts, though . . . Well, as I said, I'm giving you a friendly warning.

You asked about Luna and Neville. They're here, and they're doing fine. Just yesterday she was trying to talk him into learning Mongolian for some reason. Other than that, they're both their usual selves.

I want to thank you again for the Marauder's Map. It's been a lot of fun. Learning about some peoples' habits (for instance, Cho Chang visits some unused classroom on the fourth floor every Thursday evening). One thing I noticed yesterday morning was Dumbledore walking out of McGonagall's quarters. This wouldn't be so strange except I'd awakened at five and just checked the map on a whim. Do you think there's something going on there?

So, what do you have planned for Valentine's? Fred and George have made some noises about setting up a booth in the courtyard that day and introducing their newest line of wheezes. I'm too scared to ask.

Take it easy, and be good.

Ginny

Harry saw the magic shift slightly as Nim woke up and almost subconsciously morphed her image. He knew she wasn't fond of her base form and was more comfortable when she was wearing one of her masks, so he didn't argue the point. He'd seen her natural form like he wanted and wasn't going to complain if she used her skills to put herself into a form that was more comfortable for her.

"Hmm," she groaned out as Harry's hands continued their work on her bare form. "You can keep that up forever."

He chuckled. "Forever? You'd eventually get sore, wouldn't you?"

"I don't care. Ooooh, yeah. Right there," she moaned, arching her back a little.

He smacked her lightly. "Hold still, you. This is a very delicate operation." He returned his concentration to what he was doing.

"As long as you keep that up, I'll do anything you ask."

"Anything?" he asked with a smirk, using his thumbs to great effect if her continued moans were any indication.

"Anything, lover boy," she confirmed.

"Hmm. I'll have to give that some thought. Meanwhile," his hands came off of her back, "it's time for the birthday girl to get her lazy but cute arse out of bed and ready for the day."

She made a pouting noise but obediently got out of bed, wiggling her cute arse as she walked into the bathroom.

"Wench!" Harry groaned out through a chuckle.

"Happy birthday," everyone else chorused as Nim came into the dining room.

She smiled shyly around. "Thanks."

"So has Harry given you a gift yet this morning?" Remus asked blandly but with a sparkle in his eyes.

She refused to rise to the bait. "He did, in fact. Quite an enjoyable gift, too," she said calmly as she slipped into the seat the red-faced Harry was holding for her.

Ted Tonks started coughing violently.

Andy reached over and patted him on the back as she addressed her daughter, "That's nice to hear, dear. I'm glad to hear that he's treating you well."

His breathing under control again, Ted looked at his wife incredulously. "Um, dear, you DO realize that they're implying -"

She interrupted, "Ted, I love you dearly, but you need to realize that she isn't your little girl any longer. She's an adult, and anything they might be doing or not doing isn't any of our business any longer."

He sighed and nodded. "Sorry, Cami," he said to Nim, "but you'll always be my baby girl."

She smiled at him. "I know, Dad. Please, just remember that I'm not that little girl anymore."

"I know. You grew up somewhere along the line." He smiled. "Stop it."

Everyone laughed.

Harry said, "I'm tempted to say that I appreciate how she's growing up, but I won't. It'll just give Moony too much ammunition against me."

Remus, grinning slightly, opened his mouth, but Andy interrupted him. "Instead of pursuing that," she said with a quelling look to the werewolf, "I have a gift for my daughter."

Everyone looked at her a little strangely. They'd agreed the previous day to wait until after the evening meal before giving Tonks her gifts.

Ignoring the looks, Andy turned to Harry. "It's done."

"What's done?" he asked, blankly. A moment later, his eyes lit in recognition. "It is? I thought it wouldn't be done until later this month?"

Andy shrugged. "So did I. Turns out I was wrong."

Nim was looking back and forth from her mother to boyfriend. "What are you two talking about?"

Harry was visibly excited. "Finish your breakfast, Nim. I have an errand to run in Diagon Alley before we celebrate your birthday. I think you want to be along for the errand. Trust me, you'll enjoy it."

Andy nodded, smiling at her daughter. Nim thought the smile had a vicious edge to it, but she wasn't sure.

"Where to first?" Remus asked after the three apparated to Diagon Alley.

"Gringotts," Harry answered, already heading that way. "Snargtooth has some paperwork for me."

It was a matter of only minutes until they were safely in the goblin's office. "What may I do for you this day, Lord-Baron?"

Harry looked at the goblin in resignation. "How many times must I ask you to call me Harry?"

A smile flickered at the edges of Snargtooth's mouth. "I do appreciate what you are trying to do, Lord-Baron, but I am afraid that it is simply out of the question. While doing business with or for a wizard that we respect, all goblins will refer to you by your title."

"Give up, Harry," Remus advised. "He's not trying to be difficult, it's simply the goblins' way."

"Fine, fine," Harry said, holding up a hand in surrender. "Snargtooth, Andy tells me that you have some paperwork for me."

Wordlessly, Snargtooth pulled a rolled-up scroll from a desk drawer and handed it over. He gave Harry a toothy smile which Harry returned.

"Thank you," Harry said. "While I'm here, is there anything further we need to discuss?"

Snargtooth produced a handful of other parchments. "Simply a few signatures, Lord-Baron. Purchases and funds transfers authorized by your business manager and such matters."

Harry glanced at the sheets only briefly before signing each with the offered quill. Standing, he said, "Have a profitable day, Snargtooth."

"And you, Lord-Baron Potter-Black. Mr. Lupin. Lady Black."

Nim stopped on her way out the door. She flicked a glance at Harry before looking back at the goblin. "I'm sorry, what did you call me?"

"Lady Black. You are a lady, and you are of the House of Black, are you not?" Snargtooth asked innocently.

She rolled her eyes and left the room. Harry managed to wink at the goblin behind her back before he followed his irate girlfriend.

"Was that goblin teasing me?" Tonks demanded quietly.

"Yes," Remus answered around a grin. Ignoring the growling metamorphmagus, he turned to Harry. "Where to now?"

Harry grinned, eyes twinkling. "It's a surprise." He went down the front steps of Gringotts bank and looked around. "I know it's around here somewhere," he muttered. Finally spotting his target, he said, "Ah, there it is." He marched across the small square at the center of Diagon Alley, his two confused bodyguards trailing in his wake.

When Harry entered the business office of the Daily Prophet, Tonks turned to Remus with a questioning look. He just shrugged in response.

Harry smiled at the young witch at the front counter. "Yes, Mr. Potter?" she asked, unaffected by his notoriety.

"May I speak with the senior editor, please?" Harry asked politely.

"Mr. Cuffe is a very busy man," the receptionist returned immediately with a superior tone. She turned back to what she had been doing, dismissing Harry.

Harry found himself somewhat impressed. Nobody had ignored him so impressively since his return to the wizarding world. "Hmm. Perhaps you're right," Harry allowed after a few seconds of thought. "How about Rita Skeeter?"

The witch behind the desk now looked wary. "I'm afraid, sir, that I am not allowed to let walk-ins speak with senior editors OR senior reporters." Her snobbish tone from before had been replaced. Now it was equal parts defensive, apologetic, and scared.

Harry thought about that for a few seconds, surprised at such a vastly different reaction to his requests. He'd think she'd be more awed by the senior editor than a reporter. Unless . . .

"She's threatened you somehow, hasn't she?" Harry asked quietly.

Tonks glanced at Harry in pride and a little surprise.

The receptionist looked startled for a half-moment before settling back down to a professionally blank mask. Harry's fledgling Legilimency skills had shouted out her answer as clearly as if she'd spoken it aloud.

Harry nodded. "Okay, I'm going to send her a note and then wait for her here. Thank you," he glanced at the name tag on the desk, "Cathy."

Without further ado, Harry waved a hand and conjured a piece of parchment.

"Show off," Remus teased.

He smiled at Cathy and asked to borrow a quill. Wide-eyed, she gave him the one in her hand. After scribbling a quick note, Harry returned the quill and turned to Nim. "How do I turn this into the kind of paper airplane I saw flying around the ministry?"

Tonks waved her wand over the page, muttering under her breath. The short note Harry wrote to Rita folded itself up and flew out the back door of the room.

Harry, Tonks, and Remus retreated to the seating area.

They had barely seated themselves before Rita Skeeter burst into the otherwise empty room. "Harry, darling! So good to see you again. Thank you ever so much for coming to see little old me. This must be Nymphadora Tonks! I can see why you are dating her, Harry. Quite a woman. And you are Remus Lupin, I believe. Charmed to meet you." She turned back to Harry, still wearing her syrupy sweet smile. "Tell me, what can I do to help the Boy Who Lived?"

Harry's first few dozen suggestions died before they were spoken. As satisfying as voicing some of them may have been, it wouldn't help. "I'd like to speak with the senior editor, and I was wondering if you could get us in to see him."

Rita's face fell just a little bit.

"You, of course, are welcome to sit in on our discussion. In fact, I will insist on it," Harry said.

"I can get you in, Harry, but may I ask what it is about?"

Harry smiled conspiratorially. "Not here. This is something only you and the senior editor of this paper need to hear about."

A bright light formed itself in Rita's eye. She stood and walked past the desk, not even slowing as she fired a smirk at Cathy. She led Harry, Remus, and Tonks down two hallways before knocking on a door that had a simple nameplate, **B. Cuffe**.

"Enter!" a gruff voice called.

Rita entered the room. "Barney! How are you doing?"

The overweight, middle-aged man seated behind a cluttered desk sighed. "Rita, for the last bleedin' time, my name is Barnabas, not Barney." His eyes slid to Harry and widened slightly. He quickly stood and offered his hand. "Lord-Baron Potter. What can the Daily Prophet do for you?"

After shaking the man's hand, Harry turned his head. "Remus, could you seal the room, please?" While the very confused werewolf was doing that, Harry waved Rita to a seat and took the last guest chair.

Rita took out her acid green quill and a sheet of parchment, a gleam of excitement in her eyes.

Harry gave her a cold look. "Put that away before I blast it through the wall," he commanded flatly.

Rita looked shocked and turned to Cuffe.

The editor looked uncomfortable. "Mr. Potter, I'm allowing this unannounced meeting simply because of who you are. Please do not order us around. When it comes down to it, you have no authority here."

A slow smile formed over Harry's face. It was not a cheerful smile; it was instead the smile of a predator that had cornered his lunch.

A look of dawning comprehension formed on Tonks and Remus's faces.

"You didn't?" Remus asked, impressed.

"Andy did," Harry confirmed.

"You are going to get a VERY thorough thank you when we get home," Nim announced.

Harry laughed.

"What are you people talking about?" Rita demanded, clearly irate.

Nim looked at Harry, a question clear in her expression.

Harry waved in invitation. "Happy Birthday, dear," he said with a grin.

"*Petrificus Totalus*," Nim said cheerfully. Rita froze in position. Nim waved her wand again, and an opaque, soundproof Privacy Sphere formed around the two.

Harry turned a smirk to the now-scared editor. He placed the scroll he'd been carrying onto the desk. "I suggest you read this, Mr. Cuffe."

The man hesitantly leaned forward and took the page. It took him less than a minute to read the contents. He blinked hard and stared up at Harry before looking down and reading the parchment again. Licking his lips nervously, he glanced at the Privacy Sphere before turning his full attention to Harry. "This is . . . unexpected, sir. With the Gringotts seal, it has to be true. Therefore, you're now the majority stockholder in the Daily Prophet. What happens now?"

"Rita is being fired," Harry stated flatly. "You will carry a high-profile story on it. The reason is her gross journalistic misconduct. I will work with a writer of our mutual agreement to tell the stories of what Rita's done wrong as it affects me. As much fun as you've had smearing my reputation, you know that muckraking DOES sell papers. We'll see if the same can be said about a reporter's reputation.

"Generally, I don't plan on taking a very active role in the day to day operation, here. I WILL step in if you get out of hand, though. Therefore, there are a few ground rules. These damn Quick-Quote Quills are absolutely off limits for all reporters. Using a Transcription Quill is fine.

"In the future, you will confirm any information you print." Harry raised his hand to Cuffe's impending objection. "I realize that you also have to report things that cannot be confirmed, but there are a few rules on what I consider acceptable behavior. Do NOT report something as fact unless it can be confirmed by at least two UNBIASED sources. If something is given to a reporter by only one source, state that it's unconfirmed or a rumor. Reporters should be reporting FACTS, not opinions. If they want to give opinions, they can write a second article for the editorial page. I'm going to start holding the individual reporters responsible for the libel they write. I understand that sometimes your sources are wrong, but if you and they can prove they tried to get to the truth, they'll be fine so long as a retraction and a correction is printed."

Pale and perspiring, Cuffe chewed his lip in thought. "I understand, sir. You do realize that this will adversely affect the value of our stock?"

Harry glared. "If you're worried more about making money than being truthful and honest, then you'll be replaced very, VERY rapidly."

Cuffe audibly gulped. "I was not trying to talk you out of your suggested course of action, sir," he said in a quavering voice.

Harry didn't quite believe the words but decided not to pursue the issue. "Of course not. Now, call in a reporter that you think can write this story with as little sensationalism as possible."

A minute later, Remus brought down the privacy wards to let in a young woman just barely older than Harry.

She stopped short at entering the scene. Her senior editor looked like he was about to have a heart attack, a Privacy Sphere was taking up a quarter of the room, one of her old Defense professors was standing there looking highly amused, and Harry Potter was looking at her in surprise.

"Samantha," Cuffe called, getting her attention. "I believe you know everyone here?"

The girl nodded, confusion written all over her face.

"Lord-Baron Potter just bought a controlling interest in the Daily Prophet," Cuffe announced to her mounting shock. "He's going to give you a story about Rita's," he waved vaguely at the opaque sphere, "misconduct. It'll be printed on the second page, day after tomorrow."

He turned to Harry. "For something like this that isn't earth-shattering, it's too late for tomorrow's paper." He held his breath, worried that his new boss would begin making unreasonable demands.

Harry nodded and turned to the woman. "Samantha Firthquill, isn't it? Hufflepuff keeper?"

She smiled shyly. "I'm surprised you remembered, Lord-Baron."

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's Harry. Now, it'll probably be more than one day until you can print this anyway." He turned to the editor. "It all needs to be confirmed, right? After all, I am a VERY biased source." He smiled at Cuffe's look of confusion. "I'm not going to demand preferential treatment. I'll probably do something wrong or stupid eventually, and you'll report that. So long as all the reporting stays honest, we won't have a problem."

Exhaling loudly, Cuffe mopped his sweaty forehead. "Understood."

Harry frowned in thought. Cuffe and Samantha looked worriedly on.

The Privacy Sphere came down, revealing a very angry yet resigned looking Rita. She had apparently been released from her paralysis but was silenced and magically stuck to the chair. A very chipper and happy-looking Tonks put her wand away. Seeing Harry's expression, she turned to Remus. "What'd I miss?"

"Dunno. That's his 'I'm about to have a wild idea' look."

Harry smiled.

Cuffe gulped again.

"Nim, please go to Amelia. Ask her, politely, if she can spare a few aurors."

"Will do." She tilted her head and grinned. "Are we gonna be checking forearms?"

At Harry's nod, she nodded back and apparated out of the room with a truly scary grin in place.

Harry turned to Cuffe. "Is there any other way out of the building other than the front door?"

Confused, he nodded. "Back door. Left out of this office, right at the second hallway, all the way at the end."

Without prompting, Remus said, "I've got it covered." He left the room.

"What's going on?" Samantha asked in confusion.

Harry suddenly had his wand in his hand. "Mr. Cuffe, Samantha, slowly, please raise the sleeve on your left arm."

Still confused, Samantha did as requested. Grumbling, Cuffe did the same. Neither were marked. Harry stood and pulled Rita's sleeve up. She wasn't marked, either.

"What's going on?" Samantha repeated her earlier question, this time with more emphasis.

Cuffe answered, "Rumor has it that all of the Death Eaters have a tattoo of some kind. Presumably, he's checking that we aren't followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Another rule," Harry announced. "Either call him Voldemort or Tom Riddle. You're just adding to the irrational fear by not using his name. It's what he wants you to do."

Harry raised his wand and mumbled a very long incantation. A yellow burst of light emerged from his wand. Another long spell and a blue light came out. Nodding in satisfaction, he said, "Apparition and portkey wards are up. I'll take them down after everyone in the building has been checked." He turned to Cuffe. "I presume you have a break room or meeting room of some kind. Please have everyone in the building assemble there. It'll speed up the aurors checking everyone and so we can let you get back to work faster." He fixed the editor with an intense look. "If I hear that you tried to warn anyone about what's about to happen, you won't live to regret it," he threatened flatly.

Cuffe nodded and bolted for the door, personally convinced that the man he was leaving behind could scare a basilisk with that stare of his.

Harry waved his wand at Rita's chair and floated it into the air. "Samantha, could you please grab a couple quills and parchment? I'll meet you in the lobby, and we can start going over the information I can give you about Rita's serious lack of honesty."

Samantha's smile had a wicked edge to it as she looked at Rita. Giving Harry a quick nod, she also left.

Harry, with Rita and her chair floating along behind him, entered the lobby less than a minute later. He waved his wand and set Rita down with a

hard thump near the seating area.

Cathy looked on with wide eyes. "Um . . ." she said, clearly not knowing how to react to the strange sight.

"Cathy, I'm sorry about earlier," Harry said to the flustered girl. "I wasn't trying to imply you couldn't keep secrets. I was just trying to get Rita here to take me to see Mr. Cuffe."

"Okay," she said with a frown.

"Why don't you come on over here and have a seat? Samantha Firthquill is going to interview me about this sorry excuse for a reporter. I expect you'll enjoy some of what you hear." He paused for a moment. "And you may have some things to add."

As Cathy was cautiously crossing the room, the front door opened and Amelia Bones entered, followed by six aurors and lastly Tonks.

"Director Bones," Cathy squeaked, nearly snapping to attention.

Amelia looked at her in amusement. "I see Harry's antics have captured you, too, young lady." She turned to Harry. "What's up, Harry? Tonks said something about a quick sweep to find Death Eaters?"

Harry pointed his wand at the door behind her. "*Colloportus* . Yep. I suggest your aurors go to the break room or meeting room or whatever they have back there. I strongly suspect that Senior Editor Cuffe will cooperate with letting you check everyone for Dark Marks."

She frowned. "Won't the majority owners, whoever they are, object?"

Harry grinned, eyes sparkling. "No, I won't."

She laughed. Cathy and the aurors all blinked in surprise. Tonks smirked as she took a seat next to Harry.

Amelia turned to her aurors. "Secure the employee meeting area. Sweep the rest of the building, then start checking everyone for a Dark Mark. If anyone has one, stun them immediately and then bring them here."

"Remus Lupin is guarding the back door," Harry mentioned.

Amelia nodded. "Exclude Remus from your sweep. Check his arm if you must, but he can hold the rear exit while you're all busy. I'll be here with Harry. Report developments as needed."

The senior auror saluted just as Samantha entered the room. She stopped in shock at who was facing her.

"Samantha, Cathy, please raise your left sleeves," Harry called as he calmly raised his own sleeve. To the auror, he said, "I asked them to come here. Please let them stay up here with Amelia and I as you do your sweep."

The man looked at Amelia.

At her nod, the man started politely but firmly checking the arms of every non-auror in the room.

"You certainly know how to give unique birthday gifts, Harry," Tonks whispered to Harry as she rolled up her own sleeve.

He chuckled but didn't answer.

When the group of aurors had left to carry out their orders, Harry waved a hand at the empty chairs in invitation. Highly amused, Amelia sat down. More hesitantly, Cathy and Samantha also took seats.

"Let me tell you what I know about Rita Skeeter," Harry said to the assembled witches. His smile did not bode well for the silent, bound reporter.

Scion of Gryffindor 38 - The Fall of Fudge

Senior Reporter Dismissed

Rita Skeeter, one of the senior reporters for the Daily Prophet, has been discharged from our staff.

Several shocking accusations were placed against Ms. Skeeter recently and have been investigated. When they were confirmed, her employment was immediately terminated.

It seems that she had been spreading malicious lies about several citizens under the guise of reporting "facts". Whether the false reporting was due to personal vendettas or whether she had been encouraged by someone (rumors abound that it was someone high within the ministry) to tell these falsehoods is still unknown. Among the notable names on her victim list: Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, Lord-Baron Harry Potter, Director Amelia Bones, international quidditch star Victor Krum, and Baron Marcus Abbott among dozens of others, important and obscure alike. See pages 7 through 18 for a full listing of her known and confirmed as false statements. The Daily Prophet prints this list as a retraction for each individual item given and most humbly apologizes for the damage done to each individual so harmed.

Interestingly, the one prominent name that does NOT show up in the list of her victims is Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge.

In addition to the gross journalistic misconduct, it has been found that Ms. Skeeter is in fact an illegal animagus in the form of an extraordinarily ugly beetle. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has reportedly begun the process of pressing charges against her.

New Ownership of the Daily Prophet

In a move that took months of patient work, Lord-Baron Harry Potter has bought a controlling interest in the Daily Prophet.

When asked why he purchased the periodical with the largest circulation in wizarding Britain, he said this, "Two reasons, actually. First, I know the paper (though not each individual reporter working here) has been known to print lies in order to promote a politician. Or perhaps the articles are done out of pure spite. This not only tarnishes the reputations of good people like [D.M.L.E. Director] Amelia Bones and [Baron] Marcus Abbott, but it also promotes distrust in the community. That discord is a weapon that works right into the plans of Voldemort. The second reason I bought it is more pragmatic. It's a solid business that shows a daily profit. I'm simply investing in a proven business."

Yes, we actually printed the name "Voldemort". That is one of the few changes that Lord-Baron Potter made upon assuming ownership. As he said at the time, "Either call him Voldemort or Tom Riddle. You're just adding to the irrational fear by not using his name. It's what he wants you to do."

With the change in ownership, the editors, writers, and staff of the Daily Prophet wish to apologize to the public for some of our past articles that may have been less than entirely objective. We occasionally were subjected to pressure to "slant" our stories in a certain way, especially for political articles and those reporting upon the return of Voldemort immediately after the Tri-Wizard tournament when he did in fact regain a corporeal body.

Though we cannot change the past, the staff at the Daily Prophet promises to be objective in our future writing.

Two Daily Prophet Staff Members Arrested

In an effort to purge our ranks of Voldemort sympathizers and agents (known commonly as Death Eaters), the entire staff was examined by aurors under the personal command of Department of Magical Law Enforcement Director Amelia Bones.

Two arrests were made: Kristophe Chickey from our production department and Christine Burgon from the circulation department.

Both are being held by aurors pending formal charges of being Death Eaters.

Looking around at the grand ballroom, Harry sighed.

He and Nim were at yet another ministry sponsored event that Cissy had badgered him into attending, this time in early February. He'd been told somewhere along the line the reason for the event, but he'd long since forgotten.

Aside from dancing with Nim and chatting with a handful of the attendees, it had been a dreadfully dull evening for him.

"May I have a word with you, Harry?"

Harry cursed himself. That'd teach him to complain about being bored. "Certainly, Minister. However, I ask again that you do not call me by my first name. That is a familiarity that I reserve for a select few."

Nim and the Abbotts sitting across the table from them tried to keep from grinning.

Fudge frowned, but it disappeared almost immediately. "Very well. If we could speak privately?"

Harry sighed again and stood, offering Nim a hand up. "If you will excuse us, Marcus, Emily?"

They smiled at him. "Certainly, Harry."

Once Nim was standing (and not relinquishing his hand), Harry turned back to Fudge. "Lead the way."

Fudge glared at Tonks. "I said privately."

Harry's last vestige of politeness evaporated. "I will not hold any secrets from Miss Tonks, Minister," he stated flatly.

"I will not speak with this . . . trollop listening in," Fudge spat.

Now Harry wasn't letting Nim's hand go. He feared she would start hexing if he released her. "Minister, you will NOT speak of her that way again. And if you still want to talk to me, you will do it here."

Fudge's jaw bunched up a few times as he fought various emotions. "Very well. I want you to join me in a joint press conference to announce how the fight against the followers of You-Know-Who is going, and I further demand that you stop preventing the Daily Prophet from printing all the information that I give them."

Harry shook his head slowly. "For the last time, I will not perform any public action designed simply to make you look good. I am NOT on your side, Minister, and I wish you would stop trying to make it look like I am. As for the Daily Prophet, I am not preventing them from printing anything. I just gave them some guidelines and restrictions as to what they can claim to be facts. It is in an effort to make them honest. If you want something printed, please prove it to the reporter's satisfaction." He paused for a moment. "If you can't prove what you're claiming as true, then what does that say about your claims?"

Fudge turned several shades that Harry had only ever seen Vernon Dursley produce. "You insolent brat! I am the Minister of Magic! You will do what I tell you to do!"

Ignoring the entire room full of magicians that were listening and staring at the confrontation, Harry calmly asked, "Why would I do that?"

"Because I'm the Minister of Magic!" Fudge roared. "You will do what I ordered, or I'll throw you into Azkaban!"

"I will not."

Flecks of foam were now forming at the corners of Fudge's mouth. "Aurors! Arrest this man!"

The auror standing nearby was looking very uncomfortable. "On what charge, sir?" he asked carefully.

Fudge screamed incoherently. He drew his own wand and rapidly fired three spells at Harry from point blank range.

None of them made it through the shield Harry wordlessly put up. Tonks instantly had her wand up and pointed, but couldn't fire so long as she was also encased in Harry's shield.

This didn't prevent others from acting.

"*Stupefy!*"

Marcus Abbott put away his wand, completely disregarding the auror pointing his wand at him. "Idiot," he grumbled, glaring down at the unconscious Minister of Magic. He looked up and over at Harry.

Harry lowered the hand he'd instinctively put up in a warding gesture and dissolved his shield. He looked over at Abbott and nodded his thanks.

Marcus nodded back before turning toward the deadly silent room. "As a member of the Wizengamot, I hereby call an emergency session for a vote of no-confidence against Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge. According to the laws governing this situation, the closed session will start at dawn, two days from today."

"Lords, Ladies, Barons, Baronesses, and guests, I call this, the seven hundred and fifty-fourth meeting of the British Wizengamot to order. Be advised that all magic is tracked in this room and duels are not permitted to be issued during the course of our meeting. Only those wearing a

signed ring or carrying one by proxy are permitted to vote."

The scene was very different from the last time Harry had been in the Wizengamot chambers. Instead of being mostly empty, this time nearly every seat was filled. Not only had almost all of the Wizengamot members shown up, but all ministry department heads were also attending, clustered down in one corner of the seating area. Few of them were members themselves, but today's topic was the kind of thing that got a great deal of attention from the ministry, so they were all there as spectators.

Also among the changes from the last meeting, instead of bored members, everyone was very much awake despite the hour. Last, but certainly not least, Fudge himself was there, tucked into an Obscuring Sphere near the front of the room. It allowed him to witness everything going on but prevented him from participating.

At his desk in front, Dumbledore took his seat. "This is an emergency session, called by Baron Abbott, for a vote of no-confidence in Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge. Baron Abbott, the floor is yours."

Marcus stood from his front row seat. "Thank you, Chief Warlock." He turned to face the majority of the room. "We are all aware of Fudge's long history of inept and corrupt leadership. He may have been a sufficient caretaker during peace, but he has proven himself to be woefully negligent to the point of truly harmful during the time of war that we find ourselves facing. Specifically, his long-time and repeated refusal to acknowledge the return of the self-stylized -" he took a breath, "- Lord Voldemort," many of the listeners shifted uncomfortably as Marcus continued, "refusal to increase the auror forces to prepare against the resurgence of terrorist activities, and repeated public attacks against the people trying to spread word of the danger, specifically a public smear campaign against Lord Dumbledore and Lord-Baron Potter a year ago. This by no means is a complete list of Fudge's transgressions but highlights his utter refusal to acknowledge the danger and instead spend his time and our tax money trying to keep himself in power instead of doing his job properly.

"Some of you may ask why I'm bringing this up now, when we could have had this discussion back in our November meeting. What brought this to a head was my witnessing Fudge attempting to coerce Lord-Baron Potter into helping him prop up his public image. When he failed, he threatened The Boy Who Lived with prison. When that threat also failed, he drew his wand and tried to kill the young man."

The audience shifted again. This had all been well-covered by the Prophet, but to hear the Minister of Magic being flatly accused of such a series of crimes was still uncomfortable.

Abbott turned toward where the ministry department heads were sitting. "Director Bones, I believe your department is investigating this incident. Could you be so kind as to tell us your findings to date?"

Amelia stood. "I cannot speak to any topics save the attack on Lord-Baron Potter. So far, we have interviewed dozens of witnesses to the event, several of whom are in the room. All of them agree with your summary of the event, Baron Abbott. Harry was polite and non-threatening, and he refused to bow to the pressure Fudge was placing upon him. Fudge drew his wand but was incapable of piercing Harry's shield before you stunned him."

"Is it possible he was under the Imperious Curse?" Baron Parkinson asked.

Amelia turned, her stance subtly expressing her dislike of her questioner. "Possible, yes. There is no proof one way or another."

"Per the laws in question, the cause is actually irrelevant," Dumbledore interjected himself into the conversation. "Whatever the reason for his actions, and I am certain Amelia's investigators will eventually get to the root of it, this meeting is to decide if we feel he is capable of continuing at his post."

Parkinson frowned, but he nodded and sat down.

Dumbledore asked, "Director Bones, is there any more information you have for us?"

"Nothing beyond rumors and my personal opinion, Chief Warlock." She, too, sat down.

Harry had to grin. She answered his question directly, but the tone and words carried their own message.

Dumbledore asked the room at large, "Does anyone else have proof to present? I would remind one and all that opinions and rumors will do us little good. Only proof is useful to this body."

Several people frowned and more than one grumbled, but nobody stood up.

Sighing at the necessity, Harry stood. "I am an eyewitness to a few conversations that I feel are relevant, Chief Warlock."

Dumbledore nodded, eyes twinkling. "Please speak, Lord-Baron Potter." He took his seat.

Harry slowly turned, trying to address everyone in the room. "We all know the rumors of Fudge's close friendship with Lucius Malfoy, confirmed Death Eater. Both Arthur Weasley," Harry nodded to the man sitting with the other ministry directors, "and I witnessed a conversation between the two immediately outside the courtroom after I was acquitted of violating the statute of underage sorcery a year and a half ago. They spoke together in very friendly terms, using each other's first names in a manner that was clearly between friends. Director Weasley, do you recall the conversation?"

Arthur Weasley stood. "I do not recall the specifics of what they discussed, but the general feel of their conversation is as you described it, Harry." He took his seat again.

Harry nodded. "While it is not illegal or immoral to have a friend under these circumstances, the fact that Lucius Malfoy was later revealed to be a

Death Eater, and had been since Voldemort's first rise, make Fudge's friendship with him . . . suspect.

"The next conversation was regarding Fudge ordering the arrest of Rubeus Hagrid, the groundskeeper at Hogwarts during the whole 'Monster of Slytherin' scare we had a few years ago. I believe Fudge's exact words were, 'We have to be seen doing something.' That doesn't sound to me like the words of a man arresting the one he feels responsible for the attacks. Rather, it appears that he was doing something he KNEW was incorrect, yet was done for political reasons. Do you recall this conversation I have described, Lord Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore stood. "I do indeed, Lord-Baron. Your words, I think, are a direct quote of Cornelius. As an aside, Lucius Malfoy was also there at the time and they were on friendly terms then, as well."

"The final piece of information I have came at the end of the Tri-Wizard tournament." He looked sadly at the suddenly ashen-faced Amos Diggory among the ministry employees. "I reported to Fudge then that Voldemort had been resurrected and named all the Death Eaters who had attended him. Fudge refused to believe me. 'He just can't be back. He can't,' are the words Fudge spoke. The tone, however, was that of a man scared of a truth that has just been revealed to him. Lord Dumbledore and Lady McGonagall were both present for that one, I believe."

McGonagall stood. "Indeed, Lord-Baron, that is how I recall his words at the time."

Dumbledore stood as well and nodded. "Indeed. I believe you said that is your final piece of information, Lord-Baron?"

Harry nodded. "Unfortunately none of this qualifies as proof of wrongdoing, however, I believe I have proven his state of mind during a few crisis moments in our recent history. All the rest of what I may say is simply my personal opinions and non-provable observations of the man. Thank you for your time." Harry sat.

Neville, sitting beside him, chuckled quietly. "That was sneaky. Almost as well done as Director Bones's line earlier."

Harry shot him a quick grin.

Dumbledore was asking if anyone else had any further evidence to present. Three more people repeated conversations they'd overheard from Fudge. None of it was particularly surprising, but was more proof that Fudge was a self-protecting and corrupt power monger rather than a competent leader.

Dumbledore finally gaveled them to silence. "I believe we all have heard enough to have a vote. May I remind you that it requires a vote of two-thirds to remove a Minister from office."

Ten minutes later, Cornelius Fudge, spitting in fury and loudly threatening revenge, was led from the room in chains.

Harry allowed himself a small, tight smile that could almost be called a smirk. It was an expression shared by more than one other in the room.

However, some of them were happy for different reasons.

Scion of Gryffindor 39 - The New Minister Is . . .

It took a few minutes for the hubbub to die down after Fudge, former Minister and now on his way to a prison cell for the various death threats he'd just uttered, had been ignominiously dragged from the room.

Dumbledore finally gavelled everyone back into silence. "As the post of Minister of Magic is now vacant," he started with palpable irony, "it is up to us to appoint an interim office holder until an election can be organized.

"According to the ancient rules of the Wizengamot, we are now sealed from communication with the outside for the duration."

A murmur arose from the audience. Dumbledore held out a hand in a calming gesture. "In a true emergency, they can still contact us; please have no fear of that.

"I will now accept nominations from the floor. I wish to remind everyone that the recipient of the nomination must appear within one hour if they are not already present. This is the only normal exception to the seal order. Also, nobody is permitted to nominate themselves for the post of Minister of Magic." He paused while everyone absorbed all the information. As most people saw this coming, there were no questions. "Does anyone wish to submit a name?"

A cacophony of voices was immediately heard. Dumbledore had to pound the wooden block on the table for several minutes to regain control of the room. "If you wish to speak, stand and I shall recognize you." A dozen people immediately stood. Unperturbed, Dumbledore calmly continued, "Once someone is nominated, the person so nominated will be permitted to speak for a few moments to accept or decline." He inclined his head toward one of the standing wizards that Harry didn't know. "Baron Williams?"

"I nominate Lord Albus Dumbledore."

A few scattered cheers sounded.

Dumbledore looked moderately embarrassed. "I'm afraid I must decline, though I am honored to be considered. With everything else I must do, I am afraid I could not devote the time or energy needed for the position." He nodded toward one of the standing witches. "Baroness Robbins?"

The nominations continued as various witches and wizards named people. A couple ministry officials that Harry had never met, Director Amos Diggory, Chief Auror Rufus Scrimgeour, Baron Abbott, a Baron Ramforth, and even Arthur Weasley were all also nominated.

All of them accepted with one exception. Arthur declined, stating, "I appreciate the show of confidence, but I'm afraid I have to respectfully decline. I do not believe I have the temper and drive to perform as well as the public deserves." He paused and added sheepishly, "And my fiscal skills aren't quite up to the job, either." There were some smiles, but at least as many respectful nods at Weasley's painfully honest answer.

"Baron Bailey," Dumbledore called on the last standing magician.

"I nominate Lord-Baron Harry Potter," Bailey said in a clear, Irish accent.

Harry just about fell out of his seat as the room erupted in noise. A couple dozen people were yelling, anger clear in their faces. About an equal number were pounding on their arm rests, showing support.

Neville, sitting beside Harry, closed his eyes and started silently reciting every plant in the Hogwarts greenhouses by their Latin names in an effort not to laugh at the situation. Or Harry's expression.

The room eventually quieted back down after many calls for quiet. Before Harry could say anything, Dumbledore spoke up, "I am sure that Harry is entirely too busy to take over such a responsibility, though I am certain he is quite grateful for the show of support. Are there any other recommendations from the floor before we begin the voting procedures?"

His face under rigid control, Harry stood. "I believe you said that anyone nominated could make a short statement, *Lord Dumbledore*," he emphasized slightly. "I also do not recall asking you to speak for me." Those who actually knew him didn't miss the cold tone he'd used.

Dumbledore had the audacity to blink at him in surprise. "Harry, you cannot possibly think -"

Harry turned to face the still standing baron and cut Dumbledore off, "Baron Bailey, I want to thank you for submitting my name, but I must respectfully decline. Not only do I not have the temperament or experience for such a position, but I'm afraid anyone voting for me would be doing so for all the wrong reasons. I'm afraid I'm seen as a kind of rallying point, and that's the wrong reason to vote someone into such an office. To that end, I would like to nominate Director Amelia Bones, whom we should be doing everything in our power to support anyway. As director of the D.M.L.E., she is uniquely suited to the current fight, and I've found her to be a fair, open-minded, and personable witch in all the dealings I've had with her." He hoped Marcus wouldn't get angry with him, but he figured Amelia was one of the better choices available.

A murmur went up in the audience. Both for Harry's nomination and the obvious friction between Dumbledore and Potter. Dumbledore's expression was still benign, but for those who knew him well enough to read his face, it was clear that he was not happy.

Amelia stood up from her seat among the ministry workers, eyes going back and forth between Harry and Dumbledore. "I am honored to accept your nomination, Lord-Baron Potter. If chosen, I hope to justify your faith in my abilities during this trying time."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Yes, well. Are there any other nominations?" When nobody else stood, he nodded. "Very well. If all of the accepting candidates could please come forward and give a short explanation to us as to why they feel they should be chosen?"

Seven magicians were shortly standing before the group.

One stepped forward immediately. He was thin and carried himself with a smooth grace that contrasted with his slightly coarse features. "My name is Baron Ramforth," he said, sounding as if anyone who didn't know him was behind the times. "My family has owned our ancestral home for over twenty generations. We own various properties we rent out and operate a few precious gem mines around the world. When elected, I shall do all in my power to hold us together during these troubled times and restore the wizarding population of Great Britain to her former glories."

Next, a thin man limped to the fore. Despite the streaks of gray in his hair, he spoke with a presence the few could match. "I am Chief Auror Scrimgeour. If elected, I'll use the knowledge I've gained as an active auror and director of our auror forces to put a swift end to the threat we're currently facing."

None of the rest reacted for a moment before Marcus Abbott waved toward Amelia. "Ladies first," he invited with a smile.

Bones gave him a short smile and a nod at the courtesy. Turning to the room, she said, "I am Director Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. In addition to it being my job to keep the wizarding world safe, it is also personal for me. I've lost most of my family, including my niece less than a year ago, to the Death Eaters. If elected, I'll use my experience as a high-level administrator not only in the current crisis but also in the long term to help the people of wizarding Britain."

The remaining four men shared a glance before Amos Diggory spoke. "I'm Amos Diggory, Director of the Department of Control of Magical Creatures. Like Director Bones, I too lost family to the Death Eaters. In my case, it was my son Cedric at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament." He nodded toward Harry. "Again, I would like to thank Lord-Baron Potter for returning his body. If elected, I hope to work for the betterment of my fellow wizards and witches."

One of the remaining two that Harry didn't know stepped up. He was a relatively young wizard, compared to the others standing in front. "I'm Chris McWilliam of the Goblin Liaison Office. I hope to use my knowledge and relationship with Gringotts to promote a stronger economy for us. That is the only long-term basis for peace and prosperity."

"I'm Baron Marcus Abbott, owner of Abbott Greenhouses. If elected, I hope to use my business and managerial knowledge to serve the citizens of our country.

"No offence toward some of my fellow candidates," he continued, "but perhaps my viewpoint from outside the ministry is what the people of Great Britain need." He looked ironically toward the door and the recently departed Cornelius Fudge. "After all, the current administration hasn't done very well."

The last one to step forward was a thin man. "Fred Johnson, Assistant Director of the Department of International Cooperation. If chosen, I'll attempt to appeal to the foreign governments for aid with the threat we're facing."

Harry initially thought that such short statements were very peculiar, but then remembered one of the side notes in the rules of the Wizengamot that he'd read. The theory is that a candidate's history should speak for itself, so any grandstanding or long-winded speeches under the circumstances were severely frowned upon. It sounded like an altogether reasonable idea. Not for the least reason that it saved them from a lot of long speeches.

When Johnson stepped back, Dumbledore stood and waved his wand. An image of a sheet of parchment appeared in front of everyone, listing each name. "Press your signet ring next to the individual's name to vote. Per Wizengamot procedures regarding electing a temporary Minister, each vote will remove only one of the candidates. After each vote, we will alternate between debate amongst ourselves and words from the candidates. Are there any questions?" When nobody spoke, he nodded. "Very well. Everyone, please vote."

Harry examined the page, eyes flickering back and forth between Marcus and Amelia's names. He expected either could do very well, but he was the one who nominated Amelia. Potter and Black votes went to Amelia Bones.

Two minutes later, all the illusionary ballots disappeared. Dumbledore stood and looked at the sheet in his hand. "One-hundred and forty-four votes were cast. Baron Abbott received twenty-five. Director Bones received twelve. Baron Ramforth received fifty. Directory Diggory received twenty-four. Assistant Director Johnson received three. Chief Auror Scrimgeour received fifteen. Director McWilliam received fifteen." He looked over at the still-standing candidates. "Assistant Director Johnson, thank you for your time."

The losing man nodded and headed back for his seat. It might have been a trick of the light, but Harry thought he looked relieved.

"We will take a short break for lunch and then a round of debate before our next vote."

"After that stimulating repast, I ask if anyone wants to speak for or against any of the candidates. Also, any questions anyone may have or other points to discuss. At the moment, it is a free-form discussion."

Baron Parkinson said, "I wish to speak in favor of Baron Ramforth. He has always been an honorable wizard in all of my dealings with him, wishing nothing more than to uphold the values and traditions of the wizarding world."

Harry frowned. The way it was phrased, it sounded ominous.

Harry wasn't the only one to think so. Neville stood. "Baron Ramforth, would you consider yourself a traditionalist?" Ramforth nodded proudly. Neville nodded back. "Thank you, that was my only question."

Harry leaned over and whispered to Neville, "You sly devil. You basically got him to admit to being a pure-blood supremacist."

"Not quite," Neville whispered back. "Just that he's a traditionalist. What anyone chooses to make of that is up to them."

A younger baron was apparently thinking the same thing that Harry was. "What is your opinion on the rights of the muggle-born, Baron Ramforth? Actually, I'm interested in the answer to that question from all six of you."

Ramforth smoothly answered, "So long as they are law-abiding citizens, I have no quarrel with them as a group."

Scrimgeour, Bones, McWilliam, and Diggory all gave variations on the opinion that bloodline didn't matter to them.

Abbott, however, said, "Some of my best employees are muggle-born. I've heard from my daughter that one of the smartest witches in Hogwarts right now is muggle-born. Not only does bloodline not matter to me personally, but I have long been of the opinion that any discrimination, overt or covert, against them should be illegal."

Many of the barons sitting around Parkinson shifted in their seats, scowling slightly. Ramforth's eyes narrowed slightly. A good portion of the rest of the room was nodding in agreement with Marcus's words.

The first election platform plank had clearly been laid.

Various lords and barons rose to speak for or against one of the candidates. Nothing surprising came out of the testimonials or questioning.

Something said earlier in the meeting caused Harry to stand in the next lull. "When we were discussing Former Minister Fudge, Baron Parkinson brought up the possibility of the minister being controlled through the Imperious Curse. I would like to suggest that each of the candidates before us be tested for their resistance to this heinous form of mind control."

Amidst much whispering, Baroness McComb stood. Harry remembered her as the Chief Elder during his trial in August. "I second the motion. A minister under the control of someone else is not only worse than useless, but would no doubt be working directly for the madman trying to destroy us all."

There was general agreement to that, so each of the remaining six candidates had to submit to testing. After a bit of discussion (and a vote to temporarily suspend the law for this case only) Albus Dumbledore cast the spell upon each of the candidates.

Only one of the candidates failed to throw it off. Director McWilliam of the Goblin Liaison Office nodded sadly and returned to his seat.

Dumbledore called for another vote. The procedure was repeated, this time with only five names on the ballot. Again, Dumbledore read the results. "One-hundred and forty-four votes were cast. Baron Abbott received thirty. Director Bones received twenty. Baron Ramforth received fifty-one. Directory Diggory received twenty-seven. Assistant Chief Auror Scrimgeour received sixteen." He paused. "Chief Auror Scrimgeour, thank you for your time."

As the man limped back to his seat, Dumbledore said, "I call a twenty minute recess. We shall reconvene and hear from our remaining candidates at that time."

Harry stood up and stretched out his arms, working the kinks out from staying in one place for an extended period of time. Done stretching, he headed toward the front of the room. He and Dumbledore needed to talk.

"Harry," Amelia intercepted him before he made it all the way to the floor.

"Amelia," Harry half-bowed back to her. She gently pulled him over to a couple empty chairs and waved her wand to create a Privacy Sphere. Once out of sight of the rest of the room, she slumped a little.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked in concern.

"Harry, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the incredible compliment you paid me by nominating me. But you need to know that I don't want that job."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "And here I thought it was the lifelong dream of any ministry employee to get into that office," he teased.

She gave him a half-hearted glare in return. "I can do more good as head of D.M.L.E. than as minister. I think I can do good here, Harry, and I know I'm not going to win this next vote. I'm the one in last place, now that Rufus is out of the running." She paused before plunging forward, "You need me to bow out and endorse someone else. Hopefully that will keep all those votes away from Ramforth."

"He's a deez or a sympathizer?" Harry asked directly.

She slowly shook her head. "I wouldn't go that far. Not known as dark so much as not light. You heard his opinion of muggle-borns. Given his way, he'd isolate the wizarding world from the muggle world completely."

"Which would doom us in the long run. Talk about short-sighted."

She shrugged. "So you actually need me to endorse Amos or Baron Abbott," she said, bringing them back to the topic.

Harry sighed. "Tell me honestly, do you think Diggory can do it? I hardly know the guy."

Amelia grimaced. "Probably, if he listened to some advisors."

"Hardly a ringing endorsement," Harry noted.

Her expression showed that she was uncomfortable with her next statement. "Rumor has it that he's been listening to Dumbledore ever since his son's death. While that in itself is not a bad thing . . ."

"We'd be exchanging an incompetent buffoon for Dumbledore's lackey."

She winced. "Not the word I would have used, but essentially correct. You really ARE angry with him, aren't you?"

"After Tom is molding in some shallow grave, I'll tell you about it. Our history is long and only a few parts of it are mutually pleasant."

She let it go. "So you'd rather I throw support to Abbott? With the way you two act, it'll look like he's YOUR man."

Harry grimaced, acknowledging the truth of the way it looked. "Aren't you worried how your impartiality will look after this?" Harry waved at the Privacy Sphere.

She gave a slight smile. "I've had a reputation of independence since before you were born. Everyone has tried to recruit me into their little factions since I became an auror. Dumbledore did, Voldemort did, Fudge did." Her smile grew. "In that category, Harry, you're not a threat."

He laughed.

She grinned along for a moment. "Then you recommend Baron Abbott?"

Harry nodded firmly. "Yes. Good guy. Like he said, he's a businessman, so he may be thin on some of the governmental niceties, but that's what department heads are for, right? He's got the instincts and nerve to be on top of a major company and keep it profitable throughout everything going on through the last war and the beginnings of this one. Everything I've heard about him makes me think he's honest. He's also allied with the Longbottoms; his daughter is Matched with Neville so that has to say something about the family character."

She nodded thoughtfully. One wave of her wand and the Privacy Sphere dissolved. She bid him a polite goodbye and headed toward Baron Abbott.

Harry stood and resumed his approach to Dumbledore.

"Harry!" Dumbledore greeted him cheerfully. "What can I do for you?"

Harry sighed. "Headmaster, again I ask you not to call me by my given name. I also ask that you never again speak for me as you attempted to do earlier."

Dumbledore appeared momentarily apologetic. "I was simply attempting to save you the -"

"Perhaps you did have benevolent motives," Harry allowed, cutting him off. "However, speaking for someone without their permission is considered rude and disrespectful. I learned very little of worth from the Dursleys, but that is one thing that seems to be as true in the muggle world as it is in the magical."

Dumbledore was quiet for a moment. "I shall attempt to keep that in mind."

Harry just nodded.

Diggory walked up to the two. "Headmaster. Lord-Baron." He bowed slightly to Harry.

"Director Diggory. I don't recall that I said anything at the time, but you have my condolences for Cedric."

Diggory just nodded, looking a little down. He turned to Dumbledore. "Albus, I must confess that I'm still not sure about running for Minister. Both Amelia and Baron Abbott are perfectly capable of doing -"

"Amos," Dumbledore soothed the man. "We have spoken about this. We need someone in the minister's chair who will do good for the community. I think you would do marvelously at it."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure he could," Harry said, drawing the attention of both men. "On the other hand, if he's hesitant, then perhaps he should step back and endorse someone else."

"Harry," Dumbledore started in a slightly condescending tone. He changed what he was going to say at Harry's tightening jaw muscles. "Lord-Baron, your nomination of Amelia is a noble thing, but she is far too stubborn a person to have in the position of Minister of Magic. Despite

everyone's best efforts, nobody can influence her once she's made up her mind on a subject."

Harry adopted a slightly amused expression. "Did you just admit that you're against her because you can't influence her decisions?" Without waiting for a response, Harry continued, "Either way, isn't that a very GOOD attribute to have in this time of obviously powerful lobbying efforts of questionable goals? After all, Malfoy and Fudge led us into this current mess."

Again not waiting for a response from the Chief Warlock, Harry turned to Diggory. "Sir, if you're uncomfortable with running for Minister, then perhaps you should step back and throw your support for someone whom you feel can do the job properly."

"Amelia, for instance?" Dumbledore interjected in a slightly sarcastic tone.

Harry sighed. Shaking his head slightly, he continued to address Diggory. "You, sir, should do what your heart tells you is the right thing. Whether that is to run yourself or to throw your support to Amelia or Baron Abbott. It is your choice, sir. Please do what you want and feel is best for the public, rather than what someone tries to convince you to do." He nodded respectfully to the man. "Good luck, Director."

Harry moved back toward his seat, leaving a quietly fuming Headmaster and a pensive Director in his wake.

Just as he was sitting down next to Neville, Marcus Abbott approached. After shaking Neville's hand and giving his fellow baron a few polite words, the man turned to Harry and chewed his lip.

Harry almost smiled. "Let me guess, you're trying to figure out how to get my support despite the fact that I nominated someone else, and she's still in the running, correct?"

Marcus hesitated a moment before giving a sheepish grin and nod.

Harry laughed. "Marcus, it isn't that I doubt your ability to do the job. I just think Amelia could do it as well." He glanced over toward where Amelia and Amos Diggory were speaking in intense whispers with a disgruntled Dumbledore looking on from a short distance. Smirking up at Abbott, Harry continued, "I think you'll find the next round of speeches to be . . . enlightening."

Marcus followed Harry's gaze for a moment. "What did you do, Harry?" he asked quietly.

"Annoyed Dumbledore, mostly, I think." When Neville and Marcus just looked confused, Harry waved it off. "Just watch the show, guys. The playing field will be dramatically altered soon."

"Should I be scared?" Marcus asked with a note of amusement in his voice.

"Not at all. Nothing bad for you, I promise."

Marcus shook his head and headed back down to the front.

"What'd you do, Harry?" Neville asked in a whisper.

Harry practiced his diabolical grin and refused to answer the question.

Without much prompting from Dumbledore, the room quieted back down. "We shall now hear from our remaining candidates."

Bones and Diggory both started speaking. "I would -" They both cut off and looked toward each other. Taking a lesson from Abbott, Diggory waved a hand. "Ladies first."

Amelia nodded. "I shall make this quick. I am withdrawing myself from the list of candidates for interim Minister of Magic."

A rustling of robes was heard as the audience reacted to the news. More than a few looked toward Harry as he was the one to have nominated her in the first place. For his part, Harry kept a calm expression on his face, his attention on Amelia.

After a moment, she continued, "I want to thank Lord-Baron Potter for honoring me with his support as well as everyone who voted for me for their confidence in my abilities. However, I feel that I can do more good for the people of Britain if I maintain my place as Director of the D.M.L.E." She paused. "I wish I could fully endorse one candidate above the others. Honestly, though, I feel that either Amos Diggory, a man whom I've worked with before, or Baron Abbott, clearly an honest and good man in his own right, could do the job of Minister of Magic well." She gave the audience a respectful half-bow, repeated the action toward Dumbledore, and nodded specifically toward Harry. "I thank you all for your time." Head held high, she stepped toward her previous chair in the block of ministry worker seats.

Diggory was looking toward her in something like amusement. "Well, that simplifies what I was going to say," he said almost to himself. Addressing the crowd, he said, "I, too, am withdrawing from the running." The rustling from the crowd was more pronounced this time. Unperturbed, he went on, "I want to thank Lady McGonagall and all those who voted for me for the show of support. With the withdrawal of Director Bones, I feel no hesitation in whole-heartedly supporting Baron Abbott. In speaking with him over the short recess we just had, he seems to be a good, honest, and open man whom we could all follow without qualms. Thank you all for your time." He repeated the half-bows toward the audience and Dumbledore before he, too, headed toward his seat.

While the audience was reacting to this news, Abbott and Ramforth were eyeing each other. With a slightly mocking smile, Ramforth waved his hand in invitation.

Ignoring the silent sarcasm, Marcus said, "Unfortunately for Baron Ramforth, I am NOT withdrawing." A sound of amusement went around the room.. Marcus continued after a moment of thought, "I am surprised but definitely pleased with the shows of support from Directors Diggory and

Bones. If elected, I promise to get us through the current crisis with," he paused only momentarily, "Voldemort." Most of the crowd shuddered.

Harry noted that Parkinson and a handful around him did NOT shudder, but were instead scowling.

Marcus was going on, "Once the current terrorist threat has been dealt with, I will push for total equality among all witches and wizards. Thank you."

Ramforth stepped forward. "When elected, I will do all in my power to bring the peace and prosperity that all proper witches and wizards deserve, as it is our birthright."

Again the vote was taken, now down to only two names.

This vote would be the one to determine the interim Minister of Magic.

Everyone endured a seemingly long and stressful wait while Dumbledore was studying the paper in front of him. Finally, he spoke. "One-hundred and forty-four votes were cast. Baron Abbott received seventy-two. Baron Ramforth received seventy-two. We have a tie."

The room erupted in noise. There were no provisions for a tied vote, so nobody knew what to do. Parkinson led a short drive to claim some of the non-represented votes (Malfoy was the one he used as an example), but Dumbledore stopped that idea by reiterating the rule that only those with the signet rings could vote. Words were exchanged in both directions, but it was clear that nobody would budge on their stance or their vote.

After an hour of fruitless shouting, Harry sighed at the necessity of what he was about to do; he saw no other way out of the situation. He stood and announced in a loud voice, "I have another vote to cast."

Every eye was suddenly on him; some in hope, many in suspicion.

A quick, wandless spell was cast to remove the glamour, and the third signet ring on Harry's hand came into view. Holding the hand high so all three rings were clearly visible, Harry proclaimed, "The House of Gryffindor votes for Baron Abbott!"

Scion of Gryffindor 40 - Dual Duel

"The House of Gryffindor votes for Baron Abbott!"

To say that Harry had put the kneazle among the snidgets with his proclamation was true, if just a bit understating the fact.

Out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Neville wince, and he was tempted to do the same.

The sound was overwhelming; three-quarters of the Wizengamot and nearly all of the Ministry representatives were shouting at one another.

Not being able to hear anyone over the chaos, Harry looked around for the reactions of the people he knew.

Dumbledore, Minerva, and Amelia, who already knew of Harry's lineage, looked relieved at Harry's action.

Marcus was stunned for a long moment before a smile blossomed.

Harry was amused to see Parkinson and Ramforth wearing expressions that would look normal for any of the members of the Crabbe or Goyle families .

It took a few minutes, but the sound level finally fell enough that individual sentences became understandable.

"I demand another vote!"

"HOW DARE HE? HIM? He cannot be the heir of a noble family as old as Gryffindor!"

"Potter for Minister!"

"That impudent brat!"

"I'm with you, Lord-Baron!"

"Isn't it against the law to withhold your family name like that?"

"There hasn't been a founder's heir known for centuries!"

"Vote! We need another vote!"

A thunderous bang stopped everyone in mid-word.

At the front of the room, Dumbledore calmly put his wand away. "Thank you for your attention. I believe we should have another vote."

Baron Parkinson surged to his feet, face purple in rage. "I demand that that upstart brat be expelled from the Wizengamot!"

A low noise of anger started rumbling around the room, but it was ignored by Dumbledore who calmly asked, "For what reason?"

This apparently stymied Parkinson for a few seconds. Finally, color rising, he ground out, "Failure to disclose all of his votes."

"That is not against the rules and procedures of the Wizengamot, Baron Parkinson. Now, if there are no other objections, we should -"

Parkinson interrupted again, "I cannot, simply CANNOT believe that snot-nosed little upstart can be Gryffindor's heir!"

Harry regretted that the Wizengamot rules prohibited challenges during sessions.

Meanwhile, several voices shouted back at Parkinson.

"He's wearing the ring, Parkinson."

"Sit down and shut up, Parkinson. We're going to have another vote."

"You're just sore as he's not on your side."

"If he were voting your side, would you have objected?"

Chuckles sounded at the last two observations.

Flushing and visibly gritting his teeth, Parkinson dropped back into his seat.

Mustache twitching and eyes twinkling, Dumbledore initiated another vote. The results came back quickly and everyone looked at Dumbledore expectantly. "One-hundred and forty-five votes were cast. Baron Abbott received eighty-"

Dumbledore continued speaking, but a great burst of noise from the audience drowned out his voice. Roughly half the room was standing and cheering the new Minister. Harry noted that very few of the Ministry representatives were happy, but all the ones he knew to be good, honest people were standing and applauding.

It was nearly ten minutes before the scene calmed down enough that Dumbledore's voice could be heard again. "Having discharged the cause of our emergency meeting, I hereby call the seven hundred and fifty-fourth meeting of the British Wizengamot adjourned."

Some of the attendees all but bolted for the door, Parkinson among them.

Harry and Neville waited until the majority of the people had left before heading down toward Marcus.

Grinning slightly, Harry bowed to the man. "Congratulations, Minister. Please let me be one of the first to wish you a long, prosperous, and eventually PEACEFUL term."

Marcus made a semi-amused noise in the back of his throat. "That is my goal. Speaking of which, could we get together sometime and discuss that? I'm sure you have some information that is unavailable to the Auror Corps."

Harry nodded. "Certainly. Feel free to owl me." Harry turned his head. "You know what this means, Neville?"

"What's that?" Longbottom asked as Abbott looked on.

"You're dating the Minister's daughter. Now he has the authority and the RIGHT to have your dates chaperoned by aurors."

Neville groaned as Marcus and the newly arrived McGonagall laughed.

Once her laughter died down, Minerva addressed herself to Marcus. "Minister, it has been quite some time since a sitting Minister's children have been at the school. Legally, you have the right to assign an auror team as bodyguard to her, even while she is in the castle and at class. If you intend to do so, please let us know so we can make arrangements."

Marcus, looking slightly overwhelmed already, slowly shook his head. He glanced at Harry, then Neville. "No, I don't think I will. Unless she thinks she needs one, anyway." He grinned and shot another sideways glance at Harry. "I heard that she's received some recent, in-depth defense training. I think she can take care of herself inside the Hogwarts wards."

Harry was tempted to suggest to Neville that he try to arrange some D.A. bodyguards, but based on Neville's expression, the thought was already there.

"Good day, Minister," Harry said instead, nodding respectfully to him again.

Abbott waved him off with a smile.

Harry didn't make it far.

"That was well done, Harry."

Harry turned to the Headmaster with a sigh. He was tempted to try to call him Albie, Percival, A.P.W.B.D., Appy, Ap-wibbid, old man, or any other moderately degrading nickname he could think of, just to try to make a point. He decided against acting like a child, however. "Again, I ask you to not call me by my familiar name, Headmaster.

"As to what you said, what part of my actions today are you so happy with?"

"Revealing your heritage at the correct moment as you did to prevent a deadlock. Masterfully done."

Harry half raised an eyebrow. "Is your approval supposed to mean something to me?" He was trying to prove a point to the man as well as being genuinely curious to see Dumbledore's reaction.

Harry heard the hiss of indrawn breath from several people who were watching and listening, but surprisingly, neither Neville nor McGonagall were among those.

Dumbledore just looked sad. "No, I suppose not. Good day."

Fudge Ousted, Abbott Interim Minister

In an all-day meeting, the Wizengamot yesterday had a vote of no-confidence against former Minister Cornelius Fudge, and appointed Baron Marcus Abbott as Interim Minister.

After losing his position, Mr. Fudge apparently uttered several death threats against various Wizengamot members, resulting in his

arrest.

The D.M.L.E. has stated that he is currently under arrest for these threats. They are also beginning an investigation into several inconsistencies in Ministry financials over the previous ten years at the request of multiple Wizengamot members.

The Daily Prophet will report further on this situation as information becomes available.

After removing Mr. Fudge, the Wizengamot voted for an interim Minister of Magic until a general election can be held in the summer months.

The field of hopefuls initially included Chief Auror Scrimgeour and D.M.L.E. Director Bones. After multiple votes, Baron Abbott, owner of Abbott Greenhouses, narrowly beat out Baron Ramforth. See page 4 for a full breakdown of the series of votes.

The Daily Prophet wishes our new Minister the very best.

House of Gryffindor Reclaimed

In a desperate move to break a deadlock at the Wizengamot meeting to pick a new Minister of Magic, a vote was cast for a family that has not been active in centuries.

Lord-Baron Harry Potter-Black is also Lord Gryffindor.

Yes, readers, you saw that correctly. The Boy Who Lived is the heir of Gryffindor.

What, precisely, does this mean?

That answer varies depending on who you ask. Some claim that makes him de facto Headmaster. Or that he owns Hogwarts castle. Or that he can override the school board.

What will the young wizard, already Patriarch of the Potter and Black names, do with his new family title? Only time will tell.

Harry,

It's been a while since I wrote you, so I thought I'd send you an owl.

I have several questions about what you've been up to, but I'll tell you about what's happening here first.

Ginny mentioned that she'd told you a little about Kevin. Yes, I am in fact dating a Ravenclaw. I'm not sure you've ever met him, actually. I don't believe you had any classes with the Ravensclaws. He's a quidditch fan, so I think you'd get along with him pretty well.

As you can probably guess, Lavender broke up with Ron; I guess she got tired of his attitude. Especially his possessiveness. That boy was downright smothering when he and I were dating, and in retrospect, it was probably a good thing that we broke it off so quickly. Neither of us would have been happy.

The D.A. has been going well, all things considered. We're still meeting regularly, and Padma and I have had at least as much fun finding new charms as we have had in the meetings. The library is such an *interesting* place!

Sorry, I had a "bookworm" moment. Kevin has been trying to help me with that, and I'm getting better, really.

The castle has been quiet this year. There's no great mystery to solve or strange petrifications of the students to cause anyone to do any serious investigations. Even the Slytherins have been more or less keeping to themselves.

I did attend a few of the "Slug Club" meetings that Professor Slughorn has put together. I believe Neville said he mentioned what the Slug Club is back at the Equinox Ball. He seems mostly concerned with what the muggles call "networking" (I'll let you know what that means if you don't already). At any rate, I don't quite trust him to have our best interests at heart, so I'm keeping my distance. It sounds too much like social ladder climbing to me to be any fun.

Now, what about you? I've read the articles in the Prophet about what you've been up to. But, honestly, I've suspected that you are a literal Gryffindor since it was obvious that you affected the wards around the school, and your showing up wearing the sword at the new year merely confirmed it in my mind.

Do you know if you have any secret libraries or anything in the castle that only you can access? If not, could you investigate this? I haven't been able to find anything in my research, not even in the oldest versions of "Hogwarts, A History".

About the Wizengamot vote, it was a good use for your three votes - assuming it IS only three. You aren't hiding another important name from me, are you, Lord-Baron Potter-Black-Gryffindor? [smile]

I also read the articles about ousting Fudge and imprisoning Umbridge. Well done on getting rid of that hag! You're a hero at the castle for that action alone, I think I even saw Professor McGonagall grinning at the paper that morning!

So, aside from overthrowing governments, imprisoning sadistic torturers, implicating embezzlers, claiming long-lost lineages, and buying newspaper companies, what have you been up to recently?

Keeping up your studies? Have you been taking some time off to spend with Tonks? It IS Valentines soon, you know.

Yes, yes, laugh at me if you want: I've recently learned the value of spending some "down time" with someone you care for, and who cares about you. It really is good for your blood pressure and mental health.

Take care of yourself, Harry, and please write when you have a minute.

Your friend,
Hermione

Harry walked into his regular dueling lesson with Tonks and stopped short in confusion. Shack, Remus, and Godric were in the room in addition to Tonks. "Uh, hi?"

Tonks said, "We're going to have a practice duel. You and me against Shack and Remus. No truly harmful spells allowed, and we follow regular dueling rules. Ready?"

Without waiting for a response, Godric barked out, "Begin!" He immediately floated upward to stay out of the way while still keeping an eye on the action.

The three older magicians immediately pulled their wands and started casting.

Harry was caught slightly off guard and was a moment behind Remus. Instead of blocking Remus's first spell, he ducked it while drawing his wand. He rolled back to his feet in a dueling stance.

Blindness spells, tripping jinxes, stunners, confusion spells, and conjured and transfigured makeshift shields flew back and forth, flickering into and out of existence as four wands moved furiously.

Harry was comfortably in the flow of the duel when his concentration was shattered by a shout of surprise that abruptly cut off. His head whipped over to his right just in time to see Tonks collapse bonelessly.

In the calm corner of his mind, he remembered that this was merely a practice duel and that Shack's spell wouldn't have really hurt her, but his more instinctive side had just watched his ally and lover felled so remorselessly.

With a wordless growl of anger Harry cast a powerful bludgeoning hex at Shackbolt.

While Harry was casting the spell at Shack, he also heard Remus cast a spell at him and raised his left hand in an unconscious warding gesture.

Harry was struck speechless when a shield came up on his left side and deflected the spell that Remus had fired. Staring at his left hand in surprise, Harry almost didn't react to the volley of stunners that Shackbolt then sent at him. His hasty shield deflected all of them, but they scattered in random directions, a sure sign of a sloppy or failing shield.

Before he could correct it, a string of stunners from Remus pierced his underpowered off-side shield.

"*Ennervate*."

Harry's eyes opened to see all four of his teachers looking down at him.

"What'd you learn from that?" Godric asked directly.

Harry thought about it for a moment, still lying on the floor. "Don't get distracted by an ally falling. Also that dueling two opponents at once isn't any fun at all."

Shack snorted in disgust. "The deez won't line up so you can duel them one at a time, you know."

Harry looked at him sourly. "I know that." He frowned in concentration for a moment before jumping upward and holding his wand in his left hand. "Two on one again," he stated simply.

A quick look flashed between the four. Tonks moved to the side of the dueling chamber, and Godric floated to the ceiling again. Remus shrugged to Shack and moved back to where he'd been standing. Shack started the fight by casting a Blindness Jinx without warning.

Harry sank into the split concentration state he'd been learning as part of Occlumency, trying to keep track of what both of his opponents were doing. He stayed mostly defensive with his left hand and wand. His right hand, with the armband focus, had more control so he chose to go back and forth between offense or defense as needed on that side.

He lasted for quite a while against the combined power and experience arrayed against him. The young wizard finally fell when both of his opponents cast strings of stunners at him simultaneously, overloading his shield.

"Ennervate ."

Harry again opened his eyes to see all four of his teachers looking down at him. He groaned.

Tonks was grinning. "Finally."

Godric nodded. "Finally," he echoed.

Harry frowned. "Huh?"

"You finally started dual casting," Remus answered, helping the young man to his feet.

"You mean that whole thing was a setup?" Harry turned to Tonks. "You lost to Shack intentionally?" he asked in amazement.

Godric answered, "Yes. We needed you to take on two opponents at once without thinking about it. What better way than to make you protect your chosen mate?"

"I'm not some helpless little MATE that needs protecting," Tonks grumbled at the ghost.

Harry quirked a smile at his grandfather. "Very Slytherin of you."

Shacklebolt barked out a laugh.

Godric grinned at the barb. "Touché. It worked, didn't it? After getting back up, you could do it without the stress of the moment. You aren't very good at it, yet, but you know you can handle two at once if you absolutely have to do so."

"Yes, yes, you tricked me into being able to duel two at once. Happy?"

"Ecstatic," Remus said in a very dry voice.

Harry gave him a dirty look.

Tonks said, "Okay, now we just need to work on your endurance and practice the two on one fights. You'll get better at it the more you do it."

Harry nodded, happy to have a new and clear direction to his practice even though it sounded exhausting. "I still need to improve in one-on-one duels against a very powerful opponent, though."

They all nodded. "Yep. For that, we figure that if you sequentially take each one of us on, you'll get tired long before all four of us do. After enough of that, you'll be ready to fight against someone a lot more powerful."

Harry grimaced, not liking the sound of them intentionally trying to make him exhausted, but recognizing the value of the plan.

Godric added, "Perhaps you could talk Dumbledore into helping you at that point."

Harry was even less happy about it now. Perhaps he could talk with Flitwick instead.

"What're you thinking about so hard?" Tonks asked quietly, startling Harry a little.

He looked around and was surprised to discover that the other three had left at some point. "The training, mostly. And worried about facing the Dork Lard."

She giggled. "Dork Lard? That's a new one. Anyway, why are you concerned? Shack, Remus, Godric, and I will turn you into a fighting machine in time. Then you'll go and get rid of him and we'll all live happily ever after."

He smiled briefly at her statement of support. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. I just hope I'm up to the challenge," he said quietly, staring off through the wall.

She sat down on the floor beside him. "Listen to me, Harry James Potter." Her serious tone pulled his attention from the nebulous lands it had been wandering and back to her. "You are going to train and keep training until you're as good as we can make you. Then we'll get the information from the Order that we need and make a raid on the Head Deezer's hideout. You'll fight him, and you'll win. Do you know why?"

Amused at her words, he shook his head.

Staring at him intently, she continued quietly, "Because it's simply unthinkable for you to lose. You've never lost at anything yet, so why should you lose this one?" She grinned slightly, "Besides, after ten years with the Dursleys, Fate owes you one."

He laughed.

Her smile turned impish, "And if that isn't enough, then how about this?" Her look became sultry, eyes promising a multitude of delights. "Harry, I promise to give you as many reasons to win as you can physically handle."

Harry blushed spectacularly but laughed anyway. "Now THAT is the kind of bribe I could really get into!"

"That IS the point," she purred.

Scion of Gryffindor 41 - Goodbye, Dursleys

The intercom tone sounded.

Vernon Dursley reached over to press the button. "What?" he growled, eyes still on the balance sheets in front of him.

"Vice-President Cummings wishes to speak to you, sir," she answered, her voice a scared rush.

"WHAT?" Dursley shouted, half-standing from his plush swivel chair. "Why didn't you tell me earlier, you useless little -"

"His office called just now," she objected timidly.

"When did he want to see me?"

"Immediately." Her voice barely came out in a squeak this time.

His finger came off the intercom button. "Worthless bint," he muttered, hurriedly gathering a handful of pages of the latest sales figures. He came out of his office, strode past his very young secretary without a word or glance, and hurried to his boss's office.

Cummings's secretary, a no-nonsense type that didn't like him for reasons he'd never fathomed, barely glanced at him. "Conference room," she stated shortly.

Muttering a curse under his breath at the woman, why she couldn't have told HIS secretary that in the first place, *though maybe she did and the bitch didn't tell me*, he mentally growled, Dursley turned around and headed toward the conference room.

Once there, he peeked in the window embedded in the door. Director Cummings was at one side of the table, speaking with another man whose back was to the door. A woman was sitting a few places down from the unknown man.

After a polite knock on the door, he entered the room with an obsequious smile. "Mister Vice-President? You asked to see me?"

Cummings looked up. "Dursley, yes, come in. Take a seat."

Vernon did just that, taking a place at his boss's right side, papers stacked neatly in front of him, pen beside the stack. He looked at Cummings attentively, waiting to learn why he'd been summoned.

Cummings waved a hand at the other man. "Mr. Griffin here has purchased enough Grunnings stock that he now has a controlling interest."

Dursley immediately sat up straighter and smiled at the man. Owning that much stock in the company that employed him made him the most important man in the room. He was a little on the young side to have that much wealth but was otherwise unremarkable in appearance. Brown hair, blue eyes, bland face, and a Saville Row suit. A stunningly beautiful woman was seated a couple places down from Griffin, steno pad in front of her. Dursley didn't recognize her. *An air-head secretary to follow her boss around, do the fetch-and-carry work and warm his bed at night, no doubt*, he thought uncharitably.

Cummings continued, "Mr. Griffin has assured me that he is not planning on suggesting any changes here at Grunnings, but he wanted to meet the senior staff."

Dursley smiled even wider at the man and extended his hand. "Vernon Dursley, sir. Pleasure to meet you."

Griffin smiled slightly and took his hand for a moment. "Yes, yes," he said vaguely. "I simply want to get a sense of the people in charge. Tell me a bit about yourself, Mr. Dursley."

Chest puffing out in pride, Vernon started giving him a long, detailed exposition of just why he was the most important thing to happen to Grunnings Drill Company since they started business.

After a minute, Griffin held up a hand. "I've already read the company reports of your employment, Mr. Dursley. I'm more interested in what you're like outside of work. Civic activities, volunteer work, church, family, that sort of thing."

Vernon was temporarily panicked at the beginning of Griffin's words. Civic activities and volunteer work were a waste of his hard-earned money and valuable time. Church was attended only at Christmas and Easter in order to keep up appearances. But Griffin had hit the important word at the end. "Ah, yes. My family is quite important to me. My wife, Petunia, is active with a neighborhood group of friends and in her flower garden. We've a son, Dudley, who attends Smeltings. He's a successful pugilist as well, my boy is. Division champion in his weight class! Of course, he has his own circle of friends as well. Good group of boys." Vernon forcefully shut his mouth. He knew he was on the verge of babbling, but he

didn't know what it was that Mr. Griffin wanted.

Whatever it was, he was bound and determined to give it to him.

He was a major stockholder, after all.

Griffin nodded politely. "No other family or dependants, then?"

"Well, my sister, Marge, is visiting for the week, but she doesn't live with us. Has her own place out in the country. Breeds purebred bulldogs."

The attractive air-head started leafing through the papers in front of her. *Not even trying to take dictation on the important meeting she's here for!* Vernon thought in disgust, keeping his face from revealing his opinion.

Griffin continued his questions, "And your opinion on what Her Majesty's government should do with criminals?"

Vernon looked at him with a slight frown. "I'm afraid, sir, that I don't quite understand your question."

"Ah, sorry. Do you advocate punishment through incarceration and monetary fines, or do you advocate more strict or more lenient punishments for those who break our laws?"

Vernon set his face into hard lines. "The stricter the better. Drifters and thieves stealing valuables from us hard-working folk? And what do they get for it? A slap on the wrist and then they go out and continue sponging off of society. No, sir. Put 'em to hard labor so they EARN their keep."

The secretary paused in her search to make a small notation on the pad in front of her.

"And your opinion on alternate lifestyles?" His attention pulled back to Griffin, Dursley looked at him in blank confusion, so Griffin explained, "Oh, unwed couples living together, for instance. Same gender couples as another example. Any living arrangements that are outside of the usual family structure."

Vernon paused for a moment, trying to decide how to phrase this next part. "I . . . strongly disagree with such living arrangements. A family should be a man and wife taking care of their children."

"You don't believe in adoption, then?"

"Oh, certainly. I meant to say that the couple should take proper care of all the children in their custody."

"I see. Based upon your obvious moral stance, Mr. Dursley, may I assume you believe in honesty, fair wages, and evenhanded business dealings as well?"

Dursley nodded firmly. "Yes, sir."

Griffin turned. "Mr. Cummings, could you excuse use for a moment?"

Cummings simply nodded and left the room.

Dursley looked at Griffin with a slightly confused expression.

Grinning, Harry let his morph relax.

Dursley's face faded to near-white before it rapidly shifted to a purple that Harry had never seen before.

Wandlessly and silently, Harry petrified his uncle.

"Just to prevent you from doing anything rash, here, Uncle Vernon," Harry said conversationally, "I've immobilized you with my magic."

"Now, the first thing you need to know is that I've been recording this conversation. You have been recording, haven't you, dear?"

"Yep!" Tonks cheerfully replied, holding up a small tape recorder that she'd had on her lap.

Harry nodded and turned back to Dursley. "The part about being a major stockholder is true. Between that, this recording saying what a fine, upstanding citizen you claim to be, and the fact that your employer doesn't know Harry Potter exists . . ." Harry trailed off, letting Vernon draw his own conclusions. "How many of the health fairs, company picnics, or holiday parties did you ever take me to? They've no idea you had another child living with you. Now, what do you think would happen if I showed Mr. Cummings a copy of my school record, giving my address?"

"Anyway, I think you will agree that I could get you sacked very easily." He paused before theatrically smacking himself in the forehead. "Sorry, I'll release you in a second so we can actually talk. Before you have some microscopic thought about attacking me, you should know that this lovely young lady would cheerfully gut you like a fish if I asked her to."

Tonks, eyes suddenly blood-red, nodded vigorously, a demented grin in place. Her tongue came out and wet her lips as she looked over at Harry. "Anything you command, My Lord," she said, voice a soft groan.

"Now, now. No need to scare him unless he deserves it, dear."

Tonks pouted.

Harry had to hide his smile at her show. Turning his head, Harry nodded at Dursley.

Suddenly free of the magic holding him in place, Vernon's eyes widened. Moving slowly, he placed his hands flat on the table. "Vice President Cummings knows you're in here with me," he said in a shaking voice. He seemed incapable of taking his eyes off of Tonks.

For her part, she steadily stared at him with a slight grin teasing the corners of her mouth.

"Oh, certainly," Harry agreed with Vernon's words. "He won't see anything unusual with my talking to you. When he said that I wanted to meet all the senior staff, he was right. I've met with each of you privately like this. Like I've said, I really do own a lot of stock, and I just wanted to make sure most of the employees are honest and trustworthy.

"Now, back to the topic. I asked if you agreed that I could probably get you fired if I wanted to."

Swallowing hard, Dursley moved his eyes over to Harry and nodded once.

"Very good. Nice to see that you can recognize the basic facts. Now, listen very carefully." Harry leaned forward just a little and dropped his voice. "I'm not planning to."

Dursley leaned back in his chair. His eyes went even wider, now flickering back and forth between the two seated in front of him.

Harry smiled pleasantly and nodded. "That's what I thought. You're surprised. Because you expected me to get you sacked. Which means, somewhere deep down - very, very deep down - you actually recognize how badly you've treated me and that you believe you deserve to be punished for it.

"Much as I'd enjoy getting you fired and then stringing you up by your entrails," Harry ignored Tonks's sharp inhalation, "I've long since decided that I'm going to try to be a better person than you."

Tonks made a frustrated noise.

Harry turned to her again. "I spoil you shamelessly on most things, my dear, but not on this. It took too long to clean up after the last one."

Tonks came close to sulking for a moment. In a whisper, she said, "Forgive me, My Lord."

Harry affectionately smiled at her. "No worries. I'm just letting you know why I'm planning on leaving him alive at the end of our little conversation."

Harry turned back to Dursley. "Where were we? Oh, yes, my letting you live. I'm just saying goodbye to you." Harry let all expression drain from his face. Pushing a little magic into his voice, he gave it an echoing, powerful effect. "Be warned, Dursley. I will be watching. If you or yours steps over the line, I will be back. You *really* don't want me to do that."

Closing his eyes, Harry took a deep breath. His features reverted back to Mr. Griffin before Dursley's incredulous eyes.

Potter's eyes, now an ice cold blue, snapped open. "Leave," he flatly commanded.

Vernon Dursley, sweating heavily, bolted for the door.

At four that afternoon, Remus was under an invisibility cloak and following behind Harry and Tonks as they walked up Privet Drive.

Harry, again looking like Mr. Griffin, wore a Saville Row suit with his three family crests done upon the left breast in exquisite detail. Tonks, still in her secretary persona, wore a fashionable business suit and was walking one step behind Harry on his left side.

As they approached Number Four, Harry took note of the overlapping wards. They were all stable but looked very weak. He couldn't identify all of them, but those that he recognized included identification and anti-apparition wards. Squaring his shoulders, he walked briskly toward the door and firmly rapped on it.

Within a minute, Petunia Dursley opened the door. "Hello, how may I help you?"

He smiled at her charmingly. "You are Mrs. Petunia Dursley, is that correct?"

She nodded, confusion clear in her eyes.

"Might we come inside? We have something of a private nature to discuss, and I believe you would prefer to do this behind closed door, ma'am."

Harry could see the thought processes going on behind her eyes without needing Legilimency: a clearly wealthy man comes to her home and wishes to speak privately with her? No matter what the cause, it would no doubt be good for her reputation and probably pocketbook.

"Certainly! Please come in!" A patently fake smile plastered on her face, Petunia waved them forward.

Harry entered, Tonks right behind him. As previously agreed, Remus stayed outside under the cloak. Harry glanced around the front room quickly. Unsurprisingly, not a thing had changed since Harry had been there last, at the end of July.

Petunia took one of the chairs and said, "Please have a seat."

Tonks sat at one end of the couch primly. Harry took the other end of the same couch, facing his aunt.

Petunia was looking at them, eyes narrowed slightly. "Forgive me, sir, but I'm afraid I don't recognize you."

Tonks spoke up. "Formally, his name is Lord-Baron Potter-Black-Gryffindor."

It took a few seconds for that to sink into Petunia's mind. Her jaw dropped open.

Harry let a slightly sarcastic grin form as he relaxed his morph. Tonks changed her hair to a shocking purple and shifted around so that she laid her stockinged feet onto Harry's lap, lounging against the opposite arm of the couch as she did so.

"Y - You . . . POTTER?" Petunia screeched.

"Hello, Aunt Petunia," Harry stated flatly, one hand casually resting on Tonks's ankles. "How've you been?"

Her face now wearing an ugly scowl, Petunia stood.

Harry looked mildly up at her. In a level tone of voice, he said, "You really don't want to do anything stupid. I'm fully within my rights to use magic, so sit down and save your threats."

Even without his wand visible, this was apparently enough to convince her. She slowly sank back down into her chair. "What did she call you?" she finally asked, eyes resting on Tonks with distinct distaste.

"Lord-Baron Potter-Black-Gryffindor," Tonks answered airily, smiling back at the scowling look.

"What does that all mean?" Petunia snapped back. "*Normal* folk don't have titles like that. And don't you have any shame? Sitting there like some scarlet woman, it's disgraceful!"

Without missing a beat, Tonks shifted her hair color to a flaming scarlet. After a moment of concentration, her skin also changed color to a red as if she'd spent hours under a tropical sun. Grinning at Petunia's dumbfounded expression, she answered the question, "Lord-Baron is a combination of titles. 'Lord' is a family title for having performed a heroic deed for the public. 'Baron' is because he's sufficiently wealthy. Technically, he's a Lord twice over and a Baron three times, but calling him Lord-Lord-Baron-Baron-Baron just sounds wrong."

"How about Lord-Baron-Baron-Lord-Baron?" Harry asked her.

"Nah. Baron-Lord-Baron-Lord-Baron flows better. Just sounds silly, is all."

"Hmm, true. Okay, Lord-Baron it is."

Petunia scowled at the pair's light tone. After a few seconds what Tonks had said apparently registered, and a slightly crafty look came into Petunia's eyes. "Wealthy, are you? Well, perhaps that Potter boy my sister married wasn't completely worthless after all. In that case, I demand you pay us back the money we spent in raising you."

Tonks, skin back to something normal looking, stiffened in place, and her eyes flared.

Harry barked out a laugh. "*Pay* you? If you think I actually owe you anything -"

"We housed and fed you for fifteen years, you ungrateful whelp!"

Harry chuckled bitterly. "Ten years and five individual months of someplace as close to hell as this side of Azkaban can be."

Petunia set her jaw in a stubborn line. "You owe us, Potter!"

Harry shook his head. "You're delusional. Okay, fine. Ten years in the cupboard. Five months in Dudley's second bedroom. Food that I'll charitably call 'barely adequate'. Shall we call it five thousand pounds, just to keep it in round numbers?"

Petunia nodded, a slight grin forming.

Seeing her expression, Harry gave her a shark's grin. "Ah, but now we get to what *you* owe *me*. What's a part-time cook cost? How about a full time house cleaning service? Gardening, washing the car, painting the fence and garage twice a year? I figure you owe me about fifty thousand pounds. Oh, and let's not forget the criminal abuse and neglect, nor the fifteen thousand pounds in tax breaks that I'm sure you claimed for raising me." His light tone gave way to a scowl worthy of an angry Snape. In a deadly whisper he finished, "*Don't you dare talk to me about what you think I owe you.*"

Petunia fell back into her chair, eyes widening.

Harry closed his eyes and did one of the calming and centering techniques Shack had taught him. No matter how satisfying it might be in the short run, obliterating her and the house wouldn't do him any good.

Temper back under control, he opened his eyes. "Why, Aunt Petunia?"

She apparently recognized the question he was really asking. "I hate what magic did to my family."

"What did it do?" Harry asked, genuinely curious to catch a glimpse of a family he'd never known.

"My parents loved Lily more than they loved me!" she exploded. "Lily this and Lily that. They were so *proud* to have a witch in the family. What could little Petunia do to compare to that?" Anger gone as quickly as it had appeared, she slumped down and continued in a low, bitter tone, "No matter what I did, I couldn't be as good, as clever, as loved as Lily was. Can you possibly understand that?"

The moment of silence was broken by Harry's ironic laugh. "Oh, yes, *Aunt Petunia*, I think I can."

Petunia's face turned gray, and she buried her face into her hands.

Before any of them could say another word, the front door banged open and Marjorie Dursley strode in, one plump hand around a leash leading to Ripper the bulldog. "Petunia? Are you -" She broke off as she spotted Tonks and Harry sharing the couch. "You," she observed in a disgusted tone.

"Yes, me," Harry acknowledged, looking at her disinterestedly.

"You should watch your tone, you little delinquent. And who's the tart with you? Some whore that you've no doubt knocked up? Why you're still -"

"As usual," Harry interrupted her rant, "you're spewing garbage without knowing anything. You'd best shut that large hole in your face before it gets you into trouble."

Face turning even uglier than usual, Marge lunged at the pair on the couch.

Harry waved his hand in a casual gesture and stuck her to the ceiling. "The sooner you realize that you know nothing about me or my parents, the less . . . unpleasantness we'll have between us. Understand?" Through it all, Harry's tone was calm, but there was an underlying intensity to it.

The front door opened again, and Remus entered, minus the cloak. He paused as he took in the scene. Finally shutting the door, he ironically asked, "So how's everything going in here?"

Harry hadn't even looked over at him; he was still looking up at Vernon's sister. "Marge, tell me: if a dog attacks one of her betters in the pack, is it up to the alpha to dish out the punishment or up to the one who was attacked?"

Marge held her tongue, expression growing darker by the second.

Tonks, still reclining comfortably, asked in a dry tone, "Does it matter? In either case, it's up to you."

"True," Harry mused with a thoughtful nod. He turned his attention back to the woman hanging above him. "Keep that in mind. Now, you know nothing about me, so don't you dare say a single word about that which you don't understand. You listened to Vernon's stupid bigotry and hatred instead of trying to figure anything out for yourself. For your information, and in terms you'll understand, it was Petunia who was the runt bitch of the litter, not my mum. Tell me, what does that make your favorite little neffy-poo?" Harry didn't like the metaphor as it applied to his mother, but he figured it would at least register with the canine-obsessed woman.

Marge was quiet for nearly a minute, face going through several expressions, none of them pleasant. "I don't have any idea how you got me up here, but I don't believe a word of what you're saying," she finally said.

Harry shook his head in exasperation. "You remind me of a professor I had last year. Fat, narrow-minded to the point of not recognizing reality, and supposedly female."

This was finally too much for Marge. "Kill!" she shrieked, glaring at Harry.

Ripper reacted to the order from his mistress.

Unfortunately for him, Remus Lupin was standing nearby.

At Ripper's first motion toward Harry, Remus made a strange growling or barking noise that stopped Ripper in his tracks. The ugly bulldog looked up at Remus for a long moment before his bladder and bowels let loose. A second later, he fell over and didn't move.

Waving one hand in front of her face, Tonks snickered.

Gazing down at the dog, Remus gave a slight shrug. He looked up at Harry. "Oops." His tone was anything except apologetic.

"You killed Ripper!" Marge wailed from the ceiling.

Harry cast a Silencing Spell at her without looking. To Petunia he said, "I originally came to ask you why I was treated worse than a leprous slave while living here. Since I have that answer, I'll simply say goodbye, Aunt Petunia. I'm never coming back." He stood and waved his hand at Marge again.

The Sticking Spell released her from the ceiling, resulting in her falling to the floor. A minor Cushioning Charm prevented any serious injury to her or the floor.

It was pure chance that her face ended up in a warm, lumpy puddle on the carpet beneath her.

After a quick Stunning Spell, removal of the Silencing Spell, and a Memory Charm on the woman on the floor, Harry helped Tonks to her feet.

He then turned and headed out the door without looking back.

That evening, Harry, Tonks, and Remus walked down a hallway in the dormitory wing of Smeltings School for Gentlemen.

Based on the whistles, comments, requests, offers, and suggestions coming at Tonks from every direction, not a one of them was a gentleman.

Reaching the correct door, Harry stopped and knocked. A short wait later, the door opened to reveal Dudley Dursley, wearing only boxers and a t-shirt. He looked surprised to see Harry standing outside his door. After blinking a few times, he asked, "What do you want?"

Harry decided not to say anything about Dudley's choice of clothing, though he thought the **Boxers do it with their gloves on** slogan was a bit over the top. "Could we come in and talk, Dudley?"

Dursley shrugged and let them in. Harry entered his cousin's small dormitory room to find a television playing a cartoon and a computer game paused during a scene of mass carnage. Tonks and Remus both entered with the teens and stood near the door.

Dudley leered at Tonks. "Nice of you to bring me a present, freak."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'd be real careful trying anything with her, Dudders. She's the witch equivalent of a constable."

Her smile shifted a little. It suddenly looked more like a smirk.

Dudley shrugged and turned back to Harry. "Why're you here, anyway?"

"I just said goodbye to both of your parents and Aunt Marge. Thought I'd round out the set by visiting my favorite cousin."

"Well, ain't that nice of you? Cut the shite. Why're you here?"

"Wow, you figured that out all on your own? Looks like that education isn't being wasted after all," Harry said, eyeing the dusty textbooks shoved into a corner of the room.

Dudley dropped into the chair in front of the computer. "Talk or leave. I really don't care which."

One eyebrow went up on Harry's face. "I must say, I'm impressed. I expected at least a threat by now."

Dudley shrugged. "Look, shrimp, I don't like you. Why should I bother trying to hurt you, though? I only did that cuz it was what my old man wanted me to do. Now, why're you here?"

"Too bad," Harry mused to himself as if Dudley hadn't spoken. "I had some frustrations I wanted to take out on you."

Tonks spoke up, "Let's get you back home and into bed, and we'll see if we can work through some of those frustrations of yours."

Remus rolled his eyes.

Dudley openly evaluated Tonks. Looking surprised, he turned back to Harry. "She's serious."

Harry shrugged and nodded before turning a fond smile to Nim.

Dudley frowned but didn't pursue it. "So, you're saying goodbye?"

Harry nodded.

Dudley turned back to his computer. "Fine. Have a good life. Or whatever it is you people do."

"You, too," Harry said, distantly sad to realize that he never really had a chance to connect with his cousin.

"Wait a second," Remus said, surprising everyone. He looked at Dudley for a long moment before giving a decisive nod. "If you ever need to get in touch with Harry -"

"Remus," Harry interrupted him.

"For emergencies," Remus said, turning to his de facto godson. "You know as well as I that they probably won't ever use it, but just in case."

Harry frowned for a moment but shrugged when he saw the logic in Remus's argument.

Remus turned back to the bemused Dursley teen. "Arabella Figg knows how to get in touch with us."

Dudley's eyebrows tried to crawl up and off his face. "Old Mrs. Figg? I always knew she was crazy. One of your sort, then, is she?"

"More or less," Harry agreed. "Anyway, if something comes up, she'll know how to contact me." He grinned, looking somewhere between mischievous and malicious. "If your kids turn out to be magical, for instance. Bye, Dud."

Turning, Harry went through the door that Nim held open for him.

Scion of Gryffindor 42 - Visit Hogsmeade

Harry and Remus apparated onto the Hogsmeade train station platform with a pair of quiet pops.

"What time is the game?" Remus asked.

"One," Harry answered, glancing down at his watch.

Remus chuckled. "Why do you wear that thing, anyway? It's been broken for years, hasn't it?"

Harry shrugged self-deprecatingly. "Habit?" he ventured with a grin.

Remus looked down at his own (functioning) watch. "We have some time to kill. Why not buy one?"

Harry looked around at the storefronts they were walking past, finally spotting a discreet jewelry store. With Remus in tow, he walked in.

The bell over the door drew the attention of a cheerful looking witch who came out from a door behind the counter. "Good morning, good sir. You are well come to Banner's Jewels. What can I do for you today?" She smiled at both men in front of her.

Harry said, "I'd like to buy a new watch."

"Certainly, sir!" she said with overwhelming cheer. She bustled over toward a counter and pulled a tray of watches out from under the glass counter.

Once Harry came over, he saw small, discrete pocket watches; full size pocket watches on heavy chains; thin wristwatches apparently designed for women; mid-sized wristwatches; and heavy wristwatches that looked like they could double as a battering ram if they needed to. Looking at the three wristwatches that looked appropriate for male mortals to wear, Harry asked, "What options can they have?"

"Nothing much, I'm afraid, dear. An Impervious Charm that has to be renewed once a year is the only one I can put on it for you."

Harry looked up at her in surprise. "With all the advances in magic, I thought there would be something more. I dunno, a portkey or a Shield Charm or something."

The look of confusion on the witch's face remained. "Deary, where in the name of Merlin have you heard of such a thing?"

Harry blushed. "Muggle idea to make watches have more stuff in them," he answered truthfully. It was from Dudley's series of James Bond movies, but he didn't think that reference would make any sense to her.

The look of confusion on the witch's face cleared, and she gave a little chuckle. "What will the muggles think of next? No, I'm afraid I can't do any of what you're asking for. A permanent Shield Ward requires a large anchor stone. I suppose you could turn it into a portkey if you wanted to, but then again you could just as easily turn your glasses into a portkey. That's assuming you know how to make them and don't care that the Ministry tries to regulate them, Lord-Baron."

"Call me Harry, please. Well, since I can't put any exotic charms into it, I'll take this one." He handed over a plain watch.

"Did you want to get something for Dora?" Remus asked from his spot near the door.

"Huh?" Harry asked.

"We're in a jewelry store, Harry," Remus said dryly. "I just thought that buying your girlfriend something wouldn't be a bad idea."

Harry looked back over at the witch with an embarrassed grin. "Uh . . ."

She laughed. "Some jewelry, huh?" She thought about it for a few seconds. "Unless you're looking for rings . . ." She trailed off with a grin.

Harry shrugged, completely unembarrassed by the implication. "Not at the moment, thank you for asking."

Appearing mildly surprised at the response, she said, "Well, in that case, if this is the same Nymphadora Tonks I remember from her own Hogwarts days, she's a full metamorph with a penchant for changing her hair color, correct?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at her in suspicion. "May I ask how you remember a student from a decade ago that well?"

She held up a hand. "I assure you that I didn't stalk her, dear. We shopkeepers talk about the more . . . memorable students. A full

metamorphmagus is one." She shot a sideways grin at Remus. "A generation ago, it was a certain group of four Gryffindors who seemed to spend a lot of time in Hogsmeade outside of the student weekends."

Remus unsuccessfully fought his grin.

"More recently, it was that red-headed pair of mischief makers." The witch's eyes moved to Harry. "And, to be totally honest, dear, it's also been . . . well, you."

Harry sighed in resignation. "Am I really that memorable?"

She shrugged. "Well, dear, with your fame as the Boy Who Lived on top of the Death Eater captures over the summer, you must admit that you're certainly well known."

Harry's lips twisted into an aggravated look.

She grinned, a sly, teasing look. "That, and Rosmerta says you have the most captivating eyes."

Harry's eyes went very big. He wasn't the only student at Hogwarts who'd had a mild crush on the friendly, voluptuous witch proprietor of The Three Broomsticks.

Remus and Madam Banner laughed at Harry's expression, causing him to blush spectacularly.

Taking pity on the young wizard, Banner said, "Unfortunately, I don't have anything that can change color based on hair color, but I do have a pair of earrings that can change according to the color of the dress."

Skin tone returning to normal, Harry asked, "If there's a charm for changing by dress color, why not hair color?"

"Most witches don't change their hair color often enough to make it worthwhile."

"Buy a plain pair," Remus suggested from the door. "We can use this as a charms project."

Harry nodded and ended up buying several pieces of plain jewelry in addition to the watch he'd picked out earlier.

Just after one, Harry and Remus made their way toward the Gryffindor seating area in the Hogwarts quidditch pitch.

The first friends Harry found were Neville and Hannah, sitting exactly at the boundary between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff seating area.

Harry laughed as he slid into a seat behind Neville. "Hey, you two."

Both of them twisted around. "Harry! Oh and Professor Lupin!" Hannah said.

Remus smiled at her. "It was almost three years ago since I was your professor, Miss Abbott. Please, I'm Remus or Mr. Lupin." He turned to Neville. "The same with you, Mr. Longbottom."

Neville gave him a little smile. "Yes, s - Mr. Lupin." His grin got bigger. "Have you been keeping Harry out of trouble?"

Remus grinned as Harry gave his former roommate an evil look. "Alas, no. Despite my best efforts, he manages to find more trouble than I can keep him out of."

Harry rolled his eyes as the two students snickered. "How've you two been? Hannah, how's your dad doing?"

She answered, "What little I've heard from Dad is that he's overwhelmed but getting a handle on it. Apparently, the amount of pure trivia that comes to the Minister's desk is impressive in a frightening kind of way."

"That's what department heads are for, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Seems that Fudge wanted to keep control of *everything*, though. He wanted at least a copy of ALL proposals to hit his desk, even if it only affected a two man department."

"Talk about a micro-manager," Harry muttered.

Hannah overheard it and nodded. "He was. Anyway, Dad's getting the procedures changed, so it's getting better, but in the meantime, he's had to deal with memos such as what kinds of memories are appropriate to give to a muggle after obliviation when a biting teacup is confiscated."

"Yikes," Harry sympathized. "Well, I originally came to speak with Hermione and watch the game."

Neville pointed to the far side of the Gryffindor seating. "She and Kevin are over there somewhere."

Harry nodded. "Thanks. Take care, you two."

Making their way toward the general area that they'd been directed to, Harry and Remus waved and had a friendly word with a few dozen students they knew. They were both warmed by the friendly greetings they received. They finally spotted the couple they were searching for and slipped into seats behind them. "Hey," Harry said.

Both of them were clearly startled. Jumping apart from their close huddle, Hermione stood, drew her wand, and spun in one fluid motion. Kevin merely craned his neck around and looked.

Harry smiled at her reaction. "Very good."

She gave him a sour look as she put her wand away. Her face melted into a smile and she leaned over to give him a hug. "Harry! How have you been? Oh, and thank you for the compliment, *Professor* Potter."

Harry laughed as he hugged her back. "I'm good. Decided to take a break, and my minders let me come to catch some quidditch."

"We are not your minders, Harry," Remus said mildly.

"Who was it who said I couldn't come to Hogwarts without a guard?" Harry asked.

"Kingsley. I'm not here to keep you safe. I'm here to watch Gryffindor beat Hufflepuff."

Harry rolled his eyes. He knew Remus was present at least as much to be a bodyguard as a fan. He understood the necessity even if he chafed at it.

Distracting her friend from his darkening thoughts, Hermione said, "Harry, I'd like to formally introduce you to Kevin Entwhistle. Kevin, Harry Potter."

Harry smiled and shook the Ravenclaw's hand. "How have you two been doing?"

Hermione brightened. Kevin did as well, in a slightly more self-conscious way. "We're doing well," Hermione said, smiling momentarily at her boyfriend. "Studying with a Ravenclaw is so much easier. Kevin can help me on some of the problems, and I don't have to nag at him to study like -" She abruptly snapped her mouth shut and turned a bright red.

Harry laughed. "Like your two male chums of past years?" he asked with a grin.

Still blushing, Hermione nodded. "Honestly, yes. Sorry about that, Harry, but -"

Harry shook his head and gently cut her off. "Don't worry about it. You were right. You *did* have to nag at us to study."

A smile flitted at the corners of her mouth for a moment. "Yes, well, studying with Kevin is . . . easier. Not only do I not have to force him to do his homework, but studying with your boyfriend has certain other benefits."

Harry grinned and wiggled his eyebrows in an overly theatrical manner. "I know what you mean. My girlfriend is one of my tutors, remember?"

She laughed, sitting and snuggling back up to the warmth that Kevin provided. "See, you *do* understand the value of proper motivation."

"Do I really want to hear this?" Remus asked without taking his eyes off of the game.

"No," Harry cheerfully admitted. "Sorry, Remus, but Tonks has methods available to her that you, I'm afraid to say, simply do not. At least where I'm concerned."

Hermione and Remus chuckled.

Kevin finally spoke up. "You're not what I was expecting, Mr. Potter."

Harry quirked an eyebrow at him. "Were you expecting some dark and broody teen with a case of rampaging schizophrenia? Or was I supposed to be the avenging 'Chosen One'? Or maybe the rebellious leader of the illegal D.A.?"

The Ravenclaw sixth year ducked his head a little. "Um, all three, I suppose. I see your point, though."

Harry nodded. "Good. Then I don't need to convince you that I'm a regular teen, right?"

Hermione and Remus both made rude noises.

"Quiet, you two," Harry admonished without bothering to look for the smiles the pair were wearing.

Kevin was trying to fight a grin himself. "Not quite normal in the same way I am, but I think I see what you're saying."

"Oh, you're not normal," Harry disagreed cheerfully. "Anyone *normal* couldn't have caught the eye of our fair Hermione. Speaking of that, you, Hermione, have some explaining to do. I hear from Ginny that you're dating someone? How come you didn't tell me and have me vet him?"

She gave Harry a stern look. "You do not have to vet him, as you so quaintly put it. I'm perfectly capable of picking a boyfriend without your input, thank you. As for the timing," she paused for a moment, "we weren't exactly on good terms right then."

Harry nodded, face solemn. "Okay, I'll give you that one. But I do, too, have to check him. You don't have a big brother around so the job falls to me."

Remus was silently laughing and shaking his head by this point. Kevin looked somewhere between amused and concerned.

Need I remind you that I'm older than you are? And secondly, I need your permission, do I?" Hermione finished archly.

"Not at all. I just want to make sure he's good enough for you," Harry answered promptly.

Hermione relaxed a fraction. Instead of responding to his comment, she asked, "And the age difference?"

Harry pulled himself erect and let a little magic bleed into his voice. "Being Lord-Baron Potter-Gryffindor-Black doesn't counter a mere ten and a half months?"

She tried, and failed, to look outraged.

He just looked at her calmly for a moment before turning to Kevin. "I don't need to threaten to give you a good thumping if you hurt her in any way, do I?"

As Kevin was frantically shaking his head, Remus shook his head. "Harry, stop trying to give poor Mr. Entwhistle a coronary."

Hermione finally broke down laughing. Kevin looked at his girlfriend as if she'd just betrayed him.

Harry relaxed, an easy grin coming to the fore. "Don't worry, Kevin. Hermione is laughing at me, not you. She knows I'm just teasing the both of you."

Kevin appeared to consider the words for a moment and finally nodded to Harry. He turned to Remus and blatantly changed the subject. "Good afternoon, Professor Lupin. How've you been?"

"I'm doing well, Mr. Entwhistle. How about yourself?"

As Remus and Kevin started talking, Harry asked Hermione, "Seriously, how're you doing?"

She smiled. "Really, Harry, I'm good. I'm discovering what Parvati so colorfully phrased as 'The joys of discovering that boy plus girl can equal fun'. Better yet, my grades aren't suffering for it. Between classes, Kevin, and D.A., I'm keeping busy enough. How about you?"

"Doing good. I'm learning things that are more directly useful, and I'm having fun doing it."

"How so?"

"Shack lets me pick what potion we're doing and the topic once a week. Tonks and I duel often as not instead of spending all our time figuring out how to avoid red caps."

"The rest of our education is important too, you know, Harry," Hermione admonished.

"But a little less immediately needed in my case," he pointed out.

"Well, true."

The four chatted idly as they watched the remainder of the quidditch game. It was a fun, clean game, and the Gryffindors, despite having a mediocre team, were steadily outscoring the relatively young and inexperienced Hufflepuffs. Ginny, again playing as the Gryffindor seeker, finally caught the snitch to finish the game.

Harry was standing and applauding when he first felt it. Even for late March, it was suddenly too cold.

Scion of Gryffindor 43 - Attack on Hogwarts

Harry's danger instincts were making him sit up and take notice at the same time that Kevin rubbed his arms. "Is it getting cold?"

"Shit. Dementors," Harry stated with a sigh.

Hermione blinked at Harry for just a moment before pulling out her wand. A whispered spell later and her amplified voice rang out, "D.A. Emergency! Dementors incoming. Evacuate everyone to the school. We've prepared for this, people. You know what to do."

As Hermione was canceling the spell, Ginny, flying above, shouted over the gasps from the students surrounding them, "Confirmed, coming from the Forbidden Forest." She then turned and fired off a Patronus Spell. Harry couldn't tell what form it took from his angle, but it was clearly corporeal.

Without hesitation, Harry drew his wand and sent a Patronus in the direction of the Forbidden Forest as well. Roughly a quarter of the students also pulled out their wands and cast the spell. Harry was impressed and proud. Most of them didn't get a corporeal form, but many more than just the half-dozen from last year now had solid forms

The air and ground of the pitch now contained numerous silver forms, all racing in the same direction. The flyers unable to cast a Patronus flew down toward Hermione and Harry and floated in front of them.

Harry was scrambling to come up with something to say to the group when Hermione crisply ordered, "Natalie, Carmen, Jeff: disillusion yourselves and fly along the route back toward the school. Report problems back to me or Padma. Keep an eye out for Death Eaters. The rest of you patrol the pitch and help the evacuation."

They all simply nodded and set about their duties.

All along the stands, the former and current D.A. members were directing everyone down to the ground and then toward the school. It was all happening very rapidly and in an orderly manner. The noise was slowly picking up as the students realized just how serious the situation was, but it was not yet overpowering.

Harry watched the unfolding scene, pleasantly surprised.

Kevin, standing at Hermione's back, saw his reaction. "Hermione and Padma have the D.A. trained to deal with all sorts of problems. In an emergency, Hermione is in charge of the D.A., and Dumbledore directs the professors." He turned and looked toward the professors' box for a moment before nodding to Harry. "They're already gone. Dumbledore has talked about this scenario with Hermione." He glanced at Hermione in clear pride. "The professors are making noises about giving her some sort of official staff position." He resumed scanning in all directions, quite literally guarding Hermione's back.

Harry shared an impressed look with Remus. "So much for thinking I have to take the lead in protecting the students," Harry observed.

"They're doing fine protecting themselves," Remus agreed.

Seeing that the dementor situation was under control at least for the moment, Harry waved his wand and sent a Messenger Spell to Ginny. "Someone had to herd the dementors here. Keep an eye out for deez in the Forbidden Forest."

She looked down toward Harry for a moment in surprise before she nodded acknowledgement. She held her position above the rapidly emptying stands, head scanning back and forth constantly.

Harry cast a Sonorus Spell on himself to be heard over the crowd noise. "Samuel!" When the young Hufflepuff came to a stop, Harry asked, "Can I borrow -"

He was cut off as Samuel Firthquill, the seeker that Ginny had just beat to the snitch, jumped into the stands and handed Harry his broom before the question was finished. At Harry's surprised look, he shrugged. "You're much more valuable up in the air than I am right now, Mr. Potter. Just bring it back to me when you're done, okay?" He grinned for a moment before he joined the flow of students heading down.

Remus spoke up while putting his communication crystal back into his robes. "I've called Dora and Shack. They said they're going to call Amelia then they're on their way here." He frowned at Harry. "I'm sure I can't talk you out of jumping into this fight, so I'll just ask you to be careful. Some deez and dementors just have to be ready to cut us off. I suggest you watch for that. I'll be part of the rearguard. Don't get yourself killed, Harry." He waited for Harry's nod of agreement before he waved Kevin and Hermione ahead of him.

Harry quickly gave thanks that he had such effective allies before he jumped onto the broom, a Nimbus 2001, and flew along the route the students were taking, being careful to keep above the level where the dementors' aura would seriously affect him. As he flew over the entrance to the pitch,

He saw Remus and a handful of the senior D.A. forming up, preparing to cover the end of the retreat.

He moved along above the flow of students just in time. Over fifty dementors surged out of the edge of the Forbidden Forest, clearly attempting to cut off the retreating students. The students moving past screamed and recoiled from the black cloaked figures. The line of fleeing students behind them slowed, nobody wanting to move toward the visible dementors.

"*Expecto Patronum*!" Harry bellowed, concentrating on one of his more pleasant memories with Nim. Prongs again gracefully bounded from his wand and enlarged on his way to ground level. Once there, he started running along a line between the advancing dementors and the students. "Keep moving!" Harry yelled at the students, jolting them back into motion. Despite his and Prongs's best efforts, the dementors slowly continued their advance. "I could use some help over here!" Harry called, still keeping most of his attention on directing Prongs.

Before any of the D.A. could respond, he heard the Patronus Spell cast from a half-dozen more voices, all mature. The professors had finally joined the battle. Six more Patroni, including Dumbledore's phoenix, joined Prongs and the seven easily held the skirmish line as the student body continued to stream past.

As Harry kept watch over Prongs, a blue spell lanced out from within the Forbidden Forest. Harry moved his broom out of the way, but the spell never reached him.

It stopped ten yards in front of him, intercepted by one of the disillusioned flyers.

Unfortunately, it didn't appear to have been intentional. The young Hufflepuff player immediately became visible and crashed to the earth in the no-man's land between the fleeing students and the Patroni.

Among the cries of the suddenly panicked students, Harry heard one of the Patil girls, presumably Padma, shout, "Someone needs to pick Carmen up. Senior D.A. and the professors are still kinda busy . . ."

"Got it!"

Three boys ran out of the flow, grabbed the unconscious girl, and continued moving toward the castle with their burden.

Harry kept one eye on the forest, and presumably the deez who'd tried to shoot him down, and another on Prongs. He thought that he could see movement behind the tree line, but no more spells came out at them. Taking a moment, he grabbed the floating broom and looked for someone to give it to. An obvious choice came past in the flow of students. "Katie!"

Katie Bell looked up and caught the broom that Harry dropped to her. She was immediately in the air, joining the assembling rearguard.

Once the last of the ground-bound students had left the quidditch pitch, the last two stragglers having been picked up by the Hufflepuff beaters, the patrolling flyers formed above the rearguard for the retreat. Remus, Hermione, and Cho with Ron and Katie above them formed a solid core of defenders from which the others could rally and keep the retreat orderly instead of a panicked rout. The Patroni also gave ground easily and did more to protect the students than they did to attack the dementors. With a nearly solid wall of Patroni between them and the students, the dementors failed to get close to their prey.

Getting closer to the school, Harry saw a knot of professors standing just outside the Entrance Hall, defending the very doors of Hogwarts.

Ginny drifted over toward Harry. Side by side, the two watched a fleeing student, a young Ravenclaw by his size and robe colors, stumble and fall. Harry was about to dive down when two upperclassmen, a Gryffindor and a Slytherin, bodily lifted the boy and continued toward the school without slowing. Padma hadn't had to say anything this time.

Looking more closely, Harry saw several crying or shaking people being carried or helped by their fellow students. Even if the dementors couldn't touch them, their desolate aura was still affecting the fleeing students.

Seeing that Prongs was about to lose his form, Harry cast the Patronus Spell again, his seventh since the beginning of the fight.

Beside him, Ginny also recast the spell. A solid form fell to the ground in front of her in a crouch before jumping to its feet and running toward the dementors. It took Harry several confused seconds before he recognized it as a person wearing Hogwarts robes and waving a short sword that looked very familiar. He turned to her with an incredulous expression.

She shrugged. "You *did* save me from the basilisk," she defended herself, forced to speak loudly to be heard.

"Yeah, but . . . *I'm* your Patronus?" he asked in disbelief.

"I was eleven!" she objected. In an apparent attempt to ignore the revelation, she turned away from him to survey the battle.

As uncomfortable as she was, Harry gladly let it go.

Eventually the last of the students and then the rearguard made it to the safety of the school doors, leaving dozens of students and professors, the ones who'd been casting and recasting Patroni, shoulder to shoulder in their defense of the school. Now having more space to work with, the hundreds of dementors flowed around the knot of defense. They continued to try to move forward, but the concentrated mass of Patroni defeated any chance they had of advancing.

"Stalemate," Ginny observed as she cast yet another Patronus. "They can't get in, but we can't all get out."

Harry shook his head. "This is only temporary. We've called the ministry for reinforcements. They can't win in the long run; in fact, I wonder why

they're still here."

By this point Harry was floating near the center of the defense, trying to look everywhere at once. From the side he heard Ron shout, "Bloody hell! We have to figure out a way to contain them!" Harry glanced over and saw Ron glaring down at the tenacious dementors.

From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Flitwick and McGonagall confer for a moment. Almost in unison, they raised their wands and each conjured a length of ten foot tall stone wall behind the teeming mass of dementors. Seeing what they were doing, Harry drifted over the heads of the dementors, keeping a wary eye on the Forest, and started conjuring walls of his own. He was rapidly joined by several of the upper-class students on hastily-summoned brooms, and shortly a large, open space was enclosed on the front lawn of Hogwarts. From above, it appeared to be a horseshoe with the open end toward the school and the mass of dementors.

With a new goal in mind, the Patroni were now on the offensive, pushing the dementors together and toward the opening of the enclosure.

Many of the dementors tried to retreat toward the Forbidden Forest, but Harry flew ahead of them and recast Prongs yet again, cutting them off from escaping. Considering the deez he knew to be in the Forest, he kept part of his attention in that direction. He was joined by the remaining flying Patronus-casting players, and their Patroni held that side as the standing magicians began to herd the dementors toward the trap.

Fortunately, a small contingent of aurors plus Tonks, Kingsley, and Amelia arrived from the direction of Hogsmeade and added their Patroni to the fight, preventing the dementors from retreating in that direction.

The rest of the demons were soon pushed into their new prison and more conjured walls sealed them in.

Almost all of the standing magicians near the castle, those who had been within the dementors' auras, promptly fell down, visibly shivering.

Harry landed near Amelia. "Deez in the Forest," he gasped out to her.

She immediately dispatched a team to begin sweeping the near end of the Forest.

"Dobby!" Harry called when he'd gathered enough breath again.

The elf cracked in and took one long look around. "I's know what to do, Master Harry!" He cracked back out.

"Harry!" Nim cried as she threw herself at him. He caught her slight form against him and held on tight. Though he'd not been in the thick of the fight, the adrenaline rush was now leaving him, and he hung onto Nim for all he was worth.

"Very clever," Amelia commented presently, eyeing the stone enclosure.

"Thank Minerva and Filius," Dumbledore cheerfully informed her as he strode up.

Even after a fight, he didn't appear to be mussed, Harry thought with a short grunt of amusement.

Dumbledore continued speaking, "Welcome to Hogwarts, Amelia. Thank you for your timely appearance."

Bones shook her head. She pointed to first Tonks and then Kingsley who was standing near Harry. "Thank Tonks and Shacklebolt. They were the ones who told us about the problem."

Dumbledore nodded to them. "I thank the two of you, then. Hogwarts owes you a great debt."

Shack shrugged. "Remus warned us. We just brought the reinforcements."

Remus came up to the group, supporting Hermione. He immediately shook his head at Kingsley's words. "Harry identified them first."

Harry also shook his head. "Hermione got the students organized and moving."

Hermione started to say, "The D.A. -"

She was cut off by a grinning Amelia. "Could you all just admit it was a team effort?"

Tonks, still sniffing against Harry's chest, chuckled a little.

Harry gently extracted himself from Nim's enveloping hug. He handed the broom he'd been riding to Hermione. "Could you return this to Samuel Firthquill? Also, please ask the D.A. to downplay my part, okay? This is - and should be - about what they did."

Hermione took the broom and nodded.

Everyone was startled as Dobby cracked in laden with a huge tray full of mugs. He scowled around when nobody moved. "Yous be taking this hot chocolate," he stated.

Chuckling, Harry picked up a mug, causing everyone else to take one as well.

Giving a satisfied nod, Dobby cracked back out.

"Pushy elf," Nim said with clear affection.

He is," Harry agreed with a grin. "Wouldn't trade him for the world, though." He took a large sip of the chocolate and immediately felt better.

Looking around absently, he saw more elves distributing chocolate among the magicians collapsed in front of the school. Everyone seemed to be recovering slowly.

When something brushed his leg, Harry looked down to see Crookshanks looking up at him with something in his mouth.

"What do you have there, Crookshanks?" Hermione asked her pet, setting her mug onto the grass.

The part-kneazle continued to look up at Harry before opening his mouth and dropping a rat at Harry's feet.

A rat with a silver paw.

After a long moment of silence, Remus let out a feral noise and reached for his wand.

"Hold!" Harry growled at the man.

Remus finished pulling out his wand and started to bring it to bear, eyes gleaming.

Harry grabbed Remus's wand and twisted it to point up. "I said stop, dammit," Harry snarled in Remus's face, fighting a losing battle against the werewolf's greater strength. "Yes, I want to kill him slowly as well, but we need him alive. He'll have information on the deez, and then he can prove beyond doubt that Sirius was innocent."

Remus took a deep breath and slowly relaxed. "I know, Cub. Sorry about that. But that rat has caused so much hurt to so many people . . ."

Harry nodded firmly. "I know. It may not be very Gryffindor of me, but I'm looking forward to seeing him in Azkaban or maybe even Kissed. But only *after* we've sucked all the useful information out of him." Seeing that Remus wasn't about to kill Wormtail, Harry let him go and turned back around.

Kingsley had already conjured a small, transparent carrying case around the unconscious animagus.

"Who's the smart kitty?" Hermione cooed to the part-kneazle in her arms.

Harry reached over and scratched him behind the ears as well. "I owe you one, Crookshanks. You let your mistress here know what you want for your birthday and we'll see what we can do, okay?"

After rubbing his head on Harry's hand for a moment, he gave a firm meow.

Harry turned to Amelia. "Director Bones, in your capacity as head of D.M.L.E., I request that you accompany us to Minister Abbott. This animagus Death Eater," he gestured at the cage Shack casually held, "will have information that I'm sure is of great interest in multiple criminal cases, not the least of which is Sirius Black's."

Amelia looked at him in amusement as he formally told her things she already knew. "I agree, Lord-Baron. He no doubt has a great deal of information that we can put to immediate use against Lord Voldemort, as well. I should also report on this," she waved at the stone walls that another team of aurors were reinforcing.

Minister of Magic Marcus Abbott looked up from his desk as they walked in. "Amelia!" he greeted her cheerfully enough, though the lines of stress and sleeplessness were evident on his face. He'd been informed of the fight as Amelia and a large contingent of aurors were leaving the ministry, but he hadn't heard the results yet. He blinked in confusion and put the quill in his hand back in an inkwell. "And Harry. Should I be concerned when the head of Law Enforcement and Harry Potter both show up for an emergency meeting?" He paled. "Is this about Hannah?" he asked fearfully

Harry smiled reassuringly. "Hannah is fine, sir. As to your first concern: perhaps you should usually be worried, but in this case we bring good news on more than one topic."

Abbott's smile returned. "Ah, *good* news. I'm always happy to hear that, especially in these times. So, what part of the fight at Hogwarts would result in bringing two such esteemed personages to my office to report good news?"

Amelia answered directly, "Approximately two-hundred and fifty dementors, nearly all of the rogues from Azkaban, attacked Hogwarts." Marcus blanched. He knew about the dementors, but not that nearly all of them had been used. Amelia continued, "However, through the efforts of the professors and a student militia, informally known as the D.A. I believe, the dementors were all captured."

Marcus simply gaped.

Harry added, "Oh, and we also captured Peter Pettigrew, the real Secret Keeper and betrayer of my parents, and a Death Eater for longer than that.

"How's your day been, Minister?" Harry finished with an innocent expression

Abbott slowly shook his head. Leaning forward to plant his elbows on the desk, he said, "Let's start this over from the beginning. Tell me about the dementors and the attack."

Chuckling, Amelia took a guest chair and waved Harry toward another.

Battle at Hogwarts

Rogue Dementors Captured

Allies of the self-stylized Dark Lord Voldemort attacked Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry yesterday. Under cover of the annual Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff quidditch match, almost all of the renegade dementors flooded in from the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

Fortunately, many of the quick-thinking students recognized the situation for what it was and employed advanced tactics and magics to defend the rest of their fellow students.

Said Professor Severus Snape, current Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, "I was in the castle during the early stages of the battle, but from what I was told many of my students knew what to do without instruction. The Patronus Charm is very difficult to master. That so many students knew it is a surprise, but a pleasant one in that it proves that I should have had this teaching position long ago."

According to several witnesses, a study group called the Defense Association took command of the situation immediately and started the majority of the student body moving toward the safety of the school. They cast Patronus Spells (see page 6 for a full explanation) to slow down the dementors' advance and retreated to the school in good order. Several Ministry aurors, led personally by D.M.L.E. Director Bones, quickly arrived on the scene and assisted the students and professors in rounding up the dementors into a temporary, conjured structure.

There were two students reported Kissed. After the battle, aurors found the pair near the quidditch pitch, but not in the stands. Their names have not been released, pending notification of their families.

Two Death Eater bodies (names not yet released) were found by school representatives in the Forbidden Forest near the castle.

Our readers will recall that the dementors abandoned their duties on Azkaban Island early last summer and were presumed to have joined forces with Voldemort's Death Eaters. Attacks on isolated muggle villages have been reported in the muggle press, possibly accounting for the activities of the dementors in the months since.

Now that the wayward dementors have been caught, what will the ministry do with them? Does Minister Abbott have a plan to deal with them?

Time will tell.

The Truth of Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew Revealed!

The living body of one Peter Pettigrew, believed killed by the infamous Sirius Black on 2 November, 1981, was delivered to ministry custody yesterday. Under Veritaserum interrogation, it was revealed that he had in fact been a Death Eater, betrayed the Potters to the Dark Lord Voldemort, and framed Sirius Black for his own murder as well as that of a dozen muggles.

Sirius Black has already been exonerated, posthumously, by the ministry.

A full accounting of the tangled story will be coming as more details are revealed.

Meanwhile, legal consultants are examining what restitutions the ministry must make to the estate of Sirius Black for wrongful imprisonment.

In accordance with new ministry guidelines, Mr. Pettigrew will be given a trial for his part in the deaths of James and Lily Potter and his purported support of Voldemort. If he is found guilty, which is likely given the Veritaserum confessions that have already been reported, then he shall be stripped of his Order of Merlin and sent to Azkaban prison.

More information will be reported on the trial once it has been released.

My Lord Gryffindor,

In accordance to the Hogwarts bylaws, as well as our more personal agreement, I wish to make a report to you pertaining to the recent battle at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

It was the Hogwarts wards that initially alerted me to the incursion. My first action was to move myself and the available professors to the escape route that the students would, by necessity, take. I also alerted the professors that had remained in the school to set up a strong point at the doors to the school.

I was preparing to alert Miss Granger as de facto head of the Defense Association when I heard her announce the situation to the student body.

You were present for the battle itself, and were instrumental in several aspects of it, so I do not believe I need to describe what happened in any detail. If you are unclear about any of it, please ask.

I must say that I feel that the Defense Association performed marvelously. For a largely under trained force, they were far more effective than expected. Miss Granger in particular performed most impressively. I shall have to give some thought to giving her a commendation for special services to the school. As an Heir to a Founder, do you have any thoughts on this matter?

Aside from the expected minor injuries (bruises, minor contusions, and the like) there were three more serious casualties.

Miss Ryder was hexed severely and fell from her broomstick. I believe you witnessed this, so I do not need to describe the circumstances. Madam Pomfrey has assured me that the injuries, while serious, are not permanently damaging, and Miss Ryder will be up and about within a week.

Upon questioning, it seems that she was attempting to protect you, though unfortunately her Shield Charm was not up to the task.

If you have read the [Daily Prophet](#) article, then you are already aware of the two other casualties. Miss Smythe of Slytherin and Mr. Jacobs of Ravenclaw were both seventh year students. They were found under the quidditch stands nearest the Forbidden Forest, apparent victims of the Dementor's Kiss. As they were purported to be in a romantic relationship, I hypothesize that they were spending a moment of quiet time together and were caught by the flood of dementors without any means of escape. Circumstantial evidence supports this theory, but again I have no proof.

As nobody was aware of their location, none of the combatants, myself included, were aware of the need to rescue them. For this reason, I mourn their passing but will only accept a fraction of the blame for it. I respectfully suggest you do the same.

In other news, the centaurs had followed a team of three Death Eaters after they had reportedly Portkeyed into a clearing in the Forbidden Forest. According to the unofficial report the centaurs provided us, the Death Eaters herded the group of dementors that attempted to intercept the student retreat. After releasing their charges, the Death Eaters then attempted to curse you. The centaurs attacked the three from behind with their bows immediately thereafter. Two bodies were delivered to Professor McGonagall shortly after you left for the ministry. Both are eastern European nationals and their names are unknown. The third Death Eater simply vanished. I suspect that Mr. Pettigrew was the third, and we have the wonderful companion to Miss Granger to thank for apprehending him.

The centaurs, represented by Magorian's son, unofficially provided us with this assistance. He pointed out the risks his father ran to give us this much.

There was a portkey on one of the two delivered here, so I am assuming that was the planned method of egress for the invading Death Eater teams.

Aragog reports, via his old friend Hagrid, that the acromantulas ambushed and eliminated another team of three.

I suspect that there were a number of Death Eater teams that escaped without incident or notice, though I do not possess any solid information one way or the other on that topic.

I do not know what retrieval plans, if any, were in place for the dementors.

Severus has not yet reported on Tom's reaction to the battle.

Minister Abbott has already begun preparations to move the dementors back to Azkaban, presumably to resume their duties there.

In accordance with your instructions to Miss Granger, your participation in this battle has not been mentioned in the official reports to be shared with the school board nor to the representatives of the media.

I remain,

Your Faithful Servant

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Scion of Gryffindor 44 - Training and Wolfsbane

Harry limped into the dining room of Gryffindor Keep. His robes were cut in multiple places, the faint odor of smoke spoke of a recent brush with a fire, and small cut over his left eye was oozing blood.

This appearance wasn't all that unusual after a training duel.

What was unusual were the six different shades of splattered stains on his skin and clothing: vibrant orange over half of his face, lime green over his neck and a shoulder, pink centered over his upper chest, purple on one hip, red over the other leg, and blue on the foot.

Even this Technicolor image wasn't what got everyone's full and immediate attention.

Harry's wide grin and happy attitude did that.

After studying the bright student, Kelly Shackbolt leaned back in her chair. "Okay, what happened to make you so cheerful?"

Harry didn't have time to answer before Kingsley stormed into the room. Everyone except him immediately burst into laughter.

Most of Shack's head had been turned a white so pure that it hurt the eyes, his nose had become cherry red, and over the top of his head, where most people had hair, his smooth scalp was an acid green. His robes had something that was almost a pattern, too many colors to count radiating out from the middle of his chest.

The tall, stoic, former auror looked like he'd become a clown that had been attacked by a psychotic, tie-dye happy hippie.

Laura, drawn by the noise, entered the room and stopped in surprise at her father's appearance. "Daddy, what happened to *you*?"

After glaring evilly at all the laughing adults, Kingsley answered, "Harry and I were practicing dueling. We were using a spell that marked us with different colors. Don't worry, the color will fade soon."

Godric, finally gaining control over his amusement, came over and looked at Kingsley closely. After a bit of examination of the multi-colored man, he turned to Harry with a raised eyebrow. "This looks too specific to be anything except deliberate."

"Of course he meant it," Kingsley growled. "What I don't understand is how he could be this accurate!"

Godric looked amused. "You realize that it is possible to slightly change the direction of one of your spells after it's been cast?"

Everyone else stared at him for a moment before turning to Harry.

Harry tried (and failed) to look innocent.

"*Accio camera.*"

Everyone turned to Tonks in surprise. She caught the camera that came floating in a moment later and started to bring it up, a truly disturbing grin in place.

Shack, a little wide-eyed, hurriedly said, "If you take that picture, I'll tell Harry the story about the mishap you had in covert surveillance training."

Tonks paused for a moment and then shrugged, lowering the camera. Kingsley was just beginning to relax when she handed it to Lupin. "Okay . . . Here, Remus, you take the picture."

Shack glared at her before turning to the werewolf. "I'll give you a hundred galleons if you don't take a picture."

Remus nodded agreeably before he handed the camera to Harry. "Okay... Here, Harry, you take the picture."

Shack rolled his eyes and pointedly ignored the snickering coming from all around the room. "I'm your teacher. Do you really want to get me angry at you?"

Harry looked torn. He glanced over at Kelly.

She held her hands up. "Nope. That's my husband. I'm not going to get into this." Her grin never wavered while she was talking, however.

Cissy, Andy, and Ted all shook their heads, grins firmly in place.

Harry nodded and handed the camera over. "Okay . . . Here, you take the picture, Grandfather."

"Gladly." The ghost brought the camera up and took the image just as Shack opened his mouth to protest.

"Hey, Potter."

Harry looked up from the parchment. "Hey, Tonks. Is it time for my morph training?"

She dropped into a chair across from him. "Yep, so put away that junk."

He chuckled as he stacked the parchment and put away his things. "I'll let Shack know your opinion of his potions assignment."

She waved it off and conjured a mirror. "Hair short and blonde, eyes gray," she commanded. She waited a few seconds while Harry gradually changed his appearance. "Still slow, but you finally got there."

Harry looked at her for a moment in clear aggravation. "I hate you," he drawled out.

In Draco Malfoy's voice.

Her eyebrows shot up. "Very good."

He nodded and went on in his regular voice. "Grandfather taught me a Voice Emulation Spell. I can cast it wandlessly."

Her eyes brightened. "Oh, you've got to teach me that one. It'd be so useful in undercover work."

He grinned lecherously at her, reverting to his usual appearance. "You know that I prefer you as yourself when you're undercover with me, thanks."

She rolled her eyes. "You know what I meant. Lock that libido up, Potter. Now, have you gotten any further in re-arranging your facial appearance?"

He frowned. "Not really. I keep trying, but I can't get beyond very small changes."

She nodded. "I was afraid of that. Sorry, but I think we've reached the end of what I can teach you."

He frowned again but nodded in resignation after a moment. "I was afraid you were going to say something like that. I don't think I've made any real progress in months."

She smiled sympathetically at him. "Even with just hair and eyes, that's still more than what ninety-nine percent of wizards can do."

"Yeah, well, I was hoping to be able to have a full disguise."

She shrugged. "Get contacts or rimless glasses, change hair color and length, eye color, and cover that scar with a hat. Carry yourself different by standing more erect. Wear robes that you'd never wear normally. I bet we could put together a good disguise without any effort. We'd just need to give you some acting lessons and then you could have your alter ego."

He laughed. "Mild-mannered Clark Kent of the Daily Prophet?"

She frowned in confusion for a moment before her face cleared. "Ah, yeah. Dad told me about that one."

"So, acting lessons?"

She nodded. "Yep. For small stuff. We'll erase, or at least identify, your mannerisms. That hair ruffle thing you do, for instance. Then we can teach you all sorts of new little habits for you to use as appropriate."

He looked a little dubious. "Do you think that'll really work?"

She grinned. "By the time Shack and I are done with you, not even Hermione or Ron will be able to recognize you."

Harry,

In response to your correspondence:

Professor Snape has reported to me on Tom's reaction to the failed attack. The purpose was not so much to win but to sow panic. Except for the actions of the D.A. it would have succeeded, I fear.

Tom is not terribly upset at losing the dementors themselves. Severus reports that Tom considered them more trouble than they were worth. They were sent off as a single attack with the expectation that they would be lost. It seems that the only part of the attack that annoyed him was the low casualty figure.

I have researched the dementors in the Hogwarts library and am afraid that I have little new information to offer. To answer your specific questions: Their origins and social hierarchy are still unknown. It is unknown whether they understand human speech or they simply read the intent of the speaker. In either case, they can follow basic instructions. All known dementors are currently at Azkaban Island. There is no known way to destroy a dementor.

I believe I have answered each of your questions. If you have more, please feel free to contact either myself or Madam Pince, who was of enormous assistance with the research.

On a more cheerful topic, Misses Granger and Patil have already been awarded "Special Services to the School" commendations.

Your suggestion of co-Head Girl positions is an interesting one. Confidentially, few of the male sixth year students we have remaining fulfill the requirements. Mistrs Finch-Fletchley or Boot are the two most qualified, however having co-Head Girls, especially two as well known, respected, and qualified as Misses Granger and Patil are, may well be a better solution. I shall bring it up at the next staff meeting and perhaps at the school board meeting if the staff's reaction is favorable. I shall endeavor to keep you informed.

Sincerely,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Minister Abbott,

I am writing to ask what will be done with the dementors.

I had several ideas and asked Professor Dumbledore some specific questions about them.

Just so you're aware, my thought processes centered on how to prevent a repeat of their mass attack on Hogwarts.

My first suggestion is to determine a way, or if it is even possible, to destroy them. This, obviously, is an extreme measure. However, knowing if it is possible could be important. In joining forces with Voldemort, even temporarily, they crossed over the line of acceptable behavior. We need to know if we can deal with them decisively if they ever do so again.

Another suggestion is to split them up. Send some to other wizarding nations for use in their prisons. The fewer there are in any one location, the less likely Voldemort will try to get them all back again, I suspect.

My final suggestion is to place them all in a cave somewhere very remote and physically seal them in. This may result in them "starving" to death, however.

I admit that I'm very ambivalent about dementors. On one side are my own experiences with them and my godfather Sirius Black's near-destruction by them. Against that is my very non-Gryffindor wish to let them at the Death Eaters. For all of the same reasons.

Thank you, sir, for your time.

Harry J. Potter

Lord-Baron Gryffindor-Potter-Black,

The Minister of Magic routed your missive to a new sub department. I shall endeavor to answer your suggestions individually.

The Department of Mysteries has reported that they have conducted experiments in destroying dementors. They claim to have been unsuccessful. Further information on that topic is unavailable.

Your second suggestion of offering them to other ministries has met with approval. Letters have gone out. To date, only a handful have returned. I am happy to report that several eastern European ministries have expressed interest. Apparently the Ministry of the States, more commonly referred to the U.S. Department of Magic, has laws against "cruel and unusual punishment" under which dementors and their effects apparently fall.

Your last suggestion of sealing them off was discarded for two separate reasons. First, it would run the risk of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named finding them and recruiting them again. Second, Minister Abbott flatly rejected the idea of attempting to eradicate the species.

Thank you for your interest. Do not hesitate to owl me with any further queries.

Percy I. Weasley
Vice-Director of Dementor Affairs
Sub department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

Remus was pacing back and forth. "Get the Wolfsbane, get to this safe room that Harry promises is there, and lock me in. All in," he checked his watch, "thirty-five minutes." He continued to pace for a few more seconds before he bellowed up the stairs, "Are you ready to go yet?"

On his way down those same stairs, Harry let the slightly rude question slide. The full moon later that night had been causing Remus to get progressively more anxious as the day had worn on. "Yeah," Harry answered instead, glancing over at Tonks and Shack, who were also going along for the trip to Hogwarts.

With a nod from Harry, all four apparated to the Hogsmeade train station and then started walking toward the distant school.

"Explain to me why we have to go to him," Tonks grumbled.

"Because he's a lazy git who wants to take a measure of petty revenge on us by making us come to him. It also feeds his egotistical - and blatantly flawed - sense of superiority," Remus answered shortly.

"Crossing the ward boundary is painful to him, and he was late getting this batch of Wolfsbane complete. It'll save time for us to go to him," Shack said from Harry's other side.

"Isn't that what Remus just said?" Harry asked innocently.

Shack tried to look chastising, but one corner of his mouth curled up against his will.

Tonks and Harry just grinned.

Remus, prowling along ahead of the other three, stumbled and fell to one knee. He stayed there for a few seconds as the others caught up to him.

"Moony?" Harry asked in concern.

Remus's voice was ragged. "I'll be alright, Cub. The moon'll rise in a few minutes, but I'll have the Wolfsbane before then." He slowly straightened back to his feet, visibly expending an effort to do so. "I'll be alright," he repeated, moving toward the castle doors again.

Harry, Tonks, and Shack shared a concerned glance before following him.

The quartet were quickly to the Entrance Hall doors and found the surly Potions Master standing there with a steaming goblet. Snape thrust the goblet at Remus. "Drink it now. I have no wish to be anywhere near you any longer than I must, werewolf."

Remus grimaced but took the goblet, gulping down the contents as quickly as possible.

After he got the goblet back, Snape turned to Harry. "Your tame werewolf liaison has already been through, taking the rest of the batch I made. I expect the payment in my vault by end of the day tomorrow." He turned back to Remus, smirked, and then strode away toward the dungeons in a swirl of robes.

Tonks rolled her eyes. "What a snarky git."

Shack was looking after the retreating Master Brewer, frowning. "Something was wrong with that," he muttered. He turned toward Harry only to receive a shrug in response to his unasked question. "What do you think, Remus?" he asked next, turning toward the werewolf.

When the three turned toward Remus, they found him standing in the doorway, looking at the rising full moon and shaking uncontrollably.

"Remus?" Harry asked hesitantly.

A low moan was his only answer as the shaking grew in intensity.

"Harry, back away slowly," Shack said in a calm tone as he silently drew his wand.

Having been part of a scene much like this some three years previously, Harry recognized that what he saw in front of himself was definitely not good news.

Knowing that Remus wouldn't be dangerous for several more minutes, Harry first fired off a Messenger Spell to Auror Chris Drake, the liaison with the werewolves. *Wolfsbane apparently ineffective. Quarantine them!*

His second action was in an effort directed at the situation at hand. "Hogwarts, full lockdown immediately!"

Even as every door in sight slammed shut (and siege bars dropped into place to further secure most of them), Harry then cast, "*Mobilicorpus*."

Harry's spell lifted Remus off his feet just as he curled up into a ball, harsh breathing giving way to a growling howl that sent shivers down everyone's spines.

With the floating Remus trailing behind, Harry started running toward the seventh floor. "Hogwarts, open up my route to the Come and Go Room."

As he saw a couple of the staircases move to accommodate his latest order, he heard Shack pant out, "Dammit, Harry! I hope you know that this is a bad idea!"

"I'll going to protect him, Shack, even from himself," Harry snarled back, not even slowing in his movements. "Hey, better yet, you two get Snape and take him back to the Entrance Hall. I think we have a few things to talk about."

"Potter!" Tonks objected.

"No time!"

Visibly conflicted, she stopped. Shack - not looking very happy either - grabbed her shoulder and started to pull her back down the stairs.

"Harry!" she called out.

"I'll be fine, Nim! Go!" He didn't slow to watch what the two former aurors did. He panted out the revised instructions to the castle as he moved, worry and full-blown panic fighting for his attention.

It was halfway down a hallway on the fifth floor that his luck ran out. With a hair-raising howl, Remus began his transformation.

Harry's Body Movement Spell failed. As it was designed to handle only non-resisting bodies and Remus was, at this point, anything but, the spell's failure didn't surprise Harry. Fortunately he had a backup plan. "*Lycanardium Leviosa*."

The writhing form - now visibly changing - unsteadily rose into the air. It was taking most of Harry's concentration to hold the spell. There was no way he could continue on with his burden. Pacing back and forth and envisioning what he needed all the while holding the irate werewolf aloft would be well beyond his powers of concentration.

With the little attention he could spare from holding his pseudo-godfather aloft, he tried to think of what to do.

No rooms - even classrooms or cupboards - were close enough to shut him in even momentarily.

Transfiguring or conjuring something to help the situation would take too much attention from holding him at bay.

Werewolves were notoriously resistant to stunning or binding spells of any kind.

He briefly considered trying a stunner anyway, but decided that pouring enough energy into one to be reasonably sure it worked would exhaust him, rendering him defenseless if it didn't in fact work.

Sticking Remus to the wall or ceiling would work only if the werewolf wasn't willing to lose some skin or fur for a shot at a human. Harry wasn't willing to bet his life on that one.

The ceiling was too low to stick himself to it and stay out of the werewolf's reach.

House-elf magic didn't work against werewolves. They'd had that conversation with Dobby long since.

Standing and waiting for Shack and Tonks - the only two who knew where he was and that he might need help - wasn't an option. Holding this spell on the now raging and thrashing werewolf was draining him rapidly.

"Hogwarts, I could use some help, here," he said, not knowing what else to do.

"If I may make a suggestion, Lord Gryffindor?"

Harry nearly lost control of the spell in surprise. He carefully looked over to find a portrait of some aristocratic-looking wizard looking at the floating werewolf in concern. "Please," Harry said, voice tight under the strain.

"Ask Hogwarts to isolate part of the hallway and put the werewolf in there."

Not knowing what else to do, Harry said, "Hogwarts, please isolate Remus in part of this hallway."

Looking like a reverse of the effect when the gateway to Diagon Alley was opened, blocks seemed to materialize and shift into place to form a solid barrier further down the hall. Once that one was completed, another wall started to form between Harry and Remus. When Harry lost sight of the hovering werewolf, the spell failed. Fortunately, the wall finished forming before the lycanthrope could do more than fall unceremoniously to the ground.

Relieved of the spell, Harry slumped over, panting. After a moment to recover, he looked up at the portrait that was now wearing a satisfied smile. "Thank you . . ."

"Baron Horatius Cadogan, My Lord," the portrait introduced himself, bowing slightly.

Harry blinked and looked at the painting closely.

The older man sighed. "I see you've met my great grand-nephew."

Harry's mouth twitched. "Yes, sir. Thank you for the suggestion." He looked at the stone wall that was previously a corridor. "I hope there aren't any portraits down there."

"Fear not, my lord, there is nothing of interest in the closed-off area. You should have an easy time of it tomorrow when you bring down the walls and take the werewolf into custody."

Harry shook his head and sighed, ignoring the muted sounds coming from the new prison cell. "He is a friend. This situation is no fault of his."

Cadogan looked outraged. "Of course it is his fault! He knew it was a full moon, and he knew of his affliction, did he not?"

"He did, but we are at Hogwarts so he could take a dose of Wolfsbane Potion."

The portrait calmed considerably at Harry's words. "It doesn't seem to have worked," Cadogan remarked dryly.

"I noticed," Harry returned in a similar tone. "Rest assured, I'll be speaking with Snape on that very subject in a short while."

Cadogan nodded firmly. "Very well then, sir. I shall spread the word of what transpired and post a portrait guardian somewhere at the far end to prevent any students from trying to remove the wall."

Harry gave the portrait an abbreviated bow. "Thank you, sir, for all of your assistance. If you ever have a request of me, feel free to speak it."

Cadogan waved that off. "Thank you for the offer, My Lord, but I'm happy enough where I am and can go visit other portraits when the urge strikes me."

Harry nodded and walked back the direction he'd originally come from, wishing that he could do something more for Remus but knowing that he was beyond assistance for the time being.

It was only one corridor later that Professor McGonagall came racing up to him and stopped in front of him. "What's wrong?" she asked, wand out and panting to get her breath back.

He blinked at her in surprise. "What?" *Howd she knowanything was wrong?*

"I was already supremely concerned over the unannounced lock down when one of the portraits said you were down there," she pointed back along the path he'd just taken, "and needed immediate help."

A small smile came to Harry's face. Reaching one hand out, he laid it flat upon the wall. "Thank you, old girl. I owe you one for all the help tonight." Nothing visibly changed, but Harry somehow felt comforted for a moment.

Smile ratcheting up a notch, Harry turned to his former head of house. "Remus started an uncontrolled transformation." She paled as he continued calmly, "I asked Hogwarts for help, and apparently she sent one of the portraits to you. One of the others, a Baron Cadogan, helped me isolate Remus. He's blocked in on the fifth floor. Baron Cadogan said he'd post a portrait at both ends to prevent anyone from messing with the new walls until tomorrow morning."

Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, the Gryffindor house ghost, floated around the corner and came to a halt in front of Harry. "I bring news, My Lord. Your two assistants caught Professor Snape and restrained him after a short duel. They are on their way to the Entrance Hall on your order. Baron Cadogan informed us of his situation and I've invoked your name to dispatch the Fat Friar and the Grey Lady to both ends of that corridor for the duration."

Harry nodded, relaxing slightly. "Thank you, Sir Nicholas. With both a portrait and ghost at both ends, I sincerely hope the walls will remain undisturbed until tomorrow."

"Harry?" McGonagall asked, confusion etched onto her face.

He sighed, rubbing one hand over his face. "I suspect that Snape intentionally botched the Wolfsbane, Minerva."

She sucked in a breath sharply, her lips disappearing entirely as she scowled deeply.

Waving the ghost and professor along with him, Harry continued his trek toward the Entrance Hall.

When they arrived, they found an unconscious and bound Snape on the floor, a rigid Shacklebolt standing guard over him, and Tonks nearly vibrating in rage.

"This utter bastard tried to *kill* us!" she seethed when she saw Harry.

Even Sir Nick made an angry noise at that.

"What happened?" Harry asked tightly. He idly wondered about the trickle of blood coming from Snape's nose.

Shack reported flatly, "We caught up with Snape just outside the dungeons. He had the gall to smirk at us and asked if your pet wolf was sick. He then made a comment of a bitch like Dora literally having puppies if you were still around Remus. She drew her wand. So did he, and they dueled for only a few seconds before I joined in. We got him quickly and brought him back up here as you requested, sir."

"Are you okay?" Tonks asked, looking Harry over.

He nodded. "I'm fine. He's trapped on the fifth floor. A couple ghosts and portraits are guarding him until tomorrow."

The former aurors nodded.

"Oh, Severus, what have you done?" McGonagall asked sadly.

Shaking his head at the situation, Harry cast a Messenger Spell. *Headmaster Dumbledore, your presence is required in the Entrance Hall immediately.*

Harry saw McGonagall cast two more Messenger Spells a moment later. At his raised eyebrow, she asked, "I presume you contacted Albus?" He nodded, and she explained, "Filius and Pomona."

He nodded again, recognizing that the senior staff needed to be on hand. "Who's the senior Slytherin professor?"

"Slughorn," Shack stated, wand still trained on the unconscious man on the floor.

McGonagall waved her wand and then nodded to Harry after the small, silver form disappeared.

"While we're waiting, I respectfully request that you remove the castle-wide seal order, Lord Gryffindor," Sir Nick said respectfully.

After a startled moment, Harry grinned sheepishly. He looked up, and everyone heard a series of clicks as all of the doors unlocked again.

Sir Nick and the portraits had apparently been busy spreading the word as most of the resident ghosts floated into the room, forming a perimeter around the group to keep the now flowing students from getting too close. Seeing the very unusual sight, even by wizarding standards, none of the students seemed to want to leave the Entrance Hall.

Presently, Headmaster Dumbledore and the remaining senior staff arrived. "May I ask what happened?" Dumbledore asked calmly, taking in the entire situation with one glance.

Shacklebolt repeated the sequence of events, followed by Harry telling his side of it.

The listening students were grumbling amongst themselves by the time Harry was done. Remus was remembered fondly by most of the student body, it seemed.

Dumbledore nodded sadly when the students settled down again. "Very well. I will speak to Severus about this. Please release him."

Harry snarled, "*Speaking* to him has never made a difference, Headmaster. I've warned you and warned you, but you continued to ignore me. You will allow aurors to arrest him for three counts of attempted murder just as soon as Amelia can get them here."

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "Miss Tonks and Mr. Shacklebolt, based on what he has said, could it be proven that he intentionally tried to cause the death of the three of you?"

Tonks scowled deeply but shook her head. "If he claims the Wolfsbane was faulty only by accident, then we can't prove he did it intentionally. We don't have the legal grounds to demand Veritaserum, either."

Dumbledore shrugged and spread his hands as if to say, "There you go."

There were sounds of outrage from the student audience that the main participants ignored.

Frustrated that Snape would apparently get away with attempted murder, Harry ground out, "As heir of Lord Gryffindor, I hereby permanently expel Severus Snape from Hogwarts grounds. So mote it be."

"So mote it be," echoed all the ghosts and portraits present.

Three house-elves popped into existence and floated the still unconscious and bound Snape out the doors very rapidly.

A cheer went up amongst the students.

Hearing them, Harry smirked slightly.

Dumbledore frowned at Harry. "Was that necessary?"

Harry rolled his eyes and turned to the four senior professors. Speaking loudly enough to be heard over the audience, he said, "If the four of you want him back, bring a petition to me, and we can discuss it. Otherwise, congratulations on your promotion, Professor Slughorn; you're the new head of Slytherin House. Please be more fair and even-handed than your predecessor was."

Slughorn bowed slightly. "Thank you, Lord Gryffindor. I was head of Slytherin in Severus's time here, you know, and I shall endeavor to do my best for Hogwarts once again."

Dumbledore spoke up, "May we discuss this in my office?"

Harry led the other seven magicians into the Headmaster's office and took one of the guest chairs without waiting for an invitation. Tonks and Shack stood behind Harry, flanking the door. The four professors arranged themselves around the room, not clearly siding with either Harry or the headmaster. Dumbledore himself was behind his desk.

Before Dumbledore could say anything, Harry said, "We have to get through this, Professor."

I agree, Harry."

Harry sighed. "It can start by you doing what I have repeatedly asked and *not* using my first name."

Slughorn and Sprout looked surprised, but nobody else in the room reacted.

Dumbledore paused before nodding. "As you wish.

"On the matter of Professor Snape -"

"*Mister* Snape," Harry interrupted firmly.

"Severus," Dumbledore went on. "It would be better for all involved if he were to remain here."

Harry gave a short bark of laughter. "Better for whom? Not the students, certainly. Aside from their obvious opinion on the matter, due to your attempts to ignore it, he has poisoned an entire generation of students against Slytherin House and potions. I know I complained repeatedly about his actions toward me. Nothing was ever done. Now something has finally been done about it."

Dumbledore frowned disapprovingly. "With your new authority, you are getting revenge for the imagined slights he has perpetuated against you?"

Harry sighed softly and shook his head. *The man is still refusing to see the truth even when it's laid out before him. So much for his promised change of attitude.*

Before Harry could respond, McGonagall spoke up, "You're fully aware, Albus, that there is nothing *imagined* about it. You heard them cheering as well as I did. Harry is not the only one to complain about Severus's actions. How many hundreds of complaints have I brought to you over the years?"

"I, too," Flitwick agreed. "Albus, we have counseled you for years to replace him. You have not listened. Well, now someone has finally done something about that blatantly biased man. I for one am not going to mourn his loss in these halls."

Harry watched with unconcealed amusement as the two senior teachers made their positions abundantly clear: Not on Snape's side.

Sprout cleared her throat. "Much as I dislike speaking ill of a colleague, I must agree with Min and Filius. Albus, even you must recognize the problem that Severus was to us all."

Slughorn, though fidgeting uncomfortably, nodded agreement.

Dumbledore sighed. He turned to Harry. "Lord Gryffindor, I implore you -"

Harry waved a hand, cutting off the older man. "No. His attempt to poison Remus and kill the three of us was the last straw, Headmaster. You may think he's redeemable. I do not. For your sake, I will not pursue things any further than this, but if I ever see him again I will treat him as the Death Eater he is. Do you understand?"

Dumbledore suddenly looked his age. "Severus has put himself at risk for the Light since before you were born. He has spent years reporting on Voldemort's movements, saving innumerable lives."

"Like my parents'?" Harry asked coldly. Dumbledore winced but didn't respond to the pointed retort. Harry went on. "Besides, do you have any proof of what you're saying?"

Dumbledore frowned slightly. "I do not understand."

"He claims his life has been endangered by his spying. Do you know that, or are you taking his word for it? You claim that his reports save lives, but do you *know* that these instances aren't set up by Voldemort to let Snape get closer to you? Could the raids he's helped you foil have been setups? Have any high ranked deez been caught or killed on his information alone?"

An uncomfortable silence held for a short time before Dumbledore finally answered, "I am afraid I have no answer which will satisfy you."

That answer did not surprise Harry, so he simply continued. "Absent proof to the contrary, I have to act on the information I have. All I *know* about the man is that he's unthinkingly biased, a Death Eater, and he was directly responsible for the deaths of my parents. Based on those facts and in the interests of the safety of the school, I think I did the only thing I could, long overdue as it is."

Dumbledore sighed again. "At your age, you have yet to make such a life-altering choice in a moment of weakness. Some day Severus may tell you his story. Then you may find sympathy for him."

Harry ignored the blatant attempt to make him feel guilty for his actions. "I sincerely doubt that I could have anything more than pity for that man," he answered instead.

"Now," Harry went on, clearly changing the subject, "we need to decide what to do about the Defense position." After a moment of thought, he gave a half-amused, half-ironic snort. "The curse against the position is holding strong, it seems."

He shook his head and turned to the professors. "I admit that I don't have any ideas. The only decent Defense professor I had was Remus, but his condition would prove problematic for all involved."

McGonagall nodded. "Agreed. Though there has been a second recent teacher in the field that I hear was more than competent."

Harry thought through the Defense professors he'd had. Crouch Jr. and Quirrell were dead, Lockhart was in the long-term care ward of St. Mungo's, he'd helped imprison Umbridge, and they had already agreed that Lupin couldn't take it again. Realizing what she probably meant, he fixed a stern look on his former Transfiguration professor. "I certainly hope you aren't referring to me."

Flitwick chuckled at the overt look of innocence on McGonagall's face. "She was, and I was going to point out the same thing." The diminutive professor held up a hand to Harry's gathering frown. "I'm not going to suggest that you take the position, Harry. Much as I think that you can relate to the students and that you're a competent teacher in your own right, I don't feel that you should have the job. This is no reflection on you, but rather the fact that you're simply too inexperienced to handle it for long periods of time. Perhaps in a few years you would have the proper temperament, but for now . . ." He trailed off with a shrug.

Harry couldn't decide whether to be relieved or slightly insulted. He settled on amused. "Thank you, Filius. Even if it were offered to me, I don't think I'd want it."

Flitwick nodded to him before turning to the rest of the room. "I admit that I am also out of ideas. Placing an advert in the Daily Prophet, perhaps?" He grinned sideways at Harry. "In the meantime, perhaps a temporary, guest professor for Defense?"

Harry raised his hands. "No, no, no. Not me."

Tonks, McGonagall, and Sprout grinned at the byplay between the two men.

"Actually," Shacklebolt said slowly, "I have another suggestion for you all."

"What's that, Mr. Shacklebolt?" Filius asked his one-time student.

"Me," Shack answered simply. He turned to Harry. "No offense to you, Harry, but Kelly and I aren't all that happy about how Laura is growing up in your Keep. Despite everyone living there, there's nobody near her age and really nothing for her to do. We've been talking about moving back out, and this opportunity seems to be too good to pass up."

"As a former auror instructor, your qualifications are certainly sufficient," Dumbledore said.

The other professors nodded in acceptance.

Shacklebolt turned to Harry. "With your permission of course, Lord Gryffindor."

"Stop it," Harry admonished him. "You certainly don't need my permission, Shack. You're your own man. My only concern is what you've been teaching me."

Shack shook his head. "Your Occlumency is as far as I can take it, Harry." Neither man looked over to see Dumbledore's reaction to this tidbit of knowledge. "You have the basic potions knowledge already. Now it's just a case of practice if you want to get any better. Honestly, I don't have anything more to teach you."

Harry nodded and stood, offering Shack his hand. "Good luck, Professor Shacklebolt."

Tonks, Shack, and Harry were walking away from Hogwarts when the silvery form of a Messenger Spell impacted Harry's head. He relaxed.

"What's up?" Shack asked.

"That was Auror Drake. I got the warning to him in time about the bad Wolfsbane. All of the werewolves have been contained. Several people got scratches, Drake included, but nobody was bitten."

The two former aurors breathed a sigh of relief.

"I don't get it," Tonks said.

"What's that?"

"Snape. It's not like we wouldn't know who messed up the Wolfsbane. Hell, he was nearly gloating about it."

Shack nodded. "While he was distracted by taunting you, I quickly peeked into his mind. There's . . . something in there when it comes to Remus, Sirius Black, and James Potter. And by extension, Harry."

Harry was not surprised. "The man is clearly intelligent. It's not like Potions Masteries are given away in Christmas crackers. He's functioned as a spy for Dumbledore for nearly two years as well. Yet when it comes to me, he's never acted rationally. Hating me just because I look like my father? Even after what he called Occlumency training, he *still* accused me of living a pampered, attention-seeking life. It's like whenever he thinks of Remus, Sirius, or me, he's filled with unreasoning hatred, overriding everything else. I recognize it, I just don't understand it."

"Something Riddle placed?" Shack suggested.

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. Whatever the problem, I plan on staying away from him for the rest of my life."

Tonks said, "Another thing: Why sabotage the potion now? I mean, this is not the first time he's made Wolfsbane for Remus. Why wait until this month to do this?"

"This is the first month that the Ministry representative wasn't watching him, wasn't it?" Shack asked.

"I guess," Tonks agreed. Her expression made it clear that she wasn't happy with the answer, however. "I just wish there was more we could do. I know he picked on you Gryffs pretty bad, but in his own way he messed up us Slytherins just as bad."

Her two companions merely nodded agreement.

The three reached the train station before Harry turned to Shack. "Are you three moving to the castle tonight?"

Shacklebolt shook his head. "I need to talk with Kelly and Laura about it first. Like I said earlier, Kelly and I have discussed it, so there shouldn't be much of a problem. We'll probably move in tomorrow morning unless something comes up."

"I need to come early to release Remus, but otherwise just let me know if you need help with anything."

"Will do, Harry. Oh, and if I forget to say it tomorrow, thanks for everything."

Scion of Gryffindor 45 - Football and School Boards

"At the half, the visiting Hammers of West Ham United have no goals and our own Arsenal Gunners have one. While we wait, the staff of Highbury would like to welcome one of our owners to today's game. All you Gooners join us in welcoming Harry Potter!"

Seamus Finnegan, having barely paid attention to the announcer before those final words caught his ear, nearly fell out of his seat. He turned and shared an incredulous look with Dean Thomas. "Did he just say . . ."

"Uh, yeah, I think he did," Dean agreed, eyes wide.

"You don't think . . ."

Dean thought about it for several seconds. "I dunno. What do you think?"

"Maybe," Seamus said slowly. "Me mum has always said the Potters are one of the oldest and richest names."

"We did just find out that that he's the heir of Gryffindor, too," Dean agreed.

"Do ya think we should go and check?"

The boys shared a look and grinned before jumping up from their seats and making their way to the aisle.

It was only a matter of minutes before they made their way to the executive boxes in the Clock End of the stadium. There, they looked around for an indication of where their former roommate might be. They quickly spotted Remus Lupin standing in front of a short hallway.

"Professor!" Seamus called.

Lupin looked over, his face breaking into a smile as he spotted the two Gryffindor students. "Mr. Finnegan and Mr. Thomas! Fancy meeting you two here. Speaking of that, how *are* you two here?"

Dean looked mildly embarrassed. "Well, Professor, you see . . ."

"We aren't here," Seamus stated when his friend trailed off.

Remus chuckled. "Understood. Believe it or not, I was once a student, too. The group I hung out with would think nothing of leaving the school for a Saturday afternoon to catch a quidditch match."

The two boys grinned. "You, Professor?"

"Yes, me. I was a prefect, but I'm afraid that Harry's father was a bad influence on me." Remus grinned wryly in remembrance.

Dean paused momentarily to assimilate that tidbit of information before he said, "How are you doing? I mean after what we heard happened at the school last week."

"I'm fine now, thank you for asking. Now, what can I do for the two of you?"

"We heard the announcement. Is Harry really here?"

Remus tilted his head for a moment before a devious grin formed. "Yes, he is. I'm sure he'd be happy to see two of his former roommates." He waved down the hallway behind him. "Go on in."

The two boys quickly thanked their former professor and then hurried down the hall. Dean knocked at the door before opening it immediately and stepping in. "Harry?"

Looking over Dean's shoulder, Seamus saw some movement before a flash of red light came at them, causing Dean to crumple to the floor. Giving an undignified squawk of fright, Seamus grabbed for his wand before another flash of red light came at him.

"*Reenervate* ."

Seamus's eyes open to see a widely smirking Remus Lupin looking down at him. "Are you okay, Mr. Finnegan?"

Seamus blinked once, slowly. "Wha' 'appened?" he asked thickly.

"Sorry about that," Harry said, standing beside the couch. "You startled us."

Seamus levered himself to a sitting position as Lupin woke Dean up. Aside from the door, the opposite wall was a floor to ceiling glass. From having seen it from the outside, Seamus knew it to be a one-way mirror. A couch sat in the middle of the room, a pair of tables at either end.

Harry Potter was standing behind the couch, looking down at his two former roommates with worry etched on his features.

Seamus blinked again as something strange about the scene finally registered.

Harry wasn't wearing a shirt. And his trousers hadn't been fastened properly.

"Uh, Harry?" Seamus asked.

"Yeah, Seamus?"

"Why aren't you dressed?"

Harry looked down at himself as if noticing his lack of clothing for the first time. "Uh -"

"That'd be my fault," a young woman stood from the couch and turned to face Seamus.

Seamus gaped at her. She was, quite simply, one of the most gorgeous women he had ever seen. Her small but undeniably feminine body was clad in a short-sleeved, white shirt of some stretchy material that fit every contour of her body like a second skin and only came down to her midriff, exposing a fair bit of toned stomach. She was wearing a skirt of glossy black leather that was barely long enough to protect her modesty, showing off her muscular, tanned legs. A pair of tall black boots rested near the couch. Seamus barely noted that her long black hair hung loose, one side hooked behind her ear, not quite covering the pair of tasteful black earrings she wore. Incongruously, her navel ring was bright purple. "Aaah," Seamus intelligently said, staring at her.

Dean was clearly in better condition than his best friend. He stood and took a step toward her, hand outstretched and smile at full wattage. "Hello, gorgeous creature. I'm Dean Thomas and my witless friend here is Seamus Finnegan."

She laughed, showing off even, white teeth. She took Dean's hand and shook it. "Call me Tonks."

"I think I'm in love."

Everyone turned to Seamus, expressions showing some variation of amusement.

He flushed. "Sorry, did I say that out loud?"

Everyone laughed. "Afraid so, mate," Dean said with a wicked grin.

Tonks moved behind Harry and wiggled her way under one of his arms. "Sorry, Mr. Finnegan, I'm already spoken for by this gorgeous hunk of man-wizard right here."

Seamus groaned theatrically. "Do you happen to have any family my age?" he asked hopefully.

Harry snickered. "She's Draco Malfoy's first cousin," he offered.

Seamus made a face. "Even if his father hadn't killed him, that *still* wouldn't be funny, Harry."

"I thought it was," Dean observed.

Harry waved the two boys to the couch. "Even though you two so rudely interrupted us, please have a seat." He turned to Remus. "Speaking of them rudely interrupting us . . ."

Remus smiled innocently. "I remember them from when I was your professor. I knew they were former roommates of yours, Harry. Don't tell me you didn't want to see them since they happened to be here."

"But right *then* ?"

"Your timing stinks," Tonks mentioned to the two boys.

Remus, grinning broadly, threw Harry a mock salute. "With your permission, sir, I shall resume my post."

Harry glared at him. "I'll get you for that," he promised.

Remus's grin widened a notch before he left the room.

"That werewolf is crazy," Harry stated with a sigh, letting Tonks drag him back to the couch. Seeing the other two were still standing there uncertainly, Harry waved at the empty half of the couch. "Really, guys, have a seat."

Seamus quickly took a seat next to Tonks.

As Harry was putting his shirt back on, Dean snapped his fingers. "Now I remember! Tonks, you're the one that the Prophet has been writing about dating Harry, right?"

"That's me," she cheerfully agreed, snuggling into Harry's shoulder.

Seamus asked, "You used to be an auror, right?"

She nodded.

"Also a metamor . . . something?"

"Metamorphmagus. I can change my appearance." To prove her point, she changed to look like Minerva McGonagall before she curled up tighter to Harry's shoulder.

Seamus shook his head at the image.

Dean laughed. "Now *that* is something I thought I'd never see." He turned to Harry with a grin. "I always thought you were the one with the weird abilities."

Smirking, Harry did a combination of a morph and a wandless Glamour Charm. As an afterthought, he also transfigured his clothing. Seeing what Harry had done, Tonks laughed and transfigured her own clothing.

It'd taken a few seconds, but the expression on his former roommates' faces was worth it.

Stunned, Dean and Seamus looked at Minerva McGonagall and Argus Filch snuggling on a couch.

Seamus groaned and dropped his head into his hands. "I'm scarred for life."

Dean laughed along with Harry and Nim. "That was very impressive," he said to the couple who were reverting back to their previous appearances.

"Thanks," Harry said. "Some of the skills I'm learning I'd rather not become common knowledge, though."

Both boys nodded, understanding what Harry was asking.

Dean frowned a little at Tonks. "Auror Tonks?"

She waved a hand. "I'm not an auror anymore. Just call me 'Tonks'."

He nodded and continued his previous thought, "I noticed your earrings changed color with your hair."

She nodded. "Harry gave them to me. I change my hair color a lot." She demonstrated with a rapid shift through the rainbow of colors, ending with the previous black. The earrings in question were only a moment behind the hair in shifting colors.

Dean hesitated over his next question. "Uh, should I ask why your navel ring was purple and is now pink?"

She grinned, and her eyes sparkled, but she didn't make a sound.

"No," Harry stated.

Seamus looked back and forth for a moment. "Oh. *Oh*."

"Not to change the subject, but I'm changing the subject," Dean said with a smirk directed at his best friend. He turned back to Harry. "There are some wild rumors floating around about you, Snape, and Dumbledore."

"What those two do is their own business. I'm very much heterosexual, though."

Dean grimaced. "Now *I'm* scarred for life, you prat. You know what I meant."

Seamus mumbled, "First Filch and McGonagall and now he's talking about Dumbledore and Snape? Yuck."

"Sorry," Harry said with a total lack of regret. "What rumors are going around now?"

"Snape tried to kill you, and you got him fired for it. You're blackmailing Dumbledore."

"Both true," Harry cheerfully admitted.

The two Gryffindor boys just stared.

Tonks explained. "Snape intentionally botched the Wolfsbane. He was trying to use Remus to kill Harry, me, and our friend Kingsley. Harry demanded that Snape be arrested. Unfortunately, we can't *prove* he tried to kill us, so Harry sacked His Greasiness instead."

"And I'm holding some past actions of Snape and Dumbledore as blackmail against Dumbledore leaving me alone," Harry added.

"Harry, what's happened to you?" Dean asked.

"What do you mean?"

Dean frowned in thought. "You're the most Gryffindor of us all. Hell, you are *the* Gryffindor, My Lord," he finished with a grin. His expression cleared and he went on more quietly, "Now you're blackmailing the Headmaster?"

Harry sighed. "I didn't want to do it, you know. He keeps trying to control me and everything I do. If he were actually helping me, I wouldn't be fighting him. But he keeps trying to put limits on me without so much as asking my opinion. I finally got tired of it and did something to pry him off my back."

Dean and Seamus looked very uncomfortable. Seamus picked up the thread. "But Harry, he's . . . Well, he's *Dumbledore* ."

"And that somehow gives him the right to dictate Harry's life?" Tonks shot back with venom.

Seamus leaned back a little but continued his thought, "I'm sure he's had good reason to do whatever it was -"

Harry cut him off with a curt gesture. "You guys shared a dorm with me for years. You know about the Dursleys. What you may not know is that Dumbledore put me there against my parents' wishes. *And* he keeps sending me back there every year despite none of us wanting me to be there."

"I'm sure he had a good reason," Dean repeated his friend's previous thought, though there wasn't much conviction behind it.

"He may have," Harry acknowledged. "In fact, I'm willing to accept that almost everything he's done is for the 'greater good' that he always goes on about. That doesn't change the fact that he consigned me to hell for ten years and then never checked up on me while I was there." He sighed. "I'm angry with him. No question of that. However, I think he has his heart in the right place. Unfortunately, the only way to get him to allow me my legal rights is to pull a Slytherin-worthy move. I don't like it, but I deserve the freedom that he's denied me all my life."

"Damn right," Tonks grumbled.

He smiled at her. "Does that answer your question, Dean?"

"I suppose so. What about Snape?"

"Yes, I fired him," Harry stated bluntly, face losing all expression. "It was for the good of the school, but I can't say it didn't feel good on a personal level, too." His expression melted and became pensive. "I just don't get him. He's obviously intelligent. Head of the house of cunning and ambition, Potions Master, and rumored to be an excellent duelist. But despite rooting around my memories for a year, he still acts like I'm a spoiled little prince. He hates me for what my father and godfather did to him twenty years ago. He *has* to be smarter than he acts toward me." Harry frowned in frustration.

"He's spent too much time sniffing potions," Seamus suggested.

Everyone grinned or chuckled.

"Maybe he's sick?" Dean offered.

"For five years?" Harry asked skeptically.

Dean shrugged. "One of my uncles had a brain tumor. It made him violent and moody for years before they figured out what it was."

"Maybe."

"Some curse?" Tonks suggested. "Merlin knows what Voldy does to his followers."

Seamus and Dean's eyes went very, very wide. "Look, I know he's a mean git, but that doesn't mean -"

"He is," Tonks interrupted. "He turned spy for Dumbledore the last time Voldy tried to take over."

"Supposedly turned spy," Harry corrected her.

"Supposedly," she agreed.

Dean shook his head. "I'll pretend I didn't hear all that. Anyway, something you said a second ago, Harry. Something about rooting around in your memories?"

"Those 'Remedial Potions Lessons' I had last year? He was supposed to be teaching me Occlumency." At their uncomprehending expressions, he explained, "Defense against mental attacks. This damn scar links Voldemort to me somehow. Dumbledore thought that learning Occlumency would defend against that avenue of attack. It requires calm, patience, and thorough explanations. Unfortunately, he assigned the absolutely worst person imaginable to teach me."

"Snape."

"Snape," Harry agreed. "He spent more time belittling me than he did testing me. Or attacking me, depending on how you look at it. He spent almost no time at all actually *teaching* me anything. Shack taught me more per session than that git did over six months."

Harry shook his head. "Enough about greasy gits. Tell me about Shack. How's he doing teaching you guys Defense?"

Both boys brightened. "He's good! Even better than Lupin or you were." Seamus stopped. "Er . . ."

Harry laughed. "It's okay, Seamus. I can accept that a senior auror who taught at the auror academy *might* be a better defense teacher than I am. My ego, fragile as it is, can stand it, I think," he finished dryly and with a grin.

"How very mature," Tonks said, matching his tone.

"You were acting appreciative of my maturity earlier."

"Instead of pursuing that, and probably making Seamus insanely jealous," Dean paused to grin at the mock-pouting Seamus, "why don't we tell you about Professor Shacklebolt?"

"This Hogwarts Board of Govenors meeting is called to order."

Harry looked around the table curiously. The twelve witches and wizards on the board all looked middle-aged to elderly, which for a magician could mean anything after 70.

Aside from Headmaster Dumbledore, he didn't recognize anyone in the room.

The apparent chairperson read the parchment in front of him for a moment before looking up at Dumbledore. "Headmaster, before we get to your usual report, perhaps we could address some specific issues?"

"Certainly, Mr. Brown. What can I help you with?"

"First, the dementor attack. I have read your report. I also have an independent report that Mr. Potter there," he nodded toward Harry, "was instrumental in the fight. Your report does not mention him at all."

"That was at my request," Harry said before Dumbledore could say a word. "Yes, I was there. I don't know how 'instrumental' I was, but I was there casting Patronus Charms."

"Why didn't you want your name on the report?"

"I felt at the time, and still do, that the accolades should go to the D.A. and the professors. I dislike the noteriety I have, but I recognize that if it were included that I was part of the defending group then the story would become an heir of one of the founders valiantly defending the school from harm instead of the simple fact that I did no more than a dozen other students who were there. In fact, I did significantly less than some. Specifically, Hermione Granger and Padma Patil were the leaders of the D.A."

"Which you founded last year."

"Which I led for one year," Harry corrected him. "I tried to teach them duelling. They expanded on that themselves. Their cooperative tactics were something I had no hand in."

"So you're saying you didn't do anything to help at the fight?" one of the others asked.

Harry frowned at him. "No, I'm not. I'm saying that I did as much as many others. However I did *not* do the most."

"So what did you *do* ?"

"I cast a Patronus multiple times. I was a flyer guarding the escape route. I also helped conjure the walls we finally used to contain the dementors."

"As far as casting, that was more than just about anyone else accomplished," a third person pointed out. "Miss Granger and Miss Patil were apparently directing the D.A. and the evacuation, not casting spells."

Harry nodded. "True. However, I'd think that casting a Patronus Charm would be easier than controlling a few hundred panicking students."

The questioner laughed. "No doubt. What I was saying, however, is that the number and power of the spells you admit to casting was higher than anyone else with the possible exceptions of Professors McGonagall and Flitwick." She turned to Dumbledore. "At least that is the impression I got from the report, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded. "Minerva and Filius were the two who cast the most, I believe. Between the Patroni and later conjuring the walls, it was quite impressive."

"Where were you, Headmaster? After all, you're generally accepted as the single most powerful wizard who was there."

"I thank you for the compliment, Mrs. Brinkman. As to your question: I directed the staff to herd their Patroni toward the structure. I heard Miss Patil do the same with her D.A."

"Mr. Potter," the second one re-entered the conversation. "I do wish you'd make up your mind. Did you help or didn't you?"

"He's already answered that," another wizard pointed out.

"Yes, but why didn't he do *more* ?"

Harry tried to keep control of his temper. "What would you have had me do, sir?"

"I don't know. Banish the dementors or something."

"I'm unaware of any such spell. If you have information on how to deal with these things that's better than the Patronus Charm, please share it."

He huffed. "I don't know anything better. I'm no spell creator or Unspeakable."

"Neither am I."

"But you're Lord Gryffindor!"

Harry cocked his head. "Should that somehow grant me more knowledge than everyone else has?"

"Yes!"

Everyone in the room was now looking at this wizard in confusion or a small measure of pity.

"I'm sorry to say that being the Heir of a Founder does not give me access to any forgotten arcane lore from the time of Merlin. I'm not all-powerful. I'm just a sixteen year old wizard trying to make my way in the world."

"You're the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, and Lord Gryffindor!"

"All are titles that I have no control over. The supposed prophecy that made me the 'Chosen One' was made before I was born, or so I've heard. I was fifteen months old when my mother's sacrifice gave me the title of 'Boy Who Lived'. I inherited the title of Lord Gryffindor at the same time, because my father died in the same attack."

"But . . . But why aren't you doing more? Why haven't you defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

Harry sighed. "Is that what this is about? I'm sorry I haven't vanquished the most powerful dark wizard alive. He's been running around, practicing the darkest of magics for decades. I learned that magic was real only six years ago."

The wizard came to his feet and pointed a finger. "I don't *care* how old you are! It's your bloody job to take care of him. My granddaughter *died* because you haven't done it yet!"

Harry winced. He was only vaguely aware that several spells had been cast to silence and restrain the grieving man.

When the room quieted again, Harry looked sadly at the red-faced man who was tied to his chair. "I'm sorry for your loss, but there is nothing more I can do."

Without a word, one of the other board members stood and floated the bound man out, returning moments later.

Chairman Brown cleared his throat. "I believe we've sufficiently covered this topic?" He glanced around before turning back to Harry. "I apologize on Mr. Smythe's behalf. There will be no more outbursts. Shall we continue, Lord Gryffindor, or would you like to reconvene at a later time?"

Harry closed his eyes for a few moments before he straightened in his seat and said calmly, "Thank you for the offer, Mr. Brown, but I believe I can continue."

Several members of the board looked vaguely impressed. "Well done, Mr. Potter. Or shall I call you Lord Gryffindor?"

"As this is in regards to the school, perhaps Lord Gryffindor is more appropriate. I don't want to seem arrogant over it, but it makes sense."

"Indeed. Purely for my own curiosity, what was that you just did, Lord Gryffindor?"

"Just a calming and centering exercise that my Occlumency teacher taught me."

"It is good to see that you took lessons you had with Professor Snape to heart," Dumbledore put in.

Harry glared at him. "That . . . *individual* has never taught me anything of worth. I learned it from Kingsley."

One of the board members spoke up, "Professor Snape never taught you anything? Has he not been your Potions Professor for years?"

"Yes, but he didn't teach. He put the brewing instructions on the board and spent the rest of the class terrorizing us."

Pensively, Harry went on. "I take that back. He never taught us anything in a *classroom*. He did teach us that there are bullying individuals in authority and that complaining is pointless. Also, he encouraged the Slytherins to do the same. Hopefully with him gone and the worst of the Slytherins at least neutralized, the school will get better."

Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably.

"Do you have something to add, Headmaster?" Chairman Brown asked neutrally.

It is true that there have been some long-standing . . . issues with Professor Snape. Now that Lord Gryffindor has banished him from the castle, we shall see how everything settles itself out."

One of the witches scowled at Dumbledore. "Don't you try to blame this young man for fixing the situation you created, Albus! Yes, he banished that man. You say that like it was unjustified; it was not. For the sake of the students, it should have been dealt with long ago." She turned her head. "Not that I blame you in the least, but what triggered your actions, Lord Gryffindor?"

"Remus Lupin gets his Wolfsbane Potion through the Black Foundation. He and I went to the castle to get it from Snape. Though I cannot *prove* it without giving him Veritaserum, it is the opinion of myself, Professor Shacklebolt, and former auror Tonks that Snape intentionally caused the Wolfsbane to be faulty with the intent to kill us."

"What makes you think he did it intentionally?"

"A couple things. Three years ago when Remus was a professor, the Wolfsbane that Snape produced was perfect for the entire school year. Similarly, when he started producing it this past autumn, it was fine. This is the first month that nobody was watching over his shoulder, whether Headmaster Dumbledore or the ministry representative.

"Also, when Tonks and Shacklebolt cornered him while I was dealing with a transformed werewolf, some of his statements made it clear that he knew that the potion was bad. He'd walked away from us before we knew the potion was faulty, so he had to have known it some other way."

Brown took up the questioning. "Professor Snape sent in an editorial to the Daily Prophet with his side of the story."

Harry grimaced. "Yes, I've read it."

"Then you're aware that he claims he neither did nor said nothing to provoke you or them and that Miss Tonks drew her wand first."

"I wrote a counter-editorial that invited him to compare his pensieve memories against those of Tonks and Professor Shacklebolt. As both he and Kingsley are Master Occlumens, precautions would have to be made to prevent tampering with the memories. It's been several days, and he has not responded to my suggestion."

Harry continued, "As to who pulled a wand first, Tonks freely admits that she did. Incidentally, this is immediately after he basically admitted to trying to kill her, her *de facto* partner, and her Patriarch using yet another close friend as the weapon. I can hardly blame her for drawing her wand under those circumstances."

"I suppose not. Albus, do you have anything to add?"

"I do not. I was not a witness to any of it. I can only say that I trust Severus Snape with my life."

"Unfortunately, I cannot in good conscience trust him with the health and safety of a school full of children, which must be the main focus of this board. Though Lord Gryffindor does not need it, he has my full backing on this action." Most of the rest of the board nodded, making it clear that the entire board supported Harry's actions.

This made Harry feel slightly better about what he'd been forced to do.

Brown went on, "It is a bit ahead of ourselves - this meeting was originally only supposed to cover the first term after all - but how is Professor Shacklebolt working out?"

"Quite well," Dumbledore said. "He was an auror instructor and so had a measure of teaching experience before coming back to Hogwarts. He is relatively young, but that has not proven to be a detriment thus far. By all reports, his Defense lessons are very popular. We shall see how the students do in their O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams."

Chairman Brown nodded at the information. "One last item I'd like to discuss before Headmaster Dumbledore's regular status report. I see that you made a suggestion of two Head Girls next year instead of a traditional Head Boy and Head Girl?"

"That was me again," Harry said. "After the fight, it occurred to me that both Padma Patil and Hermione Granger would be well suited to the position. None of the boys in my class stand out in my mind as exceptional Head Boy candidates. With those two things in mind, I suggested to the Headmaster that possibly Hermione and Padma could be co-Head Girls and the school would do without a Head Boy."

"This is not the first time such a situation has come up, and we've had the discussion every so often. The most recent was four years ago, if memory serves." He sighed. "The problem with that is that there are many gender-specific issues that require a Head Position for boys and one for girls. If we do not, then the senior prefect will get the responsibilities of a Head Position without any of the authority or perks. That's not fair to them."

Harry nodded slowly as he thought about it. "You make a good point. Okay, I'll drop that suggestion. My apologies for taking up your time."

"Not at all. It is these kinds of suggestions that we want to hear. The fact that this isn't a new one to us is irrelevant. You didn't know that we'd already discussed it.

"Now," Chairman Brown went on, "unless there is anything else, I think it's time for Headmaster Dumbledore's first term report. Headmaster?"

"Due to changes in the point and detention systems, there were some significant changes from previous years. Specifically, Slytherin gained far fewer points than usual and the other three houses did far better."

"What caused this?"

"Lord Gryffindor altered the point system in some way."

The board members turned to Harry with disapproving looks. "Lord Gryffindor, what did you do?"

Harry gave Dumbledore an aggravated look before turning to the board. "What Headmaster Dumbledore failed to mention is that my changes potentially affected all the professors, but only Snape complained.

"In short, I put a review system in place. Any point additions or subtractions had to be approved by the Headmaster portraits. If the portraits decided that the points, positive or negative, were unjustified, then it didn't happen. Once I heard that Snape was using detentions in place of unjustified points, I expanded the same system to detentions.

"I did NOT limit this to Snape or Slytherins. I made this across the entire school. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout as well as all the other professors were working under exactly the same system."

One of the board members, who'd previously been silent, said, "And only Professor Snape complained about it? And Slytherin is doing far worse than usual while all the other houses are doing far better?"

"That is correct."

The board member sighed. "Professor Dumbledore, I told you and told you, but you would not listen. It's obvious that Snape was horribly abusing the point system to elevate his Slytherins far beyond their true position and reducing the other three houses in the same way." He turned to Harry. "All of my grandchildren told me about him. I warned the Headmaster here, but I didn't want to believe how bad it really was."

He nodded respectfully to Harry. "Lord Gryffindor, you are a better man than I. In your position, I would have done far more than sacking him."

Harry smiled at him. "Thank you, sir."

"After all of today's revelations, I must ask: Do you feel that we should replace Headmaster Dumbledore?"

Scion of Gryffindor 46 - Fight in the Three Broomsticks

Last Chapter:

"After all of today's revelations, I must ask: Do you feel that we should replace Headmaster Dumbledore?"

Several people drew in sharp breaths, but nobody said anything.

Harry sighed and shook his head. "Headmaster Dumbledore has given me, in confidence, the reasons for many of his actions, including why he kept Snape on staff. I do not agree with all of these decisions, but I understand his reasoning. I feel that his heart is in the right place, though I believe he's trying to juggle too many conflicting responsibilities.

"Therefore, as far as his Headmaster position goes, I would suggest that he retain the job but only if he makes an oath to put the students' interests first when it comes to decisions that affect the school; Snape's employment over the past decade and a half being a case in point. Until such time as this board feels he is doing this consistently, I would recommend that the Headmaster and the four Heads of Houses act as a council of sorts to discuss and vote upon all such matters."

Chairman Brown glanced at the other board members, getting nods in return. He turned back forward. "One addition: This council's tiebreaker vote goes to the Deputy Headmistress. With this addition, your suggestions seem reasonable to the board, Lord Gryffindor. Your thoughts, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore adopted a slightly depressed look. "I am saddened that you feel that I have failed you in some way. If it is the will of the school board that the senior professors keep an eye upon my decisions, then I will of course comply."

Harry frowned. *Manipulative old coot is trying to make us feel guilty for this. We're imposing limits on him for his bad decisions and he's trying to make us feel bad about losing faith in him.*

He is crafty. Gotta give him that.

Brown's eyes narrowed the tiniest bit, but his voice was as calm as ever. "Very well, then we are agreed on this." He turned his head to the wizard who had had a Dictation Quill going the entire time. "Robert, please send copies of the relevant portions of this transcript to the four Heads of Houses." He turned back forward. "Headmaster, the rest of your end of term report?"

"Other than the change in the point and detention structure and the highly public arrest of nine students, the rest of the first term was without significant incident. With this board's consent last summer, I rehired Professor Horace Slughorn for Potions and moved Severus to Defense . . ."

After the board meeting broke up, Harry spoke briefly with each of the members as they all walked down the path from the castle toward Hogsmeade. Once at the small town, each board member bid a polite farewell to the others and Apparated out.

Harry turned toward the Three Broomsticks, having made plans to meet Remus there after the meeting. Humming cheerfully to himself, Harry pushed open the door and looked around. Several dozen townspeople were having lunch, producing a comforting babble of background noise. It wasn't a Hogsmeade visit day for the school, so no students were to be found.

Harry joined Remus, Laura, and Kelly at a table. "Hey, you two. What're you doing here in town?" he asked curiously.

"Nice to see you, too, Harry," Kelly said with a grin.

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Sorry. Hi. How're you and your lovely daughter doing this fine day?"

"We're fine, thank you for asking. Since Kay is buried in essays, Laura and I wanted to get out of the castle."

"How do you like castle life? You've been there for . . . a couple weeks now?"

"It's great!" Laura chirped. "The ghosts help me when I get lost. Did you know that one of them can *almost* take his head off?"

Harry smiled at the girl. "Sir Nicholas. He's Gryffindor House's ghost. I was a student last year, remember?" he gently reminded her.

She pouted. "I forgot." She leaned over and whispered to him loudly enough that people three tables over could still hear, "I don't like Peeves."

Harry 'whispered' back, "Me neither."

"How'd the board meeting go?" Remus asked, fighting his grin.

Harry frowned. "Not too bad, I guess. After hearing what a mess Dumbledore had made with Snape, they asked me if I thought he should remain in his position."

The two adults were silent for a long moment. "How did you answer?" Kelly finally asked.

"I said we should pitch him out and make the Sorting Hat the Headmaster with Fawkes as the deputy."

Remus made a single snort-like sound of laughter before he grew quiet.

Kelly rolled her eyes. "This is serious."

"I know, I know. His heart's in the right place, but he has lost track of the important things about running the school somewhere along the way. I asked him to give us an oath that he'd put the students' interests first when it came to school related issues. The four Heads of Houses will keep an eye on him until the school board is convinced he's back on track."

Remus slowly nodded. "A good answer, at least for now. If nothing else, keeping Severus teaching proved that he wasn't thinking about the students' education first."

"That's basically what I said."

"You know, he well could have information that the rest of us don't that means the decisions he made really *were* in the school's best interests. Not to mention that fighting Voldemort by just about any means is better than if he were -"

The conversation was interrupted when multiple people Portkeyed into the room with their wands out.

The one appearing behind Remus immediately shouted, "*Argentum Spiculum!*" From a distance of less than a meter, the Silver Spear Curse didn't have time to completely manifest before it pinned Remus to the table with a partially formed silver lance through his right shoulder.

Two more stood near their table, aiming wands at the back of Laura and Kelly's heads.

Harry saw more had appeared around the outer walls of the room, all facing inward and covering the crowd.

His wand had already appeared in his hand. With the threat to Laura, Kelly, and Remus, he hesitated. He was still assessing the wretched tactical situation when he felt a wand-tip touch the back of his head.

This one was the apparent leader as she shouted, "Nobody move!"

Harry breathed a silent prayer of relief. They were not going to immediately start killing everyone, their usual pattern of behavior. His hesitation had been the right move. Except for this minor piece of good news, everything else was bad. Their planning and information had been superb. Nobody had had any time to really react. Their positions were perfect. The layout of the room and positioning of the invaders made any shielding of innocents impossible.

Nobody else in the Three Broomsticks had so much as moved.

After his initial howl of pain, Remus was reduced to quiet whimpering in between ragged breaths. That was the only sound in the room for long seconds.

The one behind Harry spoke again. "We're only here for Potter. The Dark Lord wishes everyone to know that so long as the witches and wizards of Great Britain do not fight against him, he shall let you live. So long as nobody does anything stupid here, we won't have to hurt you."

Everyone else remained silent.

"Potter, *slowly*, wand on the table and back away from the door."

Harry didn't move. Instead he observed, "Ah, so Voldemort wants my wand as a trophy? Not surprising, I guess." He shrugged

"If it's only me you want, let everyone else go," he suggested next.

"And you start cursing us the instant the last one is out the door? Just how stupid do you think we are, Potter?"

Harry decided not to answer that question. Instead, he said, "Tell you what, if you let them go, I promise to hand over my wand."

"Harry, no!" Kelly objected.

The person behind her snarled, "Shut up, bitch!" He smacked the side of her head hard enough to nearly topple her chair.

Kelly shook her head and blinked a few times. Then she turned a scared look toward Harry.

"How do we know you'll keep your word?" the voice behind Harry asked. He finally recognized it as Pansy Parkinson. He had sent her to Azkaban at the beginning of the school year, but she was one of the many who had been broken out by Voldemort at Christmas.

Harry answered, "You know us Gryffindor hero types. We always keep our word and are honorable to a fault." While he sounded calm and collected, he was anything but. He didn't like negotiating like this, but Remus had to get to a healer very soon if the werewolf was going to survive the day not to mention needing to get the noncombatants out of the building.

Pansy said, "Let this be a lesson to you all. If you do not fight us, we will not harm you. Everyone except this table, leave the building."

Nobody moved for a few seconds. Then Madam Rosmerta walked over to a table containing an ancient witch. She helped the older woman to her feet and said, "Come along, Margaret. Let's get you out of here."

As the two of them slowly headed toward the door, a few more small groups stood and moved out. Once the others saw that the two Death Eaters guarding the door were letting them go, more and more people headed that way.

The Three Broomsticks emptied rapidly.

Harry looked toward Laura, Kelly, and the still moaning Remus, then turned his head around to look at Pansy. He tilted his head toward the three still at the table and raised an eyebrow.

"I have a Portkey from Dumbledore," Kelly announced. "I can get the three of us out of here and Remus to the Hospital Wing."

"Yes," Pansy said thoughtfully. "But first: Potter, put the wand down and walk over to the bar. Then she can Portkey her daughter and the beast away."

Harry nodded agreement, slowly placed his wand on the table and stood, moving across the room so that his back was to the bar. From where he was standing, he could see an even dozen deez. Four at the table, two at the door, and the rest spread evenly around perimeter of the room.

"Harry?" Laura asked in a very scared voice.

"It'll be okay, Laura. Trust me," Harry tried to soothe her.

One of the Death Eaters Vanished the silver spear that was pinning Remus to the table. He shakily stood up, face flushed and eyes wide as his left arm cradled his right.

Harry could almost see the thought processes going through Moony's head. "Don't do it, Remus," he ordered. "They'll pay for what they've done. You need to go with Kelly now."

Remus twitched but didn't object as Kelly laid a gentle hand on his arm. Other hand on her daughter's head, Kelly triggered the Portkey.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Now free from distractions, he sarcastically asked, "Showing his benevolent intentions, Tom is graciously allowing them to go free?" He snorted derisively. "More likely, he's got too many enemies now and is trying to keep the people from rising against him until it's too late."

Pansy answered in a brittle voice, "If My Lord wishes to let the sheep remain sheep, I will not question him."

"You mean you refuse to think for yourself. Though I doubt he really wants *you* thinking." Harry shrugged. "No matter. On to business: you can all save me trouble and surrender now."

Most of the deez laughed, some more forcefully than others. The smallest figures did not laugh at all.

"Very bold statement for someone who is outnumbered twelve to one, Potter."

"You do realize that your half-blood master will eventually get you killed, don't you?" Harry asked conversationally. He turned his head to the side where the two smallest hooded figures were standing. Based on their size, he assumed they were still students. "Did he warn you about the dementor attack? If it'd worked, all the students would have been Kissed. And you actually want to swear loyalty to someone who shows no loyalty toward his followers?"

"Our Lord is loyal to us!" Pansy proclaimed.

"No he's not, Parkinson." There was a minor stir as they realized that he recognized her despite the hood and mask. "He rescued you from Azkaban because he was after Lucius Malfoy's money, not out of a sense of loyalty to you. Tell me, now that Malfoy is broke, how well is he treated? How are all of you treated? Abject humiliation and Cruciatus Curses? How much loyalty does that show toward you?"

"Shut up!" Parkinson screamed. She leveled her wand. "I'm going to enjoy this."

Harry's wand jumped off of the table and flew into his outstretched left hand.

Everyone gaped at him.

"How did you do that? You swore to hand over your wand!" Pansy's voice was somewhere between confused and whining.

"And I did. Is it my fault that you can't keep it?" Harry glanced over toward the smaller figures again. "Drop your wands, and I'll accept that as a surrender."

"*Crucio!*" Parkinson screamed.

At the first sound she made, Harry sank into his combat mindset: Occlumency techniques that enabled split concentration.

Harry Banished one of the heavy oaken tables toward Parkinson. The Cruciatus Curse impacted the surface, leaving a smoking crater, but the large, heavy table continued to fly towards her.

"*Perseco*," Harry whispered, waving his arm in a broad gesture. A bright blue, ribbon-like light came soaring out and toward all of the deez in a broadening arc. Roughly half of them cast a shield, and most of the rest ducked. The three who did neither learned that the spell was originally used as the magical equivalent of the guillotine.

Some of the deez who had ducked fired spells in retaliation as Harry raised his wand and cast a long duration shield spell that Godric had taught him. He sidestepped the single Unforgivable, a Killing Curse.

A wave of his hand sent the bottles behind the bar flying toward the two deez near the door. One raised a Barrier Shield, stopping the flying glass from hitting him. The second cast a Blasting Curse, shattering half of the bottles in flight only to be sliced to ribbons by the flying shards he had unthinkingly produced.

Harry immediately followed with a flame spell, and the spilled alcohol caught fire. The physical barrier spell did nothing to protect the remaining wizard at the door, and in seconds a third of the room was engulfed in flames.

As the billowing smoke provided a visual barrier as well as making it difficult to breath, Harry ducked behind the bar and cast a Bubblehead Charm on himself. With spells flying randomly around the room, Harry shifted to Mage Sight and stunned several more deez before one of them thought to cast an Air Purification Spell.

When the air cleared, Harry was standing behind the bar, wand pointing to where he knew Pansy was cowering behind a ruined table and hand toward a pile of debris that he knew contained the two other surviving deez. Pansy's ragged voice ordered, "Attack him, you fools!"

"Last chance to surrender," Harry countered flatly. The spells that had come from that corner with the smaller deez had been weaker than most, so Harry concluded they were students. He had no desire to kill unMarked students.

Only a moment passed before two wands came sailing over the pile of debris. Two deez slowly stood with hands in the air and masks off, revealing themselves to be fifth and seventh year Slytherin students. "We surrender, Lord Gryffindor."

Pansy screeched for a moment before Harry saw the magical flare of a Portkey activation.

Harry looked toward the spot she'd just occupied before smirking. A wave of his wand and a Messenger Spell flew off. *Tom, give Pansy my love.*

Harry turned to the two students who were nervously looking at him. He pointed at a bare spot on the floor and flatly ordered, "Sit."

They instantly moved to comply.

He bound them before turning to the still-burning fire and extinguishing it with a long Water Spell.

Only then did Harry check himself for injury. Finding none, he took a deep breath, fractionally relaxing for the first time in what felt like a long time.

"Attention inside," a Sonorus-enhanced voice proclaimed from the street. "Come out without your wands or we will come in after you."

Harry walked over, moved the charred and still dripping door out of his way and cautiously looked outside. A half-dozen aurors were pointing wands at him. "Come on in, guys. The party's over."

He calmly walked back inside while the aurors hesitantly entered, looking around at all of the destruction.

"What happened?" one of them asked.

Harry cast a quick Scouring Charm and hopped up on the now-clean bar and recounted the story. He finished by saying, "Careful, there are Portkeys on that one and that one," as he pointed to the older surviving Slytherin and one of the charred bodies.

The lead investigator looked over at the two aurors standing over the prisoners and simply raised an eyebrow.

"He's right, boss; this one has a Portkey. Hmm, no Dark Marks on either of them."

One of the aurors magically checking the bodies confirmed the presence of the second Portkey.

The one standing beside the leader, younger looking than most, asked, "Sounds like you hit them hard and fast without giving them much of a chance." It wasn't quite an accusation, but his attitude was clear.

One of the witches who was poking around turned and spoke in an accent that Harry could not place. "A fight like this isn't a formalized duel, McGee. The survivor is usually the one who hits first, hardest, and fastest. Neatness and playing by the rules is for tournaments. It has no place in real combat."

The one in charge, standing and silently studying Harry asked, "Could we have a Pensieve account of all of this?" he asked, waving a hand around to indicate the entire situation.

"I'll visit Amelia later this afternoon," Harry offered.

"That'll do." The lead investigator looked around the room to see that all of his people were doing their jobs. "Dual casting and some wandless?" he asked quietly.

Harry was a bit impressed that the older wizard had drawn those conclusions so quickly but only smiled in return.

The auror nodded fractionally. "Thank you for your actions and your time, Mr. Potter. Please see the Director to give that Pensieve account. I'll owl you with any further questions or if I need you to come in."

Harry said, "You're quite welcome. I'll go and see Director Bones straight away. Good day." He jumped down from the bar top, heading out the door.

Outside, he found Madam Rosmerta with tears tracks snaking down her face. He went over and gently touched her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, yes, Lord Potter, I'm fine. It's just . . . my tavern . . ."

Harry thought about it for a moment. "Dobby."

Dobby popped in. "Yes, Master Ha-" He cut off as he looked at the scene. Turning back to Harry, he blinked a few times before resuming, "How can Dobby be helping Master Harry?"

"Please go to Hogwarts and find an elf who is willing to work outside of the castle temporarily and send that elf to me here. Then please find out Remus's condition in the Infirmary and report back to me."

Dobby nodded and popped out without a word.

Harry pulled out his communication crystal and called Nim, giving her a report on the situation when she answered. Hearing that he was fine calmed her considerably after hearing that a fight had occurred. She promised to go to Hogwarts, inform Kingsley if Kelly hadn't by then, and then come to guard him. It took Harry several minutes to convince her to sit vigil with Remus while Harry took care of business at the Ministry.

When Harry finally put his crystal away, he found a small, young elf standing patiently at his side. "Dobby is telling Sherry that Master-Lord Gryffydor be needing her?"

"Yes. Could you please work with Madam Rosmerta here until The Three Broomsticks is cleaned, repaired, and open for business again?"

Sherry looked unsure. "Will Sherry still be being a Hogwarts house-elf?"

"Yes. You are just helping out here temporarily. I'm not going to ask you to move and leave the castle and your friends."

The little elf nodded happily. "Sherry can be doing that."

Madam Rosmerta, who had been listening, objected, "Lord Potter, you don't have to -"

Harry gently cut her off. "I don't have to, but I want to. It was because of me that your place got damaged and much of your stock was destroyed. That reminds me: bill me to replace what I sent up in flames."

Madam Rosmerta gaped, mouth opening and closing several times before she finally collected herself. "You don't have to do that, but if you insist, My Lord."

"I do, and I'm still 'Harry', right?" he quirked a grin at the witch who had received innumerable student crushes over the years.

Though her eyes were still red, she laughed. "You rogue! Just like your father and godfather, you are. Fine, I accept the help, but only if you come back sometime and let me thank you properly."

Harry smiled her and then turned. "Thank you for the help, Sherry."

The little elf simply curtsied before turning to Madam Rosmerta. "What does Madam Rosma wish Sherry to be doing?"

Dobby popped back in, distracting Harry from the conversation. After a quick, shy glance at Sherry, Dobby turned to Harry. "Master Harry, Madam Healer told Dobby that Master Remus is very ill but will not be dying. She is saying that the silver burns will be taking weeks to be getting back to normal."

Harry let out an explosive breath and felt the band constricting his heart loosen up. "Thank you, Dobby. That is very good news. Please return to the Keep and inform everyone still there what happened. I need to go to the Ministry for a while then I'll be at the Infirmary."

Amelia looked up from the paperwork on her desk when Harry entered. "Hi, Harry. I already heard some of what happened from Auror Gibbs. How's Remus?"

"He'll survive, I've been told. The silver burns will take weeks to heal, though."

"Thank Merlin he'll be okay."

"So, what brings you here?" she asked, leaning back in her chair.

"The senior investigator - Gibbs, you said? - asked me to show you a Pensieve memory of the fight."

She nodded and pulled one from her hidden wall vault. Harry deposited the memory, starting from when the Portkeys brought the deez in and lasting until the aurors came into the tavern. She immediately viewed it.

Harry spent the time practicing an Occlumency meditation.

When the Head of Magical Law Enforcement came back out a few minutes later, she rubbed her eyes. "Students. He's recruiting bloody students again." She sighed and leaned back in her chair as Harry put the memory back into his head. "The last student trials were difficult enough," she said softly.

"They aren't Marked," Harry pointed out. "I remember the aurors saying that. Besides, the ward I put up last summer would've triggered if they were."

She sighed again. "What was the Messenger Spell you did?"

He waved it off. "Taunting Voldemort. Nothing important."

She barked out a laugh. "Only you could call taunting him 'nothing important'."

Harry smirked but did not verbally respond.

She peered at him. "Seriously, how're you doing?"

"Honestly? So far, I'm okay. I'll probably fall to pieces tonight, but for the moment I'm holding it together."

She said, "The books don't suggest it, but you may want to have Tonks with you tonight. She knows what to look for and can . . . help you through some of the issues."

Harry smiled softly. "Thank you for the recommendation, Madam Bones. I'd already planned on asking her to be . . . nearby."

She nodded once and changed the subject. "Based on what I just saw, you won't be in any legal trouble. You're probably going to get some bounty pay, depending on who all was caught, in fact."

Harry shrugged. "Whatever. Not like I need it."

"Probably true, but it makes the citizens feel better to see bounties being paid for catching escaped deez."

He grimaced. "I hate the attention, but you're right, of course."

Harry thought for a moment and then began to wave his hand around the room and cast several anti-eavesdropping spells. Amelia watched him in silence. Once the room was as secure as he could make it, he asked, "Could I make a request?"

"I'm listening," she said noncommittally but with a tilt to her head that hinted toward curiosity.

"Could you dig Voldemort's location out of Pettigrew's brain if you haven't already and get it to me discreetly?"

After a moment of silence, she asked, "Any particular reason why?"

"You know enough about me to know the answer to that, Amelia. Or at least you suspect it."

"That whole 'Chosen One' thing?"

Grimacing at the nickname, he nodded.

She frowned. "I don't suppose I could talk you out of doing something foolish, could I?"

Harry took a long time before softly answering, "Every day that he's free, more innocents are hurt or killed. I've been trying to run from that fact while I've been training, but today shoved it in my face. We were lucky. Only Remus was hurt, and he'll heal. How many will die in tomorrow's raid? How many more students will be "recruited" by Voldemort and their lives destroyed?"

She closed her eyes and sighed sadly. "Are you sure you're ready for this, Harry?"

"As ready as I'm going to get, Amelia," he stated calmly.

She seemed to accept him at his word. "I'll owl you to come back in once I have some relevant information, Lord-Baron," she promised, straightening in her chair.

Harry stood and bowed respectfully. "Thank you for your time, Madam." He left quietly, heading toward Hogwarts and his wounded friend.

Scion of Gryffindor 47 - "Are you crazy?"

Nim stared at Harry. "Say that again."

"I'm going to kill Voldemort the day after tomorrow," Harry dutifully repeated to her and everyone else living (and dead) at Gryffindor Keep.

"That's what I thought you said. You see, I was hoping I was hearing things. I just didn't want to believe that my boyfriend, the man that I love, was suicidal."

"Nim -"

"Cuz, you know, getting himself killed would really put a crimp in my future plans." She stood and started pacing. "*Why*?" she finally asked Harry.

"Why what?"

"Why are you doing this? To yourself? To me?"

"There's this prophecy -"

"*Stop!*" she shrieked, cutting him off. She took a few deep breaths, visibly reigning in her emotions. Once her hair shifted back to purple, she whispered, "Don't make jokes, Harry. Not about this."

Harry sighed deeply, suddenly feeling far older than his sixteen years. "I wasn't trying to be flip, really. I was answering the question. The prophecy says I have to kill him."

"Bugger the prophecy!" she shouted.

Surprisingly, it was Cissy who replied. "Whether Harry wants to do anything about the prophecy is actually irrelevant. The Dar- Voldemort believes Harry can vanquish him. Therefore he's not going to stop trying to kill Harry."

Andy nodded and took over from her sister. "And knowing that, it makes sense for Harry to do it on his terms instead of waiting for Vol- Vol-" she grimaced and then continued, "Riddle to make the next move."

Nim made a wordless growl of frustration and turned back to Harry. "I don't suppose I can talk you out of this?"

"Not really. You know I was talking with Amelia and Dumbledore all morning. They're arranging for a series of distractions for the deez early that morning. A bunch of raids on homes of suspected deez, and the aurors and the Order are going to raid one of their old bases. We're hoping most of the deez will be tied up elsewhere so I can sneak in and kill Voldemort."

"So you're going to sneak in by yourself and take on the whole bloody deez army and the darkest wizard since Grindelwald?"

"Well, when you put it that way -"

Ted interrupted the conversation. "I'm not happy about it either. I do have a question, though. Why now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why now? Why are you going after him *now* instead of three months ago or three months from now?"

Harry marshaled his thoughts. "Several reasons. One of the board members said something the other day. His granddaughter died because I haven't killed Voldemort yet."

Nim's eyes flared. "That's -"

Harry held up a hand, forestalling her impending tirade. "I know he was out of line with what he said, but there is a kernel of truth in it." He sighed and scrubbed his face with a hand before continuing, "More to the point, though, I'm going now because Tom is at his most vulnerable now, and I'm not going to get significantly better anytime soon."

She looked disgruntled at his argument but did not comment. "What do you mean about him being vulnerable?"

"His Hogwarts attack failed. His kidnapping attempt the other day failed. Granted, they are not the only attacks he's made in the past few months, but they are the highest profile ones. He's probably frustrated, and his followers are no doubt beginning to second guess their decision to join him. Add to that his big change in public policy, that 'live and let live' announcement that Parkinson made. I don't believe for a minute that it's genuine,

but it shows he's trying to avoid the fights he can right now.

"The Ministry is finally doing its job, the Order is cooperating with them, and Voldemort has lost a lot of ground. The Prophet is being honest about the attacks, both good and bad, but it's proving that the deez aren't invulnerable. And bad as some of it is, at least having everything out in the open is keeping the rampant paranoia and terror down."

Harry sighed again. "Look, while he's hardly powerless, his position is the worst its been since his resurrection. However, if we give him time, he'll just start digging himself back out of the hole he's in. I need to hit him now, when he's at his weakest and we actually know where to find him. If I wait, it'll just keep getting harder.

"The Order and Ministry are already planning on doing things in two days. I can call them off if I have to, but . . . Think about it. This is a decent opportunity, and will there ever be a better one?"

"If not now, when? If I wait until both I'm significantly more powerful and Voldemort can be pinned down again, I might find myself at forty with everything I care about destroyed and everyone I love long dead."

Andy frowned. "I'll not say that I like it, but I suppose I understand it. Why are you going to attack him in a commando raid instead of trying to get him to come to you?"

"Do you honestly think he'll amass an army and lay siege to Hogwarts or something? He's never acted like that in the past. It's always been terror, raids, and then guerilla tactics. He's never permitted his people to engage in a stand-up fight against a nearly-equal force, so why should I expect him to do it now? He's only very rarely gone on raids himself, so trying to ambush enough raids to snare him is impractical.

"The only other approach I can think of would be to dangle some bait for him to come after. The problem *there* is that I can't think of anything I'm willing to sacrifice that he'd be willing to come out of his hole to chase after." Harry sighed. "Look, I don't want to do any of this. But I don't know any other way to have a fight anytime soon on anything even close to my terms."

Everyone in the room thought silently about his words.

"I'm going with you," Nim stated decisively.

Harry's face closed off. "But -"

Her eyes narrowed. "Why can you go, but I can't?" she demanded.

Harry opened his mouth a couple times before answering, "I don't want you to get hurt."

Ironic snorts came from several directions.

"Kettle, meet cauldron," Cissy said dryly.

Nim folded her arms and smirked triumphantly.

Harry frowned heavily. "Fine," he conceded, "but I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it, you just have to accept it. Two is better than one, right?"

"I suppose," Harry grudgingly admitted.

"Besides, I know a way through almost any ward. I just need to talk with Dumbledore and he can get me the equipment."

"Dumbledore?" Harry balked.

Nim looked at him sternly. "Look, you're already trusting him to run interference, right? I need some stuff from the Ministry. Something I heard rumors about in the Department of Mysteries."

"Yeah, yeah; you made your point."

"Good. Look, as fine a student as you've been in dueling and fighting, I'm still a graduate of the Auror Academy, and you aren't. I've seen more combat than you have, Potter. You need me to help you get close enough to Voldemort. The prophecy may say it has to be you to finish him off, but I can help get you to that point, right?"

Harry had a pained expression. "Just don't get yourself killed, Nim. I don't know if I could survive that."

"Much as I hate to admit it, I can't promise that any more than you can, Harry," she candidly answered.

Andy winced. "Again, I'll not say that I like it." She raised a hand to Nim's frown. "I don't like it," she repeated, "but I understand why you're doing it." She turned to Godric. "Your heir is a reckless influence on her."

Godric gave a wisp of a smile but did not respond.

"Actually, I'm surprised that you aren't trying to talk them out of this."

Godric shrugged. "Why would I do that? He's Gryffindor, so he'll do what's needed. She'd choosing to follow him. I probably won't like the

methods he's contemplating - your daughter's Slytherin influence on him is as obvious as his on her - but he *will* do the right thing. It's not in us Gryffindors to do anything less."

"You're genetically predisposed to be raving lunatics?" Andy asked in dry humor, clearly trying to lessen the tension.

"Not quite," Harry answered. "Maybe I really do have a 'saving people thing' as Hermione put it. Personally, I prefer to think that there's something that only I can deal with, so I'm going to deal with it. I don't want to, but I don't really have a choice."

"Right. So let's do some planning," suggested Tonks.

Harry and Nim, wearing their dragon hide armor and carrying all of the shrunken equipment and supplies they expected to need, silently materialized in the woods behind a massive and run-down estate.

Harry looked around, found nobody else in sight, and then squinted in the pre-dawn to make sure they had apparated to the right place. Multiple wards overlaid the main building.

"Is this the place?" the disillusioned form of Nim whispered from beside him.

"Yeah," he whispered back, still studying the overlapping colors and patterns. "It's got a Perimeter Alarm Ward, a Magical Tripwire, and some kind of defensive ward in addition to the Portkey and Apparition Wards."

She paused. "I hate to admit it, but I've never heard of a Magical Tripwire."

"Like a Perimeter Alarm except it detects magic crossing the field instead of living bodies."

"Ah, you mean a Magical Sensor Net. No kind of identifying ward?" she asked.

Harry shook his head before he remembered that he was invisible. "Not that I can see."

"That Mage Sight thing is useful," she commented.

A pair of soft pops sounded behind them, causing both to turn with raised wands.

Harry could see the aura of one disillusioned magician and a man wearing blue auror robes but without any masking spell at all.

"Disillusion yourself, Robbins," the invisible one hissed.

"Password?" Nim murmured.

Both aurors jumped. "We were sent by Director Bones. Password is 'fluffy'. Whatever the hell that's supposed to mean," the still visible auror finished in a grumble.

Harry and Nim relaxed and sheathed their wands. "What'd Amelia tell you?" Harry asked. "And disillusion yourself, Robbins. We could've killed you five times over already."

As Robbins was sheepishly tapping his wand upon his head, the other said, "*Director Bones* ordered us to report here and take orders from the wizards on site. Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Don't worry about it," Harry said.

"Lord Potter," Tonks said. "They need to know, Harry," she added.

"I suppose," Harry grudgingly answered. "You see that manor?" he went on.

"Yes, sir. Beat up old place," the senior auror observed.

"Voldemort's in there."

Harry was grimly amused at their sharp intakes of breath.

"So you may want to be kind of careful about showing yourself," he continued dryly. "There are several wards over it. At some point, I hope the wards come down. If they do, contact Amelia and give her the message, 'Riddle's wards have fallen.' More aurors will show up, but don't let them approach the place without Amelia's direct order, including the password 'cavalry'. Once you get that, hit the place, wards up or down. Other than that, don't do anything at all to reveal yourselves. None of us would survive it if you did. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," replied the audibly cowed auror.

"If you're done scaring the piss out of them, we have things to do, Potter," Nim said. Not waiting for an answer, she groped around for his arm. Once she found it, she laid a hand on his shoulder and followed as he moved forward. When he stopped just inside the tree line, she did as well. "How much further can I go?" she asked.

"Another two feet is safe."

He watched her move a bit further before crouching down. She quickly planted two thumb-sized bushes into the ground as far apart as she could reach. Moving back, she pointed her wand and muttered a string of spells at each bush. Before their eyes the bushes grew at an incredible rate, going up as well as toward the wards until they formed an arch that each of them could walk under if they crouched.

"Did that work?" she asked.

Harry moved forward and looked closely. "The bushes straddle the edges of the wards."

Nim then pulled a small tube out of her bag and laid it on the ground. Another quiet spell and it expanded enough for them to crawl through and grew about four feet long. Leaning against it, she shoved it through the arch formed by the bushes.

Pulling a piece of chalk out of her bag, she very carefully drew a rune on the outer surface of the magical tunnel, completing an intricate series of runes inscribed on it. When she stepped back, Harry saw a muted green flash from them.

"You told me that you had a way in without triggering the wards, but you never were very specific."

"I'd heard the Unspeakables had a way, but I didn't know the details until Dumbledore pried it out of them. The bushes are to hide the presence of the metal of the tunnel. The tunnel, once I put the final rune on it, rejects all external magic. This is safe enough from the tripwire, as you call it, as it's an item straddling the ward, not a spell flying through it.

"Now, just to be sure we won't be detected, I'm going to also use a Magic Dampening Field that Bill Weasley taught me." She pointed her wand down the tunnel and uttered a string of syllables that were definitely not Latin.

In Harry's Mage Sight, the tunnel filled with sparkling white diamonds that hovered in place, twinkling slowly. It was unlike anything he had seen before. "Whoa."

"There," she said in a tone of satisfaction. "Once we're in there, move quickly. The Dampening Field will negate our Shrinking Charms and Disillusionments after a few seconds."

"Ah. That would be awkward."

"Yeah."

She ducked down and quickly crawled through the tunnel.

Harry watched the wards closely as she did so. Fortunately, they did not react to her passage. Once she stood on the other side, she urgently murmured, "*Move* ."

Harry scuttled through and stood beside her. "I'm here," he informed her. "Lead on."

She immediately headed toward a shadowed door to the main building, Harry moving along a few paces behind and slightly to the side.

Once in the niche containing the door, he wandlessly cancelled his Disillusionment and knelt. Pointing to the ground, he whispered, "*Serpensortia* ."

He heard Nim inhale sharply as a mid-sized green and brown snake appeared at his feet.

"*Little friend*," Harry hissed, "*I'm going to cast a spell upon you to make you invisible. Please enter this building and look around at what the humans inside are doing then come back here. Can you do that for me?*"

"*A moment, wizard*." The snake looked carefully around itself. Finally its head stopped when it was turned to where Nim was standing. Its small tongue flicked out a few times before the snake turned back to Harry. "*Your invisible mate is frightened, but she is hiding it well.*"

Harry grinned up at her before turning back to the snake. "*She is a good fighter and a good mate. Will you do as I asked?*"

"*I will*." After Harry disillusioned it, the snake turned and slithered through an opening in the dilapidated doorway.

"What did that lizard say about me?" Nim growled quietly.

"Snakes aren't lizards," Harry mildly chided her. "To answer your question: he thought you're cute."

"I'm invisible," she retorted.

"Snakes can see through magic. Didn't you know that?"

She was silent for nearly a minute. "Are you serious?"

"No, but I had you going, didn't I?"

"Prat."

"He could smell you and said you smell cute."

She snorted. "Prat," she repeated, with a bit of humor in her tone.

Harry grinned to himself, having succeeded in lowering the tension.

"By the way, if I weren't along, how were you planning on getting through the wards?" Tonks idly asked.

"I was either going to try to dig under them, or levitate a tree long-way to interdict the field and then dig under that."

"You'd have to go pretty far underground for the first one to work." She thought for a moment. "That second one might work, but you'd have to uproot a big tree whole and then lay it down at the edge of the yard without anyone noticing the movement or sound."

"I think I like your idea better."

"Me, too."

Harry chewed his lip for a moment. "I'm still tempted to bring the Portkey Ward down. I really don't like not being able to use escape Portkeys."

"Can you take the ward down without anyone inside noticing?"

"Maybe," he hedged.

"Maybe? *Maybe*? What in the name of Morgana does 'Maybe' mean?"

"Grandfather taught me a ward breaker spell that shouldn't alert the ward's original caster unless that wizard is very sensitive and inside the wards in question. The deez also may have a monitoring spell on the inside that I can't see. Finally, if anyone inside, like Voldemort, has Mage Sight, it would be obvious when it came down."

"Way too many variables in that answer."

"I said, 'Maybe,' for a reason, you know."

"I'm not real happy running that many risks."

"Me neither. I'd prefer to be able to use Portkeys, but that's just too dangerous to try. I won't say I like the plan we came up with, but it still seems like the best option."

"Let's see," he started to tick items off on his fingers. "Prisoners get that long-term, slow to cast Medical Stasis spell, transfiguration to hide 'em, and a twelve hour Portkey. If I'm hurt, you grab me and get us both the hell out. If you're hurt, you escape on your own or I put you under stasis, hide you, and go forward alone." He frowned.

"I know you don't like it, Harry. I don't, either, but as you said, this raid is our best chance to finish this war. If you can, you *must* continue forward."

He still looked very unhappy but nodded. "Yeah. Anyway, Wormtail said Riddle's room is always on the top floor, which is the second in this case. Didn't he say there's a basement?"

"Yeah. I'll continue to lead when we're inside. I can spot physical traps, though it'd surprise me if they tried anything quite that 'muggle'. Stop me if you see any magical traps." She paused. "Anything else?"

He let out a breath. "Not that I can think of."

One of her dissillusioned hands came up and ran down his cheek. "Trust in yourself and trust in me, and we'll both get through this, Harry."

Out of things to say, the two waited in silence for several minutes, watching the sun slowly creep above the horizon.

Harry's serpentine scout finally returned. *"Wizard? There are many humans hibernating in a space near this entrance. Two more, a female and a male, are moving about in other open spaces. I saw places for you to move upward and another to move underground, but I can not go either direction. I can smell more humans, but I can not locate them."*

Harry nodded. *"Thank you, little friend."* He waved a hand and conjured a field mouse. While the mouse was twitching and looking around, the snake pounced. Harry cancelled the snake's disillusionment as the mouse's tail was disappearing.

Tonks made a disgusted noise but otherwise kept her peace.

The snake turned back to Harry. *"My thanks, wizard. Good hunting to you and your mate."* It turned and slithered along the wall, quickly lost in the shadows.

"Much as I'm glad that you're embracing your inner Slytherin, I don't like snakes," Nim grumbled. "What did it say?" she asked in a firmer voice.

Harry chose the better part of valor and did not to comment on her phobia. "Sounds like a dormitory of sleeping deez close to this door. There's also another witch and wizard wandering around this level. The snake couldn't go upstairs or downstairs. There are more around, but it doesn't know where."

"Take care of the sleepers first?"

Harry nodded and recast the Disillusionment over himself. Together, they crept through the doorway. Harry put an Alarm Ward over the door and then they started looking into each of the rooms they came across.

They quickly found the bunk room. While Nim guarded the door, Harry silently put each sleeping deez into stasis. Even moving quickly, it still took him nearly ten minutes to deal with all twelve of them.

He then transfigured each of the deez into an object that had a duplicate in the room. Some deez became bed sheets, some pillows, and some bed frames. After transfiguring a deez, he turned each "person" into a time-delayed Portkey, set to deposit them into a special prisoner room that Amelia had showed him. Shortly, the room was empty of sleeping Death Eaters and contained nothing except unmade beds.

When he finished, Tonks said, "Very good. I've been checking the room and peeking out the door while you've been busy. There are Silencing Spells built into each wall, floor, and ceiling. No sign of sentries so far. They must rely on their wards. Ready?

"Yep. Let's do it."

They carefully crept back out into the hallway. Harry could see her disillusioned form casting a spell, but she did not verbalize it.

In a murmur she said, "Silencing Spells on all sides here, too. Hallways will carry sound, but otherwise we should be safe."

Tonks leading the way, they moved further into the manor. Once they found the stairs to the basement, they headed down. Harry paused to cast an Alarm Ward plus a Wall of Silence Spell over the open entrance so anyone on this floor, two of whom were still unaccounted for according to the snake, would not hear anything that occurred downstairs.

They made it downstairs to a long hallway without incident. Only three doors came off the hall, one on each side and one at the far end. Both side doors led to large storage rooms. After Harry and Tonks came out of the second room and back into the hall, the far door suddenly opened and many young deez came flowing out, chattering among themselves. Several were directing floating crates along. The whole group was followed by an older deez who growled half-heartedly at them to hurry up.

Both Harry and Nim froze in place at the unexpected presence of so many enemies.

Unfortunately, one of them bumped into the invisible Harry before they could retreat.

"Huh? Whazzat?" he asked blankly.

Harry immediately hit him with a Paralysis Hex.

Seeing that they would have to fight, Harry put up a powerful shield and started casting Piercing Curses as rapidly as he could.

Half of the deez were wounded and most of the rest were blindly firing curses in all directions when the older one thought to cast a wide-area Finishing Spell.

His disillusionment removed, Harry cast a Needle Wave Curse that caught many of the remaining targets in a spray of small quickly moving slivers of metal.

Also exposed, Nim cast a fan-like flamer down the hallway. Caught in two area-affect spells, all but two of the deez were down and out of the fight.

Showing a surprising presence of mind, one of the two stepped forward the short distance and plucked Harry's wand from his hand. Thinking he had the smaller wizard disarmed, his face lit with glee as he started to shout a curse.

Harry curled his right hand into a fist and punched him in the jaw.

The deez's head exploded, painting the ceiling and far wall with a red-gray spray speckled with a few bits of white bone.

The last standing deez stopped his one-sided, losing duel with Tonks to stare in astonishment at the toppling body. She moved forward and dropped him with a contact Electrocution Hex.

Harry was already was stunning every wounded deez in sight.

She looked over at Harry once it was quiet. "You okay?"

Harry shook out his hand, sore from the punch. "Yeah, I'm alright. You?"

She held a hand to her side where he could see her armor through her torn shirt; one of the unaimed curses had apparently found its mark through her shield. After a couple deep breaths, she announced, "I'm fine." She glanced at the headless corpse at Harry's feet. "What'd you do to him?"

Harry smirked, proud of his idea. "Blasting Curse through my armband."

She laughed. "At the moment of punching? No wonder he's such a mess."

Harry twitched at the graphic reminder that he had just killed another person, clever method or not. Ruthlessly suppressing his emotions, he summoned his wand and cast the stasis spell on each before using cleaning spells to remove all the blood and assorted other stains.

Transfiguring them into the kind of brick-a-brack laying about and then into Portkeys took only minutes after that. After Vanishing the broken crates

and casing a few repair charms, the hallway looked as it had.

While he was doing this, Tonks quickly checked out the rest of the basement level. "Looks like they were packing up to move. The room they exited has lots of boxes filled with magical artifacts and books. There's also an empty wine cellar past that. Nothing else on this level. You done?"

"Yeah, let's go."

"Hey, what about your disillusionment?"

"You can only have that over you twice a day, remember?"

"Damn, that's right. Should've remembered that."

"Fortunately, I came prepared." Harry pulled his Invisibility Cloak out and draped it over himself.

"Bad planning, Potter. You should've used the cloak before the snake and saved your two disillusionments for inside."

Harry answered with an embarrassed silence before he said, "Oops."

"Live and learn. Just something you need to keep in mind for next time."

"Yeah."

With Tonks again leading the way, they went back up to the main level and continued their cautious exploration.

The pair next encountered Bellatrix Lestrange. They found Tonks's disowned aunt carefully packing up potions ingredients into boxes. When they entered the room behind the witch, Tonks bumped into the doorframe, causing Lestrange to look over her shoulder. Her eyes widened, and she drew her wand and fired a series of area effect spells with amazing speed.

Harry raised his wand in his left hand and cast a powerful shield while his right hand came up and started sending curses back at the deranged witch. Organ burners, cutting curses, bludgeoners, fireballs and freezing spells furiously flew back and forth for a few seconds. Unfortunately for Bellatrix, she was one wand against more than two.

One of Tonks's cutters finally punctured her aunt's shield, throwing the older witch off balance. Harry's follow-up string of Hammer Fist Hexes shattered her shield and landed, throwing her through the air to crash into the wall behind her with a sickening crackle. Bellatrix immediately went slack and left a smear of blood on the wall as she slid down in a heap.

Harry jumped across the room to examine her for signs of life. Instead, he found the back of her head caved in and blood slowly leaking out.

He turned around to check on Nim, sparing only a glance at a smoking corpse in the doorway.

Tonks's disillusionment had been broken at some stage, and she was sitting on the floor with her leg bent back at an impossible angle, holding her side and biting her lip.

Swearing vilely Harry dashed across the room to check on his lover. Her left leg was a mangled mess, with white shards poking through her dragon hide armor. Much as he wished otherwise, he knew they were pieces of bone. He resolutely shut off that line of thought and cast a Tourniquet Spell on her leg.

She was studying the smoldering corpse beside her. "Uncle Rudolphus, I think," she commented in a pain-filled voice.

He barely spared a thought about him, presuming he must have entered between himself and Tonks and been cut down by one of Bellatrix's spells.

Not worrying about the other late, unlamented, but crispy Lestrange, Harry cast a Numbing Charm on Tonks's side and leg.

She immediately relaxed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He glared at her. "Why didn't you speak up sooner?"

Gingerly feeling the cut on her side, she placed her left hand over it and pinned it in place with her right arm. "You were checking that the enemy was incapacitated, and I couldn't distract you from that. She *is* down for good, isn't she?"

He nodded, a grimly satisfied smile in place.

"Good. Anyway, once the fight was over, you saw to me quickly enough."

"I have to get you to St. Mungo's immediately."

She shook her head. "No time. We discussed this, damnit. Don't change the plan just because you don't like it, Potter."

Harry frowned mightily. "Nim, I -"

"Save it. Tell me tomorrow. Now, go and finish this so we can do the 'happily ever after' thing I keep hearing about."

He managed a smile. "Will do. See you later." He gave her a quick kiss before standing back up. With a pained expression, he cast the stasis spell on her. After looking out the window, he transfigured her into a stick that would blend in with the others littering the yard. After the Portkey Spell was cast on her, he tossed her out the window, fighting a lump in his throat the whole way.

Having finished protecting his lover as much as possible, he turned back to the mission. He transfigured Rudolphus into a vial and Bellatrix into powdered belladonna. Grinning at the irony, Harry cast the Packing Spell, dumping the spilled items into the available containers. Cleaning and repair charms were thrown liberally around, keeping the room from looking like a battle had been fought.

Looking down, he was dismayed to see his Invisibility Cloak; this would not help his chances to fulfill his 'happily ever after' pledge. Taking the torn garment in hand, he looked mournfully down at what was left of the priceless artifact, his only keepsake from his father. In the fight with Bellatrix, it had been hit and was no longer living up to its name.

Having reached his daily limit of two Disillusionment Charms, he was out of options for staying out of sight.

Harry recast the Silencing Charm on his boots and moved quickly yet stealthily throughout the ground floor, putting Alarm Wards over each exterior doorway, confirming that no additional deez were around, and confirmed that everything was undisturbed. Moving up the stairs, he cast another Alarm Ward behind him.

Once up to the first floor, Harry saw an intricate set of layered wards and spells on the stairway leading to the top. Instead of trying to unravel the mess, Harry simply added a Wall of Silence and went exploring.

The second doorway he approached was open so Harry cautiously peeked inside.

Lucius Malfoy was seated at a desk, reading a parchment. Malfoy must have seen him, because he looked up, his one good eye widening dramatically at seeing Harry standing in the doorway.

In a single smooth motion, his wand came up, and he fired a Cruciatus Curse.

Harry ducked inside the almost empty room while raising a shield and firing a Blasting Curse that missed and obliterated the desk. Malfoy jumped out of his seat and towards him, shouting, "*Avada Kedavra* !"

Unable to dodge in time and with nothing handy to summon into the spell's path, Harry employed a defense that he had practiced endlessly with Nim.

Using multiple Deflecting Charms he stopped the Killing Curse in mid-air.

Now a pulsating green ball of lethal energy, it started drifting slowly downward.

"Now, that wasn't very nice," Harry chided the older wizard.

Staring in amazement at the floating spell, Lucius did not respond.

"I want to put you down like the mad dog you are, but I have to do this properly," Harry said with regret. He straightened and said, "Lucius Malfoy, Patriarch of Clan Malfoy, for the killing of Draco Black of my clan, I declare Line War upon you and yours." He smirked. "Pity that you're the last Malfoy...."

Lucius made an animalistic noise and started firing a wide variety of dark curses at Harry.

Harry kept his shield up and soon had Malfoy backed into a corner. The older man had a vast repertoire of spells, but lacked the stamina for a long fight. Harry finally disarmed him and fired a Webbing Spell at him. Some of the gummy material intentionally covered his mouth.

"By the rules of a Line War, I could take you for all you're worth. The only problem is that Narcissa Black already has all of your wealth."

Harry's grin widened at the look of mad rage displayed in Lucius's one eye.

Harry strolled up to his bound foe, watching his ineffectual struggles. "What was it you said to me once? Something about coming to a 'sticky end'?" Harry asked, knowing that he was taking more enjoyment out of this than was truly healthy.

Before he was tempted to do something permanent, Harry stunned him.

The stasis, transfiguration, and Portkey spells were almost routine by this point. A few repair charms, and the room looked undisturbed.

The next two rooms were empty, and in his haste Harry almost missed the last room on the floor.

He almost wished he had.

It contained an unidentifiable corpse and what was left of Pansy Parkinson. Her shackles were arranged so that her wrists supported all of her weight and pulled at her shoulders. She was stripped naked and every square inch of skin below her neck showed evidence of systematic spell damage. Her face was unmarked, but one ear had been roughly removed from the side of her head. Dried blood and other liquids pooled beneath her.

"My God," Harry breathed.

Surprising him, her eyes opened. She looked at him for a few moments before a whispered chuckle came out. "Potter? Here? You are truly mad. You have to know that My Lord will kill you for being here." Her voice was pain-filled and ragged.

"I doubt it. Tommy wants to kill me for many other reasons."

Her eyes flared. "My Lord is a great wizard and will crush you! I dream of the day I shall rule at his side."

Harry stared at her in disgust. "He did this to you and will kill you eventually."

"He will never kill me. I am too loyal and valuable to him. I failed him, and he is punishing me for it. Nothing more," she stated with surprising calm.

Harry slowly shook his head. "I don't even want to think about the mental state of anyone who could say that and mean it."

"You will die horribly for this," she stated, ignoring Harry's comment.

"Perhaps," he allowed. He put her in stasis and left, seeing no point in doing anything further with Voldemort's discarded tool.

The floor secured, Harry moved back to the stairway and studied the spells there.

Most of the spells were for ensuring privacy, but the Intruder Alert Ward was problematic. It would alert the caster if he were to try to disable it.

He had a moment of regret that neither Dumbledore nor Bill Weasley were along with him.

Harry stared at the wards for a short time while he came up with a plan.

Growling with annoyance at the necessity of what he was about to do, Harry first conjured a mirror and slowly morphed his face and hair. Satisfied at the result, he cast a Voice Emulation Spell and the needed transfigurations to make his clothing look correct.

To complete his disguise, he cast a Glamour Charm to make it appear that the face of Lucius Malfoy was wearing his eye patch while not restricting his own vision.

Harry took a few deep breaths to calm himself. Things would get very ugly very quickly.

He began once he was as centered as he could manage. With a few words, Harry cast his own Portkey and Apparition Wards. He would not allow Voldemort to escape.

Moving quickly, Harry raised his wand and brought it down in a slash, crudely ripping the stair's warding spells apart.

Making a quick prayer, he ran up the stairs.

One of the doors above opened and Voldemort stepped out, wand raised. "Lucius, what -"

Harry fell to one knee, looking down at the threadbare carpet. "I beg forgiveness, My Lord, but this is an emergency! I have just learned that aurors are about to arrive!"

Voldemort growled and hurried toward the stairs. "Finish packing only the valuable and rare items. We're moving to the other -"

As Voldemort was moving past him, Harry shifted his hand and cast the strongest Cutting Curse he could manage.

It was barely past Harry's hand before it abruptly changed direction and instead of going up and into Voldemort's chest it angled down and into his leg.

Harry raised his shield and threw himself away from Voldemort.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry had the momentary pleasure of seeing the Cutting Curse begin to connect before a bright light obscured everything, and he was violently thrown down the hall.

Harry winced as he came to a tumbling stop. His armor and shield had taken the brunt of the impacts, but he would have a gang of bruises before long.

Forcing himself to wobbly feet, Harry shifted his wand to his left hand and looked down the hall. Seeing no point in maintaining it, he relaxed his morph. Remembering a promise to Amelia, he sent a Messenger Spell off to her.

Voldemort had his left hand on the wall for support as his wand finished producing a new silver leg. His severed leg was lying in a pool of dark blood.

Breathing heavily, Voldemort glared at Harry from behind an oscillating shield. "A metamorphmagus? I'm impressed, Potter. Both for that and because you cursed someone in the back. Not very Gryffindor of you; it was much more Slytherin."

"I learned from the best; my girlfriend is a good teacher." Harry used the distraction to cast a wordless Blasting Curse.

From within his shield Voldemort merely raised an eyebrow.

However, Harry was not aiming at Voldemort, but at the wall beside him. It exploded into the hallway, showering Voldemort with debris.

Not giving Tom a chance to regroup, Harry started casting powerful Blasting, Piercing and Hammer Fist Curses at the outline he could just make out.

Voldemort fell to the floor and did not rise.

As rapidly as possible, Harry continued casting spells both through his armband and wand. Flames, shards of ice, concussion blasts, lightning, anything and everything went toward the hunkered and unmoving figure.

In between the standard ones, Harry also cast some uncommon and very powerful spells. Shield Fracturing Hexes, a variation of the Patronus Charm that caused those of evil disposition to be weakened, the reversal to an Enchanted Flesh Spell, and even an ancient Soul Purification Spell.

After what seemed like an endless time of spells lighting the hallway, Harry came to a panting stop, weaving on his feet.

Without the glare of spells lighting the room, Harry could see Voldemort squatting on the floor, an advanced shield flickering around him.

When Voldemort looked up, Harry sagged against the wall.

Voldemort allowed his shield to lapse. "Very good, Potter. Unfortunately, not good enough." Freed from the confines of his Bunker Shield, he stood, moving slowly and painfully.

Shouting incoherently, Harry flung his arm forward and sent a Guillotine Curse, followed by a Needle Wave Curse and a conjured acid spray.

Whipping his wand around, Voldemort shielded against the first and conjured a temporary wall to intercept the last two.

When the wall evaporated seconds later, Voldemort aimed his wand. "*Avada Kedavra.*"

Harry wandlessly and wordlessly summoned a piece of shattered wall which exploded into a cloud of dust when the Killing Curse hit it. Behind the visual screen, Harry banished a mass of debris toward his opponent.

He heard multiple thumping sounds as the projectiles hit a solid shield Voldemort had conjured. "I'm not that foolish, Potter," Voldemort called back.

Several curses came flying through the dust cloud. Harry allowed himself to simply fall over and the spells passed harmlessly over him.

Voldemort stepped past the rubble and towered above the prone form of his archenemy. "You have been a thorn in my side long enough. *Ava -*" The Dark Lord Voldemort let out an undignified squawk of pain as a curse slammed into his shoulder, almost pitching him to the ground.

He spun in place and stared at the figure at the top of the stairs.

The figure bowed slightly. "Heir of Slytherin, I am Godric of Gryffindor."

Harry's hand started painfully moving towards a pocket.

Voldemort was quiet for a moment before he started to chuckle. It was a thoroughly evil sound. "*The* Godric Gryffindor? How delicious. I have already defeated The Boy Who Lived, and now I can vanquish Gryffindor himself! This will be a day long remembered."

Godric fired a spell in response, but it was absorbed by an odd, smoky shield that Voldemort silently erected.

Eyes wide, Godric fired spells rapidly while Voldemort started chanting a long string of syllables.

No matter what spell Godric used, it was absorbed by the special shield that Voldemort was using.

Voice reaching a crescendo, Voldemort raised his wand. "I banish you from this realm, Godric Gryffindor! URK!"

Voldemort's cry of pain eclipsed that from Godric. He looked down to see the point of a sword sticking up out of his chest.

Unbelieving, he looked over his shoulder to find Harry holding himself up with his left arm as his right hand released the hilt of the legendary Gryffindor sword.

Red eyes glaring at Harry, Voldemort opened his mouth. Instead of a curse, a trickle of black blood escaped. The dark lord began to turn, wand coming to bear, but his strength gave out before he made it all the way around.

He toppled, wand falling from a slack hand. The 13 and ½ inches of yew rolled a short way before falling into a small fire the fight had produced. The wand immediately burst into flame, emitting a shower of sparks.

Panting in pain and exhaustion, Harry continued to stare at Voldemort's body as it started to decay.

He was not the only one watching. Harry heard a sigh. "Good. It is finished," Godric said quietly.

Spurred back into motion by these words, Harry levered himself up and stumbled over to Godric, who was floating in place but wavering in and out of sight.

Harry peered at him in confusion. "What's . . . What's happening?"

"I'm passing over," Godric answered simply.

Harry gaped.

Godric smiled softly. "Do not grieve, my heir. I have had much more time on this plane than I should. Riddle finished his exorcism spell; I am soon to depart anyway. Do you remember why I remained on this plane in the first place?"

Fighting wounds, exhaustion, and a skull-crushing headache, Harry panted out, "The feud . . . with Salazar . . . Slytherin."

Godric nodded and nearly faded out entirely before he came back into visibility. "The feud. Now that the Slytherin line is ended, I can rest. Be well, my heir. Do the name of Gryffindor proud."

With a bright flash of light and a muted pop, Godric Gryffindor disappeared.

Harry leaned against the wall, too drained for tears. Wearily, as he reached into a pocket of his robes for a healing potion, he felt a warning signal in his magic. One of his Alarm Wards had been tripped.

Cursing under his breath, Harry hurried back to the body, retrieved the sword, and turned to the nearest door, fumbling in his pockets for his shrunken Firebolt. In his exhaustion, he stumbled and hit his head on the doorframe, collapsing to the floor.

As black robed figures rushed towards him, he faded out of consciousness, thinking that either Amelia had reacted to his message far faster than expected or whoever had tripped the ward were not from the ministry.

Darkness claimed him.

Scion of Gryffindor 48 - Post Voldemort

Harry awoke.

It came as no surprise to him that he immediately regretted it.

He felt a bone-deep ache throughout his entire body, with sharper, tender spots on one ankle and his upper chest.

On the positive side, he was on a bed, a warm hand was gently holding his, and he smelled Nim's favorite perfume.

Moving slowly and using only his left hand, he fumbled around for his glasses and slipped them on. It was indeed Nymphadora at his bedside, sleeping upright in a chair. Based on that, he knew it had been at least half a day and that he was safe.

On the heels of that thought was the realization that he had actually done it. Voldemort was dead, he and Nim were both still alive, and he could now live the life he wanted. If he had felt capable, he would have jumped out of the bed to do a jig.

With a few cautious movements, Harry catalogued his condition in more detail. His ankle and chest had the tight feeling of still-healing tissues, and overall he felt very sore and totally exhausted. He knew that he should feel jubilant but was instead feeling somewhat detached.

For all that, he knew he was fortunate. It is not every day that you defeat a dark lord and live to tell the tale, after all. One was bound to come through such a thing a little the worse for wear.

His movements had apparently awakened Nim, for she stirred and opened her eyes. A smile blossomed. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," he croaked before letting out a cough.

Twisting around in her chair toward a small table, she prepared a glass of water for him.

After a few sips and swishing the water around his mouth, he gingerly leaned back until he was resting on the pillows again. Even that small effort had exhausted him. "What happened?" he asked in a whisper.

"First, I know you got Malfoy, and what's left of Voldemort's body was found. Did anything else happen that I should know about?"

"Yeah, Grandfather -" Harry's face crumpled as it came crashing down on him that he had lost yet another member of his family.

Nim's voice was sad, "We suspected as much; he hasn't been seen since. We can have some sort of memorial for him after we're out of here."

Harry took a few deep breaths to regain control. "Yeah, a memorial sounds good.

"The short version of the fight is that Grandfather saved me. I was dueling Riddle, but I couldn't crack his shield. I really wish you'd been there to help; maybe together we could've got him. Anyway, nothing I tried was enough.

"Grandfather showed up at the last moment, and Riddle turned to duel him for a while. I ran him through with the sword just as he finished an exorcism spell. Grandfather said he'd fulfilled the reason he'd stayed, so he was crossing over anyway." Harry took another breath and locked the grief away to deal with later. "What happened after I blacked out? I saw figures running towards me but don't remember anything after that."

She accepted the change of subject. "Dobby is far sneakier than you suspected. He knew that the ministry was already doing things and couldn't help us immediately. Instead he went to Remus at dawn or so. Remus gave Poppy quite a fight, but she convinced him that he wasn't in any condition to go running off to your rescue, so he did the next best thing: He contacted Auror Drake.

"Chris went to Bones and told her that he wanted to help and that he had more forces at his disposal. The timing must've worked out because she had just got your message. After she gave him the location and password, he got volunteers from the Potter Labor Pool. Nearly scared the over watch aurors out of their britches, I heard, and then they stormed the place."

Harry snorted at the irony. "I felt someone trip one of my Alarm Wards. Thought it was more deez, so I was trying to find a window to escape through."

She laughed. "Nope, just a rescue squad of werewolves. Once they secured the place, Chris called the aurors in. They brought the Portkey Ward down during their investigation. My Portkey sent me to the Keep right on time. Mum reversed your transfiguration and sent me here immediately. We're in St. Mungo's, if you haven't figured that out already."

Harry nodded. "So how are you? And me?"

She frowned and looked down at herself in annoyance.

Harry followed her gaze and saw her left leg was wrapped in some sort of livid purple material. He laughed, though his chest rebelled at it.

She blinked at him, looking hurt.

"Let me guess," he said, hand on his sore chest. "You insisted on that color, didn't you?"

She looked blankly at him. "Huh?"

"Muggle kids get to pick the color of their cast if they have a broken bone," Harry explained.

She looked down at her leg again. "That is something I'd choose, isn't it?" She grinned up at him. "Naw, it comes this way. Something about the poultice in it. Healer says it's at least another day until all the damage is fixed." She frowned. "I'm not allowed to morph until then. Well, I can do the hair and face, but it's easier to remember if I don't do anything."

Harry nodded. "I'm not complaining, but I'd wondered why you didn't change when you woke up."

Still looking disgruntled, she nodded. "Yeah, healer's orders. It wasn't any fun to morph to my base form after I woke up, I can tell you. All those bones sticking out while I'm trying to change shape." She shuddered, and Harry felt ill just considering it.

"Anyway, other than the leg, I'm okay. They revived me from the stasis without a problem. *You* on the other hand have been unconscious for a day and a half since I woke up."

"Really? I was hurt that badly?"

"No, but you were magically exhausted. The healers kept you asleep so you could get your energy back up. Besides, on the advice of Madam Pomfrey, it was easier to heal your wounds when you were unconscious. Something about not being able to keep you in bed."

Harry tried not to grin. "I'll be sure to properly thank her next time I see her."

She rolled her eyes. "I know you're finding it secretly funny. Anyway, Chris moved you here as fast as he safely could and called in more aurors to take care of the prisoners, investigate the scene, and all that. Bones showed up right quick, so everything was taken care of properly. The Portkeys we put on them made 'em easier to find. I don't know why they didn't find me."

"You were hidden better. Remember how many fallen branches were in that yard?"

She laughed. "Pretty good, Potter, pretty good."

"Anyway, the aurors found the bushes and tunnel easily enough once they went outside. They already sent that tunnel back to the Unspeakables."

"The Daily Prophet heard about all the raids and arrests. They're asking a lot of questions about Voldemort that nobody's able to answer, since you're the only one who knows, and you've been unconscious."

She paused to think. "You know, maybe Poppy made her suggestion to spare you all the hoopla."

"In that case, maybe I *will* properly thank her next time I see her."

"Funny. As I was saying, all Bones and Abbott will say is that you did indeed kill Voldemort. Aunt Cissy tells me that I and especially you have been invited to so many parties and awards ceremonies that she's had to place a notice in the Prophet that you're still incapacitated and can't attend anything."

Harry looked around the small room. Aside from the squashy chair that Nim was in and a table containing his wand and armor, it was bare. "I imagine Dumbledore, Abbott, the Prophet, and most of the magical world wants to come in here and demand some answers. How'd you manage to keep me out of their claws?"

She smiled widely. "Remember that it was a bunch of werewolves that rescued you? Well, it seems that they feel indebted to you for giving them a way out of poverty that didn't involve becoming a criminal. Add to that Remus being something of an unofficial leader and Bones and Chris Drake's vocal backing . . . Well, you've had two werewolf guards for your room since you got in here."

Harry laughed. "Nice to have some guardian wolves."

She nodded. "And nobody but nobody wants to cross them. There are a couple auror guards on the floor, too, but it's the werewolves everyone is afraid of."

"That's sad, but not all that surprising."

She shrugged and continued. "At his insistence, Remus was moved here from the Hogwarts Infirmary. He's next door. So, are you ready to see your healer?"

Harry sighed. "I suppose. Once I'm sprung, I just want to go home and sleep."

Nim waved her wand at the door, and it sprang open. A man several years older than she poked his head in. Upon seeing Harry, he broke into a

smile. "Ah, he's awake!" He advanced and stuck out his hand. "Good afternoon, sir. I'm Rob Drake."

Harry leaned forward and took his hand for a moment before falling back on his bed. "Auror Drake's brother?"

Drake nodded. "That's me. On behalf of all of us, I want to thank you for everything you've done."

Harry nodded. He was uncomfortable with the praise but knew that it had just begun.

"So, what can I do for you?" Drake went on.

Nim spoke up, "Could you find Healer McKinney?"

Drake inclined his head in acknowledgement and left, gently shutting the door.

Nim leaned over to give Harry a quick kiss before she struggled to her feet, quietly cursing the protective wrapping on her leg. She grabbed a familiar serpent-headed cane before hobbling toward the door. "Oh, you might be amused to know that Rob seems to have a crush on Remus if the looks and growls are anything to go by." She turned at the door to see Harry's bemused grin. "I'll leave you to enjoy the visit with your healer. If McKinney allows it, the press gets you after that. I'll come back in and rescue you in two hours. Bye."

She was through the door before he gathered himself enough to shout, "Nim!"

Her laughter was the only response.

"Help," he whined into the empty room with a resigned sigh.

Days later, with the recently released Remus and Tonks flanking him, Harry entered the spectator area of the auror academy's dueling chamber. Because this was the finals of the Hogwarts Dueling Tournament, the seating area had been expanded several times and now contained all of Hogwarts' student body, a large public gallery, and a strong contingent from the ministry.

He moved toward a spot with the senior Gryffindors, but Flitwick waved him toward some empty seats among the teachers. When Harry looked dubiously at the seats, McGonagall repeated the invitation. Giving in, Harry gingerly took a seat amongst his former professors. Remus was warmly welcomed by those near him, but Nim looked as uncomfortable as Harry.

Snape, to Harry's disgust, was also present, though he ignored the newcomers.

McGonagall said, "Relax, Harry. We won't bite."

Shack leaned forward from the row behind him. "Indeed not. We'll leave that to Dora."

A startled moment of silence was broken by Flitwick, who broke into surprisingly deep laughter.

Harry caught the smirk on Nim's face before he shook his head in resignation and relaxed.

Amelia Bones stood at the podium in front of the spectator seating and announced, "Thank you all for coming to the finals of the student dueling tournament!"

Once the applause trailed off, Bones smiled and said, "Once we at the ministry learned of this tournament, we asked to host the championship rounds, which Headmaster Dumbledore graciously allowed."

"Both Minister Abbott and I are gratified at the large turnout, especially among the general public."

"For the senior students, I'd like to take this moment to inform you of a new program that will be starting this coming summer. It's a pre-auror training camp, for lack of a better description. We'll give the participants a taste of auror training. It's intended especially for those who may be looking at the Auror Corps as a possible career after graduation, and all who attend will have an opportunity to hone their skills and learn a few new ones. More information will be available later."

Harry could see a fair amount of interest being expressed by many of his classmates.

Apparently satisfied with the reaction her words had generated, Bones continued, "But enough of that; we're here to finish the tournament. Professor Shacklebolt has told me that the past weeks have whittled down the field to eight competitors." She looked down at a parchment in front of her. "Miss Katie Bell is a seventh year Gryffindor. Miss Cho Chang is a seventh year Ravenclaw and this year's Head Girl. Miss Hermione Granger is a sixth year Gryffindor and the introductory information says that she will be taking over a new position next academic year, that of a Roving Security Prefect. Baron Neville Longbottom is a sixth year Gryffindor. Miss Padma Patil is a sixth year Ravenclaw and next year's Head Girl. Miss Ginny Weasley is the youngest competitor to make it this far and is a fifth year Gryffindor. Ron Weasley is a sixth year Gryffindor. And Lynda Yates is a seventh year Slytherin."

Bones paused as more cheers went up; there was a particularly loud group of redheads in the public gallery, Harry noted with amusement.

"Our referee for these duels will be Dueling Master and Senior Auror Dueling Instructor Mike Banks. Lots were drawn earlier for the order of competition. Our first duel this morning will be Miss Chang versus Baron Longbottom."

As the two competitors stepped to the dueling platform, Kingsley leaned over to Harry and whispered, "I saw your training in all of these kids, Harry."

"Thank you for that." In a louder voice, he asked, "How have you been?"

The conversation flowed around the group, touching on the Death Eaters only long enough for Harry to assure those around him that everyone he had captured was indeed in prison and awaiting trial or sentencing.

At one point, McGonagall asked Harry what his plans were. After a moment's thought, he admitted to being interested in teaching and eventually the Headmaster's position. "Though not for quite a few years yet. I still have to do my N.E.W.T.s!"

Nim tried to hide in Harry's shadow, surprising all who knew her. She merely answered the questions directed at her, and indicated that she had been offered her old auror position again but that she had not made a decision. A sideways glance at Harry caused raised eyebrows and smirks from Kingsley, Remus, Minerva, and Sprout.

Hagrid gave a booming laugh. "Careful there, 'Arry. I think she's got 'er eye on a differen' job!"

Harry refused to be visibly embarrassed by the implications, instead smiling and throwing a wink at the suddenly flustered Tonks.

Remus easily conversed with the professors around him, though he and Snape did their level best to ignore each other. When asked, he said simply that he would help Harry finish his education and then perhaps take over the Potter Labor Pool.

Nim watched the tournament intently, making an occasional aside to Harry about ideas for his continued training.

Harry kept only a loose eye on the tournament, keeping track of how his friends were doing. Hermione lost to Neville when she spent all of her time *analyzing* and not enough time *doing*. Ron, after confidently strutting up to the stage, had had his head handed to him by Lynda, causing a massive cheer from the Slytherin students. Ginny lost to Katie, though it was clearly a case of age and magical stamina winning the day for the older witch.

When Padma beat Katie with her larger selection of spells, the tournament was down to two contestants, Padma and Neville.

Bones announced a break while the two student competitors recuperated from their previous duels.

Flitwick, resplendent in the bright red formal robes of a Dueling Master, made his way over to Harry. "Lord Gryffindor, how are you enjoying the tournament?"

Harry looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "'Lord Gryffindor' is it, Dueling Master Flitwick?"

Flitwick's lip twitched. "Anyone who defeated Voldemort deserves respect."

Harry sighed. "We were on a first name basis not so long ago. Just because I put down a rabid animal doesn't mean you should treat me any differently."

Snape, studiously not looking at them, uttered a disgusted snort.

Flitwick frowned at Snape, but turned to Harry with his characteristic smile back in place. "Very well, Harry. How are you enjoying the tournament?"

"It's been interesting to watch. Nice to see everyone doing well. I'm especially glad that Neville has finally gotten the confidence to become the great wizard I knew was in there."

Snape gave a louder snort.

Flitwick ignored him. Instead, he looked speculatively at Harry. "Miss Patil is a difficult opponent. Her range of spells is most impressive."

Harry nodded. "True, however I think that Neville can take her so long as he keeps his head."

"Would you care for a friendly wager on that?"

Harry laughed. "Defending the honor of Ravenclaw House, Professor?"

"You're defending your lion, Lord Gryffindor, so it seems only fair," Filius returned cheerfully.

"Touché," Harry acknowledged with a grin. "Very well. Hmm. How about dinner and drinks at the Three Broomsticks?"

"Done," Flitwick agreed. "And let the best house win."

Harry shook the professor's hand to seal the bet. "Best? Even biased as I am, I can hardly claim that Gryffindor is the *best*. Each has its own advantages."

"This is becoming nauseating," Snape drawled.

Harry held his tongue, but Tonks saw no reason to do the same. "Then leave," she suggested bluntly. "I'd think you'd be happy to hear the Lord Gryffindor isn't bad mouthing Slytherin House, Snape, but if you can't get past the fact that it's *Harry Potter* doing so -"

Snape cut her off brusquely. "He is only saying it to look good to the mutton-headed buffoons who lap up his every word."

"Including me?" Filius asked blandly.

There was a tense silence for a few moments before Harry said, "Believe it or not as you will, Snape, but I do have an appreciation for the so-called Slytherin outlook on life. I couldn't have survived this last week without embracing my inner Slytherin."

"I'm well aware you're embracing the Slytherin warming your bed, Potter," he said with a sneer and disgusted look at Tonks. "You don't have to dress it up in pretty words in some feeble attempt to sound clever."

Tonks's hair was a red so bright that Harry almost expected it to burst into flame.

Harry sighed loudly and turned to McGonagall. "Minerva, how's the term been to you and my old House?"

Snape adopted a smug expression, seemingly convinced he had won the argument.

"Give it up, Severus," Professor Sprout suggested curtly.

Snape ignored her.

Minerva's narrow-eyed gaze at Snape shifted to Harry and softened considerably. "Very well, thank you for asking, Harry. I agree with you about Mr. Longbottom, by the by. A few years of proper Defense teachers encouraging him - spotty as *that* has been - has done wonders for the young man's confidence."

They were all saved from the escalating tension when Bones announced the beginning of the final duel.

Neville and Padma bowed to each other, the referee, and the audience. Wands at the ready, they waited for the signal to begin.

Banks's wand came up, and a sharp crack sounded.

The air between the two combatants immediately lit up in a bright, multi-colored display.

Padma was clearly startled by Neville's all-out attack and tried to dodge or shield herself from his onslaught, but her shield did not survive the relentless barrage. He broke through and then caught her with a Stunning Spell.

"Baron Longbottom wins the duel," the referee announced, blinking.

Neville, breathing heavily, smiled and looked over toward the public gallery.

Harry was the first to stand and begin clapping. He was only a moment ahead of McGonagall and the students of Gryffindor House. Quickly or slowly, or in some cases grudgingly, all of the remaining spectators also came to their feet.

Some time later, after most of the spectators had left and the room was dwindling down to merely "crowded", Harry was awaiting his turn to congratulate Neville. He hoped to escape before the Prophet reporter, who was interviewing everyone she could, tried to corner him again.

Shack was telling Harry how his time at Hogwarts had been going when both men's heads snapped around at the suddenly raised voices.

"*You* were not the one who taught me to duel," Neville stated flatly, glaring at Snape. The former Defense professor was standing in front of the Prophet reporter.

Snape sputtered for a moment. "What? Then who? Was it Quirrell, Umbridge, or that fraud Lockhart? Certainly it couldn't have been the werewolf."

"Professor Lupin was our best *official* Defense instructor, but I was referring to Harry."

"Don't be ridiculous. Potter couldn't teach a Hufflepuff blind loyalty."

His contemptuous statement generated frosty glares from every Hufflepuff in the room, including Minister Abbot, Amelia Bones, and Professor Sprout.

Cho stepped forward and stated, "Harry taught us far more in the D.A. part time last year than you did in class this year."

Snape just scoffed.

Hermione spoke up from her place among the students talking to Amelia. "We continued the D.A. this year. Due to your appalling teaching methods, we were forced to fend for ourselves. That's why many of us did well in the tournament, not to mention surviving the attack on Hogwarts. Harry's D.A. and protection gave us the opportunity that you denied us."

Snape glared at both girls. "Of course you would come to the defense of the Gryffindor Golden Boy. Much as it nauseates me, I suspect that you fantasize about him as well."

Terry shook his head sadly. "You just don't get it, do you? He taught us. You never actually *taught* anything in Defense or Potions. We did better reading the book and practicing on our own than listening to you."

Snape's glare had lost none of its venom since losing his position. "Foolish children. You know nothing."

Harry dryly asked, "You were just giving an interview praising their knowledge and taking the credit for it, weren't you?" It was a guess, but it was apparently correct.

"Shut up, fool," Snape snapped back. "I was saying that their dueling was impressive. They're clearly delusional as to who pounded that knowledge into their feeble minds."

Kingsley, still standing near Harry, said, "Give up, Snape. You're making a fool of yourself."

"You have no authority over me, Shackbolt."

Shack shrugged. "You're right, but that doesn't make what I'm saying any less true." Shackbolt's even tone carried easily through the otherwise silent room.

"Would you idiots accept my superiority over him if I were to beat your precious savior in a duel? Would that make you all see reason?"

Dumbledore finally entered the conversation. "Severus, please calm yourself."

Snape turned and spat out, "Stay out of this, Albus. It's between me and your Golden Boy, here." He turned and sneered. "How about it, Potter? Up for a duel, or are you still too *tired* after the Dark Lord was all so mysteriously defeated?"

"Why should I duel you?" Harry asked, refusing to lose his composure.

"Why? *Why?* So I can prove I'm better, you imbecile, that's why!"

Harry shook his head. "I reject the challenge."

"You cannot refuse. I demand a duel or your honor is forfeit!"

"I have no cause to duel you. I refuse the duel."

"You concede? You acknowledge that you're my inferior?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No, I'm saying that I refuse to participate in this ridiculous attempt to feed your overblown ego."

Snape, his expression radiating hatred, started to bring his wand up.

He stopped when Nim's wand came level with his eyes. Her seething demeanor was more than enough warning. Shack and Remus also had their wands out. To Amelia and Marcus Abbott's surprise, most of the students were also pointing their wands at Snape.

The former spy slowly returned his wand to its sheath. "Hiding behind your woman and pet werewolf, Potter?" he sneered.

Harry sighed and turned his head, saying, "Congratulations on winning the tournament, Neville. Please owl me over the summer. I think we have several stories to tell each other."

Neville, eyes pulled from the fuming Snape, nodded sharply. "Thank you. I'll do that, Harry."

"Amelia. Minister. Good day." He turned and strode calmly toward the exit. Remus and Tonks fell into flanking positions, keeping their full attention on Snape.

"That's right, *Gryffindor*," Snape ground out with palpable hatred. "Scurry away instead of facing me like a true wiz-"

His continuing rant was lost behind the closing door.

Severus Snape never got the duel he wanted. He spent the remainder of his life brewing potions for the darker of the pure-blood families, eventually dying an angry, bitter, and minor footnote to the history of Harry Potter and Tom Riddle.

After Harry passed his N.E.W.T. exams, he proposed to Nim. She responded by dragging him onto a muggle airplane, flying them to Las Vegas in the United States, and getting married within an hour of landing. Andy and Cissy were not amused. Ted later, and very privately, told Nim that her method was probably a good idea, though he was not entirely pleased with her actions either. The Potter-Gryffindor-Blacks had three children, one to inherit each of the three family names.

Nim went back to work for the D.M.L.E., eventually becoming a senior instructor at the auror academy.

Dumbledore and Harry reconciled their strained relationship to some degree. They never became close, but they were at least cordial. Dumbledore never pushed for more than that, recognizing that he was the primary cause of the original problem.

When Laura turned eleven, Shack quit teaching (having broken the curse on the position) and returned to the Auror Corps. He retired seventy years later as Director of the D.M.L.E.

Harry took over the vacant D.A.D.A. professorship, moving up to Head of Gryffindor House a few years later when Dumbledore retired and Minerva took his position. Despite his initial guess that he would want to become Headmaster, Harry found the administrative side of academia too tedious and left after ten years of teaching when his eldest child began attending Hogwarts.

Harry stayed active in the Wizengamot but left the political maneuvering to Andy, Cissy, and their political allies. Neville and Hannah Longbottom, Padma Patil, Hermione Granger-Entwhistle, and the unlikely team of Percy Weasley and Blaise Zabini worked together with Harry's family to create a large power block that eventually broke the pureblood supremacist stranglehold on wizarding politics.

Neville was elected Minister of Magic, succeeding his father-in-law, and stayed in that position for thirty years. He was the second minister in a row to rule for decades and still be popular when he left public office. His successor, a muggleborn named Jessica Hale, served even longer.

Remus took over the Potter Labor Pool, making it the leading company in its field. There were rumors of a romantic attachment for him, but nothing was ever made public.

With the wild success of his first business ventures, Harry ended up providing start-up money for dozens of businesses across the magical U.K., breaking the pure-blood lock on most of the magical economy. Laura Shacklebolt went on to produce magical musical instruments, Lavender Brown started a cosmetics line, and Ginny Weasley started a fashion magazine that rivaled Teen Witch Weekly. All these and more owed their start to P.G.B. Investment Company.

More would-be dark lords tried to make a go of it in England, but Amelia and then Kingsley led the aurors in dismantling the rising movements before they became serious problems. Equal rights for muggleborns and steadily increasing rights for goblins, werewolves, house-elves, centaurs, vampires, veela, and all the other sentient species eventually spelled the doom of any movement based on pureblood elitism or racism.

At the age of two-hundred and eleven and surrounded by his large family, Lord-Baron Harry Potter-Gryffindor-Black died peacefully in his bed two minutes after his wife had started her next great adventure.