

The Unknown Power Mid July to Early September

Coming through a cloud that left yet another layer of cold moisture upon his body, Harry Potter gave a relieved smile. The reason for such an unlikely reaction was simple: the Burrow had just come into view below them.

Just like the previous year, a detachment from the Order of the Phoenix had shown up at his uncle's home and spirited him off into the night. Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody led a group that included Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt and Remus Lupin. Harry didn't recognise the rest of the half-dozen witches and wizards. The Order had clearly been recruiting.

Giving a hand signal to the other broomstick riders, Remus led Harry toward the front door, Moody in close pursuit. The rest of the ad hoc group landed a short distance away, outside of the new Anti-Apparition Wards, and Disapparated after a quick wave.

Harry helped Remus retrieve his trunk, which was suspended from Lupin's broom, while Moody studied the surrounding land intently. As the three wizards approached the door, it swung open and Mrs. Weasley approached, arms wide open in invitation.

"Harry!" she greeted her de facto seventh son, burying him in a massive hug. Remus received a similar welcome, but Moody got merely a nod and a smile. That was probably just as well. Harry didn't want to contemplate what the paranoid, grizzled old Auror would do if he were on the business end of one of Molly Weasley's ferocious hugs.

"Come in, come in," she bid the three. "Warm yourselves in the front room. Go ahead and drop that trunk there. Hot tea in half a moment."

After dropping his trunk and broom in the indicated corner, Harry stiffly made his way into the living room of the Burrow, shucking his sopping wet cloak in the process. Once there, his smile blossomed as he spotted his best friend.

"Blimey, Harry," Ron said with a grin. "I think you missed a spot there. Part of your back is still dry."

Harry groaned as he spread his cloak in front of the fireplace. "In case you didn't notice, it's kinda raining right now."

Remus snorted in humour as he spread his cloak near Harry's. "That's not rain, Harry. That's called a thunderstorm. Repeat after me. Thunderstorm."

Harry looked at Remus in mild amusement. "Just because you were named my guardian, Remus, doesn't mean that you can treat me as a child."

"Sure he can," Ginny corrected him cheerfully as she came down the stairs. "It's his parental prerogative."

"Thank you ever so much for the support, Ginny," Harry said in mock aggravation as Remus gave her a grateful bow.

She smiled and curtsied back to her one-time professor.

"So how's your summer been, Harry?" Ron asked carefully.

Remus and Ginny also paused what they were doing to hear the answer to Ron's question. Harry had been corresponding with many people, but nobody was quite sure of his emotional state after losing his godfather in the running battle in June.

Harry sighed as he rubbed his hands in front of the fire. "Better, Ron, better," he finally murmured, staring into the dancing flames. "Thank you for the letters. They really did help."

"No problem, mate," Ron said softly.

Ginny was the only one to hear him. She gave her brother a smile as their mother came out of the kitchen.

"Tea is ready, everyone," she invited.

Harry let everyone else get ahead before falling into line behind Ginny. "Thank you, too, Ginny," he said quietly. "I've been thinking on the advice you gave me."

She smiled back at him, but it was brittle.

Entering the kitchen, Harry saw Moody talking to Lupin for a moment before Mad-Eye walked out after a sharp nod toward Harry.

Remus moved around the table to hold a chair out for Ginny beside where Harry had already seated himself.

Smiling at the courtesy, Ginny primly sat down before turning to her brother. "See how that's done, Ron?"

"Whazzat?" Ron asked, looking up from his tea and a biscuit.

"Holding the chair for the girl," she patiently explained. "You could learn something about how to treat Hermione."

Ron sputtered for a few seconds before regaining use of his tongue. "What makes you think -"

"Oh, give it up, Ron," Harry said in exasperation.

Ron, for his part, clamped his mouth shut and refused to respond to the teasing.

"And you," Ginny rounded on the snickering Harry, "should be paying attention as well."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied with a gleam in his eye. "I'm taking mental notes on how to properly treat a lady, never fear."

"What's this?" Remus asked, accepting a mug from Molly with a smile.

"Ginny has been giving me girl advice all summer," Harry explained.

"He refuses to tell me who he's interested in, though," Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

"It's not Cho again, is it?" Ron asked in trepidation.

"No, it's not," Harry assured him. "It IS someone you know, though."

Ron frowned slightly for a moment, clearly running through a list of Hogwarts students in his mind. "Who -"

He stopped at Harry's raised hand. "That's all I'm going say for now about it. If I decide to do something about it, I promise that you'll be among the first to know."

"So long as it isn't Pansy," Ron teased.

Harry snapped his fingers in disappointment. "Darn, you've figured us out."

Ron looked horrified. Ginny started coughing after she attempted to swallow and laugh simultaneously.

Harry rolled his eyes as he patted Ginny on the back. "Relax, Ron. It isn't a Slytherin."

Ron breathed a sigh of relief before going back to his biscuit.

Remus and Molly shared a smile.

A pop sounded behind Harry, startling him into drawing his wand, standing and aiming at the unexpected noise so quickly that his chair fell over backwards. At that, he beat Remus by less than a second and Ron and Ginny by little more than that.

Albus Dumbledore blinked at the four wands suddenly pointed at him. "Pleasant afternoon, all," he calmly said.

"Merlin, Albus, don't do that to me," Remus muttered, slowly lowering his wand.

"I thought there were Anti-Apparition Wards up," Ron frowned, also stowing his wand.

"Indeed," Dumbledore cheerfully agreed, completely ignoring the fact that he'd just gone through them.

Relaxing, everyone reclaimed their seats, Molly bustling off to get another mug and more biscuits for her newest guest.

Dumbledore took a seat and studied Harry over the top of his glasses. "Hello, Harry."

"Headmaster," Harry coolly replied.

Dumbledore sighed. "So you still have not forgiven an old man his mistakes?"

Harry shrugged. "Not totally, sir. But I am getting better. Nothing is broken yet, after all."

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "Forgiveness is a long process, and I suppose I should be thankful for where we are."

Harry didn't reply to Dumbledore's words, just shaking his head at Ron's questioning look.

"I see you have not explained all of the events to your friends."

Harry's eyes hardened. "Last summer you made it abundantly clear how dangerous putting anything sensitive into owl post was. I just got here. I haven't had a chance to speak with them about it yet."

Dumbledore said nothing, simply looking at Harry.

"I don't believe you want to be present for that, Headmaster," Harry calmly advised.

Molly sucked in a breath.

Dumbledore immediately raised a hand to her, and she stilled. "He is most likely correct. I have not been without fault in the past year in regards to young Harry here," he acknowledged.

Harry didn't react. Everyone else settled back down, Ron and Ginny with frowns of confusion.

"For what it may be worth, Harry, I do apologise for my behavior towards you for the past year. I believe I explained my reasoning to you?"

"Yes you did," Harry acknowledged, stopping there.

Apparently knowing he wouldn't be getting any further on that front for now, Dumbledore said, "I came for several purposes. First, to learn how your summer has progressed."

He shrugged. "Not too bad. Moody scared Uncle Vernon enough that they all left me alone. You all probably noticed that I was a much more active correspondent than usual. I've even got all of my summer homework finished already, even though I don't know what courses I'm going to be taking for sure."

Ron looked genuinely horrified. Remus smiled.

Nodding, Dumbledore continued, "Secondarily, I have your OWL results." He reached up and appeared to pull two envelopes out of thin air, handing one to Harry and the other to Ron. "Your Astronomy marks took into account the . . . distraction. Harry, you are permitted to re-take the History of Magic exam if you wish due to the circumstances."

When neither boy moved to open the envelopes (Ron was examining his with a decidedly frightened expression), Dumbledore continued, "On to my third topic: What you called the Defense Association. Would you perchance be willing to continue that into the next school year?"

Harry nodded. He'd already thought this subject through and knew what he wanted out of it. "With a few conditions, yes, sir. I need an open pass into the Restricted Section for myself and Hermione to do research for the classes." At Dumbledore's grudging agreement, Harry continued, "I would also like some sort of official status for the DA."

"It will be an officially sanctioned club," the headmaster assured Harry.

Ron and Ginny shook their heads. "Harry should get at least prefect status for teaching it," Ginny stated.

Dumbledore thought about it for a moment. "There have been times in Hogwarts history when a student was granted the title of Associate Professor when they assisted a full Professor. If you are willing, we could make your Defense Association an adjunct to the Defense Against Dark Arts class. Officially, you would be under the direction of that professor."

"Depends on who that professor is," Harry hedged, remembering most of his previous DADA professors with something less than affection.

The twinkle came back into Dumbledore's eyes. "I do not believe you will have any issues working for this individual, though I will not reveal their identity for the moment. Contingent on your acceptance of the Defense Against Dark Arts professor, do you agree to these terms?"

"I have sole and absolute say on who is allowed to join and who is not, fourth years and up only, and they all must sign a magically binding club loyalty contract," Harry stated, not wanting a repeat of the Marietta situation from last year or, even worse, Malfoy to join.

Dumbledore clearly wasn't happy with the conditions but agreed without comment after a few more seconds. "Lastly, I wish to discuss your Occlumency lessons with you."

Harry sighed. He'd also expected this conversation, though he wasn't looking forward to it. Turning to Molly and Remus he said, "I have a hypothetical question for you two. If someone were to attempt to teach you sword fighting by handing you a sword, saying 'defend yourself', never giving you any more instruction than that, and then beating you senseless with his own sword over and over, how would you classify that teacher?"

Molly was glowering, but she didn't respond.

Remus had a raised eyebrow. "Very poor," he simply answered.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "There you have it, sir. Snape is a very poor Occlumency teacher."

Dumbledore frowned slightly. "Surely you have exaggerated -"

Harry shook his head firmly, cutting off Dumbledore. "'Clear your mind.' That is the ONLY instruction he ever gave me. Nothing on how to do it. Nothing on what he was doing or how to defend my mind. I'm convinced that his 'lessons' did more harm than good."

Molly Weasley looked ready to hex Snape the next time she saw him.

Remus was now looking angry. The sight of an angry werewolf made Harry very glad it wasn't him who was the source of his ire.

Dumbledore's voice was grave, "How have your dreams and visions been, Harry?"

"For the first three weeks, they were awful," he answered bluntly.

Dumbledore and Lupin nodded, already knowing this.

"After that point, I discovered another . . . mental technique that helped. The visions have been manageable since then."

"What is this technique, if I may ask?"

Harry chewed on a lip. "It's somewhat personal, sir. I'd prefer not to discuss it."

"Very well," Dumbledore answered after a short pause. "In that case, I find myself somewhat at a loss with regards on how to shield your mind from Voldemort. There is no other Occlumency teacher available at this time."

Harry didn't blink, simply staring at Dumbledore. "As you say, sir." For a few moments, nobody quite knew how to respond to Harry's words.

Remus hesitantly spoke up, "It's not a perfect solution, but I can teach you some meditation techniques, Harry." At Harry's surprised look, he continued, "With my . . . condition, I need to stay calm. My father was a Muggle and he helped me learn some Muggle methods for keeping my emotions under control. Maybe the same thing will help you."

"Thank you, Remus," Harry said with a genuine smile. He frowned in curiosity. "You're Muggle-born?"

Remus shook his head. "Half and half."

"Very well," Dumbledore agreed. "Remus, I believe it would be a good idea for you to teach Harry those Muggle meditation techniques. Perhaps between his mysterious technique and meditation, Occlumency will not be needed."

Remus nodded his agreement.

Dumbledore stood. "Molly, thank you for the tea. Do have a happy birthday next week, Harry. I shall see you at Headquarters tomorrow, Remus?" Getting Lupin's agreement, Dumbledore Disapparated.

"No, I don't have any questions," Harry grumbled under his breath, so low that even Remus's advanced hearing didn't catch it.

Remus took a sip of his tea, studying the envelopes in front of Ron and Harry. "Are you two going to open those?"

Harry shrugged and opened his, totally unconcerned. He scanned down the page and announced, "Eight. 'O' with merit in Defense. 'O' in Charms and Potions. 'E' in Transfiguration and Creatures. 'A' in Astronomy and Herbology. 'P' in Divination. 'D' in History."

The room broke into a babble of Weasley voices.

Harry calmly folded the note and tucked it back into the envelope.

Remus was studying him in interest. "You don't seem all that excited or concerned, Harry," his guardian commented, voice barely audible to the young man sitting next to him.

Harry shrugged. "Nothing I can do to alter them now. Why get excited about it?"

"Albus said you could re-take the History one," Remus mentioned.

"Why bother? What Binns teaches is a total waste anyway. If he covered the First War or Grindelwald, then I'd pay attention, but the endless Goblin Rebellions are useless to me. I'm not going to fight a goblin. I'm going to fight a dark wizard."

The Weasleys had quieted down, listening to Harry and Lupin. Everyone became silent after Harry's last statement, calm though it was.

He looked around at the solemn faces and just barely managed to keep from rolling his eyes. "Ron, how'd you do?"

Taking his cue to change the subject, Ron reluctantly opened his envelope. Taking a deep breath, he pulled the parchment out and unfolded it, reading quickly. His face fell a bit. "Eight. 'O' in Defense and Creatures. 'E' in Charms and Potions. 'A' in Transfiguration, Astronomy, Herbology and History. 'P' in Divination."

"Well done, mate," Harry smiled. "Hermione will be proud of you."

"I didn't do as well as you, and I can't get into the Auror track now." Ron looked distressed at this, whereas his mother looked quietly relieved.

Harry ignored her reaction in favour of shrugging at Ron. "Think of it this way: You don't have to ever have Snape in class again."

Ron grinned slightly. "Nice try, Harry. I guess I'll just have to settle for being the Cannon's Keeper." Everyone laughed.

Molly spoke up, "For what it's worth, I am proud of both of you." She stood and hugged both boys.

"Thanks, Mum," Ron mumbled.

"Yeah, thanks, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said. "Just out of curiosity, Remus, how'd my parents and Sirius do?"

Remus smiled a bit as his mind traveled back in time. "James and Sirius were best in Transfiguration. Lily was a genius at Charms. You're better in Defense than any of them, though. You can't compare yourself to them, Harry. You're all individuals."

Harry nodded. "I know. I was just curious. I guess it makes sense that Dad and Sirius were good at Transfiguration."

Remus chuckled. "There is that. Your mother, on the other hand, was the best in the school at Charms. She was the brains behind one or two of the . . . items we produced."

Harry grinned, thinking of the Marauders Map.

Remus stood. "I'd best be going. I'll be back tomorrow morning to go over some legal stuff with you, Harry. We can also figure out a schedule for me to teach you meditation then. I'll leave you in Molly's capable hands until then and let you settle in, okay?" Seeing Harry's nod, he retrieved his cloak before walking out of the Burrow with a wave.

A comfortable silence fell upon the cosy kitchen, and Harry sighed, settling his hands around his teacup.

"Hi, Harry. How's your summer been?" Ginny asked cheerfully.

Harry turned his head and grinned at the small redhead. "Pretty quiet until Moody and his rescue squad showed up this morning. Thank you for asking."

"Have you had lunch?" Molly asked abruptly, realizing that Harry would have been traveling though lunchtime.

He waved her off. "Not all that hungry, honestly." At her scowl, he explained, "We stopped and had a bite to eat when Moody thought he saw a Roc flying ahead of us."

"How was your flight?" Ron asked.

"Cold and wet," Harry said succinctly.

Molly darted forward to check Harry for fever.

Harry sighed and looked to the two younger Weasleys in the room.

Ginny hid a grin behind taking a sip of her tea. Ron didn't bother to hide his.

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"Harry, can I talk with you?" Ginny asked hesitantly after Remus had left late the next morning.

"Sure," Harry agreed distractedly, head still spinning with all the information Remus had just given him. More guardianship papers, meditation tutoring, and new Prongs and Padfoot stories all fought for attention in his mind.

Seeing that Harry wasn't paying complete attention to her, she took his unresisting elbow and drew him toward the door. "We'll be near the paddock," she told her mother on the way out the back door.

Harry fully became aware of his surroundings again after Ginny had sat him down in the field and was leaning against a nearby tree, studying him. He looked around at his new surroundings for a moment before smiling up at her. "Kidnapping me so you can have your way with me, Miss Weasley?" he asked, tone somewhere between teasing and nervous.

Raising an eyebrow at his blatant teasing, she grinned back as much as her shock allowed. "In your dreams, Harry."

Harry mumbled something that she didn't hear.

"No," she answered the question instead of pursuing whatever it was he'd said. "I came out here to ask how you're really doing. You may be able to fool Mum and Professor Dumbledore, but you're not fooling me."

Harry sighed. "I AM frustrated with Dumbledore," he acknowledged.

She was momentarily surprised, expecting more of a fight.

"Surprised I admitted anything?" he asked with a grin. "Yeah. I decided early in the summer that I would try to hold fewer secrets. That reminds me, when we get back to school, I need to talk with all of you about the prophecy."

"You're frustrated with Dumbledore?" she prompted, sinking into a sitting position, laying aside the prophecy discussion for later.

"You didn't notice how he treated me yesterday? I don't blame you, really. It was pretty subtle." He started ticking items off on his fingers. "Making me out to be the guilty party for not having forgiven him for what happened last year. Why did he bother to ask how my summer was? You know that the Order had a bodyguard on me all summer, so he already knows how my summer went. Never one word about losing Sirius, despite how much he knows Sirius meant to me. He was expecting me to resume my Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape, despite how he knows Snape and I feel about each other. Once I made it clear how Snape treated me, did he bother to apologise for Snape's actions? Did he offer to discipline him? Did he offer to teach me Occlumency himself? No, he just went on to the next item on his agenda. He also phrased the order to Remus, and it was an order instead of a request, to make it sound like the meditation thing was his idea all along instead of Remus's. I've recently realised how manipulative Dumbledore really is without appearing to be. This is all on TOP of his refusing to tell me anything at all last year." He paused for a moment. "That all makes it sound like I'm angry at him, doesn't it? I'm not, really. That's the only way I could explain how I feel. I guess a better way to explain it is that I'm upset that it's come to this . . . situation we find ourselves in."

Ginny's eyes were slightly wide. "But you seemed so civil with him."

He shrugged slightly. "Being rude or disobedient won't get me anywhere and would only make me look like a petty brat to everyone else. More importantly, though, I still need his help. He does control the Order and Hogwarts, and I will probably need both to help me beat Moldywart."

She nearly choked before laughing out loud. "'Moldywart'? Where did you come up with THAT?"

"I may disagree with some of the things that Dumbledore says and does, but I do agree with his stance on Voldemort's name. I like seeing that, by the way," he added.

She frowned momentarily, "Seeing what?"

"Your laugh," he said with a smile.

She blushed. "You're being quite forward, Mr. Potter."

"More open and honest, remember?" he asked with a nervous grin. "I got in trouble and very upset in June because I wasn't told things. I can't very well withhold information from those around me without being a huge hypocrite."

She studied him thoughtfully. "That bears some thought, Harry. On to the next topic, though. You and Professor Lupin seem to be getting along well."

"Yeah," Harry said quietly, gaze turning inward. His thoughts were not dark, however, as he kept a soft smile on his face. "We met at Mrs. Figg's house twice a week all summer. He says I helped him, and I know he helped me deal with Sirius's death. Don't get me wrong. The letters from you, Ron and Hermione helped, but to have someone else sitting RIGHT THERE who cared about him as much as I did helped a lot. In addition, at the beginning of the month, Professor Dumbledore got him named as my legal guardian."

"I'm glad you had someone there for you, Harry."

He nodded absently.

In a more upbeat tone, she went on, "Meanwhile, I do believe your birthday is on Wednesday, is it not?"

"Yes, I do believe it is," Harry acknowledged, shaking himself into a more cheerful mood.

"Care to toss some ideas out for us?"

His brow furrowed as he thought. His first inclination was to ask for nothing (he was hardly used to anyone recognizing his birthday, let alone giving him presents), but he knew that the Weasleys would insist on doing something for him whether he wanted them to or not. He studied the redhead in front of him for a moment before a sly grin slowly formed. "I have a few ideas. Give me a while to think about it?"

"Sure," she agreed, vaguely wondering what his expression meant.

"Say," he said suddenly, "when is your birthday? I don't remember anyone ever saying."

Her gaze fell to the grass and she absently picked a wildflower. "There's a reason for that." She didn't appear to want to elaborate, but she eventually got out, "After the twins got me a pink bunny toy for my fifth birthday, I don't like to celebrate it anymore."

"Granted that you're a bit old now for something like that, but what's wrong with a pink bunny rabbit for a five year old girl?" Harry asked.

"It sang lullabies," she grudgingly elaborated.

"I guess I still don't see the problem . . ." Harry trailed off with a questioning look.

She huffed in exasperation, resigned to telling the story. "Remember that singing get well card I gave you?"

Harry quickly suppressed the grin that the reminder provoked and calmly indicated that he recalled the item in question.

"I inherited a good singing voice compared to the twins." She let it sink in enough for Harry's eyes to widen before going on, "Add to that the fact that the bunny sang at high volume and climbed out of any box or closet I put it into in order to sing at my bedside."

Showing his Gryffindor mettle, he kept his composure. "Why didn't you get your parents or maybe Bill to shut it up?"

She groaned and her head fell backwards to the trunk of the tree she was leaning against. "It was also charmed to sing when I was the only one in the room."

Harry lost the fight with his wide grin at this point. "So anytime your Mum came into the room -"

"She couldn't figure out why I was losing sleep over this cute, stuffed bunny rabbit."

"Losing sleep?"

"Sang when I was the only one in the room, right? Even if that meant at three in the morning."

Harry started laughing aloud before another thought made him ask, "Wait a second, if it was so loud, why didn't anyone -"

"Did I forget to mention the Silencing Charms that the twins had somehow managed to put up around my room?"

Harry laughed until tears came into his eyes.

She smiled at him despite the humour at her expense. "I like seeing that."

Wiping his eyes, he asked, "What, my laughing?"

She nodded. "You don't do that nearly enough for a boy your age."

He sighed. "Not to put a damper on the conversation, but I have precious little to laugh about in my life just now."

"We'll just have to do something about that this year, won't we?"

He gave her a strange little smile that suddenly and inexplicably made her nervous.

Trying to change the subject, she asked, "What is this mental technique for stopping Moldywart's mental attacks that you didn't want to talk to Professor Dumbledore about?" When he hesitated, she hurried on, "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

He shook his head slowly. "No, actually I don't mind telling you about it." He took a breath and continued, "At the end of the fight at the Ministry, Voldemort possessed me briefly. I think he was trying to get Dumbledore to kill me. Anyway, what drove him out was when I thought about Sirius." His face fell.

"His death was NOT your fault!" Ginny said immediately.

Harry grimaced. "My brain knows that. Merlin knows you, Hermione and Ron beat that into my head all summer in your letters. I just need to convince my heart." He took a breath and continued, "Anyway, my thinking about Sirius is what drove Voldemort out of my mind."

Satisfied that she'd made her point about assigning blame for Sirius's death, she frowned at what he'd said. "Forgive how this sounds, but how would thinking about the godfather you had just watched getting killed drive him out of your mind?"

He nodded in agreement. "That was my thought, too. You'd think my agony would make him stronger, not drive him out. Dumbledore's theory was that it was my LOVE for Sirius that Voldemort couldn't stand. So this summer when my visions and his intrusions got bad, I tried an experiment. I thought about all the people I love. That seemed to help."

This piqued her interest. "Really?"

He nodded, now suddenly blushing and looking down. "Yep. Mum and Dad. Sirius. Your parents, and to a lesser extent Ron and Hermione."

A brief look of hurt flashed through her eyes, unseen by Harry. "More people love you than that, Harry," she whispered quietly but apparently not quietly enough. His suddenly piercing look caused her to stammer quickly, "Professor Lupin, for instance."

An identical look of hurt flitted across his features, unnoticed by the preoccupied witch. "Yeah," he agreed quietly. Shaking his head, he said, "You never answered my earlier question."

Just as glad to avoid such a treacherous conversation, she asked, "What question was that?"

"Your birthday?"

"Oh, that. August eleventh."

He perked up. "That's just two weeks from now!"

"Noticed that, did you?" she asked dryly.

"So what do YOU want for your birthday?"

She waved it off. "I don't celebrate it, remember? Don't get me anything."

All traces of humour fled from his expression, and he looked at her intently. "Some of the best things in life can't be purchased."

Very unsettled by his sudden change in demeanour, she stammered out, "What might those be?"

"Oh, a handmade gift, an action, a favour, something like that," he said quietly, still peering at her searchingly.

"If you feel that way, Harry, then maybe I won't get you anything tangible for your birthday," she tried to pass it off as light-hearted but was seriously unnerved by his attention.

He nodded slowly. "That would be fine."

"So have you decided what you would like for your birthday?" she asked, desperate to get out of the conversation that she didn't think she could control any longer.

"A couple things come to mind," he said, leaning back on his arms to study the passing clouds and incidentally releasing her from his probing examination.

She was tempted to press him on such a vague answer, but the challenging tone he used kept her words unuttered.

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"I am a hopeless git," Harry announced, falling back onto his bed in Percy's former room the next morning.

"Good morning to you, too, Cub. Sleep well?" Remus asked with a grin, settling himself at the desk.

"I'm serious," Harry objected.

Remus was momentarily tempted to make the obvious joke, but that wound was still a little too raw for the both of them. Instead he asked, "What's wrong?"

"I told you about being more honest and open, right? Well, I decided yesterday to tell Ginny what I feel about her. The problem is that I keep chickening out at the last moment."

"And what precisely do you feel?" Remus asked, surprised to be having such a candid conversation with a teenaged wizard.

Harry studied the wizard in front of him for a moment before deciding to tell him the unvarnished truth. "An intense desire to learn if freckles taste different than ordinary skin and to count all of them that she may have on her body. Is that precise enough, Moony?"

Remus grinned slightly but held Harry's eye. "More than I necessarily needed to know, but believe it or not, I was almost sixteen once myself. I know what you're going through, though you and I definitely have different situations."

Harry grunted, one hand coming up to rub his temples. "Yeah, I'm the bloody Boy Who Lived. Do you realise how much that actually gets in the way rather than helps? Almost nobody sees ME. They just see this great, bloody title that I didn't do anything to deserve."

"Gets in the way?"

"I can't have a normal conversation with anyone without them expecting me to do something heroic or some such thing."

"It speaks well of your character that you haven't been using that notoriety to establish your own legend among the female students of Hogwarts."

Harry let out a sigh. "Being noble is sometimes a right pain in the ass."

Remus laughed outright at that for a moment before calming back down. "Why Ginny, and how do you know this isn't just a physical attraction?"

"She's one of only two girls that I can actually talk with and treat me as Harry first and all that other nonsense not at all. She's stubborn, but that's actually a good thing for me; she won't run away when I get all moody. I don't KNOW that this is more than just an infatuation. I don't know what real affection feels like, Remus. I don't know if what I feel for Ginny is going to last, but I'd like to find out. Like I said though, my infamous Gryffindor nerve seems to cower in a dark corner anytime the topic comes up between us."

"You've definitely matured, Harry. I can't imagine ever having had this conversation with a sixteen year old James or Sirius."

"Yeah, well they didn't need to deal with a homicidal dark wizard out for their blood, did they?"

"Not until he was nineteen, anyway," Remus agreed calmly.

Harry winced. "Yeah."

"Back to Ginny, though, I can think of two approaches. First is to pass anonymous notes to her through Hermione once you get back to Hogwarts. That's a bit juvenile and may not work, though."

Harry grimaced. "Don't think that I haven't considered that anyway."

"Second is to go into that dark corner and pull the Gryffindor courage back out, kicking and screaming if needs be."

Harry snorted in humour. "Now there's a visual. Getting all metaphysical on me, Moony?"

"Just using your own words, Lil' Prongs."

Harry's head snapped up to glare at his guardian. "If you ever call me that again, I may have to start using you as my Defense sparing partner. After I take your wand away from you."

Remus gave him a wide, dangerous grin. "You're welcome to try at any time, Harry. Do remember that I was once your Defense professor."

Harry grinned back at the challenge.

Remus's smile melted back into something more benign. "If there's anything else I can do to help, please let me know. That's what I'm here for. Not because I promised your parents and Sirius but because I honestly want to help you, Cub."

Harry smiled at his de facto godfather. "Thanks, Moony."

The werewolf nodded once. "Meanwhile, I had some more meditation techniques to teach you, right?"

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"I am a hopeless git," Ginny announced, falling back onto her bed.

"Good morning to you, too, Ginny. Sleep well?" the newly arrived Hermione asked with a grin, settling herself at the desk.

"I'm serious," Ginny objected.

Seeing that Ginny was not in the mood for her levity, Hermione schooled her expression. "What's wrong?"

"I can't seem to tell Harry anything about how I feel about him." Left unsaid was what she actually did feel for him. Hermione already knew.

"What happened? I thought we'd discussed this and you were going to tell him."

"I was," the younger girl agreed morosely.

"So what's the problem?"

"When he's right there in front of me, I just," she waved her hand vaguely before finishing the thought, "can't!"

"Yes you can," Hermione responded calmly. "We'll just have to figure out a way of doing it."

Ginny was about to sink further into self-flagellation but paused. "He did say he didn't want anything tangible for his birthday," she mused.

"There you go," Hermione said. "Just give him a card, saying you're giving him your heart."

"My heart isn't tangible?" Ginny asked in amusement, ignoring the implications of the suggestion.

"You know what I mean," Hermione huffed slightly but with a smile.

"I can't just SAY that!" Ginny objected, sinking back into her pit of low self-esteem. "I can't do anything until I know how he feels about me. If I say that and he doesn't feel the same, he'll think it just an extension of my silly crush on the Boy Who Lived. But it isn't," she insisted, mostly to herself.

"Whoa, Ginny, I believe you. You don't need to get yourself so worked up about it."

"So what do I DO?" the girl moaned.

"Hmm. He doesn't want a present, but wants something intangible instead, does he? This'll require some thought."

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"There's nothing much more I can teach you, Harry," Remus said later. "The meditation technique I use isn't so much learning it as it is practicing it. This is useful not only to hopefully keep Voldemort out of your mind but also for relaxation. For that reason, I'd recommend against thinking about anything distracting before you start," he glanced significantly at the wall between Harry's new room and Ginny's.

Harry blushed. "I'll keep that in mind, thanks."

"I won't be able to be at your birthday party," Remus went on. "Full moon on the thirtieth. I'll send an owl with my gift."

"You don't have to do anything for me, Moony," Harry immediately objected.

"Nonsense," Remus returned. "I want to do something for you, Cub. I just haven't decided what, yet."

Harry smiled, embarrassed, before his expression melted into a more sombre expression. "What can you tell me about Voldemort's activities?"

Lupin frowned. "Not a whole lot. There've been a few dementor attacks, but not widespread. One or two Death Eater attacks, too, but only on isolated homes. He's been pretty quiet all summer, all things considered."

"He's going to hit Azkaban sooner or later."

"Yeah. That's what we figure, too. He has too many loyal followers there not to try to rescue them. Lots of Aurors stationed there, though. Especially as the dementors are long gone. Listen, I'd better get back to Headquarters," he went on, standing up. "As I said, I won't be able to attend your party, but I'll see you before you return to Hogwarts. Take care of yourself until then."

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Wednesday the thirty-first arrived all too quickly for Harry's taste. Most teenaged boys enjoyed their birthdays, but Harry was not your typical teenaged boy. Simply put, he disliked everyone making such a fuss over him.

"You'd better go down there before Mrs. Weasley drags you down, Harry," Hermione said in amusement, leaning on his doorway.

"Why are they making such a big deal about this?" he asked in exasperation, looking up from [Quidditch Through the Ages](#) .

"They seem to be rather fond of you," Hermione answered. "Personally, I can't imagine why." Harry gave her a sour look that she grinned at. "Seriously, this is what family does for birthdays, Harry. Come on. Take your nose out of that book and come downstairs."

"Who are you and what'd you do with Hermione?" he returned, smiling. "The Hermione I know would NEVER tell someone to stop reading."

She made a face at him that caused him to laugh.

Bowing to the inevitable, he put the book down and followed her out.

"I managed to pry him out of his hidey-hole," Hermione announced as the two came down the last steps few steps into the living room.

"Come in, sit down," Molly told them from the kitchen.

Harry entered to find a place at the head of the table empty with a small pile of presents on the floor next to it. He was tempted to groan at the Weasleys' actions, but he knew that would just hurt them. They were only doing this all for him, after all. Deciding to make the most of it, he plastered a look of curiosity on his face and looked around the room at the sea of smiling faces. "Whose party is it?"

"Mine," announced a feminine voice. Every eye in the room swivelled around to find what looked like Harry's twin sister stand up from beside Charlie (home for a rare visit) and move toward the head of the table. "Oh, you all shouldn't have. Just for little ol' me?" The effect was marred when she tripped, falling face-first into the pile of presents. A muffled pop and a bright purple light sounded from under the girl.

Leaning down to help Tonks get back up, Harry laughingly asked, "Alright there, Harriet?"

"Wotcher, Harry," she replied with a grin, standing and beginning to brush herself off.

Harry took a good look at her and broke into laughter.

She stopped her hand and looked up at him in mild annoyance. "I've been working on this transformation for a while, Harry. I didn't think I'd done THAT badly." She gave him her best pouting look.

He waved a hand. "No, no, it's not that. The likeness is actually pretty good. The only problem is the purple face."

She made an outraged noise and pulled out her wand, quickly conjuring a mirror.

"Err, that was us," George said while Fred raised his hand from beside his twin with a sheepish grin and nod.

"You gave her a purple face?" Charlie asked.

Harriet, now wearing a murderous expression, rounded on the twins with wand raised.

"Not intentionally," Fred hastened to explain. "The gift was set to just get Harry's hands."

"I don't think that explaining it now will help much," George observed to nobody in particular.

"Just tell me how to undo it," Tonks ground out.

As Fred quickly pulled out his wand and cast a series of charms, Hermione said to her, "Don't take it too personally, Tonks. If you spend any time around this family," she shot a quick glance at Charlie, "you're bound to get pranked by these two. It's just what they do."

Fred and George nodded frantically, trying to simultaneously look happy, honest, and contrite.

Tonks gave a wordless growl and returned to her seat next to Charlie, still wearing the face of Harriet.

Chuckling, Harry picked up the crumpled box with purple smoke still coming out of one corner. Turning, he tossed it to George. He had only a moment to see the look of barely suppressed panic on his face before both George and Fred dove out of their chairs, letting it hit the chair back. Another purple flash came from the box. Blinking the spots from his eyes, Harry stared at the two Weasleys and suppressed a snicker.

"At least I can tell the two of you apart now," Tonks observed with a wide grin.

The right half of Fred's hair was now a bright purple, contrasting nauseatingly with his red hair. Similarly, the left half of George's hair was now coloured. They turned to each other simultaneously, eyes going from face to the other's hair. Giving sudden grins, they scrambled to Tonks's still hovering mirror and stood side by side, preening and enjoying their new look. Smiling happily, they sat themselves back down, making no move to restore their hair.

Harry shook his head and looked around at the various Weasleys in attendance. "You realise, we should have guessed they'd react like that."

The entire room broke into laughter, causing the twins' grins to expand a notch.

Harry took his seat and said, "Gred, Forge, thank you for the gift. It's been loads of fun. Especially since it didn't happen to me."

Another wave of laughter swept the room as Harry picked the first gift to open. He quickly had several gifts strewn about the tabletop. To

Everyone's surprise, Ron had gotten him a book, Sneaky Seeker Strategies . Mr. Weasley gave him the key to the bedroom he was now staying in. Mrs. Weasley gave him a hand for the Weasley clock. These two gifts had caused Harry to choke up for more than a few moments. Tonks, on behalf of the Order, gave him The Auror's Field Guide , Auror Training Manual and a wand holster for his forearm. Harry hid the two books quickly before Ron spotted them. Charlie gave him a complete set of miniature dragon figurines, reminding Harry of the Hungarian Horntail he'd drawn from the bag at the beginning of the first task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

Just after he'd opened Hermione's present, Hexes for the Vexed , a large barn owl swooped into the room and alighted on the back of Harry's chair.

Tonks immediately jumped up and cast a series of spells on the pouch suspended from the owl's leg. After she gave Harry a nod, he pulled a small notebook from the pouch. The owl left immediately.

Everyone was looking at Harry curiously as he looked at the cover of the notebook in shock. It had the initials **S.B.** and under it in a different ink, **Padfoot** . Flipping through it quickly, he realised it was Sirius's personal notes about learning to become an Animagus. A scrap of parchment was tucked into the book.

Harry,

I just found this journal at Moony's place and thought you'd like to read it. I'm sending it to you time-delayed so you'll get it on your birthday. No worries, though. I'll be getting you something else as well.

- S

"It's from Sirius," Harry said into the silence, his voice barely steady. Taking a calming breath, he laid the notebook down carefully.

Ginny laid a hand onto Harry's arm. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

Harry gave a jerky nod, eyes never leaving the notebook.

"It wasn't your fault, Harry," Hermione whispered.

"Yeah," he answered vaguely, still staring down at the innocent notebook. Fifteen uncomfortable seconds later, Harry abruptly tore his gaze from it and snatched up one of the two remaining presents. He unwrapped a small cube of unremarkable black stone. One side was engraved with, **Tap me with your wand to play the message** .

"A recording cube," Hermione said her expression shifting from concern to interest. "They can record and hold messages, much like a Muggle tape machine."

Harry placed the cube down and tapped it with his wand.

Remus Lupin's voice came out of the air, "Harry, this recording cube is half of my gift to you. I'll bring the instruction manual with me the next time I see you. The second half of my gift is a more personal bit of advice." His voice paused for a moment before continuing, "Harry and Ginny, you are the only two who can hear this part. Ginny, ask Harry to drag it out of its corner, kicking and screaming. He'll know what I'm talking about. Harry, if, after that conversation, you're still mad at me, I'll willingly drop my wand. Happy birthday, Lil' Prongs."

Ginny looked over at Harry in curiosity. "Harry?" she asked.

His face was mottled white and red as he glared at the inoffensive cube. "I'm going to strangle him," he announced. He finally chanced looking up at Ginny. "Later?" he whispered for her ears alone.

At her confused nod, Harry snatched up the last gift and started tearing it open in an effort to distract himself.

Everyone else in the room, not having heard the second half of Remus's recording, was glancing at each other in confusion.

By the time Harry got to the gift, a wide, shallow box, Ginny had paled.

Harry looked at the box in puzzlement as he noticed Ginny start to fidget. He opened it to find a sheet of parchment with fancy script of the style that was typically the result of spell work. **Tap to begin**. Harry looked up at Ginny. "What's this?"

Ginny debated trying to speak but decided against it. The squeaking noises she'd probably create wouldn't help her cause. She settled for shaking her head and waving her hand at the parchment.

He studied the patient message for a moment more. "Who did the spell work?"

"I did," Tonks answered, now back to one of her normal faces, hair a purple to rival Fred and George's. "I don't know what it says, though. Ginny did the pen work after the first page. I just know it's a series of yes and no choices."

Raising an eyebrow, Harry drew his wand.

Before he could move, though, he heard Ginny whisper, "Please be honest."

He looked up at her again, but she refused to meet his gaze. Curiosity overcoming his hesitancy, he tilted the box so nobody else could see the parchment and tapped the page. The first message seemed to be absorbed, only to come back out as, **Do you believe more people than just Remus could love you?** Two boxes, marked **Yes** and **No** appeared at the bottom.

Harry glanced at Ginny, but she was intently studying her hands. He tapped the **Yes** box. The message reformed as, ***Do you believe it's possible for my crush from first year to have grown into something else?***

Swallowing thickly and not daring to look up this time, Harry again tapped **Yes** .

Do you WANT it to have grown into something more? Hardly breathing now, Harry hesitantly tapped **Yes** for a third time.

Harry, yes I had a crush on you back even before you rescued me from Tom's diary, but that was the star-struck infatuation of a silly little eleven year old over the Boy Who Lived. I've watched you for the four years since then and come to several conclusions. You don't want all the notoriety of being the Boy Who Lived. You are an often scared young man, angry at how the world occasionally treats others. You will do anything you can to right such wrongs, often at your own expense. When you cannot act to fix such things, you take such a weight of undeserved guilt that it's a wonder you've not been broken by it.

The Boy Who Lived is expected to defeat Voldemort. Harry will do it because it needs to be done.

The rest of the world sees the Boy Who Lived. I see Harry.

And so for your birthday, I offer you the intangible gift of my heart. You first stole it five years ago on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. Now that we're both a bit older, I'm willingly offering it to you.

Harry read through the page more than once before the full magnitude of what he was seeing sunk in.

"Well?" Ron asked in his usual blunt fashion.

Harry slowly rolled up the parchment before looking up at Ron. He needed the extra time to compose his face. "Well what?"

"What did she get you?" Ron asked in exasperation.

"She wrote a poem, if you must know," Hermione informed Ron.

Ron looked from Hermione, to Ginny (who had yet to look up), to the pensive Harry. "To get these reactions, it must have been some poem."

"Thought provoking," Harry agreed with a far-away stare.

"Can we read it?"

Harry shook his head, and Ginny looked up suddenly. "No, it was to Harry."

Ron folded his arms and leaned back in his chair in a clear expression of dissatisfaction.

Charlie and Arthur were studying Harry with slightly narrowed eyes.

Tonks and Molly were looking back and forth from Harry to Ginny.

Molly suddenly stood. "Dinner in half an hour." She headed to the stove, a sudden flurry of activity.

Her movement broke the spell holding the rest of the room. People started to stand and move around, some coming over to study Harry's new gifts.

Tonks started strapping the new holster to Harry's forearm without his even noticing. Once she had his attention, she explained that it shrunk the wand for comfort as well as concealment. She also showed him how to draw the wand quickly.

Harry tried it a few times. It was little more than a flick of his wrist, but the timing was crucial else the wand ended up flying away. He finally got it to work right after nearly putting Charlie's eye out once.

Tonks praised his success after the laughter died down.

"Thanks," he said wryly. "That was a good Harriet look, by the by. Just out of curiosity, why do it? So long as you're clearly Harriet and not Harry, it's not like you can be a decoy for me."

She nodded. "That was the original goal, you know. No, now I mostly use it for personal amusement. Everyone knows what you look like, Harry. Especially after your picture was all over the Prophet during the Tournament. Harriet gets some of the most peculiar looks when she walks into the Three Broomsticks or Leaky Cauldron."

Harry and Hermione chuckled. "Should I ask for royalties? You're using my image, after all."

Tonks grinned cheekily. "Naw, I'll just block the curse Malfoy throws at your back eventually, and we'll call it even."

"Deal."

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"Excellent meal as always, Mrs. Weasley," Harry praised, finally putting his fork down after his second piece of birthday cake. Everyone else at the

table chimed in their own thanks and appreciations.

She blushed faintly at the praise. "Harry, you and Ginny should go for a walk. Boys, if you could help me clean up?"

"But, Mum," Ron objected, looking significantly at Harry and Ginny's matching blushes.

"But nothing. You get in here, Ronald."

Tonks looked torn for a moment.

Harry, realizing what she was thinking, spoke up. "Tonks, you can come along and chaperone, which is what Ron wanted in the first place. Since you're my assigned guard for the moment, that covers that responsibility, too." He turned to Ron. "Okay by everyone?"

Ron didn't even blush at the accusation, merely nodding with a barely concealed smirk.

Ginny didn't look happy, but she followed along quietly as Harry held the door for her.

Once outside, Tonks spoke up, "I'll stay out of your way and out of earshot. Yell or shoot sparks if you need me."

"Thank you, Tonks," Harry said with a grin.

Ginny smiled at the Metamorphmagus as well.

Giving a cheery wave and smile, Tonks walked a short distance away from the youngsters, giving them a degree of privacy.

For their own part, they walked slowly toward the paddock, close but not quite touching each other.

"My prat of a brother," Ginny grumbled. "I can't believe he wanted us to have a chaperone."

Harry shrugged, eyes on the stars above. "I think he wants us to be together, but not TOGETHER, if you catch my meaning." He blushed at his own insinuation.

Ginny made an unhappy noise. "He wants me to stay at the 'hold a boy's hand' stage until I'm thirty."

"He's your big brother."

"He's a big prat."

"No argument from me on that one." Harry chuckled.

They lapsed into silence again, walking slowly until they were in a small clearing among the trees. They took seats in the grass.

"I think your Mum suspects something," Harry broke the silence eventually.

Ginny shrugged uncomfortably. "My feelings aren't a surprise to her."

"Hermione and Tonks, too," Harry mentioned.

"Hermione knows. She helped me figure out how to do that scroll. Tonks is just . . . Tonks is Tonks."

Harry chuckled. That was all that really needed to be said about the Auror.

"You haven't answered," Ginny blurted out.

"Pardon?"

"About my . . . gift," she explained, eyes never leaving the blade of grass she was slowly shredding in her anxiety.

"I'm going to tell you two little stories first, Ginny," he said.

She had a brief moment of panic when he didn't give an immediate answer but sternly commanded herself to listen.

"The first is related to what Remus said to us in that recording cube. 'Drag it out, kicking and screaming.' He was referring to a conversation we had a couple of days ago. You know what I've been trying to figure out how to say something to a girl I know. I've been owing you for advice all summer, after all. I asked him the same thing. He gave me two options. First is to pass anonymous notes to her. The second is to find my Gryffindor courage and drag it back out, kicking and screaming if needs be, and just talk with her."

"Good advice," Ginny concurred, voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah. Anyway, the second story is actually an addition to something I've already told you. Remember when I was telling you that thinking about those people that I love helps keep Voldemort out of my mind?" He caught her miniscule nod before continuing, "I didn't tell you the whole list. The one thought I had that helped the most was of a certain redheaded Gryffindor a year younger than me."

Ginny stopped breathing.

Reaching forward, he tilted her head up to look at him. In a whisper, he continued, "I gladly accept the gift, Ginny." He held his free hand to his chest for a moment before presenting it to her as if it was holding something. "As an early birthday present, I'd like to present my heart to you."

Swiping at the tears suddenly leaking out of her eyes, Ginny lunged at him, knocking him to his back with her lying mostly atop his prone form.

"Does this mean you accept?" he asked in a quiet, teasing tone.

She smacked his shoulder lightly. "Git," she grumbled around her happy sniffles.

The new couple luxuriated in the hug for several seconds.

"There's something I need to ask," Harry hesitantly whispered.

"No, I won't share you with your fan club."

"Funny. I thought you were the president of that, anyway."

Ginny didn't answer, which was an answer of its own.

"No, what I wanted to ask is whether you think we should keep this a secret."

She pulled back a little so they could both sit up. "Secret?" she asked in a wounded tone.

"No!" he answered immediately. "I am NOT ashamed of you, so get that thought out of your cute little head right now. No, what I was asking is whether you think we should keep the relationship a secret for your safety."

She smacked his arm again, this time it wasn't light. "Don't you dare suggest that, Harry Potter! I am not about to hide how we feel." She raised a hand to his gathering frown. "I'm a Weasley. I'm already in this fight, Harry. After the Chamber of Secrets, I'm even more of a target than usual. Being your girlfriend won't change anything."

Harry sighed, equal parts relieved and worried. He wasn't so much worried over her becoming more of a target than she already was (she was probably in the top five anyway), but rather for more selfish reasons. If she were kidnapped, what would he be willing to risk to rescue her? On the other hand, whether they made their relationship public or not, it wouldn't change his feelings.

He was relieved at her answer because he wanted to shout it from the rooftops, he was so happy.

She was watching his face as he thought. "Don't try to protect me from the cold, cruel world, Harry," she whispered. "You know I've faced things that are as bad as what you've faced. Don't treat me like a child. Let me make my own decisions. Right now, that decision is to be your girlfriend publicly."

He smiled and pulled her into another hug.

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The couple re-entered the Burrow, hand in hand.

Molly took one look and smiled widely.

Arthur, from his seat at the table, saw the same thing and sighed tiredly. He stood and waved Harry back out the door, picking up a light cloak against the chill coming with nightfall.

A now nervous Harry nearly bumped into Tonks as she tried to enter the Burrow. It took a half second for the Auror to realise the situation. She stood back and waved Harry on past, a sympathetic smile on her face.

"Do you two know what you're getting yourselves into?" Mr. Weasley asked directly after the door closed behind him.

"We love each other, and we want to be together," Harry answered simply. In the way all young men did, he knew that not acting as an adult now would be the worst possible move.

"Forgive me, Harry, but you're barely sixteen. Ginny isn't quite fifteen."

"True," he acknowledged. "On the other hand, we've each had to grow up quite some time ago. Both in our first years, as a matter of fact."

Mr. Weasley winced at the truthfulness of the statement. "Okay, you have a valid point. It's just . . . I don't want to see my little girl hurt," he finished.

"Mr. Weasley, a war is about to start. I don't want to be in it, but I'm going to be anyway. It could very well end up killing me. I don't like to think about that, but it's the truth, and we both know it. Nearly your entire family is in the Order, which means they'll be on the front lines. Ginny could again get caught in the crossfire. Even if Ginny and I weren't together, she might still get hurt in one way or another. I don't like those facts anymore than you do, sir, but we both know that those are all facts. All I can promise is that I will do my best to not hurt her."

"You've grown up," Arthur said, giving Harry a sideways glance.

"Living in denial doesn't do anybody any good. Fudge has and look where it's gotten us. I can't afford to do that."

"You're right, of course. On all counts. Whether you're together or not, she'd be devastated if you got yourself hurt. Just promise me that you two won't . . . do anything you're not ready for."

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed, blushing slightly.

"Has anyone, err, spoken to you about -"

"Remus," Harry interrupted before the conversation got too embarrassing. He did NOT want a repeat of that conversation. ESPECIALLY with Ginny's father.

Arthur nodded, looking faintly relieved. He studied the young man in front of him for several seconds more. Giving a decisive nod, he held out his hand. "Treat my daughter right, Harry."

Harry nodded solemnly and took his hand. "I intend to, sir."

Arthur turned and entered his home after Tonks, who'd been standing right there the entire time, opened the door for him.

Harry turned to her, blowing out a relieved breath. "Thanks for not interrupting at any stage tonight, Tonks."

"Interrupting what?" she asked in an overly innocent tone. "I'm your bodyguard for the night. I've been looking outward for dangers. I haven't been watching anything you've been doing."

Harry grinned at the pretty Auror and Order member. "After I defeat Moldywart and become the star Seeker for the English team, I might just have to hire you permanently."

"Promise?" she asked with a grin, waving him into the Burrow.

Harry was chuckling as he entered the home, only to stop when he was confronted by four Weasley males standing shoulder to shoulder, staring at him. He studied their impassive expressions for a moment before saying, "Um, Tonks? Help."

She just walked past them, chuckling.

"Traitor," he called after her. "That job offer just got revoked."

She laughed louder and threw a wave over her shoulder.

Pasting a friendly smile onto his face, he said, "Hi, guys."

None of them so much as blinked.

Smile faltering, he said, "Uh, please say something."

Charlie said, "It's come to our attention that you're now dating our little sister. Is this true?"

Shifting awkwardly, Harry gave serious thought to drawing his wand. "Yes, that would be true."

"What about Dean?" Ron asked.

Charlie waved that aside. "She just said that to wind you up, little brother."

Harry vaguely wondered where Charlie had heard that story, not that Harry hadn't come to the same conclusion.

Turning back to Harry, Charlie continued his interrogation, "What are your intentions?"

For a brief moment, Harry considered answering, "Snogging her as often as humanly possible," but figured it wouldn't go over very well with her four brothers. "Treat her as a lady. One whom I happen to love with everything I am," he answered instead.

Fred nodded fractionally, apparently satisfied with that answer. "Do you know what will happen to you if you hurt her?"

"Not specifically but I can guess."

"We will make the remainder of your life very painful," George said with perfect composure.

Harry Potter, who'd faced trolls, acromantulas, dementors, Umbridge, Death Eaters, and the most powerful dark wizard in living memory more times than he cared to recall, swallowed nervously at the steady expressions on the four wizards facing him. "I understand," he said as calmly as he could.

Charlie's sudden room brightening smile released the tension coiling in Harry's stomach. "Take care of her, Harry. Welcome to the family." He took a step forward and pulled Harry into a manly hug, followed by the twins and lastly Ron.

"Don't hurt her," Ron whispered, his voice somewhere between an order and a plea.

"I'd rather die," Harry vowed quietly.

Ron gave one nod and headed up the stairs.

Charlie poked his head into the kitchen and called out a goodbye before quickly leaving.

Seeing that the coast was clear, George pulled a book from somewhere. He presented it to Harry with a flourish as Fred said, "Considering everything, here's our gift to you. Stop by the store sometime and we can go over the business stuff with you, okay?"

Harry agreed, taking the book from George's hand. Wise Words for the Wooing Wizard. He looked at the twins in shock.

They grinned and nodded cheerily. Repeating Charlie's words of goodbye, the two left to return to their flat.

Somewhat stunned, Harry slipped the book into an inconspicuous spot in the front room before heading to the kitchen. Seeing Ginny, Hermione, Molly, and Tonks sitting around the table, he dropped into the chair beside Ginny.

"So you survived the Weasley gauntlet?" Molly asked in amusement.

"I guess," Harry said, still somewhat dazedly.

"Wow," Tonks said in amusement, looking at Harry's glazed eyes. "Must have been some shock. Do you want to bring him back to reality, Ginny, or shall I kiss him?"

This snapped Harry out of his stupor. "Thank you, no, Tonks."

"Drat," Ginny pouted. When everyone looked at her in surprise, she explained, "Now I don't have an excuse to kiss you."

"Should I act stunned again?" Harry offered with a nervous little grin.

"Great Merlin," Hermione groaned. "You two are going to be impossible, aren't you?"

Tonks smirked impishly at her. "If you want to join in the fun, I'm sure there's a young wizard upstairs you could convince to help you out."

Hermione glared at the Auror, ignoring the snickers from the other two students at the table. "Your own source of fun just left, didn't he?"

Tonks smiled innocently to raised eyebrows from the others at the table. "On that note, I think I shall be leaving. Night, all." She stood and left after a quick wave.

"Well, that was unexpected," Molly said, staring at the door. She suddenly smiled and looked at Harry and Ginny. "But not the least unwelcome, much like the two of you. Congratulations. Just behave yourselves properly. That's all I ask."

Harry nodded quickly as Ginny said, "Yes, Mum."

Nodding in satisfaction, Molly stood and placed her mug next to the sink before heading upstairs.

Hermione also stood. "Harry, you may have a room to yourself now, but remember that I'm sharing your room, Ginevra." She turned and followed Molly up the stairs.

"What was that supposed to mean?" Ginny asked.

"She'll know when you come up to bed," Harry answered in amusement.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "How were the boys? They didn't scare you too much, did they?"

"Other than the varied death threats, no," Harry said with forced nonchalance. "I'm kidding," he assured her when she looked ready to start hexing her siblings. "They didn't say anything really unexpected. Just to take care of you. Fred and George gave me a book after that, saying it was my birthday present."

"Oh?"

He stood and led her into the front room, retrieving the book he'd partially hidden and handing it to her.

She flipped it to a random page toward the back, only for her eyes to widen. She slammed the book shut and handed it to Harry quickly.

"What's wrong?" he asked in concern.

"Nothing," she said in close to a squeak. She gave him a quick hug, a peck on the cheek, and fled upstairs.

Bewildered, Harry went into his room and got himself ready for bed. Once sitting in bed, he flipped through the book quickly. Chapters on flirting, first dates, later dates, proposing and so on. Toward the back, there were chapters on charms and potions useful for the couple upon consummating their relationship. Plus one on various techniques and positions. With moving pictures.

Red faced, Harry slammed the book shut.

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It was the next week when the Order plus selected others held the wake for Sirius.

It was held at Grimmauld Place, of course. Harry, Remus and Dora wore traditional grey robes that marked them as family per Sirius's direction. Everyone else wore black. It was the first time Harry had ever seen Dumbledore in black.

Without a body, the ceremonies were much abbreviated, but each of the "family" lit a special candle that had been pre-spelled. The smoke from the three candles melded and formed a hazy image of Sirius's face, smiling at the three.

Harry very nearly came unglued at that point, but with Remus gripping one shoulder and Ginny holding his other hand, he rapidly pulled himself back together.

Most of the Order members came up and offered a word or two of condolence to Harry during the later mingling.

"How are you?" Hermione asked, sympathy in her eyes.

Harry nearly replied with his traditional, "I'm fine," but held himself back at the last moment. "It hurts," he whispered, more honestly.

Ginny laid her head against his arm, prompting him to pull her around in front of him. He enveloped her into a hug and buried his face into her hair to hide the threatening tears.

"It'll be okay," Ginny said, running her hands over his back.

The crowd created a bubble of space around the pair, respecting Harry's grief.

"Why?" Harry asked in a choked voice, for once unmindful of the others in the room.

Ginny sighed but didn't even try to answer that most unanswerable of questions. Instead, she rubbed one hand up and down his back. It took more than a few minutes, but he eventually regained his composure.

"Do you know what Sirius used for his Patronus?" a voice asked at Harry's elbow nearly an hour later as Harry was nibbling on some crackers.

He turned to find Remus looking at him in a melancholy way. "I didn't realise he could produce one," Harry honestly answered.

"Oh, yes. All of the Order members can. He had the devil's own time producing one after Azkaban, of course. That is, until he found the happiest memory he had gained since. Actually, it was just after you'd met him. We all were coming back from the Shrieking Shack. Before the moon came out, do you remember what you and Sirius were talking about?"

Harry frowned, trying to remember a conversation that had taken place two years previously. "We were discussing the thought that he'd be free."

Remus nodded. "Yes, and he offered to let you move in with him. Your reaction, your instant and total acceptance of him, THAT was his Patronus memory."

Harry began to tear up again.

Remus smiled sadly and reached a hand out to grip Harry's shoulder in what was already a comforting gesture to the both of them. "I didn't tell you that to sadden you, Harry. Just a happy memory for the both of us to have regarding that loveable, mangy mutt."

Harry smiled at the description and slowly started to chuckle until he was making enough noise to garner attention from some nearby guests.

Remus nodded. "There. THAT is the sound Sirius would like to hear at his wake. We should be remembering him with happy thoughts, not sad ones."

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The remainder of August was calm at the Burrow, if one didn't count the merciless teasing Harry endured for dating Ginny.

Harry, with Ginny and Remus's support, came to fully accept the loss of Sirius. It was still an ache on his heart, but Harry was slowly moving on.

There were a few Order meetings during this time, but none of the students were invited. Harry was expecting this and didn't make a big deal about it as opposed to Ron's vociferous complaints.

August thirty-first eventually came around and with it, the students' preparing to board the Hogwarts Express the next morning.

"I absolutely forbid it," Molly Weasley stated in a tone of utter finality. Out of her line of sight, Ron was failing in his attempt not to look smug.

"Why ever not?" Ginny asked reasonably. "All I'm asking is to continue to attend some harmless DA classes."

"You were hurt in connection with those 'harmless' classes," the Weasley matriarch responded. "In the Department of Mysteries both of you were seriously hurt!" She turned to the only non-redhead in the room. "No offence, Harry dear, but association with that club is downright dangerous. I will not have my little girl continue meddling in such obviously dangerous activities." She folded her arms and gave a sharp nod that clearly conveyed her opinion that the topic was closed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ginny's eye take on a hardness that he'd only rarely seen. In the past it'd always involved a trip to the hospital wing for the witch or wizard on the receiving end.

Taking his life in his hands (literally and figuratively), Harry grabbed Ginny's elbow and steered her toward the back door of the Burrow. "If that's the way you feel, Mrs. Weasley, then I promise you that I will keep Ginny out of all future DA meetings. We'll be in the paddock if anyone needs us."

Only her shock at such a staggering betrayal by her boyfriend kept her silent until they were well out of earshot of the Burrow.

"I can't believe you just agreed to that, Harry James Potter!" she bellowed, jerking her arm out of his grasp and rounding on him. "What gives you the right to make such decisions for me? I can't believe she even asked such a thing from me. As if I'm a CHILD that must be protected from the big, bad world! How many times have any of THEM faced the senior Death Eaters?"

"Once," Harry promptly answered, leaning against a tree, out of easy reach of her wildly flailing arms.

"That's RIGHT," she snarled in agreement. "ONCE. Ron comes out of it seriously hurt, can't afford running the risk of getting hit with ANY charms that could possibly affect his mind. What happened to me in that very same fight? A broken ankle that took fifteen seconds for Madam Pomfrey to fix. That doesn't even count the OTHER time I faced Tom. I've faced the bloody Dark Lord more times than the rest of the bloody lot of them put together, and she has the incredible gall to try to keep me SAFE! What an absolutely absurd idea! Doesn't she realise that you and I are safer together than not? If I can't be in those DA classes, how in the name of Magic can I help? I'm FIFTEEN. She has NO RIGHT!"

"You're right," Harry calmly confirmed.

"YOU!" she snarled, rounding on him. "You have no bloody right, either, agreeing with her!"

"I never said I agreed with her," Harry corrected her. "I merely said I'd keep you out of the DA."

"And what, pray tell, is the difference?" she asked in a low tone, still seething.

"I said I'd keep you out of the DA, something that would be easy for Ron to keep track of. I never said I wouldn't help you learn to fight. If necessary, I'll just tutor you separately after the main DA meetings."

Ginny's mood cooled when she realised that Harry was not in fact against her trying to help.

"Not that I think you need it," Harry continued. "You're as good as I am in Defense, after all."

Ginny blushed. "No, I'm not. I couldn't teach DA as well as you do, Harry. You know so much more than I do."

"You COULD teach it at least as well as I do," Harry disagreed. "I just have a year's more education to draw on, a new pass to the Restricted Section, and Hermione's research skills on my side."

Ginny couldn't disagree with that. She'd been one of the first to catch on to all new charms that Harry had taught the previous year and usually ended up helping out the other students after she'd mastered that session's material.

"The other reason that I interrupted your conversation with your mother was because of what you were about to say. You were about to ask why it was okay for me to actually lead the DA when you weren't even allowed to attend, right?"

Ginny grudgingly nodded. That was the only problem she could see with them becoming closer over the past five years and especially since beginning a relationship a month ago. They knew each other too well. He could predict her actions with frightening accuracy. As she could his.

Harry continued his train of thought, "If you'd said that, you would just accomplished two things. First, you could well have gotten Ron barred from the DA as well, and we need him to stay in it to confirm that you're not. Second, it would have made her feel bad. Everyone knows I have to do this. Your mum deals with it by ignoring it. If we forced her to think about it, it would drive her crazy with worry. No sense in that."

"I suppose," she grumped, the last of her boiling anger dissipating.

"Have I told you lately how cute you are when you pout?" Harry asked her with a smile.

Ginny attempted her best Weasley Glare, but the look on Harry's face made her want to melt instead.

"Much better," Harry pronounced, gathering her in his arms.

"How can you do that?" she asked in curiosity.

"Do what?" he asked, fitting her head in the hollow of his neck.

"Get me out of such a horrid mood."

"Many years of practise dealing with the infamous Weasley Temper," he teased.

She rolled her eyes, even though he couldn't see it. "Funny."

"Back to the conversation, though, I have a plan."

"Will this one work better than your last one?" she asked with a malicious grin.

Harry flinched, thinking of how his plan from a week past had backfired dramatically. And the de-gnoming duty that resulted. How Ginny managed

to avoid any punishment for that failed prank against the twins is something that still eluded his understanding. "Okay, I'll tell you what it is and you tell me. While I'm doing the DA classes, I'd like you and Hermione to be in the library, researching a couple things for me: New material for the DA and a way for us to defeat Tom. Afterwards, we trade information. This will keep all findings confidential and has the added benefit of keeping Ron and your mother happy."

She thought about it for a few moments before realising it was the best offer she was going to get.

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On September first, they all made it to the Hogwarts Express after their usual morning rush. The security, Auror and Order, at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was as high as the students had ever seen.

Harry kept his head down and tried to ignore it all, knowing it was for the safety of everyone now that even Fudge-for-Brains had admitted to Voldemort's return.

After the train started moving, Harry was left by Ron, Hermione and Ginny in a compartment by himself as they went forward to the usual prefect meeting.

Harry had just settled down with the latest Defense textbook when he heard a timid knock. Harry looked up to find Neville smiling hesitantly at him through the door's window. Harry smiled back and waved his fellow Gryffindor in.

"Hi, Harry. Mind if I share your compartment?"

"Not at all. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny are all off at the prefect meeting, so I'm alone for the moment."

"Ginny made prefect?" Neville asked, heaving his trunk to the rack.

"Yup. Mrs. Weasley nearly had kittens, she was so excited."

Neville grinned at that mental image before asking hesitantly, "How have you been, Harry?" When they'd parted, Harry had just lost his godfather at the Ministry fight and Neville was honestly worried about the mental state of his friend.

Harry smiled a little, touched. "Well as can be, Neville. Thank you for asking. How was your summer?"

Neville grinned. "Really good! I worked at Uncle Algie's greenhouse most of the summer. Had a great time and made a bit of pocket money, even after buying a new wand." He pulled it out and proudly said, "Twelve and a half inches, ash, unicorn hair."

"Good on you, Neville! I'll have to keep an eye on you in the DA. Don't want you showing up the teacher, after all," he teased.

Neville blushed. "That'll never happen, Harry. The DA is going to continue?"

Harry frowned. "Probably. I talked with Dumbledore about it, and depending on who the Defense professor turns out to be, I'll keep the DA going. Openly this time."

Neville nodded firmly. "Good." He brightened. "Hey, I almost forgot. Thank you!"

Harry blinked. "What for?"

Neville looked bashful. "An 'O' in the Defense practical."

Harry smiled. "Great! I keep telling you, Neville; you're better than you give yourself credit for."

Neville, clearly embarrassed, pulled out the NEWT Herbology book and started reading.

Harry went back to the Defense book until the door opened and Hermione and Ron entered and sat, clearly disgruntled.

Ginny came in, equally upset but brightened when she spotted Harry. She unceremoniously dropped into his lap.

Luna seemed to drift into the compartment behind them, taking the empty seat next to Neville.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, seeing that three of his friends were upset.

"Malfoy's still a prefect, despite being part of Umbridge's Inquisition Squad," Ginny grumbled, making herself comfortable in Harry's lap.

"Inquisitorial Squad," Hermione corrected absently, rummaging in her bag for something or other.

"Whatever," Ginny sighed. "I'd rather not talk about it, frankly."

Neville was looking at Ginny's position in clear interest. "Something you'd like to tell all of us about your relationship to Harry?" he asked.

Ginny pondered the question for a moment. She then turned to Harry and gave him a kiss, lingering long enough to make Ron shift in embarrassment. Slightly breathless, she turned to Neville and shook her head. "Nope," she said cheekily, lying her head back onto Harry's shoulder.

Neville chuckled and even Luna gave a small, dreamy smile at the new couple.

Harry looked around at everyone. "Before I forget, there's something I'd like to talk to you all about. After the Welcoming Feast, could you all meet me in the Room of Requirement?"

"The prophecy?" Luna asked directly.

Harry nodded.

"Finally," Ginny said. At four questioning looks, she elaborated, "I've been trying to talk with him all summer about it, but he refuses to say anything until we're all together."

"I just didn't think it'd be fair to the others," Harry explained to her.

"It's not that," she objected, momentarily ignoring everyone else. "I just wanted to help you deal with it. Ron's told me you're still having nightmares, and you get all quiet every time Mum or Dad talk about Order business. It's obviously tearing you apart."

He smiled at her and sadly nodded. "Yeah, you're right. It has been bothering me. However, for reasons that will become obvious, I wanted to tell you all at once."

The other five agreed to his request without any hesitation.

"Luna, congratulations on making prefect," Harry went on, having noticed the silver badge, hanging upside down, on her robes.

"Why, thank you, Harry," the Ravenclaw answered, pulling a Quibbler out of her bag and holding it sideways to read.

Neville hesitantly spoke up, "Err, Luna? I thought you read the Quibbler upside-down."

"I didn't like how my horoscopes were coming out, so I'm trying it this way," was the simple answer.

The other five exchanged glances but nobody commented.

The door suddenly crashed open, shattering the glass in the window.

Harry's wand didn't get drawn only because his lap full of Ginny slowed his hand down enough to let his mind catch up. "Malfoy," Harry sighed in resignation.

"Well, well," he drawled, flanked by his two automatons. "Potty, two weasels, a mudblood, Loony, and Longbottom. Somehow, you just seem to deserve each other."

"Thanks, we think so, too," Ginny said as Hermione laid a restraining hand on Ron's arm.

"How's your Daddy doing, Malfoy?" Neville asked, surprising everyone.

Draco stared in surprise at the normally timid Gryffindor.

"I've heard that the dementors are absolute hell to live with," Neville added.

Malfoy growled before a light seemed to come to his eye. He turned to Harry. "Why don't you ask your godfather that question, Potter? He knows, after all." He made a mock expression of shock, "Oops, he's dead, isn't he?"

Harry nodded, swallowing the instant rage trying to come into his mind. "Yes, your Aunt Trixie killed him. And yes, he did know what dementors were like, but he escaped after twelve years to come and protect me."

"Aunt Trixie?" Neville asked in confusion.

"Didn't you know?" Harry asked. "Bellatrix Lestrange is Malfoy's aunt on his mother's side."

Neville turned and glared.

Malfoy smirked at Neville for a moment before turning back to Harry. "I think my father won't take nearly so long until he's out of Azkaban."

"Please notice that I said Sirius escaped. Not rescued by his half-blood master."

It took a second before Neville asked, "Half-blood?"

"Yep. Voldemort's a half and half. His father was a Muggle. Interesting how he's so keen on killing Muggles when he's half Muggle himself, isn't it? Somehow, I don't think that he mentions his parentage to his Death Eaters, though."

Crabbe and Goyle were staring blankly as this new information slowly made its torturous way through their thought processes.

Malfoy paled. "You're lying."

Harry shook his head. "Tom Marvolo Riddle. Slytherin house, Head Boy, class of 1945. Look him up when we get to Hogwarts."

Malfoy gaped for a few moments before pulling himself together. Giving a half-hearted sneer to the room in general, he turned and left, his personal bookends shuffling along behind.

Harry flipped his wand out of its wrist holster and pointed it at the glass shards. "*Reparo* ." The glass practically leapt up and reformed the window, solid once again.

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"Wonder who that is," Ron idly commented, indicating the unknown, stunningly beautiful woman at the head table while the new first years were being sorted.

She was the only new face at the table. All of the rest of the Hogwarts faculty was present. Even the centaur Firenze was standing at the end of the table. Harry supposed that meant the centaur was still teaching at least some of the Divination classes as Trelawney was also present.

Harry shrugged at Ron's question. "I'm sure Dumbledore will be mentioning her name in a minute. I just hope she's better than most Defense professors we've had."

"She could hardly be worse," Hermione commented.

"Shh!" Ginny hissed. "Don't say that, or you'll jinx us."

They looked forward again just as Ken Woolverton became the newest Hufflepuff, finishing the year's sorting.

Dumbledore stood, drawing all eyes to him. "I am gratified to see all the returning faces and would like to welcome the new ones I see before me. A few announcements before we begin our feast. The Forbidden Forest is aptly named and therefore remains out of bounds for all students. Our Caretaker Mr. Filch has categorically banned all items sold under the Weasley Wizard Wheezes name."

Ginny and especially Ron seemed to puff up a bit in pride at this.

"Due to the recent public acknowledgement of Voldemort's," almost all students either flinched or gasped, "return, this year's Quidditch Cup must be cancelled." Dumbledore raised a hand at the angry mutterings from most of the school and the outraged shouts from each team. "I am quite aware how unpopular this action will prove to be; however, in the interests of safety it is a decision that I must make. In a small attempt to regain some goodwill with you, there will be a Yule Ball again this year." Excited whisperings started up, mostly by the girls.

Dumbledore was still speaking. "All of the so-called Educational Decrees from last year have been revoked. Due to the . . . retirement of Professor Umbridge -" he paused as a wave of muttering passed through the students. "As I was saying, due to her retirement, we have a new professor. She is an Auror, on temporary loan from the Magical Law Enforcement Squad. Let us welcome Professor Nymphadora Tonks."

Tonks stood and waved a little timidly to the assembled students.

Ron and Ginny gaped in open astonishment. Harry bit down on a knuckle to suppress the laughter.

After a moment, Hermione stood and led the rest of the slightly confused Gryffindor house in applause. While she was doing this, Dumbledore looked at Harry with one eyebrow raised in query. Knowing what he was being asked, Harry nodded with a wide grin.

Dumbledore continued after the applause died out. "This past year, a number of students formed a club called the Defense Association." He was again interrupted, this time by shouting and cheering from various spots on three of the four house tables. Harry flushed in embarrassment at the display of loyalty. "It may interest you all to know that the lowest OWL or NEWT in the Defense Against the Dark Arts practical earned by a member of this association was an Exceeds Expectations." Harry smiled happily at this news as Dumbledore went on, "So it bears some thought by each of you whether you would care to join this club, which will be open to all students in fourth year and above. Relevant information will be posted in all common rooms in the next few days. Due to its nature, this club will be under the supervision of Professor Tonks, but will not be taught by her. Instead, the club's founder will continue to lead it." Cheering started from the same locations that had previously made noise, and Dumbledore had to raise his voice to finish, "Associate Professor Potter."

All the former DA members were stamping their feet and cheering wildly. The Slytherins appeared to be in shock.

Snape had such an expression on his face that Harry momentarily wondered if the twins had somehow slipped him a "Super Sour Sherbet".

Finally realising what it meant, most of the other Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws started clapping and buzzing with the news

"WHAT?" Malfoy's voice bellowed, nearly drowned out by the continued noise.

Unheard among the near riot the news had caused, Dumbledore clapped, causing food to appear at all the tables.

Malfoy, ignoring the food, stomped up to the head table and started yelling at Snape.

For his part, the head of Slytherin house simply glowered at Harry.

Harry himself was being showered with well-wishes by all the former DA members and all the Gryffindors who could reach him. "Get off, get off," he laughingly ordered. "First meeting in a couple days. Notes will be in the common rooms in plenty of time."

"What about the coins?" Justin asked.

Keep them as souvenirs," Harry offered.

The DA members eventually drifted back to their own tables, leaving Harry to finally turn back to his dinner.

The next half-hour was a pleasant time of laughter, catching up with friends, and excellent food. Once he was finished eating and reduced to sips of his pumpkin juice, Harry decided to take care of one order of business immediately. He stood and rounded the Gryffindor table near the head table, garnering more attention with each passing second. Stopping beside Ginny's spot next to Hermione, he lowered himself to one knee. In a carrying but not over-loud voice, he said, "Ginny, gorgeous creature and light of my heart, will you deign to accompany this humble wizard to the Yule Ball?"

Ron had a nauseated look on his face at Harry's theatrics. Hermione looked somewhere between amused and wistful. Most of the other girls in earshot were envious.

Ginny somehow managed to keep a straight face. "Yes, good sir, I do believe I shall accept your most gracious offer to accompany you to the Yule Ball."

Smiling widely, Harry stood and leaned in for a tender kiss, causing most of the girls in the room to sigh.

"Alright, break it up," Ron said impatiently.

Hermione smiled at Harry. "You're getting really good at this whole boyfriend thing, Harry." She turned her head to glare at Ron. "You could learn a thing or two about how to treat a lady, Ronald Weasley." She stood up with a sniff and stormed off.

Ron watched her go before turning back to his best friend. "Mental that one. Mental."

Harry shook his head sadly as he took the now vacated seat next to Ginny. "Ron, if you don't ask her in time this year, I can't be held responsible for any results."

Ron sputtered for a moment before applying himself diligently to his steak and kidney pie, earning giggles and snickers from the nearby students.

A minute later, Harry spotted Tonks walking down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables. She stopped across from him and nodded. "Professor Potter."

"Professor Tonks," he returned, barely keeping the amusement from his face. Now that she was closer, he recognised most of the elements of her face, but the long, brown hair in a conservative style was well out of character for her.

"Please stay after class tomorrow, and we can discuss your DA."

"Of course, Professor," he acknowledged with a slight nod.

"Tonks. Where have I heard that name before?" Neville asked, watching her walk away.

"She was one of the Aurors in the fight last June," Harry explained to him quietly.

Neville looked over at Harry past Ginny's grinning face. "I don't remember any of the Aurors being that good looking," he objected.

"She's a special case," Ginny answered in amusement. "If she doesn't explain it in the first week, we'll tell you about her."

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"... is what we're going to be studying this year here in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Questions?"

"You're an Auror?"

"Yes, for a bit over two years now."

"With those looks, you can't possibly be an undercover agent," Malfoy drawled. He cocked his head and added with a leer, "Unless you're truly an experienced UNDER COVER agent."

"Ten points from Slytherin for insulting a professor," she said calmly.

"You can't do that," he objected, sitting up suddenly.

"Fifteen."

"But -"

"Twenty."

He clamped his mouth shut and slumped back in his seat, glaring malevolently.

"Give up, Malfoy," Harry advised. "She's one of the Aurors that helped put your father away. You can't possibly scare or intimidate her."

Five points for insulting a prefect," Malfoy snarled back.

"Ten points for overstepping your authority," Harry returned. "Prefects can't take points, remember?"

Malfoy flushed brilliantly and folded his arms across his chest in a clear pout. Most of the class laughed, including some of the Slytherins.

"Let's not get too carried away, Harry," Tonks chided with a smile.

"Back atcha, Tonks."

"That's inappropriate familiarity and therefore preferential treatment!" Malfoy jerked upright in his seat again.

Harry sighed. "Why would she be giving me preferential treatment, Malfoy? After all, YOU are family to her."

"You're kidding," Seamus blurted, staring at Harry. He turned to Tonks. "He's kidding, isn't he, Professor? I mean, you're way too nice and good looking to be -" He abruptly stopped and blushed.

Again nearly everyone laughed, this time at Seamus.

Taking pity on the Gryffindor, Tonks said, "Yes, actually I am related to Mr. Malfoy here. We're first cousins. My mother and Narcissa Malfoy are sisters, though my mother was disinherited from the family when she married a Muggle-born wizard. As for my appearance, Mr. Finnegan, it's an illusion of sorts. I'm what's called a Metamorphmagus, meaning I can alter my appearance almost at will." She shot Harry a mischievous grin and suddenly morphed into Harriet, scar and all. Almost the entire class gasped, heads swivelling from Harriet to Harry.

Sighing, Harry stood and walked so he was standing beside Tonks. "Show off," he whispered.

She winked at him and let the class study the two of them standing side by side for a minute.

Going back to her previous appearance, she said, "Twelve inches on the advantages to having a Metamorphmagus among your available forces during low intensity conflicts, such as the one we're currently undergoing against Voldemort." She ignored the shudder that most of the students displayed at the name. "Dismissed."

"Clever idea," Harry mentioned as the last student was leaving. "Having the students come up with more ideas on how to use your abilities."

"Shh," she said with a twinkle in her eye. Her entire demeanour changed as she studied him. "How are you doing, Harry?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, looking up from packing his book and parchment away.

"Something was wrong with you today. I just can't figure out what it is."

"I told Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Luna the prophecy last night after dinner," Harry sighed. "I figured I owed them at least that much seeing as how I drug them to the Ministry that night." Neville's reaction was just as extreme as Harry had expected, not surprising, as he had nearly been the chosen one.

Tonks nodded slowly. "How'd they take it?"

"About like you'd expect."

"Actually, I have no idea what to expect, seeing as how I don't know the second half of the prophecy."

His eyebrows rose. "Whaddya know; Dumbledore really HASN'T told anyone," he mused to himself. To her, he added, "I don't have a problem with you, Moody, and Remus knowing, if you want."

She shook her head. "I don't need to know, so don't bother. I'm only worried about the repercussions on you."

He waved it off. "I'll be alright. They're all still speaking with me, after all."

"If you need to talk, you have friends, Harry," she offered.

He faintly smiled. "I might take you up on that one of these days. Meanwhile, you needed to talk with me about the DA?"

"Some. I'm officially responsible for it, so I have to take some interest. I'll be attending most of the meetings, just so you know. Don't worry, I'll always be overt unless I tell you otherwise. I heard about the loyalty contract they'll have to sign. I'd like to know what all goes into that before people start signing. If you need anything specific, come through me first and we can go to Professor Dumbledore if needs be. Any problems?"

He shook his head. "It'll be Friday and Saturday evenings after dinner in the Great Hall. Flyers will be going up tomorrow."

The Unknown Power Early September to October 31

"Sit down and be silent," Snape barked, slamming into the potions classroom.

Every student was already sitting and silent. He stalked toward the front before turning around to glare malevolently at the assembled sixth years. As in all NEWT level courses, all four houses were in the same classroom. This was the first year that Harry could remember having classes with Ravenclaws.

"How some of you got an 'O' in your potions OWL is beyond me," Snape gritted out, staring straight at Harry.

For his part, Harry bit his tongue and kept his temper under tight control.

"Nevertheless, you are here and I must deal with that fact, no matter how it nauseates me."

He started running down the roll call, giving Harry a moment to determine the makeup of the class. Five Slytherins including Malfoy but not Tweedle-dee or Tweedle-dum. Four Ravenclaws, one Hufflepuff, plus Harry and Hermione as the only two Gryffindors. Well, at least the Slytherins didn't outnumber everyone else put together, Harry thought hopefully.

"Potter!" Snape snapped.

"Yes, Snape?" Harry asked.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "You will address me as Professor," he ground out dangerously.

Harry didn't say anything for a moment. "May I speak with you privately for a moment, sir?"

Taken aback by the suddenly respectful tone, Snape gestured to his office, following his student and slamming the door behind him. "What?"

Harry came straight to the point. "I know you loathed my father and godfather, Professor. Why you continue to take it out on me is something I don't understand. You're intelligent and honest enough to know that I'm neither James Potter nor Sirius Black. Whether we like it or not, we both ARE on the Hogwarts faculty and, more importantly, on the same side of the war. I will treat you with respect if you cease treating me like a Blast-Ended Skrewt."

Snape's eyes flared.

"Oh, you won't need to continue with the Occlumency lessons, and I strongly suspect Dumbledore will continue to keep me out of Order business, so our only interaction will be in your Potions class, Professor."

The combination of mild compliments, offered truce, and promise of reduced interaction took the Potions Master a few seconds to digest. "I still maintain your undeserved celebrity status has given you an ego and disregard for the rules that is intolerable."

"I would gladly give up the celebrity status, sir, if I could. Unfortunately that is not something I have any control over. Also, I completely agree that it's undeserved. My mother deserves the credit for my survival. I don't." He considered trying to defend what Snape consistently called his disregard for the rules, but decided it would be a waste of time. Besides, there WAS a kernel of truth in that one, unintentional as it may be.

Snape stared at him for a few moments longer, an unreadable expression on his face. He abruptly flung open the door and strode back out into the classroom.

Harry hurried after him, taking his seat. Hermione shot him a look that was clearly a question. He shook his head at her and picked up his quill to take notes again.

Though the class wasn't what he would call good, at least it was better since Snape didn't treat him any worse than any of the other non-Slytherins.

As everyone was packing up their bags at the end of the period, Harry stopped Hermione. "Do you have a minute? I'd like to talk with you and Professor Flitwick about the DA."

Shrugging her agreement, Hermione led the way toward the Charms classroom, arriving just as the last of the third year Gryffindor and Hufflepuff class was leaving. "Hermione and Professor Potter!" the small wizard greeted them cheerfully. "To what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

Harry grinned at being called a professor. That's something he doubted he'd ever get used to. "If you have a minute, Professor, there's a personal charms project that I'd like to talk over with you."

Smiling widely, Professor Flitwick waved the two students to seats. "Call me Filius. We're colleagues, are we not?"

Harry let the offer slide by without comment. "I brought the smartest witch in the school along with me so we can hopefully work through this quicker."

"I think Minerva and Silvia would be a bit put out by the 'smartest witch' portion of that comment," he observed with a wink toward Hermione.

Hermione's blush deepened.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Potter?"

"The loyalty contracts for the DA," Harry said.

Hermione sat up straighter in her chair, turning her full attention to Harry.

"Hermione here can give you the specifics on what charms went into it last year. This time, though, I'd like to add a few extra things, and I need your expertise."

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"I still can't believe you said that to the greasy git, mate."

Hermione smacked Ron's arm.

Harry fought a smirk. He'd just told them what he and Snape had discussed behind closed doors. Ron was understandably surprised.

Ron rubbed his arm and gave Hermione a dirty look. He moved a foot further away from the bushy-haired girl and turned back to Harry. "Seriously, it sounds like you were almost being nice to him."

Though there was no explicit question in what Ron had said, Harry understood anyway. "Don't worry. I'm not about to start a Snape fan club. I still think he's a greasy git, and I haven't yet decided whether I'm going to play 'point swap' with him during the DA."

Ron grinned, and Hermione frowned.

"No, I'm not going to be overly nice to him, and I'm not defending him. I still think he's spying for the Order not because he believes it's good for the Light, but rather because it's good for Severus Snape in the long run. No, I'm calling a truce between us to get him off of my back. The way I did it is the only way I could get it accomplished considering his worldview and prejudices."

Hermione was looking disappointed. "And here I thought you were growing up."

"Is any of what I said not true? Okay, so maybe I added some editorial comments that weren't necessary, but really."

Hermione sighed. "Harry, think about what he has to do for the Order. You know Voldemort routinely Cruciates his Death Eaters. You know he has to risk getting into a deadly fight with Aurors every time he goes out. You know he has to keep a complete Occlumency shield up all the time he's around Voldemort. I'm not trying to defend him either," she added to Ron's frown, "but think about what he has to put up with on a daily basis. I don't like how he treats us any better than you two do, but think about what all he puts up. On top of that, he has Professor Dumbledore's trust."

Harry felt she was putting too much faith in Dumbledore but kept the thought to himself.

Ron was frowning heavily. "Yeah, so his life isn't all tea and scones."

Harry shook his head at Ron's stubbornness, but he did have a bit more sympathy for the Potions Master.

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Friday evening, towards the end of dinner, Harry was getting exceedingly nervous. He was waiting in the same antechamber the Tri-Wizard contestants had gathered in, waiting until dinner was over and he started the DA's first organizational meeting.

"Almost time, Harry," Dumbledore said, entering the room. "Relax, my boy. No need to be so nervous." He studied his student for a moment. "If I might say so, you do not look well, Harry. How have your dreams been?"

"Between Remus's meditation and my other thing, I haven't had any visions if that's what you're asking." He gave the grandfatherly headmaster a wry grin and continued, "As for my dreams . . . well . . . I'm a sixteen year old male with a girlfriend. I'm sure I don't need to describe my dreams any further than that."

Dumbledore's mouth twitched. "Believe it or not, I was once sixteen as well. I believe I have a fair idea of what you are implying."

They shared a moment of almost levity before Harry started pacing again. "How many are still out there?" he asked, afraid to check for himself.

"Very nearly the entire school," Dumbledore answered cheerfully.

Harry groaned, burying his face in his hands.

"If you are nervous, I have found that it helps to think of the audience wearing only their unmentionables."

Harry's mind simply stopped. He had momentary images of a few of the attending females clad only in underwear. Cho. Parvati and Padma. Tonks. GINNY.

He swallowed on a dry throat. "That would be a very bad idea, I'm afraid." He turned his back on the headmaster and surreptitiously cast a Cooling Charm upon himself.

"Perhaps so," Dumbledore acknowledged.

Harry spun to look at Dumbledore. The ever-present twinkle in his eyes the only sign of humour. Harry sighed, convinced that the older wizard was teasing him. "You're enjoying this entirely too much," he accused.

"Of course," Dumbledore agreed, to Harry's surprise. "I am always gratified when a student steps up and accepts more responsibility."

Harry glared but decided not to pursue the conversation. In verbal fencing, Dumbledore was by far his superior, and they both knew it.

A soft chime sounded, indicating the dishes being cleared, and Harry knew it was time to start. Taking one final breath, he strode out to find the head table had already been replaced with a raised platform and a podium. The vast majority of the four house tables were still filled with the students. Most of the staff was standing along the wall.

Ginny had stationed herself at the near end of the Gryffindor table and mouthed, "I love you," as he walked past.

Hermione, seated across from her, nodded encouragingly. Tonks, he noticed, gave him a discreet thumbs-up.

Finally reaching the podium, he stood behind it and looked across the sea of faces. One last breath and he started. "Good evening, and welcome to the Defense Association's first organizational meeting of the year."

Cheering and table banging came from the former members. Harry smiled at them momentarily, thankful for the show of support.

"As you can tell, some of the former members are quite happy that we're continuing.

"At the Welcoming Feast, Professor Dumbledore mentioned that the lowest OWL or NEWT of one of the former members was an 'E', which was news to me, incidentally, so I guess I'm doing something right."

Light chuckles came from most of the room, with the notable exception of the Slytherin table.

"Okay, organizationally, this is under the direction of the Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Professor Tonks, however, has indicated that she'll be giving me a degree of freedom. She will be at most meetings, so if you have a problem with something I'm doing, a higher authority will be right there. All the other professors are of course welcome to come and observe or participate as well, if they wish.

"Meetings will be immediately after dinner on Fridays and Saturdays here in the Great Hall. Curfew for members will extend ten minutes after the meetings break up if it lasts that long. Madam Pomfrey will be in the hospital wing during and immediately after the meetings for the minor injuries, though there shouldn't be many. There weren't last year, and I don't plan on altering the material all that much.

"What is this class going to teach you? Primarily, it's offensive and defensive Charm practise. I won't be assigning written homework, but I've been reliably informed that sometimes studying the theory behind a spell can make it easier to learn or more powerful when cast." His glance toward Hermione went unnoticed by no one, resulting in a wave of chuckles.

"If there's enough interest, we could have a friendly tournament at the end of the year."

"Hear, hear!" sounded from multiple points in the room.

Harry smiled momentarily before going on. "What do I expect from you? Mostly it's just hard work. Not all of these spells are fun to learn. But we have to learn them if we expect to survive the first time we're face to face with Death Eaters. That IS why this group is here, after all.

"Now, who can join? Fourth years and above only." He raised a hand toward the angry mutterings of the younger students. "This is for practical reasons. Simply put, any witches or wizards younger than that won't have the background knowledge or power to pull off a lot of what I'm going to be teaching. All houses are invited," he went on, pointedly looking over toward the Slytherin table. "Similar to last year, anyone wanting to join will have to sign a loyalty oath that is magically binding. In short, you agree not to discuss anything about the DA's activities to non-DA members. Violations of that oath will be . . . unpleasant.

"This contract will be ready for signing tomorrow night, so everyone has twenty-four hours to think it over.

"For the moment, does anyone have any questions?"

"Is what you said on the train true, Harry?"

"Which part, Neville?"

"That You-Know-Who is a half blood."

Shocked whispers started up all over the room.

Harry nodded calmly. "Yes. Tom Riddle was a Slytherin who graduated in 1945. His father was a Muggle. Incidentally, he was the one who

opened the Chamber of Secrets back then, and again four years ago. The first time led to the virtual expulsion of our own Hagrid," Harry waved to the half-giant standing along the wall, staring in shock, "who was a student at the time. That timeframe also contained the first fatality of the newly self-named Lord Voldemort. A student was killed. She's still here today. I'm referring, of course, to the ghost some of us know as Myrtle."

A buzz of whispers started up again. Harry chanced a glance at Dumbledore, honestly surprised that the headmaster would allow him to be revealing this much information. Dumbledore's expression allayed Harry's fears. Whatever else he may have thought about what Harry was doing, he wasn't upset at anything said.

"You expect us to believe any of this nonsense?"

"Whether you believe it or not, Malfoy, everything I've said is the truth. Like I suggested to you on the train, you can look up the information on Riddle in the library. Professor Dumbledore was the Transfiguration professor at the time, so he might be able to provide more information if you're interested."

"Is what the Prophet said about You-Know-Who the truth?"

"I don't get the Prophet over the summer, Padma, so I don't know what it said."

"Yes, it was," Hermione interjected. "Voldemort returned at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He did attack the Ministry in June. A dozen Death Eaters were captured in that fight."

"Rumours said you were there, Harry."

Figuring she'd already blown her own anonymity, Harry said, "Yes, Hermione and I, along with other students, were lured to the Ministry under false pretence. We were rescued by, among others, Professors Dumbledore and Tonks."

"Who were the other students? Who else was it who rescued you?"

"I'm not going to reveal those names. If they want to let their parts be known, they can come forward on their own. The ones I've already named are already part of the official record." He glanced at Hermione with a grin, "Or revealed too much personal knowledge, so there's no point in hiding them."

"My Auror partner, Kingsley Shacklebolt, was also listed in the report," Tonks added from her place against the wall.

Harry was sorely tempted to reveal Sirius's part and subsequent death, but that revelation would only confuse matters for the time being. Better to wait until Wormtail was in Azkaban before trying to deal with that whole mess.

"Any other questions?"

"Who was in the DA last year?"

"The ones making the most noise," Harry said dryly. Almost everyone chuckled. Ginny and Hermione stood and walked up to flank the podium. Ron followed a moment later, followed by a steady stream of other Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs. The only one Harry didn't see was Marietta Edgecombe, but he was of two minds over her inclusion anyway. Once the twenty-one students had joined Harry, even Zacharias Smith looking proudly back at the sea of faces, Harry turned back forward. "This doesn't count the five graduates, of course."

"More questions? No? Okay, I hope to see many of you tomorrow night."

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Harry spent the majority of Saturday discussing the DA and answering questions from various potential members. Walking through the halls, he saw that most of the previous members were similarly besieged.

They had also become instant celebrities, much to Ron's delight and Neville's embarrassment. Almost all of them threw Harry exasperated looks when they spotted him.

Evening finally rolled around, and Harry was pleasantly surprised when the majority of the eligible students stayed in their seats after dinner. Unsurprisingly, the least represented house was Slytherin, but a fair number were still there. Many younger students, perhaps hoping to sneak in, had to be chased out of the Great Hall before things could move forward.

Dumbledore waved his wand, and the head table vanished, replaced again by the podium. Harry moved forward immediately. "Okay, we're here to sign up for this year's DA. Before we begin that, does anyone have any questions?"

"You claimed that anyone could join, Potter?" Malfoy drawled from the Slytherin table.

"If you sign the loyalty oath, yes," he answered evenly. A low level rumbling came from the Gryffindor table that Harry ignored.

"Can we read it?"

Harry pulled out his wand and the scroll. Muttering a few incantations over it, a large illusion appeared in the air above and behind him. While everyone in the Great Hall was reading, Harry quietly conjured a table, inkwell and quill.

"You're the designated leader?" someone from the Hufflepuff table asked, still reading.

Harry nodded. "Last year, the members made it clear that I was the only acceptable choice. Headmaster Dumbledore asked me specifically to continue it."

"What if we don't want you?" a Slytherin asked.

Jeering from the vast majority of the Great Hall answered that question readily enough.

"What if we're unwilling to follow your orders?" the same voice persisted.

"Then you'll be in violation of the oath," Harry answered.

"What's to keep YOU under control?" a Ravenclaw asked reasonably.

Harry nodded, surprising more than a few. "Professors Tonks and Dumbledore have the authority to override my orders or remove me if they so choose."

"Are you going to sign this?"

Harry shook his head, glad he'd discussed this exact issue with Professor Flitwick. "I can't. I'd be designating myself as my leader, which can cause some magical control problems during the meetings. Also, I need to talk with various professors about the DA, and I wouldn't be able to do so if I signed. Finally, I need to speak with my researchers about the DA and they're not going to be members."

"Can we trust THEM to keep quiet?"

"I think so, yes."

"Who are they?"

"Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley."

There was a moment of stunned silence before Head Girl Cho Chang spoke up dryly, "Can't ask for better than that." Chuckles and nods from around the room.

"Any more questions?" He paused, looking over his audience. "No? Okay, let's get this thing signed." Harry put the scroll down on the newly conjured table.

Ginny and Hermione left after a smile and wave toward Harry.

Nobody moved forward for several seconds until Ron stood and calmly approached. He signed with the available quill before returning to his seat. His move sparked the remaining eighteen former DA members to queue up to sign. Seeing their enthusiastic support, first more Gryffindors and then Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs and even a few Slytherins got in line.

As people signed, more joined the line, much to Harry's pleasure. He spent most of the time chatting with Tonks and Professor Flitwick.

To Harry's utter lack of surprise, the last three people in line were Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. Swaggering, Malfoy approached the table. Casting a disparaging glare at the conjured quill, he removed what appeared to be a small fwooper feather from a pocket and signed with a flourish.

Or he appeared to sign it, at any rate. No ink was left on the parchment.

Frowning, Malfoy tried again with the same result. He looked up and glared at Harry. "What are you playing at, Potter?"

Harry raised his eyebrows in lazy denial. "Me?" He brought a hand to his chest with a look of wounded pride. "I'm not doing anything, Malfoy. Why do you ask?"

"I'm trying to sign your stupid little paper, and it isn't working."

"How very strange. Why don't you try a different quill," Harry suggested politely.

Giving vent to a subsonic growl, Malfoy did just that, using the conjured quill. Again, no ink appeared on the parchment.

"Now that is strange," Harry said laconically, having watched the procedure. "I seem to recall . . ." He tapped a finger to his lips in a pose of exaggerated thought. Turning his head, he asked, "Filius?"

"Yes, Harry?" Professor Flitwick looked over in polite inquiry.

"What would it mean if someone was incapable of signing the DA's charter?"

"The charms I placed upon it would prevent someone from signing if they had the intention of betraying the DA, Harry. Just as you asked."

"Ah, yes. That was it. Thank you, Professor."

The Charms professor, knowing full well the part he was playing, answered, "You're most welcome, Professor."

Fighting his smile, and noting absently that Tonks wasn't even trying to hide hers, Harry turned back to Malfoy. "There you have it, Malfoy. You can't

sign if you have the intention of betraying the DA."

Malfoy only barely fought off the urge to sneer. Instead, he gave a sickeningly sweet smile and said, "But I have no intentions whatsoever of betraying you or the DA."

A burst of white light came from the parchment, expanding in a sphere that quickly swept outward through the room. It knocked Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle off of their feet and onto the table behind them. Everyone else in the room was startled when they saw the light sweep through them quickly, but nobody else was affected.

"What was THAT?" Ron asked, looking around.

"That, Mr. Weasley, was the second stage of the Anti-Betrayal Charm I placed on the charter," Professor Flitwick answered calmly.

"Now that your intentions are clear, Malfoy, I'd strongly recommend that you three leave the room," Harry's pose of nonchalance had vanished.

Gathering together the remains of his pride, Malfoy got off the floor and stalked out, chased by the jeers of most of the students.

"Now that the entertainment's out of the way," Harry said, to the light amusement of the room. He rolled the parchment up and muttered a Sealing Charm over it. He handed the scroll to Tonks. "Keep that safe, would ya, Tonks?"

"Will do."

Harry clapped his hands loudly, getting everyone's attention. "Since we have such a large group of newcomers, we're going to spend some time reviewing. We'll start out with the Stunning Spell and Shield Spell. If everyone could begin to pair off? Thank you. Once someone thinks they've mastered it, please help anyone around you who seems to be having trouble. Okay, the Stunning Spell uses the incantation 'stupefy' and requires this wand movement . . ."

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The next few weeks proceeded quietly for the Hogwarts students. After one more spying attempt by Ted Nott that was instigated by Malfoy, the DA was left alone by what they eventually called the DEIT (Death Eaters in Training) crowd. The double handful of Slytherins in the DA were in the most ticklish positions, but they had made a group decision not to pass along even the most vague of information in either direction. They were attempting to walk the razor's edge of neutrality, and so far it was working for them.

At the end of September after a Saturday meeting, Harry went into the library in search of his research team. Predictably, they were surrounded by dusty tomes at one of the study tables near the Restricted Section.

Harry snuck up behind Ginny and slipped his hands over her eyes.

Ginny didn't even pause. "You shouldn't be doing this here, Argus. What if Severus sees us?"

"Ew," Hermione commented, making a face.

"Agreed," Harry said in disgust at the mere thought. Or thoughts as the case may be. "You have a seriously warped sense of humour, Miss Weasley."

"You grow up with Fred and George and see what it does to you," she retorted dryly before giving Harry a welcoming kiss. "Good news. I think we've found something that might help."

"DA or Tommy?" Harry asked.

"The Tommy issue. Let's take this to the Room of Requirement. This'll take some explaining."

Harry helped the girls gather up the books and replace them into their appropriate places. They then went towards the seventh floor, discussing the day's DA meeting. They were working on the Patronus Charm again. Almost all of the original DA members could now cast a corporeal one with the exceptions of the Creevey brothers. Most of the new sixth and seventh years could do so after three days worth of practise. Harry had asked Filch to keep an eye out for boggarts to use to practise with, as Harry's boggart was a dementor look-alike. Or at least it was the last time he'd seen one.

Once safely ensconced into the Room of Requirement, Harry asked, "Okay, ladies. What have you uncovered from the dusty shelves of Hogwarts?"

Hermione first pulled out her wand. "*Colloportus*," she cast, pointing at the door.

Harry raised an eyebrow. She was sealing the room? This must be some information.

Putting her wand away, Hermione started to pace. "Based on what you told us about Moldywart coming back, we've been going under the assumption that his new body is magically constructed. Or at least has a high level of magic in it, or helping keep it together. Does that make sense?"

"It was the result of a ritual spell and potion. It's also clearly not human, so I guess that makes sense. If nothing else, I can just try physically killing him, but I'd have to get through his magical defences first, wouldn't I?"

"You're not doing this alone, Harry."

Harry frowned. They'd had this argument before. "I have to, Ginny. Prophecy, remember?"

Both girls shook their heads. "You may be the one casting the important last spell, but that doesn't mean there can't be others there to help you. 'Power the Dark Lord knows not.' Friends or allies could well be what the prophecy means," Ginny persisted.

Hermione raised a hand to Harry's gathering frown. "We found something we think will work. It was originally designed to deal with dementors, golems, griffins, dragons and like that. A physical entity with extremely high magical resistance. Several problems, still. It's a dual spell. Two halves have to be cast nearly simultaneously on the target. 'Finite res totalus' and 'finite magus totalus'. The 'res' half tries to stop the body. If done properly, the body simply ceases functioning. This is a purely physical attack. Any magical resistance at all will block the spell completely. Muggles have more than enough latent energy in them to block this. Even a living plant has enough magic to stop this from working. Which is where the 'magus' half comes in. It attempts to stop all the magic in and around the target. The problem with this is that it's a temporary situation. One second at best."

She took a breath and continued. "Okay, that was the good news. The bad news is that the magus half takes a LOT of energy."

"How much is a lot?"

"Let me put it this way," Hermione answered, "If every professor minus Dumbledore in the school pooled their energy it might . . . MIGHT," she stressed, "be enough."

Harry blinked. "That's a lot."

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "The res spell takes a powerful magician, but it can be done by an individual. The magus half has to be cast by one, but takes the power of a dozen to cast. We still have the problem of getting both spells to work simultaneously as well. Two people standing next to each other, casting it at the same time, isn't enough. The spells have to merge when they hit."

Harry sighed. "This is sounding impossible."

Ginny and Hermione frowned. "Maybe, but it's by far the closest we've come to a way of defeating Moldywart so far."

"I hate to ask, but would Lifeforce be enough to power the second half?"

The girls shuddered. The concept of someone voluntarily using their own soul to power a spell, even one to defeat Voldemort, wasn't something they wanted to contemplate.

These were not normal times, however, and Hermione had already considered this. "No, it isn't," she answered definitively. "That's getting close to the kinds of power levels we're talking about, but it has too much of a physical component inherent in it to cast such a purely anti-magic spell."

Harry summarized, "So we have a pair of spells that we think will work. The problems are that one of them is too powerful for anyone to cast, and the two spells have to be aligned more closely than is physically possible. Did I miss anything?"

Hermione was frowning. "No, you got it all," she said slowly.

"What are you thinking?"

"How to get more power available to a witch or wizard than they normally have," she answered absently.

"Channels? Power share?" Ginny tossed out ideas.

"Power sharing spells are all dark arts," Hermione waved that one off. "They usually require a blood sacrifice and then end up draining one or the other permanently anyway. A channel is a thought, though."

"The two spells would still need to be aligned," Harry noted.

Hermione sighed and rubbed a hand across her face. "I'm too tired to think straight. I know the answer's out there, but it won't come to me when my brain feels like tapioca."

The three picked up their bags from when they entered the Room of Requirement and trudged back to Gryffindor Tower. Hermione gave them a distracted wave before disappearing up the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

"Tired?" Harry asked.

"Some," Ginny admitted, waving him down onto a couch. When he'd settled himself, she curled up next to him, using his thigh as a pillow.

He absently ran a hand through her hair, staring at the fire. "I just wish I didn't have to do this."

"Me, neither. I'd rather that our biggest concern was finding broom cupboards to snog in. Fact is, though, that with Moldywart out there, he's going to keep coming for you until we take care of him."

"Yeah," he agreed. He took a breath, knowing she wouldn't react well to the next topic of conversation. He looked around carefully and nodded when he realised they had the common room to themselves. Not terribly surprising this late. "Ginny, I'd rather you didn't have to go into danger with

me."

She sat up and turned to look at him with a piercing look. "I'd rather that neither of us had to go into danger, but that isn't going to happen unless Moldywart trips and falls off a cliff."

"You're not understanding what I'm saying," Harry whispered. "I know I have to fight him. I just don't want YOU to have to fight him."

Her eyes flared.

He held up a hand to forestall her words. "I know you don't like me trying to protect you, love. That honestly isn't the reason. It's more like I don't want you there because you will be in danger, and I'll be distracted trying to protect you."

She poked him hard. "You listen to me, Harry James Potter. You and I have to do this together. If you're resigned to do this, then how can you ask me not to do the same? As for my distracting you, you know that I'm well able to defend myself."

"I know, I know. I just don't want . . . I don't think I can survive it if you're hurt."

Her expression melted. "Then I won't get hurt. Once Hermione figures out how to do it, we can practise whatever spells it'll take in the Room of Requirement. You know it has to be me, Harry. In your heart, you know it."

He let out a long sigh and nodded. His heart did indeed know it would end up being her. He had no idea how he knew it, but he did.

She settled back down, and the young couple stared at the fire.

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Sunday afternoon, Harry and Ginny were sharing a table in the library, working their way through their weekend homework.

Hermione came charging in, caroming off of a group of Hufflepuff third years without a word, and coming to a stumbling halt in front of the couple. "By the end of this conversation, you two will worship the ground I walk on!" she announced breathlessly with an excited gleam in her eye.

Trying to match her enthusiasm, Harry said, "You convinced Moldywart that this whole taking over the world thing was a bad idea and he's decided to take up a job bussing tables in the Three Broomsticks?"

Hermione's mouth twitched. "No."

"He's going into pet grooming?" Ginny guessed.

When Hermione's grin widened and she shook her head, Harry and Ginny began alternating theories.

"Experimental Flobberworm breeding?"

"Writing love advice and horoscopes for Teen Witch Weekly?"

"Motivational speaker?"

"Hairdressing?"

"Playwitch model?"

Hermione and Ginny got nauseated looks on their faces.

Harry grinned. "HA! I won."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Very mature." She dropped her voice so the students in the library couldn't overhear, though nobody was in sight. "No, I was referring to the problem we talked about last night. I think I found an answer!"

She suddenly had the undivided attention of Harry and Ginny. "You did? How?"

Hermione shook her head. "We need to talk with Headmaster Dumbledore. He's the best around at magical theory, so he'll know if my idea will work. Besides, if my guess is right, he'll need to be part of the solution."

Quickly putting their work away, the couple followed Hermione to the stone gargoyle. Hermione stared at it for a second before turning to Harry. "Um . . ."

"Warheads," Harry said.

The gargoyle jumped aside, revealing the moving staircase that Hermione immediately started climbing. Harry and Ginny moved to follow.

"Warheads?" Ginny asked.

"Muggle candy," Hermione answered over her shoulder before using the griffon doorknocker.

"Enter," Dumbledore's voice invited.

Hermione entered the room, dropped the book she was carrying into one of the guest chairs, and started furiously pacing. "Good afternoon, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Lemon sherbet?"

She stopped suddenly and smiled at the aged headmaster as Harry and Ginny took seats. "Yes, please," she accepted one of the small candies and sat down, the book now on her lap. "Please excuse me. I've just found something and am still excited."

"Quite alright. Harry, Miss Weasley, how are you two this fine day?"

"Fine, Professor," Harry answered.

"Now, Harry, you are on the staff. How many times must I insist you call me Albus?"

He grinned ruefully, letting the easy banter calm him from the excitement Hermione had infused him and Ginny with. "As we've had this conversation four times now, I guess the answer is: At least five."

Dumbledore shook his head, twinkle firmly in place. "I can see that I will have to attempt to convince you again. It must be later, however. I daresay we had best talk with Miss Granger before she spontaneously combusts." He ignored Ginny's snicker as he turned to the fidgeting girl. "Miss Granger, you had something you wished to speak with me about?"

"I think I found how to do the channels to allow someone to use the 'finite magus totalus' spell," she burst out.

Dumbledore blinked once. He picked up his wand and cast a series of charms first on the door, then window, then fireplace. Laying his wand down again, he said, "Please explain."

"You're aware of the research Harry has Ginny and I doing?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"We found the 'finite magus totalus' and 'finite res totalus' dual spells. As you know, the power requirement for the magus portion is prohibitive. Ginny suggested using power channels. I think I found a way of doing that."

"Wait," Harry interrupted. "I thought there was a synchronization problem, too?"

"That answer is obvious," Hermione dismissed. She turned back to Dumbledore. "Blood links, using magical conduits," she explained cryptically. She opened the book again at a specific page and handed it to the very attentive headmaster.

With a totally perplexed Harry and Ginny looking on, Dumbledore rapidly read a page and a half of the massive tome. He gently closed the book again and leaned back in thought. "Fawkes?" he asked Hermione after thirty seconds of contemplation.

Hermione smiled, pleased that the headmaster thought the plan was sound. "That was my thought, if he's willing," she confirmed.

"Could you two explain what you're going on about?" Harry asked irritably.

Suddenly showing an amazing level of animation, Dumbledore leaned forward. "I am tempted to award two hundred points to Gryffindor for Miss Granger's superb idea; however, I am sure you can all see the reason this idea must remain a complete secret."

Hermione beamed at the praise, even if no points came of it.

"Would you care to explain, Miss Granger?"

She nodded and turned to the other two students in the room. "Harry, let's take the issues one at a time, starting with the synchronization you mentioned. The way to get such a dual spell to work properly is for the two magicians in question to have synchronised auras. Several ways I know about in order to do that. Some twins already have it," she nodded to Ginny in tacit indication of Fred and George. "Long time married couples can also have synchronised auras. There are various spells available as well. These all work better if they're already an existing bond between the two." She stopped, staring at Harry.

"What kind of bond?" he asked. "Magical? Emotional?"

"Magical," Dumbledore answered.

"Like the one I have with Voldemort or Wormtail?" Harry spat.

"Like the one you share with Wormtail for example, yes," Hermione calmly explained. "When you saved his life, the magic created a connection between the two of you. That connection can be used in a variety of ways if both participants are willing." She paused and went on, "To a lesser extent, you can do some things with it even if he's unwilling as he's the one indebted to you. However, that isn't who I was thinking of, Harry."

"Me?" Ginny asked. She turned to Harry. "You saved my life as well, so that same kind of bond exists between us."

"You two have a much stronger bond as there is also an emotional component to it," Dumbledore added, smiling benignly at the couple who were holding hands without even realising it.

Harry blushed slightly, but didn't release Ginny's hand.

"Headmaster," Hermione said. "Once she had Dumbledore's attention she hesitantly continued, 'Please understand that I'm not advocating it, but would it help the bond if there were a . . . physical . . . component to it as well?'"

It took a second for her meaning to sink into Harry's consciousness, and he went utterly still.

"I . . ." Ginny started, clearly understanding what her friend was implying. She shook her head and took a deep breath, shoving her emotions to the background. "Would it help, Headmaster?" she asked in a brittle voice.

Dumbledore's eyes flickered back and forth between the two for a moment. "Unlikely," he finally said. "What we need in this circumstance is a strong magical bond. The emotional bond you already share will enhance that. A physical bond would likely not harm the situation, but I feel it would not help overmuch."

Both Harry and Ginny let out a breath. Neither could decide if they were happy with that answer or not, but it was at least something they didn't have to deal with for the time being.

"Now," Dumbledore went on, "there are several spells we can enact that will bring your magical auras closer together. They will have no other effects upon you, so long as you do not try to duel each other while the spell is in effect."

"What would happen?" Harry asked, honestly curious.

"Something similar to 'Prio*ri* Incantatem'," Hermione answered. "Okay, so we have a way of getting the two spells to work together. Now the tricky one: how to get enough power available to Ginny to cast the 'magus' spell. Your suggestion of channels last night got me thinking. One of the most stable power channels that can be created is based on blood ties."

"My family?" she asked, catching on immediately.

Hermione nodded. "If we can give each of them a power focus after placing the proper spells on it, you can tap their magical energy. It'd be draining for them, but would give you a lot more power."

"Is it dangerous?" Ginny asked in concern.

"No," Hermione shook her head. "We can put a limiter on the foci. At worst, they would have a case of magical exhaustion."

"How do you make the foci?" Harry asked. "Wait," he suddenly said, eyes travelling first to Fawkes the phoenix and then to his wrist where his wand was snugly resting.

When his enlightened smile went to Hermione, she nodded. "Yes, if Fawkes is willing, we can divide one of his feathers to make multiple foci. The fact you have another of his feathers in your wand will only help."

"Nine, I should think," Dumbledore said, staring off into space. "Arthur, Molly, William, Charles, Frederick, George, and Ronald. I am afraid Percival would refuse to assist us in such an undertaking. Ginevra here would have to wear one as well, of course."

"That's only eight," Ginny pointed out.

"I would have the remaining one," Dumbledore explained.

"You're related to the Weasleys?" Harry asked incredulously.

Dumbledore laughed. "Of course I am, Harry, as the Potters are. The magical community is far too small for us not to be related. In my case, the five generations removed is not enough to be useful in this instance. No, it is my connection to Fawkes which will enable me to contribute energy to this endeavour."

"Erm," Harry fumbled, glancing sideways at his girlfriend.

Dumbledore shook his head with a smile. "Seven generations off on your father's mother's father's side, I believe."

Harry and Ginny both let out a breath.

Hiding her amusement, Hermione went on, "Will eight magical foci be enough?"

"I should think so," Dumbledore answered pensively. "The Weasley and Prewett lines tend to produce strong wizards. I, myself, will also be contributing. With my connection to the school, I am somewhat more powerful than the average wizard."

Which was grossly understating things, the three students knew without bothering to mention it. There was a reason that Voldemort was hesitant to duel him one-on-one.

"Fawkes, perchance would you be willing to contribute a feather toward our undertaking?" Dumbledore asked the phoenix politely.

The red and gold phoenix let out a short trill of song that ranged upwards in a clear note of acceptance. He fluttered over and perched on the back of Ginny's chair, to everyone's surprise.

"Such a handsome fellow you are," Ginny whispered, running one finger down his chest, causing him to croon quietly.

"Remarkable," Dumbledore said, catching Harry's eye.

Harry just grinned, thankful that the phoenix which had always been friendly toward him was also accepting Ginny.

"Who is going to explain this to Dad and Bill?" Ginny asked, still stroking Fawkes.

"Why just them and not your whole family?" Harry asked.

"They'll all get suspicious if we just give them something and tell them to wear it without explanation. Bill is a curse-breaker for the goblins, so he could probably figure out any and all charms we put on it. Therefore, he has to be told. Mum would just have a conniption if she found out about what we're doing. Ron is too protective of me to allow this. Charlie, Fred, and George would be willing to help without asking too many questions. Dad has to be told in order to give a good cover story to the others."

"Protective spell by the Order?" Harry offered a possible cover explanation hesitantly. True to his prediction, Dumbledore had been subtly shielding Harry and the other students from all Order business since the beginning of the term.

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall be contacting Mr. Ollivander and Miss Chantally immediately to commission the items in the strictest confidence."

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The pendants, each with a portion of a single phoenix feather, took only a week to fashion and then enchant. Dumbledore, Hermione, Harry, and Ginny explained the situation to Arthur and Bill that evening, getting their grudging assistance.

Harry eventually talked everyone into letting him pay for the items and the time taken by Mr. Ollivander and the jeweller Dumbledore had also hired. This was not school related, so Hogwarts shouldn't have to pay for it. It wasn't truly Order related, so that source of funds would be difficult to access without Dumbledore telling the Order more about the scheme than he was willing to divulge. That left personal payment. As it wasn't charity or gifts, Harry eventually got Arthur to accept the explanation that it was his responsibility as it was part of fulfilling the prophecy.

Ron took some friendly ribbing from his dorm-mates over the necklace that appeared as a blocky, masculine "W", but he had been told it was a protective spell for the Weasleys, the largest single family in the Order of the Phoenix. Outside his dorm room, he wore it tucked inside his shirt, as did all the non-student Weasleys.

Ginny wore hers openly, explaining that it was a gift from Harry. She wore a much more stylised "W" with a pair of emerald chips embedded in it at her hesitant request.

When Parvati had hinted that a ring would have been more appropriate, she was roundly ignored.

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Three weeks later, it was the evening before Halloween and the usual feast. Harry was reading, for the fourth time, an article in that morning's Daily Prophet. Rita Skeeter was back to her previous muckraking. This time, it was Harry and Ginny's relationship. According to the article, Ginny was pregnant by Harry, and he was on the verge of suicide due to the public disgrace. Rita somehow also managed to imply that Ginny had suckered Harry into this in an attempt at extorting money from him. Harry shook his head and muttered darkly to himself yet again. Since Skeeter's year of good behaviour had expired, she was back and appeared to have a vendetta against Harry.

Harry caught the headmaster sneaking a look at him when he folded the paper and looked up. That was the third time tonight. Finally fed up with the treatment, he approached the head table. "Headmaster, as I haven't been permitted to attend any meetings, may I ask if the Order has any information on imminent attacks?" he asked quietly.

"Whatever do you mean, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, looking at him in confusion.

"Voldemort seems to like Halloween attacks," Harry explained. "I didn't know if anything was known about his plans for tomorrow."

"Nothing is known," Dumbledore assured his student.

Harry wasn't paying all that much attention to Dumbledore's answer. Instead, he was paying attention to McGonagall's reaction out of the corner of his eye. Just as he suspected, she looked down and began fidgeting with her napkin. To anyone else, it would look perfectly natural. To Harry, it meant she knew something that she was hiding from him.

Harry turned his full attention back to Dumbledore just in time for the headmaster to realise that something was wrong. Harry's face closed off completely. "Thank you for the information," he said flatly. Turning on his heel, he strode down the aisle toward the doors, Ginny falling into step beside him as he passed.

"What's wrong?" she asked, recognising the tension in his stride. "It's not still that Skeeter article, is it? If it is, I can assure you that I'm not -"

"Look back at Dumbledore and tell me what he's doing and how he looks," Harry quietly cut off her attempt to cheer him up.

Deciding not to get angry over his attitude, at least not at the moment, Ginny threw a quick glance over her shoulder.

Dumbledore, not expecting her to turn, was a moment too slow in averting his gaze.

"He's hiding something," Ginny reported, turning back forward and dropping all attitude of cheerfulness. "He was looking at you, concerned about something. The instant he saw me looking, he turned to McGonagall. What's going on, Harry?"

He's been keeping a closer eye on me than usual tonight. I went up to ask if the Order knew about anything happening tomorrow, Tommy has a strange fondness for Halloween attacks, and he told me nothing is known. He did not say whether anything was suspected. What was interesting was that McGonagall refused to look at me when he said it."

"And since she's in the Order, too . . ."

"Right."

"I just hope it's not something around here."

"Same here. I'm afraid I'm going to be spending a lot of time with my map tonight."

"Want me to keep you company?"

Harry smiled down at her. "Sure. Maybe you can think of something to keep me awake."

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Near four o'clock, they were long since the last ones in the common room. They'd started in front of the fire, but Harry soon found himself falling asleep. He'd moved to one of the work tables, leaving his sleeping girlfriend in front of the dying fire. She'd eventually awoken when she got cold, scolded him for letting her sleep, then joined him at the table. They'd both finished their homework, so they played a few games of wizard's chess, the activated map lying next to them.

"We probably should have let Dumbledore and the Order handle everything."

Harry's face closed down a bit. "With everything I've told you about how he treated me over the years and what you've seen yourself, do you really trust him to do the best thing for us?"

"Well . . ."

Harry held up a hand, stilling Ginny's half-formed comment. "I don't doubt that he does what he thinks is the best for the wizarding community as a whole. THAT doesn't always coincide with what's best for me or what I think is best for the wizarding community, though."

Ginny nodded slowly. It was a hard for her to admit that the headmaster was only human, but after Harry's pointing it out during the summer, she'd seen many of the same signs of his subtle manipulation of all of those around him. Then there was the whole Heir of Slytherin thing that he'd completely missed. Plus the false Professor Moody. Yes, the Hogwarts headmaster was imperfect. Which implied his decisions could be fallible as well.

Forcibly changing the subject, she said, "I'm surprised Ron hasn't come down here yet."

Harry shrugged, accepting the topic shift. "I keep kinda strange hours, so he's given up trying to keep track of me."

"Strange hours?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "One of my DA duties is to mark some of the homework that Tonks hands out. I occasionally do that down here in the middle of the night."

"I thought you weren't having as much trouble sleeping," she said in concern.

"I'm not. I just don't need much sleep, I guess," he shrugged. Privately, he thought it was a legacy of only getting four or five hours a night for years thanks to Voldemort induced visions. Saying so, however, wouldn't help matters any and in fact would only upset her.

"So what do you do all night?" she asked in interest.

"You mean besides my midnight rendezvous with my harem?" He grinned at her sour look. "Seriously, I mark first and second year essays for Tonks, wander around the castle, study my Defense textbooks, Quidditch books, whatever." He glanced at the map as he'd been doing every few minutes all night and suddenly stiffened.

Alarmed, she also looked down. There, just entering the edge of the map from the Forbidden Forest, was a dot labelled **Peter Pettigrew**.

"Wormtail," Harry breathed, giving a sudden, feral grin. Abandoning the game (she was winning again anyway), he flipped his invisibility cloak over Ginny's head and said, "Follow me." He snatched up the map on his way past the table and exited the portrait hole, Ginny following closely behind.

"Don't worry, it's just me," Harry soothed the Fat Lady as she started to stir.

"Off to patrol the castle again, Professor Potter?" she asked sleepily.

"Never can be too careful," he said over his shoulder. Once out of earshot of the portrait, he whispered, "Open up."

Ginny held up part of the cloak so he could slip under it as well. Harry immediately discovered that three eleven year olds fit under the cloak much easier than a sixteen year old and a fifteen year old. After a few moments, they discovered that they could stay covered only if he was so close behind her that he was rubbing against her back. Ginny kept the map open and her head down, giving a low voiced running commentary on Wormtail's location. Harry kept his head up and steered them around with his hands on her hips. Not that either teenager disliked the

arrangement, of course.

"Shouldn't we warn a professor?" she whispered.

"In case you didn't notice, you're sharing very close quarters with one of those very same professors," he breathed into her ear.

She shivered but kept to her thought. "You know what I mean, Harry. Should we be doing this on our own?"

"I have my mirror on me. If we run into something we can't deal with, I can contact Remus quickly enough."

Harry had originally hoped to intercept Wormtail in the Entrance Hall. This proved wishful thinking as Wormtail entered the castle through a window and first headed toward the headmaster's office. The two students were then forced into a short chase. Fortunately, it appeared that Wormtail stayed near the gargoyle long enough for the two to catch up with him. Stepping quietly, the two spotted a large rat poking its nose around the base of the gargoyle statue.

Stepping out from under the cloak, Harry pulled his wand and cast a spell he'd first heard his third year. "*Animus revertor*."

The rat in front of them was caught looking the wrong way. A flash of blue-white light later, and a small, stoop-shouldered man was staring at the gargoyle. The two students heard a sigh. "Hello again, Harry," Pettigrew whispered in his slightly squeaky voice.

"Wormtail," Harry coldly greeted one of his father's best friends. The one who had betrayed them all. "You know, you could repay the Wizard's Debt you owe me right now, Wormtail. Just tell us everything you know about Voldemort, his plans, and his Death Eaters and then turn yourself in at Azkaban so you can rot in Hell like you should."

Peter turned to face Harry and managed a slight smile. "You could do the intelligent thing and renounce your loyalty to this mockery of a school and join forces with My Lord."

"I guess we're both doomed to disappointment, then, aren't we?" Harry cocked his head for a moment. "On the other hand, I could just stun you and turn you in to Dumbledore. A couple drops of veritaserum and my wish could very well come true."

Pettigrew's face lost what little colour it had. Moving so suddenly that it caught both Harry and Ginny by surprise, Wormtail threw his silver hand forward, darted toward Harry, and cast several spells in quick succession. "*Diffindo! Stupefy! Activate! Reducto! Stupefy!*"

"*Protego!*" Harry shouted, throwing up a shield reflexively when he heard Wormtail's first spell. His shield protected him (barely) from the four spells coming at him, but he had no room and no time to manoeuvre away from the small man charging at him.

Ginny was just as surprised by Pettigrew's sudden attack as Harry was. She stepped forward and grabbed Harry's arm, starting to pull him away. While her left hand was doing that, she raised her wand and called, "*Everbero!*"

At the same time that her bludgeoning spell crashed into Pettigrew, rendering him unconscious, the invisibility cloak fully slipped off her head and Pettigrew's momentum carried him further forward and into Harry.

Both Harry and Ginny immediately felt the peculiar jerking sensation of an activated Portkey.

They stumbled upon landing, Peter's limp body falling at their feet.

"Well, well. THIS is most unexpected," commented a cold, hissing voice from behind them.

Harry whirled in place, feeling his heart nearly stop at the sight of an amused Voldemort standing not four meters away in a small clearing of a forest. Glowing, magical balls floated around, casting an eerie glow over the scene.

Nagini was nowhere in sight, a fact which slightly confused Harry, but for which he was thankful nonetheless.

Voldemort was looking down at his unconscious follower. "He never was any good in a fight, but at least he activated his Portkey and kidnapped you as I ordered." He looked up at Harry. "I was planning on having more of my followers here to give you a proper welcome, but perhaps the personal touch will be more enjoyable." He slowly drew his wand but continued to point it at the ground. "Yes, MUCH more enjoyable," he hissed, eyes flickering back and forth from Harry to Ginny. "Which one shall I kill first?" His eyes stopped at Ginny, causing the girl to swallow convulsively. "While killing Harry Potter is my main goal, I do believe that killing his lady love first, before I touch a hair on his head, would be most enjoyable. Don't you agree?"

"I wouldn't agree with you even if you said that Albus Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard alive," Ginny spat.

"Oh, but I wouldn't say that," Voldemort disagreed, looking vaguely amused. Such an expression looked grotesque on his face. "You see, he ISN'T the most powerful living wizard."

Harry used the distraction of their conversation to shift the aim of his wand from pointing to the ground at his feet, to pointing at Ginny's foot. "*Confero Facultas Magus*," he whispered, fervently hoping he'd gotten the Aura Alignment Spell correct. Both he and Ginny had practised it occasionally over the past two weeks, but he wasn't totally confident in its success yet. It was going to be tested within a few minutes, he was sure.

"Why not?" Harry asked, drawing Voldemort's attention away from Ginny. "I'm not so sure I'd call you human, honestly. Morality aside, that ritual I watched you and Wormtail cast created a body for you, but really, you aren't looking human, Tom."

"Don't use that name," Voldemort hissed, his glowing eyes tightening in anger.

"Why not?" Ginny asked. "You were born Tom Marvolo Riddle, weren't you?"

Voldemort didn't respond immediately, rather he seemed to be studying her for a moment. "You're the little girl to whom Lucius gave my diary, aren't you? I'd dearly love to hear how you bested me and the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets."

"Well, Tom, all you have to do is ask."

"That name no longer has any meaning for me," Voldemort growled angrily. "I've evolved beyond the human he was." He turned his head. "Join me, Harry, and we can rule the world together."

"I'll never join you," Harry stated firmly. "Even if I was insane enough to believe you, didn't you just say that your goal was to kill me?"

"Only if I must. I'd rather have you by my side, but if you will not join me, you will die!" He raised his wand faster than the two young magicians in front of him could react. "*Avada Kedavra* !"

Harry and Ginny dove apart from each other, the sickly green light passing between them.

"*Stupefy* !" Ginny cried, throwing an extremely bright, red light at Voldemort. He didn't fall from the spell, but he was knocked backward by the unexpected power of the standard Stunning Spell.

Harry had been thinking about what he'd said a few seconds previously. Voldemort truly did not look human any longer. In fact, he was looking more and more like . . . "*Expecto Patronum* !"

Harry's Prongs Patronus formed and charged Voldemort down. Voldemort, recognising the spell for what it was, ignored it and shook off the remainder of Ginny's Stunning Spell. He was therefore surprised when the Patronus physically ran into him, knocking him to his back. Prongs kept moving forward, trying to herd Voldemort away from his caster.

Harry, using the distraction Prongs was providing, ran back to Ginny's side. Sharing a single glance, the two students nodded and turned their wands toward Voldemort.

"*Finite Magus Totalus* ," Ginny spoke, her necklace suddenly flaring to painfully brightness.

"*Finite Res Totalus* ," Harry spoke, overlapping his girlfriend's voice, pushing as much power and concentration into the spell as he was capable of.

The two spells, one yellow and one blue, seemed to twine through each other to become almost green as they cleaved through the air toward their target and struck Voldemort full in the chest.

Ginny's spell, carrying the power of eight Weasleys and one Dumbledore, performed flawlessly. All magic in a two metre sphere abruptly ceased.

Prongs winked out of existence.

More importantly, all the magical defences that Voldemort had laboriously built up since his resurrection stopped working for a critical moment in time.

That was the same moment that Harry's spell struck, causing Voldemort's body to simply cease functioning. Even if theoretically a Healer could later get Voldemort's heart to start beating again, his brain had just irrevocably shut off.

Voldemort froze in position, arms falling to his side. With all the grace of a cut tree, he fell over. A hazy smoke drifted up from his body, rapidly dissipated by the gentle breeze.

Harry fell to his hands and knees, breathing heavily, drained from casting the powerful spell.

Ginny collapsed beside him, pale and sweating, panting for breath.

It took a solid minute before Harry had the energy to pull his head up and look around. Pettigrew was still out cold, Voldemort was unmoving, and Ginny was lying beside him, shaking, and looking even more drained than he was. "You okay?" he groaned out, falling over, somewhat gracefully, onto his side to face Ginny.

"Is he dead?" she asked faintly.

Harry craned his neck and looked at his arch nemesis. Peering closely, Harry didn't see his chest rising and falling in breath. "I think so," he answered. As soon as the import of the words he'd spoken registered, he rolled away from Ginny and explosively emptied the contents of his stomach. He continued to heave, even long after nothing was coming up any longer.

"Are you okay?" Ginny finally asked as he quieted down.

"No," he groaned, spitting the foul taste from his mouth. "I killed him. I just killed someone."

"WE just killed someone," she quietly corrected him, finally feeling strong enough to lift her head.

"You took down his defences. I killed him. I cast the res spell," Harry mumbled, unwilling to look at her.

"WE," she repeated in emphasis, "cast a dual spell, love. The goal was to destroy the most evil wizard in the world. Who, incidentally, would have happily killed us and everyone we care for. We succeeded in that spell. Yes, he lost his life in the process. Would you have preferred some other result?" She had slowly levered herself upright while speaking, and was now sitting, staring at Harry's back.

He silently digested that for a few seconds before giving a long sigh. "I suppose you're right," he finally relented.

"Something you'll have to get used to, especially if we're going to have a future together, love," she teased softly.

He chuckled weakly back, finally rolling back over. "Are you okay?" he asked in concern, once he saw how pale she still was.

"Tired," she admitted. "That spell took a LOT of energy. I'll be okay in a few minutes, but I'm going to want a big breakfast."

He smiled, hoping the taste in his mouth would recede by then. "How's your family?"

She shrugged slightly. "Dunno. I suspect that they're the same as me, but they're probably all asleep."

"Aw, hell," Harry whispered. He levered himself back up to sitting and pulled his communication mirror out from inside his robes. "Remus Lupin." He waited a few seconds and then repeated in a louder voice, "Remus Lupin!" He could faintly hear something from the mirror. "Remus!" he shouted at the mirror. "Are you there?"

"Yeah, yeah," Remus said, but it was muffled. The image suddenly swerved crazily for a moment, causing Harry's stomach to almost revolt again. Fortunately, the image steadied on a sleep-tousled Remus Lupin, shirtless, in a dark room. "Harry? Why in the name of Merlin are you calling at this time of night?" He peered into the mirror for a moment. "You're outside? What do you think you're doing? Get back inside, right now!"

"What is it, Rem?" a sleepy female voice came from the mirror.

Harry didn't even try to cover first the surprise, then the ear-encompassing grin that spread over his face.

Remus, looking slightly guilty, turned to address someone out of viewing range of the mirror. "It's Harry, Dora."

"Dora?" Ginny asked, grin audible despite her exhaustion. "Could that be our very own NYMPHADORA, my dear Professor Lupin?"

"Ginny? What are you two doing together, outside, at," he looked off to the side again, "five-thirty in the bloody morning!?"

"Long story," Harry cut his guardian off. "This is important, Remus. Wake up Madam Pomfrey. Grab Pepper-Up Potions and go to Dumbledore then Ron Weasley. I expect you'll find both of them are suffering from magical exhaustion. Then get to the Burrow and Fred and George's flat. Same thing." Harry tried very hard to ignore the sounds of rustling, as if someone were putting clothing on, coming from the mirror.

"Harry? What in the name of Magic are you talking about? All the Weasleys are magically exhausted? What are you going on about?"

"I'll explain later," Harry answered in exasperation. "Just do it, alright?"

Remus stared at his ward for a few seconds, trying to judge his sincerity. "Where are you?" he asked eventually.

"Don't know, really. We got Portkeyed out by Wormtail."

"WHAT?" Remus bellowed.

"Forbidden Forest, I think," Harry continued, ignoring Remus's outburst. He gave a sly grin and added, "My girlfriend and I are fully clothed, incidentally."

Remus blushed but maintained eye contact. "You're not going to tell me anything, are you?"

Harry shook his head. "Dumbledore and Hermione know what happened if you want a preview. We should be back in time for breakfast if we are indeed near Hogwarts."

"Should I owl a Portkey?"

Harry frowned. "Doesn't a Portkey need to know the start point, at least generally?"

"Good point. You really don't know where you are?"

"Nope."

"What can we do to help?" Tonks came into view of the mirror, face composed, sporting her usual short hair, bubblegum pink at the moment, charmingly tousled.

"Send some Pepper-Up to us, too," Harry decided. "We can see where the owl heads off and follow that direction to get back to the castle."

"I could follow the owl on a broom," Remus offered.

"Dammit, Remus," Harry growled, his patience rapidly running out. "Just check on Dumbledore and the Weasleys. Get Tonks there to send the

Pepper-Up. I'll explain everything else later, but now is not the time."

"But -"

"If you don't like my answers then ground me. Right now, I'm tired, I've got a monster headache, and I BLOODY WELL DON'T WANT TO EXPLAIN!"

"Temper, Harry," Tonks calmly said. "Okay, we'll do your bidding. Pepper-Up's on the way. See you in a bit." She took the mirror from Remus. Harry's last view of his guardian was of his surprised face.

"I just hope they invite me to the wedding," Ginny commented.

Harry snorted in laughter, slowly standing and putting the mirror away. Looking around the small clearing again, he offered Ginny a hand up. "You getting better?"

She nodded tiredly. "I'll be glad of that Pepper-Up, though."

A groan from Wormtail interrupted Harry's agreement.

In an eye blink, Harry was standing, wand pointed at the recovering Death Eater. "*Silencio . Locomotor Mortis*," Harry cast.

"Why not stun him?" Ginny asked, slowly standing with the support of a tree.

"I want him to see his master," Harry answered, staring at Wormtail in cold loathing.

Peter finally came around enough to realise that there was a problem.

Before he could do anything, Harry said, "Wormtail, don't even think of casting anything. I'll cheerfully kill you if you so much as sneeze wrong."

Pettigrew froze, slowly swivelling his head to look at Harry. He took in the iron-hard look Harry was giving him, then Ginny's unsteady posture. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Looking only slightly surprised at that occurrence, he used his arms to lever himself up to a sitting position, looking at Harry in question.

Without moving his wand from the traitor, Harry indicated Voldemort's body with a head jerk. "Take a look, Peter."

Cautiously, Peter turned in the indicated direction. He stared for nearly thirty seconds before turning back to Harry, abject fear spread all over his pale, perspiring face.

Mood changing entirely, Harry said conversationally, "Maybe you could help me, Peter."

Wormtail tried to look attentive.

"I'm trying to think of a reason not to kill you, but I'm not coming up with much. So, I was thinking of letting you become a rat and feeding you to Crookshanks. Or maybe ask Remus NOT to take his Wolfsbane Potion and save you until the full moon. What do you think?"

Terrified beyond coherent thought, Peter transformed into Wormtail and tried to scurry away. His immobile back legs hindered him such that he was barely moving forward.

"*Stupefy* ." "*Petrificus Totalus* ."

Both students cast at the struggling to flee Animagus. Harry's Stunning Spell hit the slowly moving target. He immediately collapsed. Ginny was looking at her wand in surprise. Now that she was looking at it, she could see the thin stream of smoke coming out of the tip.

"What happened?" Harry asked. Ginny hadn't fumbled a known spell in years, and a Full Body Bind was well within her capabilities.

"I don't know," she admitted. "Either my wand's broken, or I'm completely magically drained." The latter possibility caused concern that rapidly grew.

"Calm down!" Harry said, trying to keep her from panicking. He handed her his wand. "We know my wand works. Just try a 'lumos'."

"*Lumos* ." Both magicians breathed a huge sigh of relief when the wand tip lit up. "My wand must have overloaded," Ginny speculated, handing the wand back to Harry.

"*Nox* . Well, it DID channel about a dozen times the usual energy into a complicated, powerful spell."

She pocketed her wand with a sad sigh.

"I'm sure we can get you another one," Harry offered.

Ginny dredged up a smile. "Maybe Charlie will get me a dragon heartstring."

Grinning at the mild joke, Harry conjured a bag and levitated the rat into it. After casting Unbreakable and Locking Charms on the bag, he tied it to his belt, taking mild satisfaction in letting it bump into his leg every time he moved.

While closely examining Voldemort's body to determine that indeed he was totally and completely dead, Harry heard a rustling and whirled, wand out yet again. A white blur approached and Harry gripped his wand harder, subtly moving in front of Ginny. He was relieved to recognise Hedwig when she got close enough. The snowy owl alighted on his shoulder. He scratched her chest for a moment before pulling the two vials and scrap of parchment from her legs. "Hey, girl. Don't go quite yet, okay? We'll need some help to get back to Hogwarts." Hedwig gave a solemn hoot, hopping from Harry's shoulder to move over to a tree.

Harry uncorked one bottle and gulped down the contents, handing the other vial to Ginny. She repeated his actions as he opened up the scrap of parchment.

Harry,

Dumbledore is magically exhausted, but his eyes are brighter than ever if you know what I mean. He won't tell us anything about what happened. Remus went off to check on Ron. I considered asking Fawkes to fetch you, but he won't leave Dumbledore. I figured Hedwig was at least a friendly face.

You, buster, have a LOT to explain to Remus and the rest of us.

I suppose Remus and I have some explaining to do to you, too.

You first.

Tonks

Harry chuckled, reading the note. "Dumbledore was exhausted, just like we expected. Remus is taking care of Ron then presumably the rest of your family. Dumbledore won't tell them anything and that's driving them batty. You about ready to go?"

Ginny nodded, the Pepper-Up causing a slight steam to float about her head.

Harry expected he looked much the same, as it was the normal side effect of this particular potion, but it DID give them both a much needed jump in energy levels.

Harry waved his wand at Voldemort's body, levitating it.

Ginny leaned down and picked up Voldemort's fallen wand.

Harry smiled at Hedwig. "Please lead us back to Hogwarts, girl. We're obviously on foot, so stay slow enough that we can keep up, okay?"

Another hoot and Hedwig took flight, stopping at another tree fifty metres distant. Her white colouring made her easy to spot and follow. Moving at fifty metre intervals, she led the two magicians slowly back to the castle.

It took more than half an hour of steady movement, but they finally broke clear of the forest on the far side of the Quidditch pitch. "Thank you, Hedwig," Harry called. His snowy owl gave an echoing hoot back and moved off into the brightening sky toward the Hogwarts owlery.

"Remind me to thank Hermione when we see her," Ginny mentioned, moving up to walk beside Harry now that they were out of the forest's winding trails.

"No kidding. We probably should ask if she wants her contribution mentioned, though."

"Why should we explain anything?"

"Hmm," Harry pondered for a moment. "That's a good point, but everyone WILL want some sort of explanation. It's not like we can get away with claiming we found him like this," Harry motioned to the body floating in front of him with his free hand. "Not to mention Pettigrew," Harry added.

"No, I suppose not," she sighed, slipping an arm around his waist.

They passed the pitch and Hagrid's Hut and continued toward the castle's main entrance.

While they were still a hundred metres short of their goal, the doors opened and out strode Headmaster Dumbledore followed by the staff, most clearly just out of bed. They froze at the bottom of the stairs once Harry, Ginny and a floating body became close enough to identify.

Dumbledore simply beamed.

The student body, also in nightclothes with robes hastily added, flowed around the knot of professors and formed a semi-circle around the steadily advancing pair of students.

Harry also spotted a knot of red hair. Obviously, all the Weasleys had come to Hogwarts, looking for an explanation.

Ignoring the deafening silence from everyone present, Harry walked forward until Voldemort's body was five yards from Dumbledore. At that distance, Harry released the levitation spell, allowing the body to fall unceremoniously before Hogwarts Castle.

Advancing another pace, Ginny threw Voldemort's wand on top of the body. It bounced before coming to a clattering rest against Dumbledore's feet.

Other than Hermione's huge grin and Dumbledore's smile, everyone else wore looks of utter shock at the scene.

"Well this is odd," Luna Lovegood's voice broke the tableau in its typical dreamy tones.

Hermione and Ginny stifled the sudden cases of giggles at the irony of Loony Lovegood saying such a thing.

Excited whispering slowly spread among the assembled students.

The staff were still gaping at the scene.

Desperately looking for something to say, Harry said, "Good morning, everyone. I wasn't expecting the entire castle to welcome me back." Only Harry's closest friends recognised how forced that casual tone was. Everyone else in earshot thought he was as calm as if delivering the body of terrifying dark wizards were an everyday occurrence.

A sudden flash to the side drew everyone's attention and very nearly resulted in Colin Creevey being horribly hexed by the still tightly wound Harry. Colin lowered his camera just enough to give an unrepentant grin to Harry and Ginny before bringing the camera back up and snapping a dozen more pictures of the scene before pandemonium exploded.

Every student began screaming and cheering. McGonagall looked nearly in tears.

Hagrid's deep voice bellowed above the noise, "I told yeh, Harry. I told yeh that yeh were a great wizard!"

Hermione dashed forward, burying Ginny in a hug, repeating, "You did it!" over and over.

Harry was smiling at the girls when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. He looked over at his headmaster. Harry spotted suspicious moisture in Dumbledore's eyes along with such a look of deep pride and happiness that Harry nearly choked up himself.

Remus nearly bowled him over, engulfing him in a bear hug.

Molly Weasley was third to approach Harry. Instead of waiting for Remus to finish, she simply wrapped both of them up in her own hug, tears pouring unhindered down her face.

Utter pandemonium reigned for more than a few minutes, Harry being passed from one person to another, alternately congratulating him, thanking him, kissing him, shaking his hand, and hugging him.

When he spotted Remus for the third time, he grabbed the lycanthrope's shoulder. "Remus, Ginny and I are still tired. We need to get out of here."

Remus nodded, pulling a few Order members in to form an honour guard of sorts around Harry and Ginny.

Dumbledore futilely tried to restore order and get the students back inside for breakfast.

Remus and Tonks led the two young heroes inside and toward the hospital wing. Once inside, Remus asked Kingsley and another Auror to stand guard at the entrance. He and Tonks followed the two students to beds before Madam Pomfrey swooped down, clucking over their obviously haggard appearance.

"Magical and physical exhaustion," she diagnosed both of them after a quick examination.

Remus nodded. "Unfortunately, they won't be getting rest anytime soon. Albus will want to speak with them immediately, and then I'm sure there will be a press conference. No telling what else Fudge might do, as well."

Harry groaned at Remus's words as Madam Pomfrey handed him another Pepper-Up Potion and a chunk of chocolate. Gunning down the potion, and feeling immediately better for it, he waited until the matron was out of earshot before looking up at Lupin. "Remus, there's something about today that you need to think about."

Remus blinked before giving a slight grin. "There are more than a few things that bear thinking about regarding this morning, Harry," he calmly pointed out.

Harry grinned then pulled the bag off his belt. Pulling his wand out, he muttered the Unlocking Charm and handed the bag to Remus.

Confused, Remus opened the bag and peeked in. His eyes widened momentarily before he closed the bag again. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Wormtail," Harry confirmed, causing Tonks's eyes to widen.

Remus swallowed, staring at the bag. "Why did you give this to me, Harry? Why not turn him in to Kingsley or Tonks or one of the other Aurors?"

Trying to keep his composure, Harry said, "He'd be easy to keep unconscious until the next full moon."

Remus stared at Harry. It took more than a few seconds before he shook his head. "No. As personally satisfying as that might be, he's more valuable alive and talking. He can give us names. After that, he's proof of Sirius's innocence."

Harry nodded, finally smiling. "That was the answer I was hoping for." He re-sealed the bag and placed it on the bed stand.

"It was a TEST?" Remus asked in delayed understanding.

An offer," Harry reacted. "I considered feeding him to Crookshanks or Hedwig, but realised the same thing you did. Besides, after he's drained of all useful information, he'll be dropped into Azkaban. If there's anything worse than death, that's it." Turning from a flabbergasted Remus, he called, "Dobby!"

Dobby the house-elf appeared with a crack. "Harry Potter sir called for Dobby?" the outrageously dressed elf asked around an ear-encompassing smile.

"Yes. Ginny and I are tired and hungry. Two big breakfasts, please, with strong tea." He looked at Ginny for her reaction, and she nodded.

Harry then turned to Remus and Tonks, but only she responded. "Breakfast for Remus and myself as well, please."

Dobby bowed and disappeared with another crack.

Remus asked, "Since when did you start ordering house-elves around, Harry?"

Harry chuckled. "Dobby is a special case. He'd probably bring me a plate of dragon ribs if I asked him. Anyway, as I'm officially staff, I'm accorded all the same rights as a full professor as far as that goes."

"Including your own quarters?" Remus asked in curiosity.

Harry blinked. "You know, that's a good question."

Tonks smirked. "Oh, we all discussed whether to offer him his own quarters. Snape was dead set against any more favouritism being shown to the Boy Who Lived, of course. Professor McGonagall and I were against it for a different reason, though."

Harry looked mildly affronted. "You were?"

Tonks's smirk grew. "Giving a sixteen year old with a girlfriend his own private quarters?"

Remus started coughing. Ginny turned a red to rival her hair.

Harry nodded. "You do have a point."

Remus nearly swallowed his tongue. Tonks looked mildly impressed at Harry's answer.

Ginny, while still glowing red, was looking at Harry with a pondering expression.

Harry was saved from any further conversation by four breakfast trays popping into existence.

All four dove into their food in favour of talking about the events of the morning.

Finally placing his fork down, Harry grinned at Remus.

"What?" the werewolf asked.

"Oh, I'm just trying to figure something out."

"What's that?" Remus asked suspiciously.

Harry's eyes flickered to Tonks and back. "Was it your animal magnetism or was it a wolf whistle that hooked her?"

Ginny laughed. Tonks grinned and picked up Remus's hand, completely unselfconscious.

Remus himself groaned. "That was about the worst pun I think I've ever heard."

Harry shook his head. "I'm sure Sirius got a lot of mileage out of punning with his name. Furthermore, I'm sure that my father made more than one crack about Padfoot's romantic exploits and 'doggy-style'."

Remus laughed. "Okay, you've got me there. James was merciless."

"Seriously," Harry went on, "I'm glad for the two of you. How long has this been going on?"

Remus grinned in embarrassment. "Since the summer."

"Just so long as I don't have to call you 'Mum'." Harry grinned at Tonks.

She stuck her tongue out at him to Ginny's amusement.

Harry's face screwed up in confusion for a moment. "Hey, I thought you and Charlie were an item?"

She just chuckled. "Charlie was a friend from my school days. We never said anything, and you all just assumed from the seating arrangement that we were together."

"It worked," Ginny said. "Mum is about to send out the wedding invitations."

"Drat," Tonks muttered. "I'll have to talk with Molly about that."

"Have Charlie and Remus with you," Harry suggested. "If all three of you explain, she won't take your head off over it."

Tonks nodded just as everyone heard the step-thump of Mad-Eye Moody approaching. He paused outside the doors and then entered, nodding when he saw Tonks, Harry, and Remus looking his way. As he approached the group, his magical eye swivelled around before coming to a stop on the bag still sitting beside Harry's bed. "You realise there's a live rat in that bag?" Moody asked in a conversational tone.

Harry grinned diabolically. "He's a party favour for later." Knowing what a media frenzy the castle would shortly undergo, he had plans on what to do with this live rat.

Moody shrugged. "Dumbledore wants to talk to ya, Potter, Weasley. Most of the Order's here. Dropping Voldemort's body at Dumbledore's feet sure stirred up a hornet's nest."

"Not what I wanted, but I suppose it was inevitable," Harry sighed, standing and stretching the sore muscles out.

Remus conjured a backpack and dropped Wormtail's bag, none too gently, into it before presenting it to Harry. "I look forward to the show," Remus said, sneaky grin in place. He may have been the responsible one of the Marauders, but he was still a Marauder.

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Harry and Ginny's talk with the Order of the Phoenix (plus Ron and Hermione) went just as they expected. To put it bluntly: Not very well.

After explaining everything to an incredulous audience, the majority of witches and wizards in the Order showed relief that Voldemort had been defeated. There were, however, a few notable exceptions.

Snape's expression toward Harry kept alternating from loathing to relief to gratitude before quickly reverting back to loathing.

"Albus! I cannot believe this! You permitted these CHILDREN to do such a thing?" Minerva McGonagall was fuming in anger toward her old friend.

"You let her do WHAT?" Molly Weasley screeched at her husband.

Arthur, after wincing, tried to calm his wife, aided by Bill.

Ron had such a look of betrayal on his face when he looked at Harry, Ginny and Hermione that Harry quickly got fed up with everyone's attitudes.

"ALRIGHT!" Harry snarled, standing from the small couch he was sharing with Ginny in Dumbledore's office. Immediate silence dropped as everyone turned to look at him. "Professor McGonagall," he started, turning to her, "he did not PERMIT us to do anything. In point of fact, he's done his level best to keep me out of the line of fire, and completely ignorant of all happenings, for well over a year now. That attitude resulted in our little jaunt to the Ministry last June," he concluded, staring at Dumbledore's chagrined expression. Having made his point, he turned his head. "Mrs. Weasley, Ron, the reason the pendants weren't explained to you in the first place was because we knew this would be your reaction. You want to treat us as children, and I suppose that makes sense except for two little things." He addressed the entire crowd. "The prophecy stated that I must defeat him. I had help, but I cast the spell that k - killed," he verbally stumbled with a wince.

Remus, Molly and Arthur also winced, knowing how this affected the young man.

Harry took a breath and continued, "I cast the spell that killed him. I had no choice but to get into this mess. Ginny and Hermione chose to help me. THAT IS THEIR RIGHT," he bellowed, overriding Molly and Ron's attempts to interrupt. "The reason Ginny had the right to help is simple. Mrs. Weasley, how many times have you faced Voldemort?"

"None," she answered in confusion, not knowing where Harry was going.

"Ron, same question."

"Same answer, as you well know," Ron muttered.

"That's right. With the exception of Professor Dumbledore and maybe Moody, have ANY of you fought Voldemort? NO!" he didn't wait for them to answer. "Ginny, on the other hand, HAS. I HAVE. Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Professor McGonagall, stop treating us like children. We aren't and haven't been for quite awhile. This had to be done. I didn't want to do it, but I had to. I didn't want Ginny to have to do it, but she was the only one who could help me. Therefore, we were the only ones who could do it, despite everyone's wishes. End of discussion. Now, does anyone have any questions that aren't based on your own wishes that we hadn't had to do it?"

Still fuming, Harry glared around the room. Ginny was looking at him proudly. Molly and Ron were red-faced, but kept their mouths shut for the moment. Snape was sneering.

Dumbledore spoke into the silence, slightly impressing Harry with the nerve of the man whom it was clear wasn't in Harry's best favour right then. "Miss Weasley, did you indicate that your wand was no longer functioning?"

Ginny nodded.

Dumbledore silently held out his hand.

Ginny drew the wand out of her pocket and handed it to the headmaster.

Dumbledore spoke a long incantation over it before giving a sharp nod. "Your assumption was quite correct, Harry. The magical core is burned out by the power of the spell it cast. Miss Weasley will be needing a new wand."

Fawkes, until now quietly watching, gave a short squawk and hopped from his perch to Dumbledore's desk. Under the eyes of everyone in the room, the phoenix took Voldemort's wand in one claw and jumped into the air, dropping the wand into Ginny's lap before settling himself on the couch back between Harry and Ginny. Once there, he started quietly crooning, causing Harry and Ginny to relax.

"It seems that Fawkes has his own answer to that dilemma," Dumbledore observed.

Ginny picked up the wand and it immediately felt warm and shot sparks.

"Remarkable," McGonagall breathed.

Moody grunted. "That simplifies that. You understand, missy, that the Aurors will need to hold that as evidence for a couple days."

Ginny nodded absently, staring at the wand in her hand. Voldemort's wand was suitable for her, too? What did that mean?

Harry laid his hand over Ginny's. "It doesn't mean anything," Harry said as if reading her mind. "The wand is just a tool. The tool isn't dangerous, the user was. Besides, Fawkes has chosen you to hold the only other wand with his feather in it."

Ginny smiled gratefully at Harry and handed the wand over to Moody.

"Even the bloody BIRD wants them together," Ron mumbled.

Bill and Hermione, the only two to hear him, poked at him to be quiet.

Dumbledore was rummaging around in his desk before coming up with a plain wand which he handed to Ginny. "That is a spare wand that Hogwarts loans to students when the need arises. Likely it will not perform as well for you as others may, but this way you are not defenceless until that wand," he waved toward the one Moody had stored in a pocket, "is again available to you."

Ginny nodded. "*Lumos* ." The wand lit, but not as brightly as she was used to. "*Nox* ." She put the wand into the dedicated pocket in her robes.

"Now that it's been fulfilled, what was the full prophecy, Harry?" Remus asked hesitantly.

Hermione glanced at Harry for permission. At his nod, she recited, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

Ron, Ginny, Dumbledore, Remus and Harry all already knew this, so they were the only ones not staring at her in disbelief.

Harry said, "This was given to the headmaster here by Professor Trelawney the winter before I was born. You're all aware I was born July thirty-first. My parents had apparently already fought Voldemort three times by that point. This," he tapped the scar on his own forehead, "is his marking me. It all fits." He saw no reason to mention that Neville was the other possible candidate. It wasn't a case of wanting the limelight to himself but rather wanting to spare Neville.

"You've known about this for months?" Molly asked, tearing up.

Harry sighed and nodded tiredly.

She stood and moved around the room to hug him.

"Power the Dark Lord knows not . . ." Bill echoed thoughtfully. "Any ideas what that was?"

"The power provided to us by the pendants could've been what it meant," Harry answered. "Personally, though, I think it was loyalty and love."

"Love?" Charlie asked with a questioning expression.

"He possessed me briefly in the Ministry in June. As Professor Dumbledore explained it at the time, my love of Sirius drove him out. Thoughts of love have been what's kept him out of my mind since then."

Hermione's face lit up in sudden understanding, eyes flickering between Harry and Ginny.

Harry ignored her and continued, "Lastly and most important, though, Ginny's and my love for each other enabled us to cast the dual spell successfully."

"Love is the power he doesn't know and doesn't understand," McGonagall summed it up.

Harry merely nodded.

"Percy Weasley is approaching," Moody said abruptly

Half the witches and wizards in the room tensed up. Fred and George scowled.

A knock sounded, and Dumbledore invited, "Enter."

Percy opened the door and was momentarily taken aback at everyone in the expanded office. His eyes tightened slightly at seeing the grouping of his entire family. He also blinked at Ginny and Harry snuggled together with Fawkes perched above them. Shaking himself back to the reason he was there, he turned to Dumbledore. "Headmaster, the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, wishes to speak with you." His pomposity and tone indicated just how important he considered this information to be.

Alternating, Fred and George cracked one knuckle at a time, staring at Percy.

Everyone could see a thin sheen of sweat break out on Percy's forehead, but he kept his attention on Dumbledore.

"Certainly," the headmaster said. "I believe we are done here. Cornelius is in the Entrance Hall?" At Percy's nod, Dumbledore stood and followed the former Head Boy out of the office.

"Unless there is more to discuss?" McGonagall smoothly took over the meeting.

Everyone shook their heads before standing and shuffling through the door.

The professor indicated for Harry and Ginny to stay behind. When the room finally cleared, the stern professor sighed and seemed to slump. "Harry, I owe you something of an apology. You are indeed correct in that I saw you two as children needing to be protected. All of your points were quite correct. I shall endeavour to remember that."

Deciding to test his luck a bit, Harry asked calmly, "Does that include the professor's quarters previously denied me?"

McGonagall paled slightly but otherwise kept her composure. "I shall have to have words with Professor Tonks for that," she stated.

Ginny smothered a snicker.

"Yes, Professor Potter, including the quarters I shall arrange for you." She flicked a glance at Ginny before turning her attention back to Harry. "Please maintain your maturity with regards to the room, Harry. I would definitely wish to avoid any . . . problems."

"You're not the first to ask that, Professor," Harry said with a grin. He started ticking names off on his fingers. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Charlie, Hermione, Remus, Tonks . . ."

McGonagall graced the two students with one of her rare half-smiles. "Indeed." She stood and looked down at them. "I daresay that there will be a press conference followed by the largest party in fifteen years yet to come today. I would suggest you two get some rest. As Gryffindor Tower is unlikely to give you any peace, I would recommend the Room of Requirement. I will send one of the house-elves to fetch you when the inevitable starts." Her expression softened. "On a more personal level, I would like to thank you both for what you did this morning. Like everyone else in the wizarding world, I owe you more than can ever be repaid." Before the two slightly stunned students could respond, she turned and strode out of the room.

Ginny shook off the mild shock first. She stood and smiled down at her boyfriend, holding out her hand.

He stood and entwined his hand with hers. "Bye, Fawkes." Harry called over his shoulder.

"And thank you!" Ginny added.

The magnificent phoenix gave back a short series of trills that the pair had no trouble interpreting as, "You're welcome."

Laughing, the two headed up to the seventh floor and the Room of Requirement.

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"Harry Potter sir?"

"Hmmp. Go 'way." Harry snuggled further into the dark, enveloping warmth.

"Harry Potter sir? Please, sir, but sir and miss must get up now. Many important wizards and witches sent Dobby to wake sir and miss."

After a major effort, Harry finally managed to pry his left eyelid open. He saw the dancing flames of a fireplace through a mass of red hair. He slowly realised that the warmth in his arms was his girlfriend. That fact brought the rest of his memory back. Staying up all night, the fight, reporting to the Order, Room of Requirement becoming something vaguely like the Gryffindor common room. Harry sleepily admitted to himself that he and Ginny probably would have taken more advantage of the absolute privacy provided if they hadn't been so tired and simply dropped onto the couch. Harry gingerly raised his head and turned toward the hand-wringing Dobby. "Okay, Dobby. I'm awake." He luxuriated in a jaw-popping yawn before shaking Ginny gently. "Up and at 'em, love."

She mumbled something unintelligible and wiggled back further, effectively trapping Harry against the back of the couch they'd stretched out on.

Her wiggling also caused some blood flow issues for the teenaged wizard, but he squelched those thoughts as quickly as he could. He shook her a bit more insistently. "Come on, Gin. Time to get up and greet our adoring public."

She grunted and stretched in a way that Harry had only ever before seen Crookshanks perform.

His blood flow issues became bigger.

Finally waking up, she rolled to her feet in one smooth motion. She smiled at the house-elf and said, "Thank you, Dobby. We're awake."

Dobby nodded and left after a toothy smile.

"Oh, and don't call me 'Gin', please."

"Hmm?" Harry asked as he tried (unsuccessfully) to tame his hair.

"I don't like 'Gin'. Yes, it's a cute diminutive of my name, but it's also the name of a Muggle liquor. One of my roommates is a Muggle-born, and I took a lot of teasing over my name after she explained it."

Harry kept a straight face as he turned to face her. "Well, when I say 'Gin', I'm not thinking about liquor. Instead, I'm thinking of the intoxicatingly gorgeous redhead in front of me."

She smiled at him. "Very smooth, Potter. Especially as you used 'intoxicatingly' there."

"Why thank you, Weasley. I do aim to please."

Giggling at the banter, she gave Harry a quick hug then turned to the door with a sigh. "I suppose we should get this over with."

"You and I just DID defeat the most evil and powerful dark wizard in history, Ginny. They just want to thank us." His face clouded over, and he hung his head, thinking about what he'd done early that morning.

"No, you do NOT feel guilt over this, Harry!" Ginny admonished. "Aside from the whole prophecy thing, he was going to kill us out there. We were simply defending ourselves the best way we knew how."

Harry straightened back up and nodded. The darkness of despair beaten back from his mind again, at least momentarily, he said, "Yeah, I know. Anyway, we need to go out there."

"I don't want thanks. I just want to be left alone." She sighed quietly.

Harry shrugged. "So do I. Welcome to my life." She gave him a venomous look, but he just smiled. "Think of it this way. All this is for their benefit, not ours."

"For our benefit, then, couldn't they just leave us alone?" she pouted.

He smiled, the last of his foul mood evaporating. Being that cute even when pouting should be illegal, he decided. "You know that's not how it works, love. They're relieved. They have a reason to celebrate, but they also want some heroes. We're it."

"Joy," she rolled her eyes.

"Come on, let's get this over with."

Sighing, she nodded and led the way out. Just outside the door, they nearly bumped into Ron and Hermione, arguing over their usual trivial whatever-it-was.

Ron broke off from his devastatingly clever counterpoint to look at his best friend and sister. "There you are." He turned around and led the other three back down toward the Entrance Hall. "You're missing quite a party. EVERYONE is here. Fudge, all the Ministry department heads, a good chunk of the Ministry, most of the Order, the entire school and most of the students' parents showed up. They're all waiting on you two. What were you doing, anyway?"

"Well, after sleeping with your sister, I tried to snog her senseless. Unfortunately, she has too much sense for me, and it didn't work," Harry deadpanned.

Ron's mouth fell open, and he started sputtering.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He's kidding, Ron."

"Actually, only partially," Ginny calmly retorted. "We haven't snogged for a good thirty-six hours now. You'll have to make that up soon, Harry," she added as an aside. After Harry's obedient nod, she continued, "On the other hand, we WERE sleeping together."

Ron turned bright red and looked like he was about to explode.

"Literally," Harry added. "I didn't get any sleep at all last night, and Ginny only got a couple hours. After the Order finished interrogating us, we went to the Room of Requirement and fell asleep on a couch."

"Don't DO that to me, mate," Ron groaned, rubbing his forehead as his colour slowly returned to normal.

"Has it occurred to you that they intentionally wind you up simply because it's so easy to do?" Hermione asked dryly.

Hermione's words, of course, triggered another argument between the two. Harry and Ginny grinned at each other and shared an eye-roll as they approached the Entrance Hall.

"There you are," Remus said, stepping over. He threw a look at the bickering Ron and Hermione. "What's with them?"

"They're flirting," Ginny stated baldly.

This caused Ron to sputter to a stop in mid-word, as both he and Hermione turned red.

Remus was only partially successful in fighting his grin. "Come on," he waved them out the doors. "There are so many people it's being held at the pitch. Awards ceremony, press conference, then party. And you two lucky kids are going to be the centre of attention. You get to give a speech and everything."

"Speech?" Harry asked faintly, wide-eyed.

"You know, a whole bunch of official sounding words strung together that the media will misquote horribly," Hermione explained cheerfully.

Harry glared at Hermione.

Ron and Remus were just snickering while Ginny slowly paled at the thought of giving a speech to everyone in the wizarding world.

"Oh, fun." Harry sighed, resigned.

Ginny shook off her shock and hugged his arm. "Don't worry. I'm sure we can sneak out halfway through the party."

Harry nodded and took a deep breath as the five some approached the Aurors guarding the main entrance to the Quidditch pitch.

The older of the two raised a hand and said, "Halt. You may not enter."

Everyone stared at him in blank shock.

"You DO realise who this is?" Ron asked, waving at Harry and Ginny.

"Yes, sir. That's Harry Potter and Ginevra Weasley."

"So you're saying we can't enter?" Ginny asked in total disbelief.

The Auror shook his head. "You four," he gestured at the students, "are expected. It's him," he gestured at Remus, eyeing him carefully, "that I can't allow past."

"Why?" Harry asked in a low tone that caused Ginny and Hermione to glance at him in apprehension. They'd heard that tone before.

"He's a well known werewolf, sir. Such an unpredictable dark creature might attack the Minister. I can not allow him past."

The four students glared. The aforementioned "unpredictable dark creature" just looked resigned.

Harry recovered first and shrugged. "Fine. YOU explain to Minister Fudge that you refused me entrance to the spectacle he's holding to honour me."

The Auror was shocked. "No, sir! I wasn't saying you were not allowed in. It's just this . . . individual that I can not allow in."

Harry shrugged again. "If you're not allowing my godfather in, I'm not going in. I'll be telling everyone that it was Minister Fudge and YOU who caused that. Good day." He turned back toward Hogwarts castle, the others moving with him immediately.

"Wait," the younger Auror requested in a strangled voice. "How about I ask Minister Fudge?" he pleaded. His older partner was clearly torn with indecision.

Harry shrugged eloquently and leaned against the wall. "Sixty seconds."

The Auror went in like a shot. The five friends all stared stonily at the increasingly uncomfortable senior Auror while waiting. It was a short wait.

The younger guard came back out. "You all may go in," he invited, smiling timidly.

"Thank you," Harry smiled at the younger and glared at the older Auror on his way past.

Remus chuckled once they were past, but it sounded strained. "Thank you," he whispered, squeezing Harry's shoulder. "Godfather?" he asked next.

Harry shrugged. "In fact if not in name, Moony, assuming you have no objections to the title," he grinned for a moment before scanning the audience. Ron was right. Everyone Harry knew was there and several thousand that he didn't as well. When the nearest one spotted him, applause started. Flushing in embarrassment, Harry kept a firm grip on Ginny's hand and led the way toward where Minister Fudge was standing beside a podium facing the largest section of stands. Harry dropped his backpack nearby and turned to the crowd.

The applause continued for several minutes, embarrassing Harry and Ginny immensely. He tried to be a good sport about it, but enough was

enough.

Hermione gave him a helpless shrug from the front of the student sections when she recognised his expression.

The Weasley twins thought Harry and Ginny's expressions were hysterically funny, though their laughter wasn't audible over the clapping and cheering.

Finally, Minister Fudge waved for silence, and it slowly quieted down. After a muttered, "*Sonorus*," he strutted up to the podium and planted himself behind it with a dazzling smile.

Harry was momentarily reminded of Gilderoy Lockhart's theatrics.

Never losing his wide smile, the Minister took a deep breath and started. "I am delighted to announce that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is dead!" A roar came from the crowd at his amplified words. "Every since receiving conclusive proof of his return back in June, your Ministry has been working tirelessly toward his defeat. I can now conclusively announce that his body is in Ministry custody along with his wand. There are no doubts that the body and wand are authentic. This war is over!" Another roar. "The Ministry can not in good faith take full credit for his defeat. I have two others here with me who assisted us greatly. For that reason, I hereby grant the Order of Merlin, First Class, to Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley!" As the Hogwarts portions of the crowd sustained the applause, Fudge slipped a medal around each student's neck and handed them scrolls. Again addressing the crowd, Fudge went on, "I must admit that I don't know all the details of the operation that resulted in his defeat, so I'm going to allow Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley to speak."

Harry kept a smile pasted on his face despite his growing outrage. The absolute nerve of the man!

Ginny, no doubt feeling his anger through their discreetly clasped hands, turned toward him as the applause slowed down. "I'll say a few words first, but YOU get to explain everything, Harry." Before he had a chance to respond, she leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek, resulting in dozens of flashes as every photographer at the event caught evidence of their romantic involvement. It wasn't a secret, but nobody had published a picture proving it yet.

Ginny cast a quick *Sonorus* Charm and stood behind the podium next to a beaming Minister of Magic. She smiled timidly at the thousands of witches and wizards. "I'm just going to say a few words before turning it over to Harry for the explanations. He did most of the work, after all. I just want to thank you all and let you know that what we did, we did for ourselves as much as for all of you. Lord Voldemort," most of the crowd, including Fudge, gasped, "was a threat to us all. Harry and I just happened to be the ones there to stop him. We would appreciate it if you didn't try to make us out to be heroes for this. We just did what had to be done. What any of dozens of others would have done if they were there instead. Now, before I ramble on any further, I'll turn this over to Harry." She rapidly stepped aside.

Resigning himself to the situation, Harry cast his own *Sonorus* Charm and moved behind the podium. The applause continued to grow until almost everyone there was standing, clapping wildly. Smiling in embarrassment, Harry waved everyone back down. If only the Dursleys could see him now, he mused. Once the pitch got quiet enough again, Harry started, "I hope everyone will indulge me for a few minutes. I'll get to this morning's events eventually, but there are a few other items that must be covered before I get to that point. There are many people for me to thank, first of all. Ginny for being willing, and able, to help me. Hermione for finding what we needed. The Weasleys for providing me a home when I desperately needed one. My godfather for his support and a link to the parents I never knew." He paused. "My godfather is a good man." He glared toward the main entrance and the offensive Auror before continuing, "And he IS a man and not a blood-thirsty monster that everyone wants to brand him as. Remus Lupin, though, was not my first godfather." Harry abruptly turned and asked, "Minister Fudge, what do you think of Sirius Black?"

Fudge blinked in confusion. Harry's speech wasn't going as he expected. "Sirius Black is a very dangerous wizard. He killed a street full of Muggles after betraying your parents to his master. He then escaped from Azkaban using dark magics we don't understand and nearly killed you again three years ago."

"He was thrown into Azkaban for killing, along with all those Muggles, one of my parents' best friends, Peter Pettigrew, correct?"

Fudge just nodded, still confused.

"Now, what did I tell you after the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Minister?"

Fudge relaxed. He thought he saw where Harry was going now. "At the time, you claimed to have witnessed a resurrection ceremony that brought He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named back to power. I deeply regret having dismissed your claims, Harry. You have my apologies for not listening to you about his return." Having said what he thought Harry wanted to hear, he started smiling again.

"Thank you, Minister, but I was thinking more along the lines of WHO I claimed was there in the graveyard."

"Yes, you implicated many people, most of whom are currently awaiting trial on charges of being Death Eaters," Fudge grudgingly admitted. The questioning was hurting Fudge's public image, but he figured the positive events of the day would easily outweigh the negative revelations, especially after he got the Prophet to put the proper spin on it.

"Yes, I mentioned several names, Lucius Malfoy being only one of them. I also said Pettigrew was there. Now, I have absolute proof of Pettigrew's guilt."

Fudge's smile froze in place. "Now really, Harry, do we really need to get into all that here and now? We're here to honour your activities in ridding us of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"I'm glad you admitted it that way, Minister, since it indeed was MY activities without any assistance, and a whole lot of obstruction, from your Ministry. Back to Pettigrew, though, I think we should let our audience decide whether they want me to explain myself. What say you?" he asked

the crowd.

In the front row Dumbledore spoke up immediately. "Please, Mr. Potter. I am most curious."

Harry gave him a wry look. Dumbledore already knew this story as well as Harry himself did.

"Aye!" chimed in several dozen voices, mostly Order members who already knew what was going on.

The group of reporters off to the side were muttering to their Transcription Quills furiously, but they all nodded frantically. This is far from what they had expected going into the press conference, but it was definitely news all the same.

Fudge clearly wasn't happy at the turn the situation was taking, but had to concede to the moment.

Harry cleared his throat, "Once upon a time, a young werewolf was invited to attend Hogwarts. His name was Remus Lupin."

"'Once upon a time'? You don't have to make me look THAT old, Harry," Remus interjected from his seat near the entrance.

A light wave of laughter flowed around the stands. Fudge barely refrained from glaring at the werewolf.

"Sorry, Remus, I got carried away for a moment," Harry apologised without looking the least bit apologetic. "Anyway, while he was a student here, he formed close friendships with three other young men in Gryffindor house. These three eventually learned that he was a werewolf when they noticed he was sick during and immediately after each full moon. Instead of turning their backs on their good friend, they tried to figure out a way to help. Eventually, they learned about Animagi. If they could turn themselves into animals, they could accompany Remus when he was in his wolf form. After years of study and practise, they succeeded. One was a large dog; another was a rat; the last was a stag. They were, in order, Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and James Potter."

Fudge sputtered. "Students learning to become Animagi? Preposterous!"

Harry was expecting this and so had his defence ready. "I have the Animagus notebook of Sirius Black. He wrote about how he and his friends did it. He details all the steps, all the failures, and their eventual success." He turned toward where he'd spotted the Hogwarts staff. "Professor McGonagall, you're the only registered Animagus here that I'm aware of. Do YOU think it's possible for Sirius Black and James Potter to do this?"

She nodded firmly. She knew full well that Sirius, Peter, and James had been Animagi, but that knowledge came from the Order of the Phoenix. Harry had not mentioned the Order, so she phrased her answer accordingly. "Those two were among the best Transfiguration students I've ever had the pleasure of teaching. I would be interested in reading this notebook, Mr. Potter, but I have no doubts that it's possible."

Harry nodded, thanking his Transfiguration professor. "To continue the story, they eventually all graduated, and one of them, James Potter, married his sweetheart, one Lily Evans." Harry grinned at Remus. "I've heard that the bachelor party was something to behold."

The audience laughed, especially those who knew Sirius and James back then. He had the entire audience enthralled.

"In the due course of time they had a son, Harry."

"I'm sure he was a very cute kid," Ginny interjected from beside him.

The audience laughed again.

Harry smiled back. "I'll ask Remus's opinion later. At any rate, Lord Voldemort was gaining in power all through this time. He'd recently heard of a prophecy, stating that a threat to his power would be born about this time. Albus Dumbledore learned all of this and recommended to James and Lily Potter that they go into hiding under the *Fidelius* Charm. Everyone thought that they would use their best friend, best man, young Harry's godfather, Sirius Black as their Secret Keeper."

Harry paused as a wave of quiet muttering ran through the stands. "Everyone expected that, so they didn't," he dropped his bombshell. Absolute silence reigned. "They instead chose Peter Pettigrew because nobody would ever think of Peter as a Secret Keeper. They didn't even tell their old headmaster their last moment change of plans. We all know what happened fifteen years ago today. What I'm telling you is that it was PETER PETTIGREW who betrayed my parents. When Sirius Black learned of Peter's betrayal, Sirius chased after him, finally cornering him in a street full of Muggles. Peter loudly accused Sirius of betraying his friends, cut off his own finger in order to leave as evidence, blew up the street full of Muggles, AND CHANGED INTO A RAT TO ESCAPE." A few tears were being shed now, and Harry's eyes were prickling. He continued relentlessly, "Sirius was immediately thrown into Azkaban without a trial. As an Animagus, he kept a grip on his sanity. He escaped twelve years later when he discovered that Peter, now the pet rat to the Weasley family, was living at Hogwarts."

Harry vaguely noticed that Percy, Scabbers's original owner, had suddenly become very pale.

"After repeated attempts, Sirius finally cornered Peter in June, two and a half years ago. Sirius and Remus Lupin, who was the Hogwarts Defense professor at the time, explained all of this to me and two of my friends. They almost succeeded in bringing Peter in, but he again managed to escape by turning into a rat." Harry turned to the man beside him. "At the time my friends and I tried to explain all of this to you, Minister. You waved it off as the ramblings of three students, a werewolf, and an escaped convict." He turned back to his audience. "Sirius managed to escape the Dementors Kiss later that night.

"A year later, we have the Tri-Wizard Tournament. After I escaped from the resurrection ceremony, I tried again to explain to you, Minister. Voldemort," the audience shivered, "was back. Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Avery, Macnair, Lestranger and PETTIGREW were all there. You again didn't believe me. You stuck your head in the sand and pretended the increasing dark activity wasn't happening. You wasted a year while Voldemort gained followers and power.

"Last June, we had the fight in the Ministry. At the end of that battle, you saw him with your own eyes, Minister. Finally, FINALLY you believed he was back. What have you done about it? Have you recruited more Aurors? Encouraged the populace to learn defence and put up home wards? No, you had a press conference to announce your re-election campaign."

By now Fudge was more than a little irate but tried to salvage the situation. "Don't you think that's a bit harsh, Harry? Err, may I call you Harry?" he asked in far-too-late courtesy.

"Only if I can call you a sycophantic spineless slug," Harry shot back, causing a minor stir among the audience.

"Now see here!" Fudge finally objected. "There's no need to be that way about it. Besides which, you have provided not one shred of proof that this fanciful tale is anything but sensationalism!"

Harry smiled unpleasantly. "Sensationalism, Minister? What do you call all this?" he asked he asked in a deathly calm voice, waving around to indicate the situation. "You called this press conference and awards ceremony. Or should I call it a public relations spectacle?"

"But on to the proof you asked for. Could I have Head of Magical Law Enforcement Amelia Bones come down here as witness, please? Also, Aurors Alastor Moody, Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt?" Once Madam Bones was standing near Ginny, the three Aurors formed a semi-circle open to the audience so everyone could still see what was happening.

Moody spoke quietly to Harry, "Quite a party favour, Potter." He had a vicious grin in place, though it was almost invisible on the Auror's scarred face.

Throwing Mad-Eye a quick grin, Harry continued, "Okay, I've got Pettigrew in my bag, stunned."

The audience gasped.

"He's currently in his rat form. Could I have Percy and Ron Weasley come down to positively identify their former pet rat, please?"

Ron came forward immediately, amused at his friend's actions. Percy came forward slowly, unable to refuse under all of the public attention.

Harry cautiously checked and was encouraged when he saw Wormtail was still unconscious. He drew him out by his tail and dropped him to the grass in front of the podium.

The three Aurors had their wands out but not pointed. The nearest audience members leaned forward for a look, but at the moment it was simply a rat except . . .

"Scabbers didn't have a silver paw," Percy loudly exclaimed, obviously thinking he'd found a flaw in Harry's story.

Harry grinned victoriously at Fudge. "I explained that at the time, did I not, Minister? He cut off his own hand in the dark ritual to resurrect Voldemort. In turn, he was given a new silver hand, courtesy of his returned master."

Fudge grudgingly nodded, and Percy's face fell.

"I agree with Percy," Ron calmly added. "Except for the one paw, he looks like Scabbers."

"Thank you," Harry said politely. "I think we can forgo asking any of the other Weasleys or the other Gryffindor sixth years up to identify Scabbers. Auror Moody, are you familiar with the 'animus revertio' charm?"

Moody nodded and cast it.

The rat immediately grew into Pettigrew. As luck would have it, his left forearm was exposed and the Dark Mark was there for all to see.

Press photographers immediately started clicking pictures like mad. Almost the entire audience gasped. Fudge was looking positively green. Madam Bones was watching in rapt attention.

"Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, could you come forward and identify this man, please?" As an aside, he explained to Fudge, Bones, and the audience, "Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor house when Peter here was a student. Professor Snape was in the same class as Peter, though not in the same house." After both professors came forward, with great reluctance on Snape's part, and identified Peter positively, Harry continued his case. "Minister, as you've not accepted the word of a werewolf before, I won't bother asking Remus Lupin to come down here and identify one of his one-time best friends.

"Aurors, his silver hand acts as a wand. Earlier he had a Portkey on him. He's aware that his master is dead. Auror Moody, I leave him in your capable hands."

Mad-Eye gave a sharp nod and waved his wand a few times, mumbling spells. After Peter was enclosed in a glowing sphere, he was levitated out with Moody and Kingsley following his still unconscious form.

Tonks put her wand away and re-joined the Hogwarts staff.

Harry turned. "Madam Bones, have you seen and heard enough to clear the name of Sirius Black?"

She nodded slowly, still staring after the departed Death Eater. "Pending interrogation of the prisoner, I will certainly be re-opening the case. If

everything you've said is the truth, I expect that the complete exoneration of Sirius Black is likely."

Harry nodded and turned back to the audience as Bones made her way back to her seat. "I'm glad that my godfather's name finally has a chance of being cleared. Unfortunately it will be posthumously. He was the only fatality in the fight in the Department of Mysteries. He was killed by Bellatrix Lestranger. He died defending me."

Harry took a deep breath, head down for a moment of mourning. He looked back up at the spellbound audience. Taking another deep breath, he continued, "I went into this press conference hoping to accomplish two things. First was to clear Sirius's name. Second was to lobby to have Minister Fudge removed from office." He turned back to Minister Fudge, who was by now in a state of shock. "Your absolute refusal to acknowledge Voldemort's return despite the mountain of evidence to the contrary is inexcusable. You listened to your good friend Lucius Malfoy and his galleons speaking to you instead of the proof your Aurors, Albus Dumbledore and I were piling up around you. I don't hate you personally, Minister. I'm not doing this out of anger or spite. I'm doing this because your actions have hurt the wizarding world I love so much. In order to secure the peace, you will best serve the wizards of Britain by NOT being our Minister of Magic." He turned back to the stunned audience. "To you good people and all the other witches and wizards of Britain: I implore you to remove Cornelius Fudge from the post of Minister of Magic in the upcoming elections."

Ignoring the speechless man who stumbled his way off the stage, Harry paused to catch his breath and calm down from the emotions threatening to explode. After a few moments, he changed the topic completely. "Thank you all for allowing me to diverge from the original purpose of this press conference. On to the events of this morning: All I'm willing to say about it is that Ginny Weasley and I cornered Peter Pettigrew in the castle. After a short duel, he Portkeyed all three of us into the Forbidden Forest before he was knocked unconscious. Voldemort was there. He wasn't expecting us quite so early but indicated his intention of killing us both. We duelled him. I cast a spell that killed him. No, it was not the Killing Curse. Shortly thereafter I stunned Pettigrew when he was in his rat form. Ginny and I made our way back to the castle, arriving sometime around dawn. The entire staff and student population was there." He sighed. "I'm sure I'm going to regret this, but are there any questions?"

Every reporter started shouting questions, each jostling the others in an attempt to get their question addressed first. Harry paid more serious attention to them for the first time. He recognised only one of them by sight. "Rita! Come on down here," he invited with a jovial smile and a wave of his hand.

The other reporters looked upset that Rita was getting special attention.

Only Ginny was in a position to recognise the vicious edge to Harry's expression.

Smiling smugly, Rita strutted up to the front, her parchment and Quick-Quotes Quill floating along behind her. "Harry, as always it's nice to see you. My first question is about what you said about Minister -"

She stopped as Harry raised his hand. "Rita, I didn't invite you down here so you could ask questions. I just wanted a clear shot." He whipped out his wand and pointed it, causing all the reporters to duck aside. "*Explodre . Incendio .*"

When it was clear that he in fact hadn't killed anyone, Rita stood and looked around, only to find her quill was in about a thousand pieces and the parchment with all her notes were now scattered ashes. "Potter! What do you think you're doing?" she screeched.

"Rita, you wouldn't know the truth if it ran up and urinated on your leg, as you proved quite spectacularly during the Tri-Wizard Tournament and again yesterday. I thought you would have learned something in your year-long sabbatical, but you clearly did not. To put it bluntly, I never want to see you again as long as I live. If you print one single word about me or anyone close to me, you'd better have a deep hole in which to hide. Otherwise, you'll have a very pissed off Harry Potter out to make your life so miserable that you'll beg for dementors to make it better. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

"You'll pay for this, Potter," she snarled.

"Literally but not metaphorically, Rita," he grinned, but there was a hardness around his eyes that gave even her pause. "Do send me the bill for a new Transcription Quill." He turned his head and addressed the huddle of reporters. "Is there another Prophet reporter here?"

One of the wizards hesitantly held up a hand, fearful of what the volatile Boy Who Lived might do to him for admitting who he worked for.

Harry smiled, trying to put the obviously terrified man at ease. "Don't worry, I'm not going to attack you. I'd just like to ask you to take a message to your editors. I hold Rita personally responsible for the senseless drivel she's been writing. So long as the Prophet ceases such false, scandalous writing, I won't take any further action against your paper or your reporters." He glared at all the assembled reporters and growled out, "Is that understood?"

As one, the reporters nodded. They were, by and large, the best in the country at what they did. They had all just watched Harry decimate the Minister of Magic and then one of the most obnoxious reporters in the wizarding media. None of them were stupid, and they all caught the not very veiled threat without any problems.

Snarling to herself, Rita Skeeter stomped off the pitch, dragging her photographer out by his collar.

Harry nodded as she walked out of sight. "There. She was really starting to bug me. Now that that unpleasantness is out of the way, are there any other questions? After all, this was supposed to be a press conference, wasn't it?"

One of the witches timidly raised a hand. "Mr. Potter, could we have some pictures of the body of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

Harry was sorely tempted to respond with, "Only if you can cease using such asinine euphemisms," but instead said, "You'll have to speak with the Ministry's public relations department about that. I believe they're currently in custody of Voldemort's body. On the other hand, you might want to

speak with Colin Creevey." Harry waved at the student before continuing, "He took some pictures this morning that you'll probably find interesting."

Colin, for his part, first went pale then rapidly smiled very widely and gave Harry a grateful nod.

"You two just defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. How do you feel?"

Harry closed his eyes and winced. Disregarding the audience, Ginny ran a hand up and down his back for a moment.

Taking a breath, he opened his eyes again and said, "Awful. That's the first person I've deliberately killed through my own actions. I'm glad he's gone and not killing anyone else, but I just wish we hadn't had to kill him. If you're asking about how we physically feel, we're both tired but otherwise unhurt."

"Mr. Potter, you earlier thanked Miss Granger for finding what you needed. Presumably you were referring to the spell you used. What spell was that, sir?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't answer that. It's possible that giving out that information could result in the remaining Death Eaters using that information to somehow resurrect their master. Again."

"Remaining Death Eaters?"

"I know that Bellatrix Lestrange escaped from the Ministry fight in June. As far as I know, she hasn't yet been apprehended."

"Will you be making Sirius Black's Animagus notebook available to the public?"

Harry thought about it for a second. "Perhaps. I'd like to read it over myself first, though."

"Could you comment on your relationship to Miss Weasley?" the Witch Weekly reporter asked.

"We're dating," he said dryly, unwilling to go further than that explanation.

"Sir, you've made a wide variety of accusations against Minister Fudge. Do you have proof of any of these charges?"

The questions ranged over many topics and continued for another half-hour before Harry ran out of patience. "Look, folks, I've had a long day, and I'm tired. Could we please wrap this up?"

"Indeed," Dumbledore stepped up immediately. "I believe that concludes Mr. Potter's statements. Refreshments are available in the Great Hall. Everyone please enjoy yourselves."

Excited chatter broke out all over. The reporters all darted out to start writing their stories.

Harry sighed and stepped back from the podium.

A fair percentage of the audience came forward immediately to speak with him instead of moving toward the castle.

Harry suffered through more hugs and kisses from adult witches than he'd ever received in his life. He got offers of endorsement deals from Firebolt, Nimbus, Bernie Bott's Every Flavour Bean, and many more products that he'd never heard of. He received job offers from Amelia Bones, half the Ministry department heads, Puddlemere United, and one non-descript man who claimed to be an Unspeakable.

Eventually, Harry broke back into the clear and spotted Remus looking at him in amusement. "For someone who was less than excited about giving a speech, you did amazingly well."

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Well, maybe I've been thinking about it for a while."

"A while?" Remus asked with a teasing grin.

"Okay, for a very long while. What do you think I did during Divination and History of Magic, anyway?"

Remus laughed and clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder.

The Unknown Power October 31 to November 6

Stepping into the Great Hall, all of Harry's worst fears were confirmed.

Hundreds of witches and wizards broke into applause the instant the young couple crossed the threshold of the room, hand-in-hand. Nearly a hundred flashes went off as the photographers made their presence known all over again.

A couple dozen young witches surged forward, batting their eyes at Harry and clamouring for autographs. Ginny very nearly snarled aloud at them. Whatever the girls and young women saw in the petite redhead's eyes was enough to convince all of them to turn away without another word.

Harry was suitably impressed and thankful. Along one side, the couple could see that Tonks was laughing so hard she was nearly falling over. Remus threw her a betrayed look but stayed at Harry's side.

As the applause died down, they could see that the Hall was done up in Gryffindor colours as if they were being awarded the House Cup. All of the house tables had been removed and only one table, containing a variety of drinks and snack items, was along the side of the room.

Hanging over where the head table usually stood was a wide banner. On one end was an image of Ginny, looking both omnipotent and caring. On the other end of the banner was an image of Harry's face, with his scar slightly exaggerated. The expression on the image-Harry's face made him appear to be immensely wise and all-powerful. Between them, in elaborate script, were the words: **The Couple Who Won**.

Below the image of Harry, someone had set up a few mannequins on a slightly raised platform. All three Dursleys and James and Lily Potter stood, looking proud and happy. Harry vaguely noticed that simulacra of the Weasley family (Percy included) stood beneath Ginny's image as he stomped toward the mannequins representing his family, such as it was.

Once he got close enough, he read the plaque at the feet of James and Lily Potter. It simply stated their birth and death dates in addition to saying that they were Harry's parents. Based on the pictures Harry had of his parents, the images looked about right. Their expressions of happiness and pride were something that Harry could only hope were correct.

The entire setup of the Dursleys was hideously inaccurate, however.

"What unmitigated fool came up with this?" Harry demanded in a loud voice.

"Harry!" Percy Weasley came out of the suddenly silent crowd in the room, smile fixed and hand extended. "Allow me to congratulate you on your stupendous achievement!"

Narrowing his eyes, Harry folded his arms in a clear counterpoint to Percy's extended hand. "You and your idiotic boss did this, didn't you?" he asked instead.

Percy's jovial expression melted instantly. "Mr. Potter! This is the Minister of Magic you're referring to!"

Harry smiled coldly. "You obviously didn't pay attention to what I said at the press conference, WEATHERBY. I couldn't care less about him. Now, since you haven't denied it, I'll assume you either did it or you're taking credit for this insult to the truth," he waved his hand at the smiling Dursley images.

Percy merely pressed his lips together and started glaring.

"Whoever did this clearly knows nothing about those three poor excuses for Muggles. There are so many problems with those images I don't think I could list them all, never mind the utter fiction that plaque says. What imbecile came to the conclusion that they were 'generous' with me in any way?" Harry abruptly waved his hand in irritation. "You know what? Never mind. I don't care who produced these things." He turned his head. "Remus, are the images of my parents correct?"

Remus, looking highly amused at Harry's words, simply nodded.

"Will 'altero simulacra' work, you think?"

Now grinning outright, Remus asked, "Sirius?"

Harry smiled and waved his hand in an inviting gesture. "Be my guest. I'll do the plaque."

"Now see here!" a red-faced Percy stepped in front of the threatened dummies.

Harry just stared at him for a moment. "Percy, think very carefully about what you saw me do to Fudge less than an hour ago. Now think about what

my attitude towards me is after what you've put your family through, your support of Fudge, your support for Umbridge, and your participation in trying to have me expelled for the DA last year." He paused as those thoughts slowly sunk into Percy's mind. "Do you really want to get in front of my wand right now?"

Looking sullen, Percy moved out of the way.

"Frankly, I'd rather do away with all of them altogether, but since I know that's not going to happen, I'd at least like this to be an accurate representation of my family," Harry muttered to nobody in particular. He pointed his wand. "*Evanesco. Evanesco. Evanesco.*" He vanished first Vernon, then Dudley, then the banner above them. While Remus was busy remoulding the image of Petunia Dursley into Sirius, Harry modified the plaque to read, **Sirius Black. Godfather to Harry Potter. Born April 23rd, 1960. Died June 26th, 1996 fighting against Death Eaters.**

He looked at Remus's efforts and nodded agreement. This was not an image of the adult Sirius who'd died five months previously, nor the bedraggled, escaped convict he was for years prior to that. Rather it was a young man with a happy yet mischievous smile in place.

He turned to the very unhappy Percy. "THIS is the family I claim, Percy. These three," his pointing hand indicated the images, "Remus, Hermione and MOST of the Weasley family. If you're going to say or do something about me, at least get it right." He turned on his heel and stalked away from Percy to see what Ginny had been up to.

The image of Percy had been removed from the Weasley group. Ginny was just finishing altering the plaque to indicate that Percy had disinherited himself from the Weasley family as he arrived at her side.

"He did?" Harry asked in surprise.

Ginny nodded, putting her wand away. "Yep. Official and everything as of last Christmas. It devastated Mum and Dad, so we didn't talk about it."

"Did you mean that, Harry?" Hermione asked from behind Harry.

Harry turned to find a teary Hermione with Ron's arm over her shoulder. "Did I mean what?" he asked, slipping an arm around Ginny's waist.

"That you included Hermione and I in your list of family," Remus said, joining the group.

Harry nodded firmly. "Definitely. Hermione, you're the sister I wish I had. Remus, I can't decide if you're an older brother or an uncle, but calling you 'godfather' is good enough for now."

Eyes suspiciously wet, Remus pulled Harry into a hug, quickly joined by Hermione then the two Weasleys.

A sharp bang pulled the three out of their group hug, Harry and Remus's wands out and aimed at the unexpected noise.

Tonks calmly put her wand away after her Concussion Charm and turned to the staring, silent crowd. "Alright, folks. Nothing to see here."

Harry's face burned in embarrassment as he realised that the entire Hall full of witches and wizards had undoubtedly watched and heard everything.

Ginny snaked an arm over his shoulder and leaned up to whisper into his hear. "Hey, don't be embarrassed. It's all true, after all."

"Yeah, but . . ." He sighed. "I just wish they wouldn't hold me up as some kind of hero. Hold US up," he corrected himself, waving toward where the now removed banner had been hanging.

"They will, you know," Remus said in amusement. "What you two did was huge and incredible. They just want to honour you for it."

"Instead, how about they hold up Sirius and the Order," Harry grumbled.

"The word you're looking for is 'iconize'," Hermione mentioned. "The witches and wizards of Britain would rather celebrate the Boy Who Lived than a shadowy Order, Harry. The fact that they get a second hero," Hermione indicated Ginny with a short nod, "is just a bonus. Whether you like it or not, you are the heroes of this."

With a sigh, Ginny said to Harry, "You were right earlier."

"No need to look so surprised. That HAS been known to happen before," Harry teased.

Ginny rolled her eyes. She explained to their small audience, "Before we came down here, he warned me that we'd end up being heroes because everyone else needs us to be heroes."

"I just wish it didn't have to be us," Harry grumped.

"Then you shouldn't have won," Hermione dryly answered.

"Think of it this way, Harry. If we hadn't won, we couldn't do this." Ginny gently pulled his head down enough to give him a passionate kiss.

Harry grinned. "Oh, you mean this?" He kissed her back.

"Oh, Great Merlin," Ron groaned.

Chuckling at their antics, Remus turned from them to enjoy the large party in progress.

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The next morning's Daily Prophet was mostly devoted to the Second Fall, as it was now being called. One of Colin's pictures had a prominent spot on the front page, which included full photo credit to the student. It took until halfway through the paper before anything except Voldemort, Harry, or Ginny was mentioned. At that point, it became the other events at the press conference, including Harry's diatribe against Fudge (which would be further investigated and covered, the paper promised) and then against Skeeter. Though the Prophet skimmed over the second part of that, they firmly stated that she had been dismissed for "gross journalistic misconduct".

Harry snorted when Hermione read that portion of the paper aloud.

"Only about five years too late," Hermione acidly added.

"Why did you let her go?" Ron asked quietly, still helping Harry open packages. He, like everyone else, was moving a little slower than usual after a very long and boisterous party all the previous evening.

In addition to the usual family post and paper deliveries, hundreds of owls had descended upon Harry and Ginny. Almost all of them were thank you gifts of one variety or another (some containing promises of a much more PERSONAL thank you if Harry so desired), and Harry had recruited his dorm-mates into helping him open all the gifts.

Malfoy, and to a lesser degree Snape, were glaring and muttering about the situation.

"I promised I'd let her write whatever she wanted again after a year. I had hoped she would have learned her lesson, but apparently she hadn't," Hermione answered Ron's question as he threw another box of Chocolate Frogs onto the pile of candies at the end of the Gryffindor table.

Natalie McDonald brought yet another armload of Ginny's haul down from where she and Ginny's other roommates were helping her open her own mail. "This is the last of it, I think. Harry, Ginny also told me to tell you that some of her letters gave her inventive ideas. I don't know what that means, though."

Dean spoke up without taking his eyes from the parchment he'd been reading. "Oh, if they're anything like this one, I think I can hazard a guess." He tilted his head and frowned at it a bit as Neville looked over his shoulder in curiosity. Just as Neville's eyes bulged at the sight, Dean commented, "You know, I wasn't aware that that position was even physically possible."

Hermione coughed, spraying pumpkin juice on Harry's robes. Natalie's eyes grew huge before she turned and scampered off. Harry groaned. Ron took on the look of a simmering volcano.

Hoping to head off a Weasley explosion (of one variety or another), Harry quickly asked, "Is that the pile of real letters?" He'd asked the boys to segregate the obvious fan mail from the other items. The fan mail had been summarily incinerated.

"Yeah," Seamus answered, hurrying to Dean's side. "There's even one from Gringott's in there that wouldn't let me open it." He got to where he could see the parchment that Dean was still studying and quirked an eyebrow. "Very . . . flexible, isn't she?" he asked.

"Uh . . ." Neville had lost all ability to communicate.

"Someone had better rescue Neville," Harry commented in amusement.

Hermione, still holding a cloth napkin to her mouth, rolled her eyes and placed a hand over the parchment in question.

That seemed to snap Neville out of his trance, and he hurried away, his face nearly imitating an embarrassed Weasley at their best.

Dean pulled the parchment away from Hermione's reach and continued to study it, muttering with Seamus. He was saying something about "double jointed" that everyone chose to ignore.

Shaking his head at his friends' antics, Harry called loudly. "Hey, everyone!" When he had the attention of most of the Hall, he continued, "Two things. First, both DA classes are cancelled this weekend. Second, you all might have noticed that Ginny and I got sent some sweets."

Most everyone chuckled. 'Some sweets', as he called it, was currently forming a small mountain near the head table.

"Everybody feel free to come along and take what you want. I only ask that any Agrippa Chocolate Frog cards go to Ron. He's still missing that one." The entire Hall laughed, and students started to make their way forward.

"Thanks," Ron said sarcastically. His slight grin, though, showed that it was less than angry.

"Anytime, mate," Harry cheerfully acknowledged, gathering up his real letters. They would require a more thorough reading later. He only hoped that Ginny's plea from the previous day to not treat them like heroes would mean that this sort of morning post wouldn't happen for more than another day. Maybe a politely worded request for the Daily Prophet to publish?

Harry's morning class that day started out having little to do with educating him. Instead, he was bombarded with requests to detail everything that'd happened. For the entertainment of Professor Flitwick and all the Charms sixth year students, he related what happened. After that, the professor went over two topics. The Animagus Reversion Charm and the mechanics behind Portkeys.

Lunch was reasonably quiet. Harry suffered through more pointing and whispers, but he had long ago become immune to it. Ginny was just learning.

Toward the end of the meal, Dumbledore asked Harry to attend a staff meeting that evening. This, of course, resulted in all the nearby Gryffindors renewing their teasing of him over his current professorial status. In an odd way, Harry was thankful to the headmaster for trying to bring life back to normal.

In the afternoon Defense class, even Tonks wanted a play-by-play of the action, though she didn't ask about the final spell he cast.

She nodded when he wound down. "Okay, class. Who can tell me what Harry and Ginny did wrong?"

Everyone stared at her blankly.

"Nothing!" Neville blurted out. "They took down the worst wizard in history!"

Tonks shook her head. "Yes, but they shouldn't have made it that far. That they survived at all is nearly miraculous. I'm supposed to be teaching you Defense Against the Dark Arts, so I'm asking what they could have done differently so as not to get to the point of nearly being killed by Voldemort."

Hermione answered, "They should have shouted out the password to the headmaster's office the instant they had Wormtail cornered."

Tonks nodded. "That's one. They had a powerful ally very near by. He wasn't informed until well after the point of it being useful. Anything else?" She looked apologetically at Harry.

"I should have stunned Wormtail when I had a shot at him instead of reversing his Animagus transformation. I let my anger get the better of my judgement," Harry said thoughtfully.

Tonks nodded, thankful that Harry wasn't bothered by this critique of his performance and was even participating.

"He should have contacted ANY professor the moment he knew Pettigrew was in the castle," Dean volunteered. He turned to Harry, "Come to that, how DID you know he was here?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably. He wasn't about to divulge the secret of the Marauder's Map. "Ginny and I stumbled upon him, and I recognised him."

"And what, pray tell, were you and the baby Weasel doing out at four in the morning, Potter?" Malfoy sneered, though it had less venom than usual after the past day's events.

"Two points for insulting a prefect, Malfoy," Harry first answered with a resigned sigh. "As a professor, I had every right to be out and about. I often patrol the corridors at odd times of the night. All my dorm-mates know I'm a borderline insomniac."

"What was Ginny doing up and with you at that time?" Ron nearly growled. He knew about the map, and had already been informed, along with the Order, about the exact sequence of events. Harry assumed Ron was hiding his knowledge behind his infamous big brother role.

"Nothing against the law or school rules," Harry assured him, skating around giving any real answer to the rest of the class.

Ron narrowed his eyes before leaning back and folding his arms. "I'll be sure to ask for a more complete answer once I have a few brothers of mine around to help."

All the remaining Gryffindors winced, remembering the legendary Weasley protectiveness toward their sister. This included the twins.

To complete the scene, Harry cowered, but he was quietly relieved. He was now positive that Ron was merely acting the part he had to. He couldn't admit to too much previous knowledge, after all.

"I'll leave Mr. Potter's fate in the hands of the Weasley clan," Tonks put her stamp of approval on that scenario, much to the room's amusement.

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Sitting down to dinner, Harry began to read through the pile of mail that he and his dorm-mates had weeded out of the obvious fan mail.

The Ministry sent two letters. First giving formal notification of the Order of Merlin that

was currently in Harry's trunk. The second parchment from them was a statement clearing Sirius Black's name. It went on to explain that a sizeable compensation for wrongful imprisonment had been deposited into Sirius's Gringott's vault plus a posthumous Order of Merlin, Second Class. This was signed with a flourish by Fudge.

Harry snorted in disgust. If the idiot Minister thought he could buy Harry's good graces, he was sorely lacking in grey matter. Not that this was news.

One polite (nearly begging) request for an exclusive interview by a Daily Prophet reporter of his choice, sent by their editor-in-chief.

A similar request for interview by the Quibbler , sent by Luna's father.

A joint offer to pose for the cover of Wizarding Today magazine with Ginny.

A request for joint interview and pictures from Witch Weekly .

An offer of a job interview from Madam Bones and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

An invitation, also from Madam Bones, to what looked like a "junior Auror" sort of summer camp. This, Harry laid aside for further contemplation.

A note from a solicitor, apparently having to do with Sirius's estate, to meet him on Sunday morning at Gringott's bank.

Lastly, the note from Gringott's. Tapping it with his wand, it unrolled itself and a key fell out and onto the table. It was larger and much more ornate than Harry's other key, even having **Potter** engraved into it. Reading in curiosity, Harry learned that due to his new legal status, he now had access to the Potter family vault in addition to his trust account. The goblins further explained that a sizeable deposit had been placed into his main account by the Ministry of Magic.

"Harry?" Ginny asked, carrying a similar letter and holding a smaller key of her own.

"Yes, love?" he asked absently, re-reading his letter.

"I just got this from Gringott's," she said, not looking up. "Do you happen to know what 'change of legal status' they're talking about?"

Harry looked up. "You too?"

She nodded, glancing at Harry's new key. "The Ministry made a deposit in my name and the goblins put it into my own, new account due to my change of legal status. Do you have any idea what they're talking about?"

"Order of Merlin awards have monetary rewards attached," Hermione mentioned from her place across from Harry. "As for the legal status, I'm not sure."

Harry stood and approached the head table, Ginny trailing along behind. "Headmaster?" Harry asked politely.

"Professor Potter and Miss Weasley. What might I do for the two of you this evening?"

"Gringott's sent us both letters this morning, mentioning our change of legal status. Do you know what they're referring to, sir?" Harry had wondered if Sirius being cleared might have something to do with it, but then why did Ginny get something similar?

"The fact that you have been granted your majority," Dumbledore answered.

Both teenagers frowned in confusion.

"Oh, dear. I see you that you do not understand the significance of receiving an Order of Merlin." Dumbledore's eyes showed great amusement. "The awards are always phrased identically, so I am aware of what it says as I also received one some time ago. The pertinent portion states that a monetary reward will be placed in your personal Gringott's vault. However, one of the goblin's banking laws states that only those who have reached their majority are permitted a personal vault as opposed to a trust vault such as yours, Harry. Therefore, by stating it in the way that it does, it has the secondary effect of legally changing you into adults. Seeing as how you two are the youngest recipients of this award by a fair margin, this has previously not been an issue. In this case, however . . ." He waved a hand at the couple, twinkle lighting his face.

"Legally, I'm an adult?" Ginny asked in shock.

Dumbledore nodded, still smiling benignly.

Harry raised an amused eyebrow. He was less than a year from reaching his seventeenth birthday, and gaining the same status by normal means, but Ginny was just short of two years away yet. "The underage wizarding decree –"

"No longer applies to either of you," Dumbledore assured them.

Harry's mind immediately started quietly planning a proper goodbye to give to the Dursleys.

Stunned, Ginny politely thanked Dumbledore and turned back to the Gryffindor table. Harry made his way to his seat in a state of bemused shock.

Hermione looked up from her examination of the Potter key. "This is your family vault key?" she asked.

Harry nodded.

Ron objected, "I thought you wouldn't get access to that until you're seventeen."

"Seems that receiving an Order of Merlin legally turns you into an adult," Harry told them.

As Ron thought that one through, Ginny dropped onto the bench across from him. "Hiya, little brother!" she greeted him cheerfully.

"Little brother?" he asked her with a raised eyebrow.

"Yep. As of yesterday, I'm legally older than you."

Hermione and Harry smothered grins at Ron's expression of blank shock.

"Harry, Ginny," Colin Creevy greeted them, walking up with a handful of photographs.

"Hi, Colin," Harry greeted. Ginny nodded to her year-mate.

"Harry, I'd like to thank you for mentioning me and my pictures yesterday during the press conference. I'm sure you noticed my picture in the Prophet this morning?"

"It was a good picture," Harry assured him. "I'm not so sure I looked quite that calm at the time, though."

"Yes, you did," Colin, Neville and Hermione chorused and then grinned.

Ron was still shaking off the shock of Ginny's announcement.

"I've gotten a couple job offers as a photographer, too," Colin proudly reported.

"Good for you," Ginny congratulated him.

Blushing a bit, Colin went on, "Anyway, I had a couple copies made up for you two. This first one is a copy of the one the Daily Prophet bought. Here's a couple panoramic shots to show you who was there. This last one, though, I think you'll both truly appreciate." He handed it to the couple with a flourish and a grin.

Harry and Ginny broke into peals of laughter. It was Snape's face. He was clearly looking down at the dead Voldemort. His expression could only be described as "dumbstruck fish". Even though it was a typical wizarding photograph and was therefore moving, the picture-Snape merely opened and closed his mouth and blinked rapidly.

Wiping the tears away, Harry proclaimed, "Colin, you're a genius! This is now officially my favourite picture ever."

Ginny weakly nodded, clutching Harry's shoulder for support.

Colin was grinning at their reaction. "Yeah, I thought you two would appreciate that one. Enjoy!" He headed off, whistling cheerfully.

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Harry entered the staff room a few minutes early that evening to find Dumbledore and Snape being the only two present. Perfect.

Harry nodded politely to Dumbledore and said to Snape, "Professor."

"Potter," Snape acknowledged.

"May I make a request?"

"Your history has proven you capable of such a thing, though the relevance and intelligence of -"

"Severus," Dumbledore warned gently.

"Far be it from me to deny the Boy Who Won anything," Snape said, smoothly bypassing Dumbledore's unspoken chiding.

"Now that you no longer have to kowtow to the children of Death Eaters, do you think you could be fair to your students?"

"What makes you think I am not fair, Potter?" Snape sneered as McGonagall entered.

She barked out a laugh. "Aside from consistent, continual complaints from the younger students of the other three houses?"

"Only the younger students?" Snape smiled oily.

"We give up complaining when it's obvious that it doesn't matter," Harry explained.

"Aside from the wide discrepancy in your class grades versus OWL and NEWT grades for all houses, including your own?" McGonagall gave another reason.

"Really?" Harry asked in interest.

Minerva grinned victoriously, still looking at Snape. "Oh, yes. Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs consistently do better on the standardized tests than he grades you. Slytherins, on the other hand, consistently do WORSE at the standardized tests."

"Those examiners are biased against my Slytherins," Snape stated.

"Only in Potions?" McGonagall questioned with all the delicacy of a Bludger.

Harry couldn't decide whether he should be enjoying the show or getting nervous.

"We have spoken about this, Severus," Dumbledore quietly interrupted the bickering professors. "Now that it is no longer imperative to stay in the good graces of the children of known Death Eaters, it would show considerable maturity and forgiveness to treat all of your students identically."

Snape's jaw worked for a few moments, but he never gave a direct answer. Instead, he thumped down in his seat and glared at Harry.

"I have another question," Harry directed his attention to Dumbledore. "Were you intending to make the Order public?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Alas, no. We must remain behind the scenes if we are to be useful against the remaining Death Eaters or other surfacing dark wizards."

Harry shivered slightly at the thought of someone else trying to take up Voldemort's banner, but he figured it was bound to happen sooner or later. Dumbledore himself took Grindelwald down fifty years earlier just as Harry took Voldemort down just the previous day.

The door opened and most of the rest of the staff entered, including Professor Trelawney coming out of her tower in a rare excursion.

Tonks sat next to Harry and threw him a flirtatious wink.

Harry winked back, causing a snort of disgust to come from Snape's direction.

Dumbledore ignored the small byplay and stood as everyone found seats. "Thank you all for coming on such short notice. Professor Firenze will not be attending, but I believe everyone else is present. I hope to keep the meeting short, but if anyone has any concerns, feel free to bring them up. I would first like us to discuss whether to re-instate the Quidditch Cup for the year. Thoughts?"

"Not that it's bad right now, but restarting Quidditch would help student morale," Harry immediately observed.

Madam Hooch nodded. "Indeed it would. It is, however, rather late to be starting a season, don't you think?"

Tonks shrugged. "Everyone will still have the same lead time available, so it's still even. Nobody would have an advantage over anyone else."

Harry was not the only one who nodded.

"Objections?" Dumbledore asked. When nobody spoke up, he nodded. "Heads, please contact your captains or choose them as quickly as possible. Madam Hooch will be producing a schedule soon, practises arranged through her, all the normal procedures in place. My second item of discussion is Hogsmeade visits, including one tomorrow."

"Isn't that rather short notice, Albus?" Flitwick asked.

Dumbledore shrugged easily. "I see no reason why we cannot resume as normal a school year as possible, Filius, given the recent change in our security threat," he nodded toward Harry. "I have already spoken with the town council and they are understandably supportive of the idea."

Nobody else commented and Hogsmeade trips were again allowed after the matter of the permission slips was covered.

"I foresee great happiness," Trelawney said mystically.

Harry rolled his eyes and caught McGonagall and Hagrid rolling theirs. He made a snap decision to use his new status as associate professor and no longer a student of hers to its fullest. "How does my future look now, Professor?" he asked politely.

She turned a cool look toward him. "I am well aware that you have long eschewed the Arts of Divination, my child, but there is no reason to be rude about it."

"I'm sorry you took it that way, Professor. I was simply remembering all those times in class you predicted my horrible death. Now that Voldemort is no longer after me, I was wondering how my predicted future has changed."

She sniffed. "An Inner Eye is a great burden to bear. I would not want to alarm you by telling you the entire truth."

Harry's eyes flared just a little and he opened his mouth.

Dumbledore stilled him with a raised hand. "Harry, please. Your disagreements with Sibyll are not unknown to us. We have no need of a demonstration."

"Yes, Headmaster," Harry ground out.

Both Trelawney and Snape looked inordinately smug.

Harry heroically kept himself from drawing his wand.

"My offer still stands, Sibyll," Silvia Vector offered innocently.

Trelawney glared at the Arithmancy witch. McGonagall, Flitwick, Hagrid and Tonks smothered grins.

Harry leaned over to Tonks and asked in a whisper, "What offer?"

Tonks whispered back with a twinkle in her eye, "Trelawney tells all of her predictions to Vector for the next two months. Silvia writes them down and then publishes Trelawney's accuracy rate when all are either fulfilled or avoided."

Harry narrowly avoided laughing aloud.

With nothing else to cover, Dumbledore quickly ended the meeting.

Harry followed McGonagall out, giving Tonks a wave. "Professor, may I have a moment?"

Certainly, Harry. What may I do for you?" she answered as he fell into step with her.

"Could I tell Ron about Quidditch and give him the captain's badge?"

She raised an eyebrow. "What makes you so sure I was going to offer it to him?"

"If you offered it to me, I would refuse it. So would Ginny. Katie has already told us she doesn't want it. Ron's the only other reasonable choice."

She smiled slightly. "Miss Bell as expressed similar thoughts to me. I had also thought of Miss Weasley, but I agree that Mr. Weasley is a better choice. Yes, you may give him the badge. I believe I gave you your broomstick back at the beginning of term?" At his nod, she continued, "Would you like to also announce the Hogsmeade weekend in Gryffindor Tower?" As they spoke, she led the way into her office and pulled the captain's badge out of her desk to give to Harry.

He smiled ironically, taking the badge. "Sure. I could always use more popularity."

She grinned minutely. "Harry, I daresay you have enough popularity right now to run for Minister of Magic." She then laughed at the horrified look on his face. "Not that I'm suggesting such a thing, of course. On another matter, your rooms should be ready Monday after classes. Please see me then, and I'll show them to you."

Harry nodded, looking forward to having his own quarters.

McGonagall went on, "Lastly, could you and Miss Weasley go to Professor Dumbledore's office after dinner tomorrow? The Chocolate Frog portrait company representative would like to speak with you both."

Harry sighed. It really shouldn't have surprised him that they would. If popular musicians had cards, then the defeaters of Voldemort would have to as well.

After agreeing, Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower. Entering the portrait hole, he saw a fair number of students in the common room, but not the whole house. He went over to Ron and Hermione's study table and leaned over the two. "Just got back from the staff meeting and McGonagall would like me to make a couple announcements. Could you two go be prefectly and clean out the dormitories for a quick house meeting?"

"Prefectly?" Ron asked in amusement but moved to obey all the same.

A few minutes later everyone was in the now crowded common room, Harry raised his voice. "Everyone, Professor McGonagall asked me to make two announcements to you. First, the good news. Quidditch has been re-started." The entire room started buzzing, causing Harry to raise his voice, "Second, the really good news is that tomorrow is a Hogsmeade visit."

Everyone erupted in cheers.

"Third years, you'll be given permission forms at breakfast. Tomorrow you'll be allowed to go to Hogsmeade, but the next time you won't unless you turn the permission slip back in to Professor McGonagall, signed by a parent or guardian. For the rest of us, existing permission slips, or lack thereof, are still active. If you want another blank to get signed, see her. If the Quidditch team could stick around for a minute, otherwise that's all I have to tell you."

Katie, Ginny, and Ron walked up to Harry as the rest of the room exploded into excited chatter.

"McGonagall and I talked about the captaincy," Harry told the three without preamble. Alicia, Angelina, Andrew, Jack, Fred, and George had all graduated (or otherwise left), so these four were all of the remaining Gryffindors with team experience. "Katie, we knew you've made your refusal well known." The seventh year Chaser nodded. "I'd refuse as well. I like playing, but not obsessing over it. Ginny?" He figured asking her opinion couldn't hurt because he'd privately asked her over the summer and knew what she was going to say.

True to expectations, she waved it off. "I'm going to have to learn how to be a Chaser on top of my OWLs. I don't have time to be captain."

Harry pulled the badge out of his pocket and held it out to Ron. "Congratulations, mate."

Ron stared at it, gaping.

Since Ron wasn't taking the badge from him, Harry pressed it into his hand. "Hooch will be making a schedule soon. See her about scheduling the pitch. See McGonagall for anything else, right?"

Ron dumbly nodded, eyes never leaving the badge.

Ginny giggled, twining an arm through Harry's. "I think you broke him."

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The next morning at breakfast, the mail call was even worse for Harry and Ginny.

While the two dormitories' worth of students were opening candy, Hermione was reading aloud several articles.

The Aurors had already made a dozen arrests based on the initial interrogation of Pettigrew (who had subsequently been sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban). Many more Death Eaters were named, shocking more than a few, and Sirius Black was publicly and officially exonerated. Harry already knew about Sirius's pardon after the post from the Ministry the previous day, but getting it out to the public made him feel

slightly better.

Aurors were beginning to round up the rogue dementors. Without orders from Voldemort, they were apparently easy to locate if not easy to contain. Measures were being discussed on what to do with them in the long term.

The next article was a long list of celebrations that had taken place and the resulting monetary fines handed out by the Aurors for attracting Muggle attentions.

The final article Hermione read was about the early stages of Fudge's political meltdown as the smaller department heads started talking about how Fudge's Ministry REALLY operated.

Harry lent only half an ear toward what Hermione was saying. He was busy opening job offers.

Every professional Quidditch team in the British and Irish Quidditch League offered him a chance to try out for their Seeker position. The English and Scottish national teams did as well.

Every Ministry department (minus Magical Law Enforcement as they'd asked the previous day) asked him to come in for a job interview.

Endorsement deals from every company he'd ever heard of and many that he hadn't.

Requests for interviews and photographs from every publication he could ever remember seeing in the periodical section of Hogwarts library.

An invitation to join the Dark Forces Defense League. Seeing as how Lockhart had been an honorary member, Harry wasn't too terribly impressed with the organization.

Requests to come and speak to a wide variety of groups from London's Chapter of the Eternal Order of the Owl to Durmstrang's Duelling department.

This was just getting ridiculous.

"The absolute NERVE of these people," Ginny fumed, glaring at a letter in her hands.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Playwizard wants me to pose."

Ron fell over.

Neville jerked so hard that the box of Bernie Bott's Every Flavour Beans in his hand spilled all over the table.

Hermione looked up, fire in her eyes. "Setting aside the morality for a moment, isn't that illegal due to your age?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "They addressed that. They ASSURED me that it was legal since I was declared an adult witch."

Harry hastily wiped away one or two (or ten) very inappropriate mental images. "Hey, did I tell you that we need to meet the Chocolate Frog people tonight after dinner?"

Ron smiled widely as he pulled himself up from the floor.

Ginny groaned. "No, you didn't. Nice change of subject, by the way."

"Thank you. Yeah, Dumbledore apparently set it up or something. I wasn't given much of a choice about it. On the other hand, I've gotten offers for you and I to do joint interviews and photos in Witch Weekly, Wizarding Today, Daily Prophet, Quibbler, Charms Digest . . ."

She sighed. "Yeah. I got a request for a solo interview with Teen Witch Weekly."

"Oooh!" Parvati squealed. "You ARE going to do that one, aren't you?"

Harry narrowly avoided throwing up.

Ginny just shook her head. "I got a request from them back right after it became public that I was dating the Boy Who Lived. They just asked again, offering a LOT more money."

In a strangled voice, Harry said, "You do what you think you need to do, Ginny."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to put you, or me, through that, Harry. We will probably have to speak to at least some of them, you know. The Daily Prophet and at least one of the respectable magazines."

"Charms Digest is well regarded, but they'll want to know the last spell you used," Hermione threw in.

Harry nodded. "Everyone will probably want to know, despite what I said at the press conference. How about interviews with the Daily Prophet, Wizarding Today, and the WWN?" he asked, referring to the Wizarding Wireless Network.

"If you can trust the Prophet," Ginny sounded pessimistic.

Harry grinned. "The Editor in Chief assured me they'd send whomever I specified. Seems my treatment of Rita didn't go unnoticed."

Ginny and Hermione looked much more comfortable at this news.

"Come on," Ron said. "It's a Hogsmeade weekend. No need to stand around here."

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Hours later, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione walked into the Three Broomsticks, laden with shopping bags.

Harry collapsed into a booth, head resting on the table.

Ginny slid in beside him, piling her bags with his at their feet.

Madam Rosmerta approached the foursome. "Hi, Harry!"

Harry groaned and didn't even look up. "Not you, too. Please."

The voluptuous owner stopped and peered quizzically at him. "Not me what?"

Ginny combed a hand through his hair. "Poor Harry here has gotten job or endorsement offers from every place we've gone into today," she explained. "You should have seen what happened in Honeydukes."

Madam Rosmerta smiled. "I can imagine. No, I'm simply going to offer you a round on the house."

Harry sat up and peered at her hesitantly. "That's it?"

"That's it," she assured him.

He smiled. "In that case, four butterbeers with my thanks."

"Coming right up!" Madam Rosmerta answered cheerfully, moving back toward the bar.

"Finally someone is treating me normally," Harry said in relief.

"She's getting us free drinks, mate. Not exactly treating us like normal."

"Better than any other shop owner we've seen today. What surprises me is how everyone is paying attention to me and ignoring you, Ginny. You did as much as I did. You should be getting at least as much attention."

"I'm trying to stay out of the limelight, thanks. I just hide behind you until I need to buy something and then wait until the cashier is gushing over you before slipping in and out."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't blame you, honestly. You saw how Wutherford Zonko treated me when I walked in."

Ginny and Ron grinned widely. "Actually, he wanted you to endorse him above the twins," Ginny explained.

"They're doing well, then?" Hermione asked.

Ginny nodded as Madam Rosmerta placed four mugs of butterbeer on the table.

Everyone thanked the owner before Ginny continued, "Mum's all chuffed about it. They're putting in insane hours, almost never come back to the Burrow, but they're making galleons hand over fist."

"Good on them," Harry gave his opinion.

"They're talking about hiring Ron and I over the summer," Ginny went on.

"As test subjects or workers?" Hermione asked in amusement.

"Yes," Ginny answered dryly.

"You don't have to work this summer if you don't want," Ron said without rancour. "I don't know how much the reward was, but if it requires your own vault, it has to be a whole bloody lot."

Harry and Ginny shrugged. She answered, "It's nice, but it's not like I can retire on it. Maybe get myself some nice dress robes for the Yule Ball," she speculated

"Oh, no," Harry objected. "THAT will be my Christmas present to you."

"And why can't I buy dress robes for you instead?" Ginny asked reasonably.

Harry opened his mouth but clicked it shut again when no obvious answer presented itself.

Hermione and Ron chuckled at Harry's expression. "She's got you there, Harry."

"I'll just have to think of something else, then. Where else do we need to go today?"

"Gladrags," Ginny answered with a grin.

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"That was interesting," Ginny said that evening as the Chocolate Frog representatives left Dumbledore's office.

Unsurprisingly, they wanted to do two new cards. Harry had argued for a joint card, but the company representative had nixed the idea immediately. All cards had one person on them only. No exceptions.

Therefore, Harry and Ginny had to suffer through a quick photo shoot each and decide on the wording for the reverse side. Harry was very interested in the fact that he was paid two knuts per card of him produced. Initially that didn't sound like much, but when he realised that at least a hundred of his cards would be produced each week, at a minimum for the next hundred years . . .

"Ron is missing three cards now," Harry said with a small grin. "Agrippa, Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter."

"Indeed," Dumbledore nodded.

"Headmaster," Harry addressed him, "I received a letter from Sirius's solicitor with an appointment tomorrow. I'm just letting you know that I need to be leaving the castle."

Dumbledore nodded. "I received a similar letter. I have already arranged for Remus to accompany us. Shall we meet at ten here in my office?"
Dumbledore suggested.

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"Are we ready, then?" Dumbledore asked Sunday morning after a late breakfast. When Harry nodded absently, still thinking about the Prophet story detailing the uncovering truths about Fudge's shady campaign finances, Dumbledore stood and held out a quill.

Harry looked at it blankly for a moment.

"Please grip the other end. This is a Portkey," Dumbledore explained.

Sighing, Harry gripped the near end.

Dumbledore tapped it with his wand.

Harry felt the usual jerking sensation and landed with a jolt in the Gringott's lobby.

A goblin had obviously been waiting for them. He stepped forward and peered at them menacingly before giving a brief nod. "Follow me," he ordered brusquely. It led them to a small room down a hallway. Opening the door, he waved them in and then followed them after they entered.

Harry saw an unknown, older wizard on one side of a table and Remus Lupin sitting in one of three chairs on the other side. "Remus," Harry smiled, shaking the offered hand.

"Harry. How have you been?"

"Busy couple days," Harry said with a small grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Understandable," the unknown wizard agreed, waving the two newcomers to seats. "I'm sure your time is as precious to you as mine is to me, Mr. Potter, so shall we conduct our business?"

Harry nodded, taking the seat between Dumbledore and Remus, and looked attentive.

"My name is Mophestus Norgellus. I am the solicitor for Sirius Black's Estate. You have my condolences on your loss, sirs," he nodded to each wizard present. After they had nodded back, he continued, "Further, I wish to apologise for bringing you in on a Sunday; however, I believe you will agree with me that this duty has been delayed more than enough. I am afraid that I was not able to do this earlier, but his fugitive status until recently was a major complication. Unless there are any issues to bring up at this point, I suggest we get on to business. I have reviewed the paperwork and all is in order. All things considered, it's a very straightforward situation." He slid a sealed scroll to Remus and another to Harry. "I've been instructed to give these scrolls to you gentlemen with the request that you read them later." He looked at his notes as the two scrolls in question were tucked into robe pockets. Solicitor Norgellus continued, "As for material possessions, there are only two bequests listed. First is his vault and all its contents. Remus John Lupin is bequeathed half the ready cash excluding the sickles."

Harry gave a sad little smile. Even now, Padfoot was doing his best to keep Moony safe. In this case, it was from silver. Based on Remus's matching smile, he was having similar thoughts.

Norgellus went on, "The remainder of the vault's contents go to Harry James Potter."

Harry nearly choked. "WHAT?"

Norgellus smiled slightly. "All the items, half the galleons and knuts plus all the sickles in that vault are yours, lad."

"But . . ."

"He was your godfather, Harry. His doing this doesn't surprise me in the least," Remus said quietly.

Harry leaned back, stunned. A bit of money, maybe stories or pictures of his father, something like that was all that he was expecting from Sirius. Slightly over half the Black family fortune was well beyond what he was expecting.

Seeing no further interruptions from Harry, Norgellus continued, "The only other specific item to bequeath is a property. The Black Manor goes to 'The Order' as run by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. I have tried to locate it, but it is unplotable. Mr. Dumbledore, do you know the property I speak of?"

Dumbledore nodded, running one hand through his beard absently.

Harry and Remus nodded, too. The solicitor was clearly referring to Twelve Grimmauld Place. That Sirius would give it to the Order, which was gearing up for a full-scale war when Sirius had died, was not surprising. Harry was even vaguely happy with that bequest as it meant he never had to step foot in the place which would have too many Sirius memories. Not to mention not having to deal with Kreacher.

Getting an affirmative answer, Norgellus relaxed minutely. "Do any of you three gentlemen challenge any of these bequests?" All three shook their heads, Harry still in a slight daze. "In that case, please sign this, stating that you understand the terms and don't wish to dispute any terms. Once that is done, Farmok here," he gestured to the silent goblin, "will take a moment to conclude the business within Gringott's and that will be all, gentlemen."

Dumbledore lifted the parchment and silently read it for a minute. Without making any comment, he lifted the provided quill and signed the appropriate line, sliding the parchment down to Harry.

For his part, Harry tried to read it, but got bogged down in the legalese. What he understood looked correct and Dumbledore had signed without comment, so Harry also signed. He didn't completely trust Dumbledore but knew the ancient wizard wouldn't do anything to truly endanger Harry or himself.

Remus signed with an even more cursory glance than Harry had given it.

After Remus slid the parchment back to the solicitor, the goblin stepped forward, drawing all eyes to him. "Mr. Lupin, shall we transfer your portion of the Black vault to your vault, or would you like a new one?"

"If mine is large enough, please send it there."

The goblin nodded and turned to Harry, dropping a large key in front of the young man. "This is the key to the Black vault. Please do not touch any of the monies in it until tomorrow as we need to transfer much to Mr. Lupin's vault. At that time, what to you wish to do with the vault?"

After getting over the shock of actually inheriting the majority of the Black family vault, Harry had been thinking. He fished his educational trust key out of his robes and put it onto the table. "Please transfer the contents of the Black vault and my educational trust vault to my family vault."

The goblin paused and took on a slightly sheepish expression. "I am afraid that this is impossible, sir. There is not enough physical space to accommodate all the items in question."

Harry blinked hard. "Is there enough space in the Potter vault to move the trust fund into there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then please do that and close that vault. I'll hold onto the Potter and Black vaults for the time being until I can figure something out."

"Much of the space could be taken up with furniture, Harry," Lupin mentioned. "I know Lily and James emptied Potter Manor before they went into hiding. Who knows what all else is in those two vaults."

Potter Manor? It had never occurred to Harry that he might now own anything more than just galleons from the Potter vault.

Farmok turned to Dumbledore. "With Mr. Potter's change of legal status, your access to the Potter vault has been rescinded, Mr. Dumbledore."

Dumbledore nodded.

Harry grimaced but felt he shouldn't really be surprised. Someone had to have been the trustee of the thing, after all, considering Sirius's incarcerated and then fugitive status.

Farmok went on, "Your security arrangements upon both of Mr. Potter's vaults has likewise been rescinded. Do you have any questions?"

Dumbledore shook his head silently.

Harry thought the line of the headmaster's shoulders was as tense as he'd ever seen it. Further, Harry thought he knew why. "Excuse me, Farmok, but what security arrangement are you referring to?" Harry asked.

The goblin looked at him curiously. "Mr. Dumbledore had several monitoring spells upon your vaults, Mr. Potter. Did he not inform you of this?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "No he did not," he answered lowly.

Farmok merely raised a hairless eyebrow. "As he had legal access as the trustee of both vaults, we had no cause to stop him, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded shortly. "I do not blame you or Gringott's, Farmok. Thank you for informing me."

The goblin ignored the suddenly tense atmosphere. "Are there any further questions?" Getting no response, he quietly left, followed by Norgellus after the wizard shook each hand again.

"What's this about monitoring Harry's vaults, Albus?" Remus asked steadily once the door closed.

Harry spoke before Dumbledore could. "Oh, I'm sure there is a perfectly reasonable answer, Remus. No doubt it has to do with trying to keep me safe. Just like sending me to live in the hellhole called the Dursley residence was for my own good. Just like not telling me about the existence of my GODFATHER was for my own good. Just like not telling me about the bloody prophecy was done for my own good."

Harry's low key but still cutting tone had a visible effect on the old wizard. He flinched.

"I did what I thought best, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly, still not looking back at his student.

"For me or for you?"

He flinched again, and Harry got a bit of guilty satisfaction in causing it. "For us all," was Dumbledore's whispered answer

"Did you even once bother to ask my opinion?"

Dumbledore slumped. He didn't even bother to try to answer the question. "If that is your opinion of me, Harry, why did you accept my help these past three months?"

"Because I needed it. I could not have done what I did on my own. I needed the access to the Hogwarts library, the means to make the pendants and your knowledge of what was possible. Make no mistake, Headmaster, I think you're a brilliant wizard who does a great deal of good for the magical community. The problem is that you've consistently treated me like a loyal follower without my ever having had a choice in the matter."

Remus spoke up hesitantly, "Harry?"

"Oh, don't worry, Remus. It isn't like I'm going to try to attack him for this." Dumbledore's shoulders twitched, but Harry couldn't decide what that meant. Shaking off the minor mystery, Harry continued, "I think he's a very good headmaster. I'll happily continue at his school and be an associate professor of his if he'll have me. I'll probably even follow his advice on most things. However, I will NOT blindly follow his every order with regards to my personal life any longer."

Dumbledore nodded and stood. "Thank you for that, Harry. I shall endeavour to keep your words in mind." He took a breath and straightened his shoulders. "I shall see you back at Hogwarts, Professor Potter?"

"Yes, Headmaster." Harry wasn't surprised at the suddenly overwhelming formality of their interaction. It was too bad, really. If the man hadn't taken such a high-handed approach to Harry's life, he probably could have been a good friend and trusted mentor.

Dumbledore quietly left, not having looked toward the other two men since entering the room.

"Monitoring your vaults was a bit extreme, I'll grant you, but did you really have to do that, Harry?" Remus asked in a slightly censorious tone.

Harry twisted in his seat and stared at Remus in astonishment. "You really haven't noticed, Remus?"

The werewolf blinked. "Noticed what?"

Harry made a noise of disgust and waved it off. "Never mind."

"No, not never mind. What did you mean, Harry?"

Harry looked at his friend for a moment, measuring the werewolf with his eyes. "Before I tell you, you need to lose the belief that he can do no wrong. Granted that he's done a LOT for you and for me, but for you to understand what I'm saying, you need to acknowledge that all of his decisions aren't the right ones."

Remus waved his hand impatiently. "I know that, Harry."

"Do you?" Harry asked quietly, still staring at the other man. "He left me at the Dursleys for ten years, Remus. He failed to check on me at all. In an effort to keep me safe, he consigned me to that hellhole simply for the supposed blood protection. If he'd even once checked on me, he would have realised how I grew up. Friendless, loveless, abused slave to those three monsters who were convinced that they could grind the 'unnaturalness' out of me. Do you know the address of my first Hogwarts letter? 'Cupboard Under the Stairs.' That's where I lived for ten years, Remus. Did he ever check? No. Even after I came to Hogwarts and indications of my home life made their way to him, did he do anything about it? No. Fred, George and Ron had to literally rescue me one summer, and he STILL did nothing.

"One of his professors was a self-obsessed charlatan. Another was possessed by Voldemort. Another was a Death Eater in disguise who managed to kidnap me from under his nose. You and Tonks aside, his recent selections for professor positions are somewhat wanting.

My Occlumency lessons with Snape are another case in point. Even after they failed miserably, he STILL wanted me to go back for more. He refuses to see that Snape is incapable of treating me objectively.

"He's fallible, Remus, and he's manipulative. Your idea of the meditation for me? He phrased it as an order to you to train me instead of acknowledging it was your idea in the first place. He also managed to make me out to be the unreasonable one for not yet forgiving him for his treatment of me last year.

"Now, I'm not saying he's a bad man. It could be argued that most everything he's done is for the greater good. I'm just saying that his controlling of my life is at an end. If he wants me to do something, he can come and ASK me rather than order it and assume I'm going to follow along like an obedient little puppy."

"I . . ." Remus shook his head at the sudden flood of information and took a deep breath. "You've given me a lot to think about."

Harry smiled and dropped the conversation. "I'm going to go and look at my two new vaults. Care to come along?"

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"What are you doing this Christmas, Moony?"

"Hmm?" Lupin looked up from the crate he was poking through.

The Black vault had contained money, jewellery, some papers that they hadn't bothered to look through and many items that even Remus couldn't identify immediately. They were now in the Potter vault, looking through the items Harry's parents had placed in there before going into hiding. He'd hoped for some personal items of his parents', but so far it was basic furniture and household goods in addition to the usual mounds of galleons.

"What are your Christmas plans?" Harry repeated. He was working on a few ideas and needed a fully trained wizard, preferably Remus, to help with a lot of it.

Remus winced. "Nothing much. Albus has offered Headquarters to those of us without permanent family or homes."

"Your family is gone?" Harry asked in concern, realising even as he asked that he didn't know anything about Remus's home life.

Remus sighed. "My parents were killed at roughly the same time your grandparents were. This was when Voldemort was first after James and Lily, before they were put under the *Fidelius*."

"Moony," Harry started out carefully, "I'm sorry if some of these questions are insulting or personal, okay?"

Remus was looking at him strangely. "You said yourself that we're as close to godfather and godson as could be, Cub. Ask away. I promise I won't get mad."

"Are werewolves still restricted from getting decent jobs?"

He nodded sadly. "Yes, we are. Albus has been giving me some of the Order funds to live on since I can't get a job otherwise. Now that the fight's over, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"The fight is hardly over," Harry corrected him. "There are still more than a few Death Eaters running around out there. Anyway, what do you think of my hiring you?"

Remus grinned at him in slight amusement. "To do what? Answer your fan mail?"

Harry grinned back. "That's not a bad idea. No, I need someone to clear out that Black vault of those unknown items, dispose of the dangerous ones, categorise the useful stuff and so on. Who better than a Defense Against Dark Arts expert?"

"I don't know . . ."

"You could also help out a lot by moving all this stuff," he waved at all the furniture and household items, "back to Potter Manor. That's the obvious place for me to live now."

"The place in Godric's Hollow is a lot smaller and quite frankly more appropriate for one instead of the Manor."

"I thought that house was destroyed."

Lupin frowned. "Good point. Okay, never mind that, then."

"Anyway, I'll need someone to move most of this back to Potter Manor. Not to mention someone actually telling me where it is. You're the obvious candidate for both."

Remus smiled. "I'd be honoured."

Harry grinned wryly. "Don't thank me until you hear the whole list of what I'd be hiring you for." He started ticking them off on his fingers. "Moving this stuff back there. Setting up the place. Setting the wards back up. Werewolf-proofing at least one room. Setting up a handful of guest rooms, a duelling chamber and a Quidditch pitch. Assuming the Manor and grounds are big enough for all of that, of course."

Remus nodded. "No problem with any of that. I don't want to get paid for this, though." An eyebrow quirked. "'Werewolf-proofing'?"

Harry shrugged. "You need somewhere to go in case you can't get Wolfsbane Potion some month. I saw how torn up the Shrieking Shack was. My list wasn't done, incidentally. This is all before Christmas holidays start. During the holidays, I'd also like tutoring. Three subjects come to mind at the moment, with the possibility of school subjects as well, depending on how I'm doing at that point."

Remus was starting to look excited. "Three non-school subjects?"

Harry took a breath. It was hard to tell how Remus would react to these. "Apparition, Animagus and duelling."

Remus blinked rapidly a few times. "I'd have to get an Apparition instructor license from the Ministry."

"Is there a problem doing that?" There was no telling what his lycanthropy would prevent him from doing.

Remus frowned. "I'd have to brush up on some of the theory for the written test."

Harry waved at the vault and the piles of galleons. "I'll cover the testing fee if you want."

Lupin's frown deepened. "I don't want charity, Cub. Besides, half the galleons in the other vault are suddenly mine, remember?" His face cleared. "On the second one: you realise that I'm NOT an Animagus."

Harry nodded. "I've read Padfoot's notebook. He mentioned that you were present for a lot of their practises. If it comes right down to it, I could just ask Professor McGonagall for tips, though I'd rather not include her, frankly."

"It took them years to learn, Harry. This isn't something you and I can do in a month."

"They started during their third year and without any ideas of how to do it. I've got three additional years of education, an instructor and a notebook on my side. I realise one month probably won't be enough, but it'll at least give me a running start."

"Just don't try to practise without me or preferably Minerva nearby," Remus said with a sigh.

Harry just grinned, realising that Remus was agreeing to his proposals.

"On another subject, Potter Manor is too big for you to keep by yourself, you know."

"You're welcome to live there with me, Remus," Harry answered seriously.

Remus graced his charge with a small smile. "Thank you, but that's not what I meant. I was referring to the upkeep of the property."

Harry grinned. "You haven't really met Dobby, have you?"

"Who?"

"The house-elf you saw in the hospital wing Thursday morning. Don't worry, I'm sure I can get at least one and probably two elves working for me just by asking."

"That's a good start, but a half-dozen would be about right. That's how many your grandparents had."

"Six?" Harry asked in surprise. "Malfoy only had one, didn't he? And the Blacks only had Kreacher."

Remus shook his head. "The Malfoys probably have a few and the Blacks did, too, before Sirius's mother died. Six may sound like a lot for you, but in addition to the main manor, there is a lot of land there plus stables, livestock pastures and like that."

Harry mentally tacked that discussion to the list of conversations he would have to have with Remus over Christmas holiday. "What happened to the elves when Mum and Dad died?" Harry asked curiously.

Remus frowned. "I don't rightly know. You have no more wizarding family, and they were barred from following you to the Dursley's, so they didn't have anywhere to go. Hogwarts is my best guess. The castle tends to collect the orphaned elves."

"Hmm. I'll ask around when I talk with Dobby and Winky. You're of course welcome to live there during this whole process. One hundred galleons a month, plus expenses and room and board. What do you say?"

Remus's jaw dropped for a moment before he composed himself. "Fifty," he countered.

"You know, if you're haggling, you're typically supposed to go higher," Harry pointed out in amusement.

"A hundred is entirely too much. Besides, I won't be able to devote all my time to this. I'm still working for Albus, too, remember?"

He sighed. "Fifty for now. We'll re-negotiate when the responsibilities change."

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After setting up a line of credit at Gringotts for Remus's use, Harry Flooed back to Hogsmeade and walked directly to the Hogwarts kitchen.

"Harry Potter sir!" Dobby tackled Harry around the knees when he entered the house-elves's domain. "Harry Potter sir has come to see Dobby! Dobby knew Harry Potter sir is great wizard!"

"Hi, Dobby," he wryly answered, prying the house-elf from his leg. He sat down and waved Dobby to a facing seat. "Please sit down. I need to talk to you."

Dobby, seeing that something serious was in the offing, calmed down and took the offered seat.

"Dobby, I'm going to be setting my family home back up and moving there. I'll need some help to run it."

Dobby's eyes started shining, but he said nothing.

"Would you consent to come and work for me?"

A high-pitched squeal that threatened to rupture Harry's eardrums was his immediate answer. In addition, Dobby physically launched himself over the table into another hug. Most of the other elves in sight looked over in amusement.

Laughing, Harry asked, "Can I take that as a yes?"

"YES, Harry Potter sir. Yes, Dobby would be very honoured to work for Harry Potter sir."

"Great. We'll start with the same pay and time off that Hogwarts gives you." Harry raised a hand at Dobby's stricken look. "You're a free elf, Dobby. I refuse to have a free elf working for me for nothing."

Dobby's face screwed up in thought for a bit before it cleared. He nodded. "Dobby likes being a free elf, Harry Potter sir. Dobby would prefer to stay free, so Dobby accepts Harry Potter sir's most generous offer."

Harry paused at something Dobby had just said. "Dobby, are you saying that there is a way for a free elf to become . . . well, not free? I mean to pledge to another family? I don't know the right term for this, but I think you know what I'm asking."

Dobby nodded solemnly. "Yes, Harry Potter sir. When an elf's family dies, the elf can Join a new family. 'Tis only a small ritual."

Harry nodded slowly. "Is Winky still here?"

Dobby's eyes started shining again. "Yes, Harry Potter sir." He turned and gave a peculiar whistle.

Winky walked over from near the ovens a few seconds later. Her clothing was, if possible, even more filthy than the last time Harry had seen her, but at least she appeared to be sober. She bowed. "Master Potter wishes to speak with Winky?"

Harry nodded formally back. "Yes, Winky. As I mentioned to Dobby, I'm re-forming the Potter household. I'm in need of some help. Might you be interested in working for me, either as a free elf or Joined?"

Winky's eyes widened. "Master Potter would allow Winky to Join his House, even after Winky's disgrace?" she whispered in awe.

Harry nodded.

Winky fell to her knees and began weeping. "Winky would be greatly honoured to Join Master Potter's House."

Harry reached over and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Please, Winky. Never kneel to me." Once a still crying Winky had re-gained her feet, he turned to include Dobby in the conversation again. "Now, you two know Remus Lupin?"

They both nodded.

"Remus will be working for me, getting Potter Manor ready for me to live there again. That reminds me." He stood and said in a louder voice, "Did any house-elves here use to work for the Potter family?"

Five elves hurried forward and lined up. The oldest looking one (or at least the one with the most wrinkles) stepped forward and bowed. "Yes, Master Harry Potter. We's have worked here since Master James Potter and Mistress Lily Potter were killed by the evil wizard."

Harry looked at each of the five, standing at something that was almost an "attention" stance. All five were wearing immaculate Hogwarts tea towels. The one who spoke was a bit older, but the rest appeared to be roughly Dobby's age. "What are your names?"

"Rully, Master Harry Potter," stated the oldest, starting a chain reaction down the line.

"Tarry, Master Harry Potter."

"Scully, Master Harry Potter." A higher pitched voice, indicating to Harry that Scully was female.

"Borry, Master Harry Potter."

"Delly, Master Harry Potter." Another higher pitched voice. Based on what little he could guess at, Harry figured that made four male and three female house-elves.

"Would each of you be willing to come work for me?"

Each of the five nodded immediately.

"I do not intend to insult you with this next question, but would any of you feel better with freedom instead of Joining?"

Looking vaguely horrified, each shook their head quickly.

"Very well. Now, I must admit to ignorance of house-elf society. I'm going to ask another question, but please understand I'm not trying to be cruel, insulting or crude."

Rully hesitantly nodded while the rest just looked wary.

"Do any of you have spouses or significant others that I should also take into my House?"

They all relaxed. Rully explained, "House-elves do not have marriages as wizards understand them, Master Harry Potter. To answer sir's question, we've have each other, and that is all that we's wish."

Harry blinked, trying to decipher exactly what that meant. Figuring he had an answer to the important part of that question, he went on, "Remus Lupin said that my grandparents had six house-elves working for them. Do you know what happened to the sixth?"

Tarry, Scully, Borry, and Delly looked sad. Rully's face froze into a mask of pain.

Winky surprised Harry by answering, "Rarry was killeded, Master Potter, while defending her master from the evil wizard."

Harry sighed. "Voldemort killed her while she was protecting my grandfather?"

All the elves save Dobby nodded. Rully looked close to tears.

Harry laid a hand on Rully's shoulder. "You have my most heartfelt sympathies, Rully, on your loss."

Rully gave a watery smile before pulling himself back up to attention.

Deciding to drop that issue, Harry said, "Remus Lupin will be re-opening Potter Manor in the next few days. For some time, he will be the only one living there as he does various chores for me. At Christmas holiday, I'll be going there and then for the summer. Once Remus opens it up, we can do the Joining ceremony then and you seven can move there to begin work. Is this acceptable?"

Most of them looked at him strangely. Rully spoke up, "We's has already agreed to work for Master Harry Potter. We's shall do as Master Harry Potter orders."

Harry frowned slightly. "I will be asking for opinions quite often. If you have thoughts or things that you think I should know, please speak up. I will never punish you for speaking your mind. In fact, I will probably reward you for good ideas. One other thing: Just call me Harry."

All seven looked truly horrified at the outrageous suggestion. "Master Harry?" Winky offered in compromise.

Harry's lip twitched. "I suppose that's close enough."

They all sighed with relief.

"If you can't bring yourselves to call me Harry, anyway," he added. "Now, does the timing work out for you seven to move to Potter Manor?"

They nodded. Borry hesitantly spoke up, "As former elveses of Master Harry's House, we's are permitted to re-join Master Harry's House if we's so choose. As free elveses, Dobby and Winky may do as Dobby and Winky choose. However, Borry humbly suggests that Master Albus Dumbledore should be told."

"Good idea. I'll inform him after I finish up here."

Borry looked very happy to have given his new master good advice.

"As I said, Remus will be there for at least a while. He has my authority to make purchases and decisions for the House. If there are items that need to be purchased, please see him. Borry?"

The young elf gulped, clearly nervous at being singled out.

"You're in charge of furnishing and decorating a room or rooms for you seven."

Borry beamed in happiness.

"I don't know if you need one or many rooms. You decide that among yourselves. Make that decision on what YOU want, not on what you think would make me happy, understood?"

"Yes, Master Harry. Borry understands," the excited elf answered.

"Remus will let me know when he's opening the Manor. What is needed for the Joining ceremony?"

Rully shook his head. "Very little, Master Harry. Master's presence in the Manor with the elf or elveses doing the Joining."

Harry nodded. "Do I need to come back down here to get you?"

"No, Master Harry. If master calls the names of his elveses within Hogwarts, his elveses will hear and come."

"I'll see you all in a few days, then. Thank you all for doing this for me."

Every one of them bowed deeply and just about cried at Harry's words.

Dobby looked so proud he was about to burst.

Rully held his bow longer than the others. "It is our honour, Master Harry. It is what house-elveses do."

Harry nodded solemnly back and left with a final wave.

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

Dear Harry,

I think the traditional start to this letter should be, "If you're reading this, then I'm dead."

Frankly, I think that's the most morbid traditional start to a letter I've ever heard of.

How about, "If you're reading this, then Padfoot and Prongs are again scheming together"?

Yes, that sounds much better, don't you think?

I'm writing this immediately after you've left headquarters after the Christmas during your fifth year. I know I said it before you left, but I really do appreciate you coming over here during your holidays, even if it took an attack on Arthur to bring you all here. It brought a bit of joy to this old mutt to see his godson again.

Anyway, this letter is to inform you of several things that you should know in case I don't get the chance to tell you in person.

Now, for my most important piece of information: MY DEATH ISN'T YOUR FAULT!

Obviously, I don't know how I died. Or went off to doggy heaven. Or went on the next great adventure, as Albus would put it. Call it as you will, but the fact remains.

Sorry, went off on a tangent.

As I was saying, what happened to me isn't your fault.

I know you, Harry, and you're no doubt beating yourself up over it, no matter what the circumstances were. My death isn't any more your fault than your parents' were. My guess is that it was, directly or not, the work of Voldemort. Whatever happened, I hope I went down fighting, defending you, Remus or any of the other "good guys" from the "bad guys".

By now, Morphey has told you that you get everything in my vault minus half the galleons and knuts. I'd highly recommend you get Albus, Remus, Tonks or Moody to sort through everything with you. Some of the things in there are downright dangerous.

Just so you know, my Will grants your custody to Remus. Whether this is the least bit possible given my legal status and the restrictions placed on Remus, I don't know. I just hope Morphey and Albus can get that to work.

Remus. Harry, I'm sure Remus will take my death even worse than you will. If not for my sake, then for his, please don't block yourself off from him.

As you know, the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black is very old and prestigious. Not to mention the most bigoted bunch of arseholes I've ever had the misfortune to meet.

Sorry, another tangent.

Among the items of interest in the vault are titles to a small home in Paris, a weekend home on the coast of Ireland, a ski lodge in the mountains of Colorado in the United States, and a small island in the Caribbean. As you can probably guess, it is this last one where I was staying early your fourth year. As Morphey said, the Black family home has been given to the Order. I couldn't imagine you'd be upset by that. Much as I detested all that my family stood for, their wealth has at least been useful. Find the titles to get the Apparition coordinates of all the other properties.

As one of the oldest wizarding families, we also had a seat on the International Confederation of Wizards. I'm afraid you won't be able to exercise your vote until you reach your majority, but I'm sure that once you do, you'll use it and the Potter vote well.

One last shock for you: You now have a title. Henceforth, you can call yourself "Lord Black". Ostentatious, huh? Personally, I

recommend you only force Snivellus and Malfoy's son to call you that, but that's your prerogative.

What the title of "Lord Black" means, officially, is that you're the patriarch of the Black family. Unfortunately (or fortunately depending on your point of view), there aren't any more Blacks for you to boss around. Unless Bellatrix or Narcissa get divorced, anyway. Or Andromeda for that matter. Wouldn't that be a hoot? If Andy got divorced from Ted, you'd become Tonks's patriarch.

So much for all the official stuff. I only have one last piece of godfatherly advice for you: Harry, don't block the world out. I know you well enough to know that you tend to bottle everything up. Don't do that. That will make you even more of a prat than Snivellus is, and that is the worst thing I can think of to doom you to.

All joking aside, please live. Go out and get roaring drunk. Have a one night stand (if you're over sixteen, young man!). Throw galleons from the rooftops in Diagon Alley. Do something outrageous. It doesn't matter what you do, just don't forget to live.

Love always,

Sirius

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Monday morning, Harry hoped that life would begin returning to something vaguely approaching normal.

Unfortunately, breakfast didn't work out that way.

"This has GOT to stop," Dean groaned, opening yet another fan note.

"I thought you'd be happy," Ron returned. "You get to keep all the 'interesting' ones, after all."

Dean smirked.

"I'm sure I'm going to regret asking, but what all have they said?" Harry asked.

"Marriage proposals, offers to bear your children, polish your wand -"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," Ginny said, dropping an armload of sweets. Fortunately, it was slightly lighter today than the previous two days, but not by all that much. "Harry, I have History first thing today. How about I write a letter to the Daily Prophet, asking them to publish a note from us? I'll ask everyone to stop sending us notes and items."

Harry nodded. "I was going to do that a couple days ago, but I've been kind of busy."

"Where were you yesterday, anyway?"

"Sirius's solicitor first, then the Black and Potter vaults, then talking with the house-elves."

Ginny frowned at that answer. "Huh?"

"Potter Manor is mine now. I've asked Remus to move all the furniture out of the Potter vault and get the place ready to live in again. He mentioned that my grandparents had six house-elves, so I went to the kitchen to see if any of them were down there. Turns out that five of the original six were. Dobby and Winky are going to be working for me as well."

"Free?" Hermione asked with an arched eyebrow.

Harry sighed softly.

Ron's sigh wasn't quiet. "I don't want to start this row with you again, Hermione," Ron said in resignation. "You just don't realise how much it insults them to be free."

Harry added, "For what it's worth, I offered each of them freedom. Only Dobby wanted it. Winky said she'd be happier Joined."

"Joined?" Hermione asked with an unhappy scowl.

"That's what they call it when they pledge themselves to a House. At any rate, Remus will be opening the Manor for me. You're all invited over for the house warming party over Christmas holidays."

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Monday's classes were the first indications that things would ever return to normal for Harry. Professor McGonagall made no mention of Thursday's missed class nor the reason it was cancelled. She merely went on to show how statues of an animal could be transfigured into said animal.

Over lunch, Ginny presented Harry with their letter to the Prophet, asking them to publish a plea from the two to stop the public from sending them tokens of appreciation. Harry liked the way it was phrased, and Hermione couldn't find any grammatical errors in the letter, so the couple signed it and sent it off with Hedwig.

Afternoon Potions was doing a section on anti-venoms. When it came time to turn in the finished potions, Snape stared at Harry long and hard but

then turned away silently. He didn't even poison any of the non-Slytherins to make them test their potions, much to everyone's relief.

Harry approached McGonagall in the Great Hall after dinner. "Would now be a good time, Professor?"

She nodded and led him out and roughly toward Gryffindor Tower. "Mr. Potter, I'm aware that I asked this of you before, but please do nothing to make Headmaster Dumbledore or me regret giving you your own quarters. Associate Professors are exceedingly rare, but Hogwarts has never had a problem with them before. Please do not be the first." Not giving him any time to respond, she stopped in front of one of the suits of armour lining the hallway. "Harry Potter," she spoke. The armour, amazingly silent for its apparent condition, stepped to the side, revealing a hole in the wall. "That password is only temporary, of course," McGonagall explained, leading the way. "I shall show you how to alter it after you've seen your rooms."

The first room Harry stepped into was roughly the same size as Dumbledore's office and appeared to serve the same purpose. A large desk took up most of the open space, but there were several guest chairs available and empty bookcases lined the wall behind the desk. All in all, it was a cosy, functional office.

Stepping through the doorway beside the desk, Harry found a small bedroom done in Gryffindor colours. A four-poster bed, two chairs and a fireplace comprised most of the major furniture of the room. One wall held a window that had a view over the Forbidden Forest. Poking his head through the other doorway, Harry found a private bathroom with the usual fixtures.

"This is somewhat smaller than most of the staff apartments," McGonagall told him. "It's actually the Gryffindor Head Boy rooms. As Mr. Ruthins is a Slytherin, these rooms were sitting idle this year."

Harry nodded in understanding. "This is more than sufficient, thank you."

"The fireplace is connected to the castle's fire call Floo system. Just use the professor's name or whichever common room you need to contact. They are not set up to allow people to move from one place to another like the larger Floo systems that I believe you're familiar with. Professor Dumbledore informed me you're already familiar with the house-elves, so there is no need to go into that with you. Do you have any questions, Professor Potter?"

"When can I move in?"

"Immediately. The rooms were just cleaned, so they can be used as early as tonight if you wish."

"Thank you. If you could just let me know how to change the password?"

She nodded and stepped out of his quarters, allowing the armour to move back into place. Once she gave him the incantation to alter the password, she took her leave.

Harry immediately did the charm and changed the password to "Moldywart". Stepping back into his new bedroom, he called out, "Dobby!"

The elf cracked in. "Master Harry called?"

"Yes, Dobby, I did. Could you please move my trunk and clothes into these rooms?"

"Certainly, Master Harry. Dobby will do this right away, Master Harry." He cracked out, presumably to carry out Harry's orders.

For his part, Harry went in search of his friends to show them where his new rooms were located and give them the password.

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The next morning, the number of owls was still much higher than usual, but was actually down from the previous days.

"Hey, Harry," Dean called, igniting yet another fan letter. "I didn't see you come back to bed last night. Did you stay up all night or did you . . . find somewhere else to sleep?" he ended the question with a lecherous grin.

Surprising Harry, Ron answered calmly, "Somewhere else. He let me know ahead of time. We must've forgotten to warn you guys."

Dean, Seamus and Neville blink in consternation.

Harry let a small smirk appear, suspecting that he knew where Ron was going.

"You know," Ron continued, "I was originally upset by it all. The more I think about it, though, the better I feel about it. You deserve all the perks you want this year, Harry. This is just a small one that I don't begrudge you in the least." He turned to face Harry fully. "Anything else you can think of that I can help with, just say the word, okay, mate?"

"Will do, Ron. Thanks for being so understanding. For a while I was worried you'd be upset with it, but I can see I was worried about nothing."

Ron shrugged. "Naw. This is something that should've happened long ago, to tell the truth."

"But . . ." Neville started to object, clearly at a loss for words.

"Bloody hell, Ron," Seamus breathed, wide eyed.

Ron looked at Seamus with raised eyebrows. "What? I don't have a problem with Harry's new sleeping arrangements. Why should I?"

"You . . . But . . . Ginny!" Neville managed to get out.

Ron again shrugged. "What about her? She certainly doesn't object."

Neville just gaped.

"Honestly, why would Ginny or I object if he's moved into private quarters?"

Dean, Seamus and Neville each let out a groan and glared at Ron.

Harry and Hermione, who'd listened to the whole thing with a straight face, broke into laughter.

"I was talking about Harry moving into the Gryffindor Head Boy quarters as he's an Associate Professor. What did you three think I was talking about?" Ron asked in a tone of pure innocence that belied his grin.

The three boys in question growled and glared some more.

Hermione wiped a tear of laughter away. "Oh, Ron, you are a terrible tease. I didn't know you had it in you."

Ignoring his muttering dorm-mates, Ron looked at Hermione contemplatively for a few moments. He gave a short nod, apparently to himself. Standing, he moved behind Hermione and leaned over so he was whispering into her ear for a moment. Whatever he said caused her to blush and gasp. Grinning at her reaction, he stood and walked out of the Great Hall on his way to his Creatures class.

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione objected, face still flushed.

He simply threw a smile and wink over his shoulder without slowing.

Ginny moved down the table from where she'd finished going through her mail. "What has my prat of a brother done this time?" she asked.

"Nothing!" Hermione said just a little too quickly.

Ginny's eyebrows went up.

Apparently realising her reaction was too extreme for the circumstances, Hermione immediately buried her face in the day's Daily Prophet.

Not getting an answer to her question from Hermione, Ginny turned to Harry.

He raised his hands. "Don't look at me; I don't know. Ron was playing a joke on Dean, Seamus and Neville. Hermione called him a tease. He whispered something to her and . . ." he trailed off, eyes moving to Hermione.

She didn't raise her eyes. "Harry, Ginny, did you see your letter is in this morning's Prophet?"

"Don't try to change the subject, Hermione Granger," Ginny admonished. "What did Ron say to you that caused you to blush like that?"

Hermione kept her mouth firmly shut and head down, drawing chuckles from everyone watching.

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Wednesday morning, Harry and Ginny's fan mail was down to almost nothing, thanks to the previous day's letter.

The one item of note that morning was Tonks walking up to Ginny during breakfast and handing her Voldemort's wand, taking the spare back from Ginny.

Natalie McDonald frowned. "What was that all about?" she asked her best friend.

"I told you my old wand burned out during the fight against Voldemort?"

After shuddering, Natalie nodded.

"Professor Tonks was just delivering my new wand to me," Ginny explained, examining Voldemort's wand minutely. If she ignored the history of the thing, it wasn't a bad looking wand. She had long since decided that telling everyone who the previous owner was wouldn't help anything and would only cause problems. She tucked the wand away and said, "I hate to eat and run, but I need to talk with Ron, Harry and Katie about yesterday's tryouts." At Natalie's nod, she moved further down the table, sitting next to Harry.

The four Quidditch team members spent a few minutes trying to privately talk about the tryouts, but the sudden silence from the nearby Gryffindors proved that they couldn't do it there without having a very large audience.

Harry was just about to suggest they move to the Room of Requirement when he heard, "Harry Potter," in Remus's voice.

He looked around for a moment, thinking his friend had come to Hogwarts. Not seeing him, he dug the mirror out of his robes. "Hi, Remus."

"Hey, Harry. I tried to catch you at the end of breakfast?" he raised his eyebrows.

Harry nodded. "I was finished. We were just talking Quidditch. How are things going there?" Remus was, after all, arranging Potter Manor.

"Reasonably well. Most of the furniture is here now. I also have the Floo connected. Call it 'Potter Manor' to get here. Could you come over tonight after classes? I need your opinion on how to set the place up before I can go much further."

"I can come over for a while, but I have to get back for some homework before too late."

"That'll be fine."

"I'll bring the elves over, too. May as well get them set up. See you later, then?" At Remus's nod, Harry tucked the mirror away.

Turning back to his team-mates, he picked the conversation back up. "Why don't we take this discussion somewhere quieter?"

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At the end of that day's classes, Harry invited his three friends along to Potter Manor. Hermione, perhaps still upset over his use of "slave labour" declined. Ron claimed homework and Quidditch team selection duties. Only Ginny accompanied Harry toward the castle entrance.

Once in the Entrance Hall, Harry called, "Dobby, Winky, Rully, Tarry, Scully, Borry, Delly!"

With overlapping cracks, the seven house-elves appeared in front of Harry. Rully stepped forward and bowed. "Master Harry called for his elveses?"

Many of the passing students stopped at the scene as house-elves were rarely seen.

"You don't get enough attention, Potter? You have to HIRE it?" Malfoy drawled from the direction of the dungeons.

Harry sighed and shook his head without bothering to turn. "Dobby?"

"Master Harry wishes something of Dobby?" the elf asked, glaring at Malfoy.

"Yes. Do you remember what you did to Lucius Malfoy immediately after you were freed?" Dobby nodded, looking downright feral (or at least so far as he was capable of such an expression).

When Harry turned, Draco Malfoy was looking somewhat confused but still held his ground. "What, you're going to have this elf lick my boots clean?" Malfoy sneered.

"Dobby, please demonstrate."

A sharp bang sounded and Draco Malfoy was suddenly hurled backwards, landing with a thump and sliding another ten feet before coming to a stop. Harry was actually grateful for the angle as Malfoy hadn't hit anything in his short flight and therefore couldn't claim injury. Every student witnessing the scene laughed as Malfoy pulled himself up with the aid of his two followers. Apparently deciding not to press his luck, Malfoy glared and stomped on past toward the library.

Harry turned with a smile. "Thank you, Dobby. Well done."

Dobby beamed.

"Okay, I spoke with the headmaster Sunday night and he's agreed to release all of you without prejudice. I'm going to be going to Potter Manor in a few minutes. Can you all use the Floo?"

Rully shook his head. "Elveses can travel to Master Harry in the house-elf way. Elveses do not need to use the Floo."

Harry nodded, not really surprised. "Okay, Ginny and I are going to Hogsmeade and then Flooing. Call it twenty minutes? Then come to me, and we can make it official."

All seven bowed and then disappeared with muted cracks.

Arm in arm, Harry and Ginny walked to the Three Broomsticks, chatting comfortably the entire way. Waving to Madam Rosmerta, Harry threw a handful of powder into the fire. "Potter Manor!"

One harrowing trip later, Harry came crashing out of the fireplace in his new home. "Ouch."

"I'm going to need to put a Permanent Cushioning Charm right there, aren't I?" Remus asked in high amusement, stepping into the room through an archway.

Harry pulled himself off the floor and glared at Remus as Ginny gracefully stepped out of the fire behind him. "At least until I have my Apparition license, I guess. You don't have to rub it in, though."

"You do have to admit that it's funny, Harry," Ginny said, brushing soot off of his back. "The great Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, defeater of Voldemort, and scourge of every surviving Death Eater, can't travel by Floo without falling flat on his face."

He turned to her with a wounded look. "Whose side are you on?"

She didn't get a chance to answer before a staccato series of cracks announced the arrival of the house-elves. All seven looked around the room for a moment before turning their complete attention to Harry.

Rully was the first to approach him. Reaching up, he laid one hand upon Harry's arm. Chanting for a few seconds in a surprisingly sing-song tone, he completed his Joining. Harry himself couldn't feel any effect, but the results were obvious on Rully's face. The house-elf suddenly stood straighter and years seemed to melt off of his face.

One by one, Tarry, Scully, Borry, Delly, and Winky repeated the actions.

Dobby simply stood there, watching the proceedings with a look of such pride on his face that he was nearly crying.

Once Winky finished the ceremony, Rully spoke up again. "The Joining to the House of Potter is complete. Does Master Harry have any orders for his elveses?"

Slightly off balance from the ceremony and sudden question, Harry needed a moment to regain his bearings. "Yes. Just to make it official, Remus Lupin and Ginny Weasley," he nodded to the two, "are to be accorded all honours when they're here. Remus has my authority to act as master of Potter Manor in my absence. Remus and Ginny, please meet Rully, Tarry, Scully, Borry, Delly, Winky and Dobby. The first five are returning to the Potter household. Winky used to work for the Crouch family. Dobby I helped free from Malfoy. I think I've told you each that story?"

The wizard and young witch nodded and smiled at all the elves.

Harry turned back to the seven. "For the moment, I suppose you should re-familiarise yourselves with the Manor and make notes on what needs to be done and what needs to be bought. Please see Remus for all the purchasing needs for now.

"Rully, I've noticed that you have acted as spokesperson since I've brought all seven of you together?"

Rully nodded. "As eldest, it is Rully's place, Master Harry."

"Then I leave it to you to determine the order of activity. Ginny and I will be returning to Hogwarts yet tonight, but I believe Remus will be living here for a time?" He turned and looked a question to the werewolf. At Lupin's nod, he turned back to Rully. "Any questions?"

"No, Master Harry," Rully answered as the rest of the elves just shook their heads.

"Thank you, and don't hesitate to speak up if there is a need."

All the elves bowed and each hurried out of the room, all going in different directions.

Remus grinned. "You've taken up the role of master of the Manor quite well, Harry."

He rolled his eyes. "Don't you start, Remus. It's just easier on them this way."

"I for one think you're managing brilliantly," Ginny gave her opinion, earning a smile from Harry.

Remus nodded agreement and said, "I suppose I should give you two a tour. Harry, you'd be interested to know that you did live here, but for less than a year. This is, obviously, the parlour. This fireplace is the only one in the Manor attached to the Floo."

He led the way out of the room and took them on a short tour of the entire Manor. The building had an air of disuse, but nothing was wrong that a good cleaning wouldn't fix. Harry was happy to see most of the furniture he remembered from the vault had already been scattered around the place, just as Remus had promised. Everything looked arranged rather haphazardly, but almost all of it was in the correct room at least.

Remus ended the tour going down the hallway upstairs. "The stairs here lead to the attic, but there's nothing up there right now. This last door is to the master suite." He opened the doors and allowed the young couple past.

Harry stopped at the threshold of the room and simply stared. Bay windows gave a majestic view of the wooded countryside. The bed looked impossibly soft, not to mention big enough for five or six. Wandering around in a daze, he noticed two bureaus in addition to a huge walk-in closet. It'd take him forever to actually use up all the storage space available in this room.

His head turned at a squeal.

From behind the other door, Ginny's voice floated out, "This bathtub is HUGE, Harry! You could nearly swim laps in it!"

Harry laughed. "Just so long as there's a shower in there, too."

Remus nodded. "That, too. Two sinks as well. If I recall the story, your great-great-grandfather constructed this place. He didn't spare any expense at the time, and it's been upgraded as needed in the meantime. It really is quite some estate you've inherited, Harry."

Harry could only nod in agreement, still looking somewhat stunned at everything.

"Now that you know what you have to work with, do you have any specific requests?"

Remus gave every indication of playing the part of a trusted aide, so Harry figured the rest of the conversation would best be served by treating him as exactly that. "Uh, yeah. More than a few, actually. How many guest rooms does this place have?"

"An even dozen, I think, if you count all the bedrooms except this master suite."

"Okay, turn the most secure one into someplace safe for you during a full moon. One of the others to your personal preferences as your permanent room." Harry gave a sudden grin. "Might as well ask Tonks's opinion for that room, too." Seeing Remus's blush, Harry smirked and went on, "I hope Rully or Borry will inform you which room or rooms they prefer for their use. Half a dozen guest rooms or so. Mix of styles and all that." He walked downstairs and called out thoughts as they occurred to him with each room he entered. "This just has to be a library. A couple study desks in here would be nice with parchment, quills, and everything. All or at least most of the books from my vaults to these shelves, of course. As that's probably at least twenty years out of date, please work through Flourish and Blott's to update the library. Heavy on Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration, but a good mix of the usual subjects as well. I suppose turning one of the smaller rooms with ventilation into a potions lab would be a good idea. Most of the general use potions I can produce reasonably well if I don't have Snape breathing down my neck. If any one of the rooms is big enough, please turn it into a duelling chamber. Jeez, how many places will this table seat? Twelve? Good grief. I hope those chairs have Cushioning Charms on them. They don't look all that comfortable. Oh, we're back to the parlour? I like these armchairs in here. Maybe a couple more, Gryffindor colours for the wall decorations or maybe a portrait of my parents if there is one. Did they or Sirius ever get portraits done?"

"Not the moving and talking kind, no. I wish they had."

Harry sighed. "Maybe some landscapes, then. Anyway, what kind of security can be put on the Floo?"

"Just about anything. Most homes of high stature like this one have a ward to only allow certain people through. I'd recommend that, just for safety's sake. Don't want any reporter Flooing in during the dead of night, do you?"

"Good point. If you could set that up, then? All the Weasleys, Hermione, you, and me for the time being."

"Even Percy?" Ginny asked quietly.

Harry nodded slowly. "Thank you. No, not Percy." The third Weasley male was a sore point for everyone. Despite everything that happened on Halloween, he still held faith with Fudge and had completely alienated his entire family.

"Dora, Albus, Kingsley?" Remus asked.

Harry grimaced. "Tonks and Moody. I don't know Auror Shacklebolt all that well. Moody for security and safety reasons. You're aware of my feelings for Headmaster Dumbledore, Remus." Harry paused and took a breath to calm down. "Anti-Apparition wards, defensive wards, like that. You have a better idea of that stuff than I do."

Remus nodded. "I'm afraid you're going to be a high-value target for the remaining Death Eaters for quite some time to come, so I'll make the wards more layered than usual. Once I figure out what wards to put up, I'll come and talk you through them."

"Thank you. What else? The entire kitchen needs to be stocked, I'm sure. Food, spices, like that. I'm partial to butterbeer and pumpkin juice, so please make sure there's some on hand. Tea and firewhiskey probably wouldn't be a bad idea to have as well. Plus whatever you like. Does the vault have all the kitchen implements and place settings I'd need? Good, that saves us the bother. Other than the wards, are there any home defensive measures I should use?"

Remus frowned in thought. "Kneazles might not be a bad idea. Golems or animated armour is a possibility, but unless you're going to be here by yourself for extended periods of time, they're probably more trouble than they're worth."

"I suppose I wouldn't mind a kneazle or two. I never had a pet, of course, so I don't know what to expect."

"Talk to Arabella. I'm sure she could help you with that. She trains them, too."

"Professionally?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow. Whenever he'd thought about it, he'd supposed that old Mrs. Figg was retired. Training animals, especially ones as intelligent as kneazles, made a certain amount of sense.

"Yep. Not a huge market for them, but enough."

"Please get in touch with her about what she'd recommend for a place this size, then."

"Will do. Anything else?" Remus looked up from the parchment he'd been making copious notes on.

"Are the grounds big enough to hold a Quidditch pitch?"

"There is already one set up back in the woods. Potters have been Gryffindor house players for generations. Chasers usually, like your father. I'll just check that all the charms are in place and it's ready whenever you are."

"Great. Could you add a set of Quidditch balls to the shopping list? After that, nothing more comes to mind at the moment."

Ginny was reading the list that Remus had been compiling alongside the notes of things to do. "That's quite enough, I think," she said in amusement. "It'll take Professor Lupin days just to buy this stuff, let alone put it all away."

"Call me Remus, Ginny," Lupin said with a smile. "I'm no longer your professor. I'd like to think we're past such formality and hope we could be friends."

The young Weasley smiled back.

"Remus, thank you very much for all the work you've already put into this. I'm certain you had to work like crazy to get this much accomplished in so

short a time."

Remus shrugged. "Not really. When Albus heard I was working for you, he took me off the active Order list. I'm still on call, but I'm not doing the scouting or research tasks I was doing before." Harry frowned, but Remus held up a hand. "Don't worry about it. With Voldemort dead and the Ministry Aurors actually doing what they're supposed to, our workload has gone way down."

Harry sighed but didn't comment. He was more concerned that Dumbledore was in the process of cutting Remus out of the Order than the change in their workload.

Ginny frowned at what Lupin had said. "You're working for Harry?"

"Didn't I tell you?" At her head shake, Harry shrugged. "I've hired him to do all of this and then some tutoring over Christmas holidays. I needed someone to do all this house setup stuff, and he's also my favourite teacher by far, so this is a win for us both. Speaking of which, do you want to learn Apparition, Ginny?"

"Apparition? But don't you have to be -"

"We're legal adults now, remember?" Harry interrupted. "I've hired Remus to give me tutoring on Apparition, Animagus, and duelling. With your permission, Remus, Ginny could join us for any or all."

Remus nodded agreeably. "Certainly. James and Sirius were younger than Ginny when they started Animagus training, so the age isn't an issue. I still think Minerva would be a better tutor, though."

"Perhaps. If we want to continue once back to Hogwarts, we could talk with her then."

"Does that mean I can read Sirius's journal?" Ginny asked.

"Sure. I was hoping there would be a bit more personal information in there, but there really isn't. A lot of it is very technical, but it was written by a teenager, so it's easy for me to follow. I'm looking forward to trying it out."

"Christmas holidays, Cub," Remus reminded him. "You've left me a fair number of tasks to do in the meantime," Remus held up the notes in indication.

"You don't mind doing all this, do you, Remus?" Harry asked in sudden concern.

The werewolf laughed. "Not at all. It gives me something to do now that Dumbledore doesn't have me running hither and yon. The pay is just cream for me."

Harry was relieved. "I don't expect you to work non-stop on this, Moony. Whenever you feel like it, take some time off. Visit your favourite Metamorphmagus at Hogwarts. Or if you both would rather, invite her here over the weekends. I certainly don't mind." He grinned at Remus's combined embarrassment and relief as Ginny laughed.

"Yes, well, I'll take that under advisement," Remus said. "One other thing that you should be aware of. I found a trunk in the Potter vault as I was moving all the furniture here." He gave Harry a sad look. "It was James's from his Hogwarts days."

Harry's face slowly lost its smile. "Do you know what's in it?"

Remus shook his head. "No. I didn't open it. I left it in the closet of your room."

Harry merely nodded, closing his eyes momentarily to calm himself. He couldn't deal with that right now. Maybe over Christmas. He hadn't seen the trunk in fifteen years. Two more months wouldn't matter. "Thank you, Remus," he whispered before he took a breath to regain his equilibrium. "We'll be going, then. I trust your taste and judgement on the decorating, Remus, but you know how to reach me if something more comes up."

The Unknown Power Yule Ball to Early Christmas Holidays

Life settled back down into routine for Harry and Ginny. If you don't count interviews, photos, occasional gifts, and frequent requests for autographs or dates, that is.

Despite being in her fifth year and studying for OWLs, Ginny spent as much time with Harry as she could. Much of it was actually spent studying with the older student, but not all of it. Harry's private quarters were a sore temptation for the young couple, but they managed to control themselves despite a few close calls.

Due to the abbreviated and out of sequence Quidditch season, Gryffindor only played one game before the Christmas holidays. Ron was thankful that their first game was against Hufflepuff. He hadn't trained them all up into the team he wanted, but they still handled Hufflepuff's team quickly and won two hundred and thirty to twenty.

The other early game pitted Slytherin against Ravenclaw. Slytherin went their usual route and played dirty against the vastly superior Ravenclaw team. After two hours of rough play, Cho easily beat Malfoy to the Snitch for a Ravenclaw victory of three hundred and ten to one hundred and eighty.

The date of the Yule Ball finally arrived, bringing excitement in its wake. Even the fifth and seventh years took breaks from their studying for the entire day. Most of the girls spent three or four hours getting themselves ready. The boys spent most of that same time chatting in the common rooms or playing games, feeling that even one hour of preparation was a bit extreme. After Ron beat Harry for the third time in chess, the two boys went their separate ways to get ready for the Ball.

Harry took a long, relaxing shower in his rooms before donning the emerald dress robes that Ginny had purchased for him in Hogsmeade just after Halloween. After five minutes spent trying to tame his hair, he abandoned the fight and left it to its own devices. Patting his robe pockets to make sure he had his wand and Ginny's gift, he made his way back to the Gryffindor common room. The Fat Lady made an appreciative noise as she opened up for him. Harry felt himself blush. Was the painting really whistling at him? Harry found most of the male Gryffindors above fourth year standing around the common room, reassuring each other.

"Hi, Ron. Any of the girls come down yet?" Harry asked as he slid in beside the redhead.

"The fourth years came down in a group and already left. Parvati blazed through a while back, muttering something about meeting her date in time. I haven't seen anyone else come down, though." He tugged nervously at his (frill free) collar. "Does this robe look okay on me?"

Harry gave his friend a half-smile. "You look fine, Ron. Hermione will be here. Don't worry so much." When and how the two had agreed to attend the Yule Ball together was a mystery to everyone, but after the initial "teasing incident", the two had rapidly grown closer, much to everyone's relief. There were even rumours a couple weeks previously of a snogging session between the two that had been interrupted by a third year.

Natalie McDonald stepped daintily down the girls' staircase, resplendent in a turquoise gown. She looked at the shuffling and nervous group of wizards in amusement. "Don't worry, boys, all the ladies are coming down soon. Nobody's gotten cold feet yet." She glanced at Harry with a grin. "Several of us tried to talk Ginny out of attending so one of us could snatch Harry, but she wouldn't budge."

Harry grinned at her as a wave of nervous laughter made its way around the room.

Natalie glided over and took Colin's proffered arm, the two fifth years heading immediately down.

Ginny was the next one to come down. Harry felt his breathing stop but couldn't be distracted enough to restart it. She was simply the most gorgeous creature he had ever seen. Her long hair had been done up in some sort of intricate braid, though a few wisps had escaped to frame her face. Her gown was strapless, leaving the creamy skin of her neck exposed. Her magical focus pendant was the only jewellery she wore. The gown's colour was a match to his own, sweeping down her trim waist and flaring out at the bottom. She didn't walk so much as glide along. Once her eyes found Harry's, her attention didn't shift again while she crossed the room to stand before him.

"You are the most beautiful . . ." he trailed off, eyes still devouring her.

She smiled demurely and dropped her gaze. "Thank you," she whispered.

Harry's mind came back into focus when Ron bumped him and whispered, "That's my sister you're drooling over."

Harry and Ginny's heads snapped over to glare at Ron.

He smiled blandly back at the couple.

Ginny broke first and giggled, her nervousness easily showing.

Harry smiled at her and reached into his robe. "That outfit is missing only one thing. Fortunately, I happen to have something that I think will help." He held out the small jewellery box and opened it.

Ginny caught her breath in a soft, "Oh!" before reaching forward gingerly. "They're gorgeous, Harry, thank you." She pulled the emerald earrings out and quickly fastened them in place.

"Bloody hell, Potter," one of the seventh years said in amused aggravation. "You're making us all look bad."

Harry looked up in surprise to find the entire common room looking at the two of them with smiles. Blushing furiously, the two linked arms and made their way out among the light laughter.

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The staff had pulled out all the stops to decorate the Great Hall. Mistletoe hung at strategic locations. Multiple Christmas trees were scattered around the room, each decorated in differing but still beautiful styles. Real fairies floated above everyone's heads, their subliminal laughter causing high spirits all around. An enchanted snowfall appeared to come out of the ceiling, stopping less than a foot above everyone's heads. As usual at the Balls, the house tables had been replaced with many smaller tables. Harry gently led Ginny toward the table with Natalie and Colin. He held the chair for her and then seated himself. They were quickly joined by a slightly star-struck Ron and Hermione, trailed closely by Neville and his date, Eloise Midgen. Neville remembered to hold the chair for his date, but Ron did not. This didn't appear to bother Hermione but did result in a bit of good-natured ribbing by Harry, Neville and Colin.

The eight students spoke their dinner orders and ate the fine meals thus provided. The conversation started with questions about the DA and Harry explained some of the topics to be covered in the new year. After that, it shifted to the upcoming OWL exams. The sixth year students assured the younger ones that they were indeed difficult, but that with proper study they could actually be survived.

Eloise, the lone Hufflepuff at the table, appeared to be quite nervous.

Trying to comfort her, Neville told about how he had had to have a Calming Draught AFTER the Potions test was completed. This little bit of embarrassing trivia seemed to help calm her.

After dinner, Dumbledore bade everyone stand and cleared all the tables away to make a dance floor. Music was provided by a relatively unknown band called Liquid Moonlight. They had a large repertoire of songs and a singer whose voice lived up to the band's name.

Harry and Ginny were on the floor for the first three dances before taking a break. Chatting for a few minutes with DA members, they sipped punch and traded comments about the other couples on the dance floor.

One song ended and instead of another beginning immediately, the singer said, "This next song is Wizard's Choice. Gentlemen, please find a dance partner, but it cannot be the witch you brought." A moment of puzzled silence before everyone started shifting around when the next song started.

More than one wizard moved toward Ginny, but she had already accepted the offer from Ernie Macmillan. Harry, meanwhile, had the attention of nearly every witch in the room. They were all hoping he would ask them, but he was instead moving toward where the staff was standing. He stopped and gave a half-bow, holding out one hand. "Professor Tonks, may I have the honour of this dance?"

Tonks, hair in an impossible braid and a mix of silver and gold, smiled and took his hand, allowing him to lead her to the dance floor.

Once they were comfortably moving, he chanced a quick look around. They were one of the first couples to the dance floor, so Harry quickly spotted Ernie and Ginny comfortably chatting. He was also somewhat surprised to see Remus wearing golden robes and dancing with Professor McGonagall. His attention was forcefully brought back to his own partner when she stepped on his foot.

She winced at the expression on his face. "Sorry," she whispered.

"S'okay," he said after the pain subsided. "I should have remembered."

"Remembered what?"

"You're the one who kept tripping over that umbrella stand, weren't you?"

She laughed and inched herself further into his arms. "You got me there. So, how do you like the Ball?"

"It's wonderful. Much better than the Yule Ball during my fourth year."

"Poor thing," she said without a trace of sympathy in her voice. "School champion, forced to dance with Miss Patil." Her face shifted to Parvati, causing Harry to stumble for a moment in surprise, before her face reverted back to her own. "I've heard mention that she's regarded as one of the prettiest girls here. I'm sure it was absolute torture for you."

Harry grinned self-deprecatingly. "So many things went wrong with that date that it would take days to list them all. Most of them were my fault, honestly. At any rate, the circumstances here are much better as well. Voldemort's gone, the Death Eaters are being captured, I'm blissfully in love and I'm about to go to stay at my very own home. How are you enjoying yourself?"

"This is great," she bubbled. "I had a hard time dating when I was in school, so I didn't get to many Balls."

"You are pretty intimidating, Dora," Harry mentioned, trying out her nickname for the first time. He explained his comment at her questioning look, "As a Metamorphmagus, most people don't quite know what to expect out of you."

"Hmm, you may be right. My boyfriends seemed to enjoy it, but they all dumped me when the novelty wore off. So, do you have any requests?"

Harry frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"Anyone in particular you'd like to dance with?" she explained easily.

He sighed. "I asked Nymphadora Tonks to dance. It wasn't because I knew she could look like Parvati Patil, but rather because I wanted to dance with HER. I know you're a Metamorphmagus, Dora. You don't need to wear someone else's face to make me happy."

She blinked rapidly a few times and opened her mouth before abruptly deflating. "Thank you, Harry," she whispered, studying the front of his robes. "Remus has said some of the same things to me. I guess I'm just not used to people liking me just for me instead of this skill I have."

Harry smiled wryly. "I think I can sympathise with that one. Hey, Boy Who Lived here, remember?"

She looked up and gave a genuine smile before laughing. "Okay, you won that one."

"Hey, I just thought of something you could give me for Christmas." At her raised eyebrow, he said, "For Christmas Day, or at least whatever portion you spend at Potter Manor, just be the real you. Don't wear some other hair or face, just be the real Nymphadora Tonks."

She slowly broke into a wide smile. "And just what makes you think I am going to be at your place on Christmas?"

"Because you're invited for as much of the holidays as you want, you know Remus is already living there and I don't do bed checks," he finished with a twinkle in his eye.

Her grin widened. "Deal!"

"I was serious about you spending as much of the entire break at my place as you want, you know."

She nodded. "I may take you up on that. Don't worry, I promise not to do any bed checks either."

Harry began to sputter as the song ended. She leaned in to give him a kiss on the cheek then walked away laughing.

He wandered back to the spot he'd been standing earlier in a state of bemused shock.

"Harry? What's wrong?" Ginny asked, having arrived just before him.

He shook his head. "Nothing, really. Just something Tonks said." He gently pulled her back to the dance floor as another song started up. Pulling her close, he whispered the conversation into her ear.

Instead of being shocked, she seemed thoughtful. "I'll have to figure out how to thank her."

Harry's jaw fell open.

"Oh, is the thought that awful?"

Harry clicked his jaw shut and shook his head vehemently. "Not at all. Quite the opposite in fact. It's just that I didn't want to push you into anything you're not ready for." He paused and amended himself, "WE'RE not ready for."

She laced her hands behind his neck and leaned her head comfortably onto his chest. "I agree that we're not ready for that step, but I'm sure it'll happen. When it does, it does. Whether that's tomorrow or not for years yet, it doesn't matter."

"You're serious," he said in wonder.

She smiled softly, though he couldn't see the expression. "You're mine, and I'm yours, Harry. It's as simple as that. Everything else will work itself out."

The next song finished before they broke their warm cocoon. Harry leaned down slightly and gave her a lingering kiss right in the middle of the dance floor before silently leading her back to the mingling areas.

Before they made it, though, they heard, "Witch's Choice. Same rules, girls. Go get 'em."

"Good luck," Ginny said with a mischievous grin before darting off.

When Harry turned around, he found the vast majority of the witches in the room were turning toward him.

Harry gave serious consideration to casting a Disillusionment Charm upon himself and bolting for the door.

Lavender latched onto his left arm just before he could put his plan into action. Before she could say a word to him, she got into an argument with Cho.

Harry's right arm, meanwhile, was the captive of Parvati who was trading words with Hannah and Eloise.

The first one to actually speak to Harry was Susan Bones. "Harry, while these witches argue among themselves, would you care to dance?"

Harry smiled at the Hufflepuff and extricated his arms. "Certainly, Susan. Thank you for asking." Certain that she was receiving venomous glares from many directions, Harry steered her toward the dance floor with a light hand to her back. Once they were moving, he simply said, "Thank you."

Her eyes crinkled up as she smiled at him. "You're welcome. They were arguing over you like you were a choice morsel. You looked like you needed to be saved from the slaving horde."

He laughed. "True enough. This morsel is already spoken for, however."

"Oh, I know that. Anyone with eyes can see it. I just want to be able to tell my grandchildren that I actually danced with you once."

Harry smiled a little in embarrassment. "Please don't make it out to be more than it is, Susan."

"What you and Ginny did IS a big deal, Harry. The fact you're trying to downplay it is just part of what makes you, you."

"Could we change the subject, please, before I start to imitate Ginny's hair?"

She laughed. "Okay, we'll do that. What're you going to be teaching us next term?"

The rest of the evening was spent laughing and dancing. In short, it was a perfect evening for Harry and Ginny.

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"Get up!"

"Hmmp. Go 'way."

"Get your lazy arse out of bed, Harry."

Harry's pillow was suddenly jerked out from under his head and immediately re-applied to his head at much higher speed.

It was moments like this that Harry wished he'd never told Ron his password. "If you want to live to see Christmas, Weasley, you'll leave the room and come back at a civilised hour," Harry threatened in a perfectly level tone from underneath his pillow.

"Pfft!" Ron waved the comment off. "You wouldn't do that to me. Ginny would never forgive you, and Mum wouldn't ever knit you another jumper. Listen, it IS a civilised hour. Why do you think I'm up? Carriages leave in an hour and you still need to pack."

"Aw, hell," Harry groaned, levering himself up and stumbling toward the bathroom.

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"Glad you could join us, Harry," Hermione teased when Harry dropped into the seat across from her, hair still wet.

"It would've been easier to get him up if he were still living in the tower," Ron mentioned.

Harry just grunted, reaching for breakfast.

"Why are you so cranky?" Ginny asked.

"Had a hard time falling asleep," Harry spoke around his breakfast.

"Looking forward to living at your own place?" Hermione asked, divining the cause easily.

Harry merely nodded.

"Oh, good," Ron said. "I was worried your insomnia was due to mooning over my sister or something."

"That, too, but I figured you didn't want to hear my fantasy with the chocolate sauce in front of the Gryffindor fire."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. Ginny did, too, but in a very different way. Ron merely closed his eyes and winced in pain.

Harry grinned at Ron's reaction.

"Prat," Ron grumbled to the amusement of the other three.

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The train ride back to London blurred by in a haze of Christmas carols, Exploding Snap and food off the snack trolley.

"Knight takes pawn," Ginny advised, studying the board while leaning into Harry's side.

"Are you playing, or is it Harry?" Ron asked.

Doesn't matter," Hermione said, putting the mark into the massive tome she was reading. "We're here."

"Just as well," Harry said, pulling the bag out for his pieces to scramble into. "I was losing. Again."

"I miss you in Gryffindor Tower, Harry. Nobody else is so willing to let me thrash them repeatedly."

"You're welcome. I think."

Ginny merely smiled at Harry's ambiguous response. She stood and stretched out the kinks as the train slowed to a crawl.

Harry indulged in some up close and personal Ginny-watching.

"Hey, Harry, your shoes are on fire," Ron calmly announced.

"Huh?" Harry's eyes didn't shift.

"I said your boxers are about to explode."

"Uh. Okay."

Ron shook his head as Hermione snickered. "You're hopeless," Ron pronounced with a theatrical sigh.

Blinking himself back to reality, Harry shrugged agreeably. "Hopelessly smitten, anyway."

From the other side of their carriage door, Tonks tapped on the window, interrupting Ron's groan. When the students were looking at her, she opened the door and stepped in as the train stopped at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. "Ready to go, kids?"

Harry stood and followed the other four out. Once on the platform, they headed toward where they could see Molly and Bill Weasley waiting. Harry gave Ginny a hug. "See you in a few days?"

"Housewarming party is Monday starting at four, right?"

Harry nodded as he released her slowly.

Ginny gave him a peck on the cheek then turned and dashed at Bill, throwing herself into a hug.

Harry waved at the Weasleys and the just united Grangers. "See everyone Monday?" he asked them all.

When everyone nodded and called their goodbyes, he held his arm out to Tonks. "Shall we?"

She threaded her arm through his. "Let's." She led him to an inconspicuous car with a silent driver and waved him in, slipping in right behind him.

The car slid through the traffic easily, finding holes in the traffic that weren't there. The Leaky Cauldron was only a few minutes away, not giving Harry enough time to marvel at the mode of transportation. They got out and entered the pub. The car pulled immediately away again. Greeting Tom the barkeep in passing, Harry and Tonks made their way to the fireplace.

"Potter Manor!" A harrowing trip later, Harry came lurching out and onto his parlour floor. "Oomph!"

Tonks stepped out of the fire moments later and looked down at the sprawled Harry. "And here I thought I was clumsy," she observed in humour.

"You are, Dora," Remus cheerfully assured her, earning a glare that was ignored. "Harry, though, has this problem with Floo or Portkey travel." He turned to the teenager now picking himself off the floor. "How are you, Cub?"

"Better now that I'm home," he grinned, just for being able to use that word. "Thanks for the Cushioning Charm, by the way," he waved at the floor he had just been lying upon.

"Sure. Hey, it was one of the things you asked me for, right?"

Harry nodded agreement.

"What did you call him?" Tonks asked, giving Remus a welcoming hug.

"Cub? Well, as I've been a werewolf since I was four, and he's my godson . . ."

She laughed at the nickname. "And I bet you were a cute little wolf cub, too."

Remus gave her a look of mock annoyance, but Harry could easily see the affection behind it.

Shaking his head at his girlfriend's teasing, Remus turned to Harry and said, "I got the entire list of chores done, CUB," he emphasized, grinning at Tonks. "We can start your tutoring whenever you want," he finished, looking back at Harry.

"Tutoring?" Tonks asked.

"He's going to teach me some of the finer points of seduction," Harry explained.

Tonks and Remus gaped. "I'm WHAT?" the werewolf asked incredulously.

Harry grinned. "Okay, not really. Animagus, Apparition, and duelling," he more honestly answered the Auror's question. He turned to Remus. "Give me a day to get settled and we can start tomorrow? Don't forget we have the housewarming party Monday, too."

"Oh! I know what we can do today," Tonks said excitedly.

Harry looked over at her with a smirk. "Well, I WAS planning on letting you two have some time alone . . ."

Remus blushed lightly.

Tonks grinned. "Oh, don't worry about us. I'll try to remember to use Silencing Charms, but just ignore any noises you may hear tonight."

Harry was impressed that she could say all that and still be totally unembarrassed.

Remus's blush deepened.

Harry guffawed at Remus's reaction.

"No, what I was going to suggest is getting a Christmas tree," Tonks finished her earlier thought.

A slow smile spread over Harry's face. "That is a grand idea, Dora."

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Five hours later, Harry stepped back from the tree in satisfaction.

The ten foot evergreen was in the parlour, off to the side of the fireplace. Magically twinkling lights, an assortment of ornaments, and a bit of garland had been added. It's amazing what the right combination of items can become.

"There!" Tonks pronounced, stepping back. She'd appointed herself the "tinsel fairy" and had been spreading bits all over the tree and occasionally the rest of the room and its occupants. Harry had originally worried that she'd over decorate the tree (the Dursley tree always ended up covered with so much tinsel that the fake evergreen itself was totally buried), but the eccentric Auror had good taste. She'd conjured just enough that it added to the effect without taking it over. Remus, likewise, had been hanging wreaths and garland around the room. The scent of pine was everywhere but stopped short of being overpowering.

"Mrow?"

Harry blinked at the unexpected sound and turned to see a kneazle sitting at one of the doors, intently studying him, Dora and the tree.

"Ah," Remus said, seeing what had Harry's attention. "You told me to talk with Arabella about getting some kneazles. For a manor the size of this one, she recommended not less than four and up to a dozen. In addition to keeping the mouse and rat population under control, they're a good warning system against hostile wizards. They won't do much directly, but they'll warn everyone in the place if something's wrong."

The kneazle twined itself through Tonks's legs, purring loudly.

Remus raised an eyebrow. "He's quite taken with you, Dora. Anyway, I got four for the moment. Two male and two female. If you want more, the Contraceptive Charm can be removed from the two girls easily enough. Kneazle kittens can also be good gifts or sold since these four are all registered animals. This one," he nodded to the kneazle accepting an ear scratch from Tonks, "is Rascal. Tabitha and Shadow are around somewhere. Midnight is here, too, but she's much more shy."

Harry grinned and offered the back of his hand for Rascal's inspection. When he began butting his head against it, Harry rubbed his head. "I'm glad you named them something reasonable. I had awful visions of kneazles named Snowball and Mr. Whiskers or something."

Remus chuckled. "Arabella didn't really name her kneazles that, Harry. Those names were part of her cover as a cat-infatuated crazy Muggle woman."

"It worked," Harry said dryly, standing erect again, and looking around the room. Everything was finished, looking just exactly like his mental image of a picture postcard Christmas scene.

His face slowly fell, however, as memories of the previous Christmas came to him. What he wouldn't give for Sirius to spring from behind the tree and start singing "God Rest Ye, Merry Hippogriffs."

"I know, Harry. I miss him, too," Remus said quietly, gripping Harry's shoulder.

Borley walked in with three mugs and handed them around, looking approvingly at the tree and decorations. The house-elf had successfully eased the melancholy atmosphere without even realising it.

Harry took an experimental sip of the hot, cider like drink. "This is good, Borley. What is it?"

"Wassail!" Remus exclaimed with a smile.

Borley smiled. "Master Remus is right. Rully was thinking it is good for the season." He nodded toward the tree.

He was right," Harry agreed.

"If masters and miss are done, supper is being ready."

"Good, I'm famished," Tonks said, leading the way toward the dining room, Rascal trotting along behind her.

"Gotta keep your energy up for later, right?" Harry teased.

"You bet. You make sure you eat enough too, Rem."

"Have you no shame?" Remus muttered, blushing spectacularly.

"Apparently not, but it is fun watching her tease you, Moony," Harry observed with a wide grin.

"You realise you're just encouraging the lad?" Remus asked of Tonks as he held her chair for her.

"He's a sixteen year old wizard, Remus. He doesn't need any encouragement," she observed dryly. "At least from me," she added after a moment.

Remus sighed, taking his own seat. "I can see I'm not going to get any help from you."

"You're the parental figure, here. I'm just the older sister who can get away with being a very bad influence." She threw the highly amused Harry a wink.

"Okay, NOW you're making me feel old," Remus pouted.

"Don't worry," Harry interjected. "I'm sure she'll find a way to reinvigorate you later."

Remus dropped his head into his hands as Harry and Tonks broke into laughter.

The entering Scully and Delly, laden with food, blinked at the strange actions of their masters.

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After lunch, Harry sat down at the desk in a small room that Remus had turned into a private study. Taking a quill, he began writing.

Dear

You and a guest are formally invited to a New Year's Eve celebration at Potter Manor.

Festivities and dancing (and assorted mayhem if the Weasley twins agree to attend) will begin at eight in the evening. Drinks and appetizers will be provided.

Floo will be open from 7:45 until 8:00. The dress is casual.

Please respond by owl with acceptances or regrets not later than December the twenty-third.

Sincerely,

Harry J Potter

Blowing gently on the parchment to dry the ink, he hoped the combination of the formal invitation style he'd looked up at Hogwarts looked okay combined with the bit of humour he'd added.

Leaving the parchment to finish drying, he counted out twenty-five sheets of parchment and stacked them neatly next to the invitation. He placed the now dry sheet on top. Waving his wand over the sheet, he cast, "*Scriptus Duplico* twenty-five." After giving the charm a few seconds to complete, Harry flipped through the sheets of parchment, nodding when all of them now bore the same text.

Dipping his quill into the inkpot again, he addressed each letter to a different member of last year's DA. To Fred and George's, he added a post script saying that he was going to be keeping this secret from Ron, Ginny, and Hermione until that day.

"Dare I ask what you're up to?" Remus asked, leaning on the doorframe.

"Inviting the original DA members to a New Year's Eve party," Harry calmly answered.

Remus nodded, not very surprised. "Have you thought about security? You have to admit that such a group would be a high-value target for the remaining Death Eaters."

Harry grimaced as he started rolling the parchments up and addressing the outside of each. "I can't even throw a party without worrying that it'll be a target, can I?" Harry looked up in sudden concern. "Hey, what about the housewarming party? Will that be a target, too?"

Remus shook his head. "So few people know about it that there's no chance of it leaking. This," he waved to the stacks of parchment, "is another issue entirely."

Heaving a relieved breath, Harry nodded and returned to writing names, rolling and sealing the scroll with a muttered charm. "I suppose you're

right. Considering who all is likely to be here, though, it might almost be amusing for a few Death Eaters to show up. What's left of them wouldn't fill a shoebox." He waved his hand when Remus opened his mouth. "I know, I know. They could attack in force."

"Nice to see all of your Defense lessons haven't been wasted," Remus said in amusement.

Harry grinned. "I'm sure our favourite Auror knows a few good Perimeter Charms."

Lupin nodded. "Now you're thinking. You should inform Magical Law Enforcement about what you're doing. This is a high profile party so they need to know about it in case of emergency. I can create a few Portkeys, too, just in case."

Harry blinked. "You can create Portkeys? Aren't unauthorised Portkeys illegal?"

Remus grinned wolfishly. "Only if we're caught. And even then, a Portkey that saves lives isn't likely to get me into trouble." He sobered. "You realise we should tell Albus."

Harry's face soured. "Yeah," he grudgingly admitted. "If I see anyone inside aside from you and Tonks, though, I'm hexing them on sight." He smirked. "Especially if it's Snape."

Lupin fought hard to keep his expression stern instead of grinning along.

"You and Tonks are more welcome as guests to this instead of guards, you know."

Remus shook his head. "Though I'll enjoy seeing all my old students, we'll be very out of place. We'll probably visit with everyone early and then disappear after a couple of hours. Don't worry about us or the security. Dora and I will handle it."

Harry sighed. "You don't have to be taking care of me like this, Moony."

"No, but I WANT to do it. You're the closest thing to family I have left, Harry. You want to have a party, so I'll help you throw a party. Dora and I weren't going to go anywhere anyway. We may as well do something helpful for you."

Eyes prickling, Harry smiled. "Thank you. Okay, I'll leave the security arrangements in your hands. Just warn me, okay? I'd like to be able to walk around my own home without being attacked by a chimera."

Remus chuckled. "Not a bad idea. I'll see if Hagrid has any of those Blast-Ended Skrewts still." He laughed at Harry's horrified expression. "I was kidding! If anything is going to happen inside, I'll warn you well ahead of time."

Calming, Harry nodded. "Well, I'm going to Diagon Alley. I have a bit more shopping to do, send these out and arrange some of the supplies."

"So long as you stay in Diagon Alley, you'll be safe enough. Have fun."

"Thanks, Dad. I promise to be back before dark."

"See that you do, young man. You're not too old to bend you over my knee for a spanking," Remus grinned back.

Harry snorted and stood, gathering the rolls of parchment. "Wrong person, Rem. Talk to the lovely lady upstairs if you want to spank someone." He grinned at Remus's uncomfortable expression. "I'm going out for a few hours. You two have fun."

Still laughing at how easy it was to embarrass Remus, Harry Flooed to the Leaky Cauldron.

"Harry!" Tom greeted the new arrival.

"Tom," Harry said, pulling himself upright and brushing soot out of his hair. "Sorry Tonks and I buzzed through here so quickly earlier. How've you been?"

Tom waved off the apology and returned to wiping down the bar top in the almost empty room. "Doing well, doing well. How about yourself?"

"Excellent. Listen, I'd like to make an order to pick up New Year's Eve. Can I do that and keep it quiet?"

Tom stopped wiping and turned his full attention toward Harry. "Surely. Throwing a party are you?"

"Considering who all would like to see me dead, let's keep that to ourselves."

Tom nodded, understanding immediately. "Consider it done. What can I do for you?"

Harry thought about it for a second. "Three hundred butterbeers and five bottles of firewhiskey should be about right."

Tom blinked. "That'd be easier, not to mention cheaper, to do kegs if you're talking about that many guests."

After staring for a moment, Harry chuckled. "You're right, of course. Not like I've ever tried to plan a party before. Okay, how about this: forty guests at a minimum, mostly students or just graduated students for a New Year's Eve party. What would you recommend?"

Tom nodded. "Three kegs, fifty mugs, the five bottles of firewhiskey, and ten shot glasses. As you probably don't need that many mugs or shot glasses permanently, I'll rent them to you for the evening. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. With your permission, I'll come through early on the thirty-first and have one of my house-elves take the stuff to my place. How much will I owe you?"

Tom's face scrunched up in thought for a moment. "Call it a hundred galleons including twenty for a security deposit. The bottles of firewhiskey are yours if they don't get drunk. Otherwise everything else should come back before January fifth. Anything missing or broken beyond repair comes out of the security deposit, Mr. Potter."

"You were calling me Harry earlier."

Tom smiled his toothless smile. "That was before this became a serious business discussion, Mr. Potter. Is that setup acceptable?"

"Sounds good to me. If the number of guests changes significantly, I'll let you know."

"Yes, sir. I'll be seeing you and your elf on the thirty-first, then. Would you like to pay now, or should I use the same account Mr. Lupin used in your name a while back?"

"Take it out of the account, thanks. If I could have a butterbeer to go, I'll be on my way."

Tom pulled a warm bottle from beneath the bar top and offered it over. "After that discussion, Harry, this one is on the house. You have a good day, now."

Chuckling over the barkeep's mercurial demeanour changes, Harry walked out the back. After pulling up the cowl of his cloak and casting a quick Glamour Charm over his face, he stepped through the magical gateway and onto Diagon Alley. He smiled as the familiar sights and sounds washed over him. Diagon Alley was mainly unchanged from when he visited the previous summer. In recognition of the season, there were more twinkling lights than usual and some holiday decorations in storefronts.

Taking sips of the warm butterbeer in his hand, he first went into the post office. Once he'd sent off all the invitations minus Ginny's (Ron and Hermione's were on a time delay to get to them the morning of the thirty-first) for a tidy sum, he left the building full of softly hooting owls and wandered down the street, peeking in storefronts.

He spent some time browsing in Flourish and Blotts, finally selecting the most obscure book he could find (on South American magical practises) to give to Hermione for Christmas.

Back outside, he went down a few stores to Quality Quidditch Supplies, picking up a new set of Keeper gloves and pads for Ron.

He considered poking his head into the Weasley Wizard Wheezes store but found it to be full near to overflowing with holiday shoppers, mainly under twenty years of age. Chuckling and shaking his head, he went on his way.

He stopped outside a jewellery store and stared at the display of rings, hesitantly considering.

"Is there anything you would like to announce, Mr. Potter?" a voice softly asked from beside him.

Startled, Harry turned, pulling out his wand in reflex.

Beside him, the man rapidly raised his hands and backed up, eyes on the wand suddenly pointed at him.

Harry relaxed and re-holstered his wand when he recognised Simon Firthquill, the reporter who'd done the post-Halloween interview for the Daily Prophet. "Merlin, Mr. Firthquill. Don't DO that to me!" He shook his hand where the remaining butterbeer had sloshed out during his sudden movements.

Slowly lowering his hands but still breathing a little heavily, Simon said, "Do that to YOU? You just scared a decade off my life, Mr. Potter!"

"Yeah, well you shouldn't have snuck up on me like that. My reactions are a little on the tense side."

"No kidding."

"How'd you recognise me, anyway?" Harry wondered. The Glamour Charm he'd used earlier had changed his hair and eye colour, which he thought would have been enough to disguise him.

Simon smiled. "Don't worry. I saw you coming out of the Leaky Cauldron before you cast the Glamour Charm. I wouldn't have recognised you otherwise. Anyway," he waved at the display of jewellery in front of them, "is there an announcement you'd like to make?"

Harry smirked. "Not at this time. Rest assured, though, if there IS such an announcement, you'll be in the first hundred people I tell."

The reporter rolled his eyes. "I'm so honoured."

"Actually, you should be; you'll be the first reporter I tell. Thank you for how you did the article in November, by the by."

He nodded, looking much mollified. "Any other quotes I can get from you, then?" he asked hopefully.

"Nothing new, sorry. Have a Happy Christmas."

Nodding in response, the reporter took his leave.

Harry turned back to his shopping, making various small purchases before he made his last stop of the day in the garden nursery, which was attached to the apothecary. Considering what he was about to buy, he figured he'd better go as himself and removed the Glamour.

"How may ah help ya, lad?" the saleswoman asked from behind the counter. Her eyes flickered to Harry's scar before moving back to his face without changing expression. Harry found himself very thankful that she wasn't going to make a big deal out of this.

"If I wanted to make a very large purchase of seedlings of various kinds, how much lead time do you need?"

"That depends on which plants and how many ya'll be needin'."

Retrieving a list he'd meticulously researched from an inner pocket, he handed it over.

She read down the list before looking up at him with a suspicious frown. "Mistar Potter, unless ya're planning on poisonin' half the country, thar's only one other use for this here combination of plants that ah'm aware of."

Harry nodded. "That is not known to anyone else at this point. I will be very upset if this information gets out before I make a public statement."

She understood the request and threat rolled into one. "'Kay. When would ya like all of this available?"

"Is the beginning of this summer acceptable?"

She stared off into space for a few moments. "Aye," she answered. "Ya realise this is going to be very 'xpensive."

"Buying seedlings and growing it all in my own greenhouse will be less expensive in the long run than buying all the ingredients as they're needed."

Her mouth quirked into an acknowledging smile. "'Deed."

After re-applying his Glamour, he went to Gringott's for a full accounting of his assets and property listings.

The next step in his plan would be recruitments and then possible real estate purchases.

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"I thought you said you put an Anti-Apparition ward up?" Harry asked the next morning. He was following his teacher into the large room in the basement that Remus had said was a duelling chamber.

"I did. I also left this room uncovered by the ward."

"So someone can Apparate into this room if they wanted to?" Harry asked in concern.

Remus grinned, but it had a wicked edge to it. "Not if they wanted to arrive in one piece. James and Sirius told me about this place. The walls and floor are constructed from a special form of basalt. There's also a copper mesh in there and it was received multiple Magic Dampening Charms. All of this means that they will absorb a LOT of magic before being damaged, no matter what you throw at them. As a side effect, any magic trying to get into the room from outside, like an Apparating wizard, will get . . . scrambled."

"This room was designed to be a duelling chamber, then?" Harry examined the wall with interest. To visual inspection, it was unremarkable black stone.

"Yep. That and a safe place to test unknown charms. James thought there might be a more private vault down here somewhere, too, but he could never find it." He let Harry get a feel for the room before continuing, "Within the room, we can Apparate just fine. This is where I'm going to teach you and Ginny how to do that over short ranges. Long range will have to be done outside later. Now, did Ginny say she wanted to do duelling and Animagus training, too?"

Harry shook his head. "Not now. She doesn't think she'll have the time, what with OWLs and everything. She feels that the DA covers enough duelling for her. She may want to do the Animagus later, though."

Remus nodded. "Probably a good decision. You remember what the OWLs were like." Harry grimaced, causing the other man to grin. "Just you wait until next year's NEWTs. At any rate, we could start Animagus training, or we could have a duel."

"Why not both? Duel for a bit, talk about that, then start the Animagus stuff? From what I read of Sirius's notebook, the early stages were pretty calm. Getting a firm mental picture of your left hand and all that."

"So you want a bit of excitement to offset the boring stuff?"

Harry chuckled a little self-consciously. "I suppose so. I can safely study my hands without you around, I think. So if you can just point me along the right path, I can do that for a few days in spare moments without wasting your time."

"Makes sense. Just promise me you won't try to go on to the next step without me present, okay?"

"I think this makes it the fourth time you asked that, Remus. I promise, alright?"

"Just making sure. I don't want you to get hurt. I'm kinda fond of you, Cub."

Harry grinned back, a little embarrassed.

"Before this gets too mushy for us, how about a duel?"

Harry laughed and drew his wand, saluting before assuming a proper duelling stance.

Remus mirrored his actions. "*Everbero* !"

"*Protego* ." The spell ricocheted into the ceiling, absorbing into the stone without visual effect. "Come on, Moony. You can do better than that," Harry said challengingly.

A gleam came into Remus's eye. "Ah, so you think defeating Voldemort means you're good? We'll see about that. *Conjunctivus* ! *Stupefy* ! *Petrificus Carpus* ! *Impedimenta* !" Four spells were cast rapidly.

Grinning wildly, Harry threw himself into the fight.

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"There you are," Tonks said from an armchair, putting her book down. Rascal was in her lap, purring contentedly as she absently ran a hand down his back. For whatever reason that particular kneazle had taken to the Auror. "I was about to go looking . . . Great Merlin, what happened to the two of you?"

Harry looked at Remus with an expression of innocence. This was rather difficult considering his black eye and shredded robes. Remus looked scarcely better with an oozing cut on his forehead and favouring his left leg.

As one, the two wizards turned back to Tonks. "What do you mean?"

She made an impatient sound and stood, dropping the annoyed kneazle to the ground. Dora drew her wand, approaching the pair. She cast a quick series of charms, clearing up most of the injuries. "What did you two do, get into a fight?"

"Yeah, well, we were fighting over you," Harry deadpanned. "You'll be happy to know that he successfully defended your honour."

She smirked. "I'm glad to see that he thinks I have some."

Harry smothered a grin.

"Seriously, what happened?" Tonks persisted.

"Duelling practise," Remus explained calmly.

"Who won?" she asked, taking her seat again.

"I went easy on him," Harry responded.

"Excuse me? Who ended up with whose wand? Who ended up on the floor, petrified?"

"I was lulling you into a false sense of security," Harry responded as if offended.

"Uh, huh. Get out of here and change robes before we talk about the early Animagus steps."

"Sure thing," Harry cheerfully agreed, moving toward his rooms.

"How did it go really?" Tonks asked once Harry was out of earshot.

"He's good," Remus reported, dropping into a chair tiredly. "For a student he's very, very good. Not yet in our league, but he could probably give most Aurors a good fight. Or Death Eaters, more to the point."

"There's a reason he's the leader of the DA, Remus, even if he is only a sixth year. Besides, after having the two of us as teachers, he's bound to have learned SOMETHING," she said teasingly.

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Early Monday afternoon, Remus lifted the security restrictions on the Floo, explaining every step to Harry as he went. The Master of Potter Manor figured he needed to know about the security on his home, after all.

The first one to arrive, half an hour early, was Ginny. The young lady immediately launched herself onto Harry, kissing him deeply. "Hi, Harry," she said breathlessly once they came up for air. "Missed you."

"Missed you, too."

Tonks groaned. "Two days. It was only two days!" she lamented to nobody in particular.

The younger couple ignored her. Harry steered her to the loveseat and sat, pulling her back down against his chest. They started talking about nothing in particular, waiting for the appointed time.

Midnight made one of her rare appearances and spent some time on Ginny's lap, much to Harry's amusement and Ginny's delight after she was introduced to the very intelligent creature.

Once the guests started arriving, Harry stood and performed his host duties, Ginny and Remus supporting as necessary.

Arthur, Molly, Bill, Charlie, Fred, George and Ron all came through the Floo, Alicia and Angelina on the twins' arms Harry was pleasantly surprised to see.

Shortly thereafter Winky entered the room from the direction of the front door, leading Hermione and her parents. Hermione's eyes flickered from Winky to Harry, accusing.

He sighed. He expected to get an earful about his elves later. On the other hand, Winky had cleaned up rapidly after Joining. Even to Hermione's eyes, the house-elf had to look happier than she did at Hogwarts.

Ginny, hearing the sigh and following his line of sight, moved toward Hermione and pulled the older girl aside for a whispered conversation.

Arthur Weasley engaged John Granger in a quiet conversation of their own. At first Harry was concerned that Mr. Weasley's fascination with all things Muggle was going to overwhelm Mr. Granger, but it was quickly clear that they were trading questions.

Jane Granger and Molly Weasley moved together and admired the tree.

Harry was absolutely sure Molly would eventually try to take over the kitchen, but he had already warned Rully about that.

Ron wandered away from his siblings and their dates, snagging a butterbeer from the drinks table. "Hiya, Harry." He looked around appreciatively. "Nice place you've got yourself here."

Harry shrugged modestly. "Built by my great-great-grandfather, or so I've been told. It's a great place. Even has its own Quidditch pitch out back."

Ron's eyes lit up. "THAT is something we'll have to use this summer."

Ginny and Hermione made their way over, Hermione looking a bit perturbed but holding her peace. Ginny threaded her arm through Harry's, not looking the least bit upset.

After a few seconds of silence, Harry offered, "You two want to have a tour?"

At their affirmative answers, the four made their way toward one of the exits.

"Gred, does it appear to you that the four youngsters are trying to sneak off?"

"Yes, Forge, that is what it seems. What do you think they're off to do?"

"Mischief?"

"Mayhem?"

"Snogging?"

"Escaping?" Alicia suggested.

"Tour," Harry answered, grinning at the twins' perpetual good humour.

"I'm wounded," Fred made a dramatic gesture.

"You wouldn't invite us along -"

"- to such an event?"

"I'm not sure I trust you not to leave some 'surprises' scattered about," Harry dryly explained.

"Oh, that hurts."

"Our very own Harry doesn't trust us?"

"With good reason," Ginny interjected.

"I'm surprised, nay, shocked at such accusations!"

"You have besmirched our honour!"

"Did you notice that they haven't denied it?" Angelina observed to Alicia.

Harry sighed. "If you all want to come along, you're welcome." He pinned the twins with a stare. "Best behaviour, guys, if you don't want coal in your stockings."

Both twins crossed their hearts and nodded solemnly.

"I just KNOW I'm going to regret this," Harry muttered to Ginny as they started the tour with Bill and Charlie tagging along.

As Harry didn't show them more than one guest room and left several rooms out of the tour, it didn't take terribly long aside from having to physically drag Hermione out of the library.

"Stairs to the attic and the master suite down there," Harry finished, waving further down a short hallway.

"There's an absolutely huge bathtub in the master bath," Ginny added.

Five Weasleys, a Granger, a Spinnet, and a Johnson all turned to stare at her.

"How do you know that, Snapdragon?" Charlie asked carefully.

"Oh, she's been here before," Harry said dismissively, knowing Ginny was setting them up. Setting them up for what, he didn't know, but he was sure it was for something. She wouldn't have said anything in the first place, otherwise.

Charlie and Bill shared a look and moved down the hall, opening the door to the master suite.

Harry sighed dramatically and headed after them, the rest of the gang following behind him. By the time he made it to his bedroom the two oldest Weasleys had entered the en suite bathroom.

"She's right," Bill announced. He came out of the bathroom just in time to see Ginny enter the room and curl up on the bed as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. He stared.

"What's wrong, Bill?" Ginny asked, head propped up on one arm.

"Munchkin, you realise that that is HARRY'S bed?" he asked carefully.

"Yes, Bill, this is Harry's bed, and this is Harry's house," Ginny agreed, absently running one hand over the comforter.

The Weasley boys gaped. The three girls looked on with grins, recognising Weasley-baiting when they saw it.

Harry tried to keep his composure when the Weasleys wheeled to glare at him. "Yes?" he asked them after a few moments of silence.

"What is our sister doing in your bed?" Ron gritted out.

"What, you think I should throw your sister out of my bed?" Harry asked innocently.

"Yes, I bloody well do!" Ron exploded.

All traces of humour fled from Ginny's expression. She rolled off the bed and walked right up into Ron's face. "Whether I want to lay on Harry's bed, fully clothed and in full view of my family, or not, is my own business, Ron! I don't ask what you and Hermione get up to in that broom closet on the fourth floor," looks of unholy glee formed on six of the faces in the room, "so I would appreciate it if you stay out of my business. If and when I want to be in Harry's bed, it isn't any business of yours. Am I perfectly clear?"

Flustered, Ron answered, "I just don't think -"

"THAT is blindingly clear," Ginny acidly cut in, earning guffaws from most of the room.

"What's this about a broom closet, little brother?" Bill asked as he and Charlie flanked Ron and steered him out of the room.

"Err . . ." a very frightened male Weasley managed.

"Do tell," Angelina bade Hermione as she and Alicia escorted an equally flustered Hermione.

Once those six had left, the twins slowly approached Harry, scrutinizing him.

Harry warily watched them.

George looked at Ginny. Fred looked at Harry.

George looked at Harry. Fred looked at Ginny.

Harry tried not to squirm.

"Take care of our little sister, Harry," Fred said, perfectly calmly.

"We meant what we said on your birthday," George added.

"You're good for each other. We just don't want it to go sour."

"So be good to each other. Don't do anything we wouldn't do."

"Would that really restrict us from much?" Ginny asked wryly, totally unaffected by their theatrics.

"No, not much," George cheerfully acknowledged

"Not really anything, come to that," Fred admitted.

"Shall we, dear brother?" George asked, holding out an arm.

Linking his arm with his twin's, Fred responded, "Let's." The two pompously marched out of the room, leaving Harry and Ginny alone.

"Did they just give us their blessing?" Harry asked, staring after the pair.

"Yep," Ginny agreed, turning Harry toward the door and gently getting him to move.

"Oh, and what was that you said earlier?" Harry asked, heading down the hall with his girlfriend by his side.

"Which part?"

"If and WHEN," he emphasized, "you want to be in my bed?"

"Oh, did I say that out loud?" Ginny asked with an innocent expression.

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Dinner was a roaring success. The elves had outdone themselves with a selection of foods that just seemed to keep getting better. No matter how much everyone had eaten, they all managed to find room for the hot apple cobbler a la mode at the end.

Everyone then retired back to the parlour, unwilling to let the evening end. After a few sofas and chairs were conjured, everyone took seats and various conversations sprang up.

The twins were restrained (for them) in their antics. They also managed to discreetly inform Harry that they, with Angelina and Alicia, would be attending the New Year's Eve party.

Elsewhere, Harry was amused to watch Remus try to speak with Andromeda Tonks while Dora was looking on in barely concealed concern.

Hermione spent some time explaining many magical items and ideas to her mother.

Arthur and John continued their earlier discussions with Harry as an occasional bridge between the magical and Muggle worlds.

Bill and Charlie spent their time teasing Ron mercilessly.

Molly had to be forcefully evicted from the kitchen by Scully and Delly, much to everybody's amusement.

Andromeda Tonks was the first to call it a night, to Remus's quiet relief.

The Grangers' Portkey, contracted through the Department of Magical Transportation at the last moment, was set for nine. Once they'd made their rounds of goodbyes, Bill and Charlie began to make their excuses.

Fred, George, Angelina, and Alicia were the next to leave as it approached ten.

At that same time, Molly moved toward Ron, who was playing wizard's chess against Remus.

"Come along, Ron. It's time to go," Molly said.

"Just a second, Mum," Ron said in distraction, still studying the board.

"Go on," Remus said, leaning back. "I concede this one. Great game, Ron."

Ron looked up and grinned. "You, too. Finally someone who challenges me."

"Hey," Harry quietly objected.

Arthur, Remus and Ron chuckled. "I taught him how to play eight years ago, Harry. I haven't beaten him in five," Arthur observed. He looked down at Ginny, sleeping with her head pillowed on Harry's lap and Midnight curled up by her feet. Smiling, he herded his wife and youngest son toward the fireplace. "Good night, all. Thanks for inviting us to the party."

Harry smiled at the three and waved, careful not to jar his sleeping girlfriend.

"Ginny can just stay here?" Ron asked in surprise.

Molly shushed him, throwing a fond look at Ginny and Harry. "Good night." She threw a pinch of powder into the fire. "The Burrow."

"But -" Ron objected. Arthur shoved him through the fire.

With a last smile at Harry, Molly Flooded out.

Arthur turned back to Ginny, studying the sleeping girl. He heaved a long, resigned sigh. Looking up, he speared Harry with a penetrating look. "Take care of my little girl, Harry. Good night," he concluded quietly.

After Arthur had Flooded out, Tonks walked over with a blanket, gently spreading it over the sleeping girl. "Good night," she mouthed to Harry with a fond look. Remus also smiled at Harry as he wrapped an arm around Tonks's waist, steering her toward the stairs. Thirty seconds later, Harry heard a thump and then a thud, followed by a muffled, "Dammit," in Tonks's voice from the upstairs hallway.

Chuckling, Harry settled himself comfortably back and stared into the fire as he gradually fell asleep.

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"Master Harry?"

Harry's eyes slowly opened as his mind tried to start functioning again after a very deep sleep.

"Master Harry?"

"Yeah?" Harry asked groggily, sitting up and pushing his comforter to the side.

"Master Remus asked Rully to bring breakfast to Master Harry's room."

"Thanks," Harry mumbled, reaching for his glasses on the bedside table. Rully bowed and left with a muted crack. Getting his glasses on, Harry began to remember the previous evening.

Blinking hard as those memories came flooding back, he looked around the room, eyes stopping on the fan of red hair spilled over the other pillow atop a Ginny-sized lump under his comforter.

Oh, my.

Harry stared at Ginny's hair for fifteen solid seconds, trying to remember how they came from sleeping in front of the parlour fire fully clothed to sleeping in his bed wearing - he checked himself - only a pair of boxers.

My, oh, my.

After ten more seconds of consideration, Harry couldn't decide if wearing clothes was a good sign or not. After five more seconds of thought, the fact that Ginny was still here indicated that it was a good sign.

Now he just had to decide how bad a lack of memory was going to prove to be.

Harry stood and walked around the bed, kneeling on the other side to see Ginny's face. Still asleep, she looked downright angelic. Her face was relaxed, hair fanning around in a russet halo.

Unable to stop his hand, Harry reached forward and cupped her cheek in one hand, thumb tracing lightly over her bottom lip.

She shifted slightly, head turning into the hand and making the cutest purring noise Harry had ever heard.

Unable to help himself, he leaned forward and kissed her lightly.

"Hmm. What a nice way to wake up," Ginny said in a husky voice.

"Yeah, about that," Harry said as she languidly blinked her eyes open. "I hope this doesn't sound really bad, but what happened last night? I remember falling asleep on the couch in the parlour, only to wake up here."

"You mean you don't remember?" she asked in slack jawed disbelief.

Harry's eyes were suddenly as big as saucers.

She screwed her eyes shut. In a broken whisper, she said, "I can't b - believe you don't remember, Harry." She sniffed.

"I . . ." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't remember anything, Ginny."

Visibly composing herself, she started in a fragile voice, "I woke up around three, all nice and warm. It was the safest feeling I think I've ever had in my life. I woke you up enough to get you to walk upstairs with me. I helped you take your clothes off, then we crawled into bed. Then we . . ." She paused, swallowing thickly.

Harry discovered that he wasn't breathing anymore.

"We fell asleep," she finished in a whisper.

As her words penetrated his shocked mind, she opened her eyes, twinkling mischievously. "Gotcha."

"Why you little -" he started in outrage. He jumped toward her, his momentum rolling the two of them over a few times before they came to a

shrieking stop on the other side of the bed, tangled in the blankets.

Still giggling, Ginny evaluated their new circumstances. "Harry, if you wanted a roll in bed, all you had to do was ask."

Harry groaned at the innuendo, letting his head fall back upon his pillow. "You're absolutely impossible, did you know that?"

"Yep," she cheerfully agreed, chin resting against his chest, eyes sparkling up at him.

The door burst open, causing both teens to look over quickly.

Tonks stood there, wearing only a long t-shirt, wand out. Her eyes scanned the room quickly, wand sweeping along with her eyes. The wand came down and her attention returned to the couple on the bed when she didn't identify any dangers in the room. "Good morning?" she asked with a wide grin.

Flushing crimson and desperately trying NOT to look at the young Aurors exposed legs, Harry stammered, "Uh, Tonks . . ."

"It was until we were so rudely interrupted," Ginny said tartly, lying her head back down on Harry's chest.

Tonks nodded, eyes gleaming in mirth. "In that case, I'll just be leaving you two kids alone. Do have fun." She turned but paused before closing the door behind her. "I've found it's more fun if there are fewer layers of blankets between the two of you, incidentally."

She quickly shut the door to the twin shouts of, "Tonks!"

The couple could hear her laughter down the hall.

Harry tried to free his arms, but found that they were cocooned too tightly. "Uh, Ginny? We're going to have to roll back out of here before we can get free."

"Why?" she asked, head still resting on his chest. "I'm quite comfortable right here."

"Because Rully brought us breakfast," he answered.

She sighed. "Fine. Just so long as you promise we can get wrapped up in your bed again."

Harry groaned. "You're a wicked witch, did you know that?"

Ginny snickered. Being on top, she started rolling them back toward the edge, unwinding the blankets as they went.

Finally free, Harry fell off the edge of the bed and onto the floor with a thud. "Ouch."

Leaning over the edge of the bed, grinning at him devilishly, she asked, "Ohh, want me to kiss it better?"

Harry blushed again. "What's gotten into you?"

Raising one eyebrow, wide smirk fighting for space on her face, she slowly looked him over from head to foot, gaze pausing momentarily at his boxers. Bringing her eyes back to his face, she blandly answered, "Nothing so far. Why?"

Harry groaned and buried his face into the comforter hanging off the side of the bed. "You're killing me here, Ginny. You're an awful tease," he said in a strangled voice.

"Hmm," she answered non-committally, climbing out of the bed right next to where he was still on the floor.

Seeing what she was wearing, his eyes widened. "Hey, those're mine."

She looked down at the modest grey t-shirt and black boxers she'd borrowed the previous night. "Why, so they are. Would you like them back?" She moved her hands to the hem of the t-shirt, preparing to slip it over her head.

She was shocked to actually see his eyes dilate and his nostrils flare. "Yes, but only if you're absolutely certain you know what you're starting." His voice was very low and rough.

Eyes wide at his abrupt change in demeanour, not to mention insinuation, she slowly released the hem of the shirt. "Maybe that wouldn't be such a good idea right now," she whispered, shaken.

Nodding jerkily, Harry stood and walked into the private bathroom. She heard the shower start a few seconds later.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she stood and pulled one of his school robes out of his closet. Picking up her wand from the bedside table, she cast a couple quick charms to shrink it to approximately her size before she rapidly changed into it. Only then did she turn to the breakfast tray, setting it onto the foot of the bed. Removing the top, she saw two plates, two glasses of juice, and two small potion bottles, marked **Harry** and **Ginny**. Not knowing what to make of the potions, she ate her breakfast, feeling bad for her treatment of Harry.

The shower finally stopped and Harry emerged from the bathroom a minute later, hair dripping and sticking up worse than usual and with a large, fluffy towel wrapped around his waist. He walked over to one of his bureaus and started rummaging around for a moment.

"I'm sorry," Ginny whispered.

He stopped. "For what?"

"Leading you on like that."

He sighed. "Yeah. I forgive you. As much fun as the teasing and innuendo is, please remember that I can handle only so much before it becomes unbearable."

"Sorry," her voice was very soft and afraid.

"Like I said, you're forgiven. Besides, the teasing is fun. Especially when it winds your brothers up."

Ginny laughed with him, but it was a little forced.

Harry grinned and held up the boxers in his hands. "I'm going to get dressed. Were you planning on staying here and watching?"

Her eyes widened, but she didn't move.

Shrugging, Harry pulled the knot on the towel, letting it fall to the floor.

Ginny turned barely in time to avoid seeing anything, blushing crimson. Studying her hands intently, she reflected that the teasing limits went both ways. Desperately trying to find a topic of conversation, she asked in a tight voice, "How was your shower?"

"Very cold. How's breakfast?" Harry asked.

She had to clear her throat before she trusted her voice after THAT answer. "Good. Two potions here, though, that I don't know where they came from."

Harry walked over, now wearing one of his Weasley jumpers and a pair of jeans. He looked down at the potions for a moment, before picking up the one addressed to him and tossing it back quickly. "Hmm, not bad."

Ginny stared at him in amazement.

"Rully said Remus sent the breakfast up, so it's probably from him. Besides, it's his handwriting."

Ginny nodded and drank her potion as Harry started his breakfast.

"Shower's free," he offered.

She nodded and quietly went that direction.

By the time he finished breakfast, she was through the shower, still wet hair pulled back into a ponytail.

Harry stood and lifted the breakfast tray. Leading the way, he went downstairs and into the kitchen, handing the tray and dirty dishes over to Winky. The couple then went into the dining room and found Remus sitting with the still eating Tonks.

"Wotcher, kids. Have a good morning?" Tonks asked cheerfully.

"Yes, at least until a crazed Auror stormed into my bedroom," Harry answered dryly.

Tonks chortled and continued her breakfast.

Remus turned to Dora. "You stormed his bedroom?"

Harry held out a seat for Ginny and commented, "It might have had something to do with Ginny's shriek, to be fair."

Remus studied the young couple in front of him for a moment. He wasn't so sure he approved, but knew he had no right to say anything. "So do they?" he asked instead.

They both looked at him in confusion.

"Cub, do you remember what you told me about Ginny after you got to the Burrow?"

Harry blushed fit to rival a Weasley.

Remus threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"What are you two talking about?" Ginny demanded.

Harry groaned and let his head fall to the table in mortification.

"As tempting as it is to tease Harry even more, that's something you'll have to get from him."

Harry sighed, knowing he may as well get it over with. He didn't bother bringing his head up and therefore his words were muffled. "I wondered how your freckles tasted."

Tonks kept quiet, but she looked like she was about to burst, and her hair was cycling colours quickly.

"All you had to do was ask, Harry," Ginny said, eyes glowing in suppressed laughter.

Harry's head came up, and he looked at her. "That would have been an interesting conversation. Hello, Ginny. I know we're not even dating, but I'm curious whether freckles taste any different than skin. Would you mind terribly if I checked?"

The other three broke into peals of laughter.

Joining in the laughter, even if it was at his expense, Harry added, "Ron, turn your back mate. I'd like to nibble on your sister. Purely platonic experiment, you see."

The laughter continued for several more seconds before dying down.

Harry grinned, the embarrassment gradually leaving as he realised that Tonks and Remus weren't completely opposed to his and Ginny's relationship. "Remus, what were those potions you sent up with Rully, anyway?"

Remus blinked at Harry's unexpected question before he stood and exited the room silently. Tarry entered the dining room with a pot of breakfast tea for Harry and Ginny before Moony re-entered the room, flipping through a potions book. Apparently finding the page he was looking for, Remus leaned down between the young witch and wizard to put the book down in front of the two of them. Still leaning between the two, he stopped short, tilting his head to the side. Harry saw and heard him take a deep breath, his eyes closed. Remus then opened his eyes and smiled slightly at Harry with a nod. Remus moved back to his previous seat and waved at the book that Ginny was already reading.

Slightly confused at his godfather's odd actions, Harry looked down and read the open pages. On one page was the description and brewing instructions for the Prophylaxis Potion. It was apparently a contraceptive and "morning after" potion for witches, lasting three months. The facing page contained the Nonpater Potion, a similar contraceptive potion for wizards.

Fighting down the rising blush of renewed embarrassment over what Remus clearly thought they'd done, Harry read the list of ingredients for the Nonpater Potion. He made a face by the end. "Considering what went into this thing, it didn't taste all that bad."

"Agreed," Remus said dryly.

"Purely out of curiosity, did you brew these this morning, or did you have some on hand?"

"Oh, on hand. They both take a while to brew, but they keep for years. Remind me later, and I'll show you where they are."

Tonks quirked an eyebrow at Remus. "You're taking this calmly, Rem. I would've expected you to give them a lecture."

He shrugged. "They're adults. It's their business, not mine." He paused for a moment. "Besides, they didn't do anything."

Harry blinked at him. "How on earth did you reach that conclusion? Especially after the teasing you just subjected me to."

Remus's eyes began dancing. "Two reasons. First, you two aren't acting awkward or hanging all over each other this morning. Second," he tapped the side of his nose, "the nose knows."

"Werewolf senses," Ginny deduced.

Remus nodded.

"I'll have to remember that," Harry drawled, drawing grins from the other three.

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The four spent the remainder of the morning in the duelling chamber. Remus lectured the two students on the fundamentals, tips and tricks of Apparition while Tonks prowled the room, strengthening the anti-magic wards. After the lecture, Remus had Tonks Apparate around the room, pointing out what she was doing and why to the youngsters. After that, it was time for Harry and Ginny to practise as Tonks moved upstairs and looked over the home's wards. Not finding anything to add or fix, she went back down and tried to help the two students.

It quickly became noon before they came back upstairs and headed toward the dining room. There, they found Arthur Weasley reading the potions book that Harry had left at the table earlier.

Ginny stopped. "Uh . . ."

Arthur's head snapped up. He studied his daughter for a few seconds, not saying a word. He visibly took a deep breath and straightened, looking Harry and Ginny in the eye. "Legally, it's not my business. As a father, though, I'm pleased to see that you're . . . taking precautions. I would like you both to know that if you have any questions or problems, I will listen." He raised a hand to Harry's opening mouth. "I've said what I have to say, Harry. Nothing more needs to be said unless you want to." He slowly lowered his hand, took another breath, and changed the topic. "I came over to make sure you were alright, Ginny. Your mother and I expected you back home after breakfast."

Remus stepped forward. Harry nearly interrupted, thinking Remus was going to say something about the potions, but he didn't. "Sorry, Arthur. We didn't realise you were expecting her back at any particular time. I don't know if Ginny or Harry told you, but Harry's hired me to give the two of them Apparition training. As she was here, we just had a lesson."

Arthur smiled slightly. "Grand idea. How are the two of them doing?"

"They're both doing very well," Tonks reported.

Arthur smiled wider. "Well, my little girl IS a natural at charms. I've heard rumours that Harry's pretty good at magic, too."

Harry grinned in embarrassment. Everyone else laughed at the massive understatement.

"At this rate, I expect they can both be ready for their Apparition tests at the new year, Arthur. If everyone's willing, three days a week for half days?"

Arthur nodded. "That's entirely up to you three." In a tight voice, he continued, "If you wanted to stay over here more than that, Ginny, including overnights -"

Harry opened his mouth to comment, but he was beaten by Ginny. "I don't - we don't want to lose your respect, Dad." She took Harry's hand. "Yes, I love Harry and want to spend as much time with him as possible. I just don't want you to . . . think less of me. Of us."

Arthur smiled more easily. Walking over, he pulled Ginny into a hug. "You're my little girl, Ginny. There's nothing you could do to make me think less of you." He released her and turned to Harry, impressed with the unflinching gaze he received in return. "You're another son to me, Harry." Quirking a little smile, he glanced at Ginny and then back. "Perhaps it'll be official eventually." The two young magicians blushed mildly, bringing a smile to the three adults.

Arthur turned to Remus. "How much will I owe you for the Apparition instruction?"

Remus shook his head, and Ginny's face clouded over.

Trying to head off multiple problems simultaneously, Harry answered, "Nothing. He's tutoring me. Ginny just happens to be learning at the same time at no extra effort on Remus's part."

"Then we'll split the cost," Arthur said.

Ginny's scowl increased, though Arthur still hadn't seen it.

Harry shook his head. "I'm receiving more tutoring than just this. I have several things going on, Mr. Weasley, and it'd be impossible to arrive at a partial fee."

He frowned. "I won't take charity, Harry."

"This isn't charity anymore than you taking me in for the past five summers, Mr. Weasley. How often did I offer to pay my way? How often did you refuse?"

Arthur chuckled ruefully. "Turnabout is fair play, it seems. Very well. And my name is Arthur, Harry, considering everything." He smiled at his daughter.

Harry nodded a little, smiling shyly.

Arthur turned to his daughter. "Will you be home for lunch?"

She nodded. "See you in a few minutes?"

Arthur nodded pleasantly and Flooed back out.

Ginny hooked Harry's arm and pulled him gently toward the library. Taking the cue, Tonks and Remus wandered away.

"Seems your family is accepting of our sex life, regardless of the fact that there isn't one," Harry remarked in amusement.

Ginny grinned. "Yeah. Though Dad and the twins were the easy ones. Mum and Ron will be the problems."

"Even with your dad on our side?"

She shrugged. "Mum and Ron are the overprotective ones. Dad will help but still . . ."

Harry sighed. "Yeah. Just for the record, I'd be quite happy if you moved in. I'm willing to share my bed just as often as you wish." He grinned a bit. "If you could keep the teasing to a lower level, though, I'd appreciate that."

Taking a breath to screw up her courage, she asked quietly, "What if it isn't teasing?"

Harry stopped walking abruptly, turning to her in shock. Finally finding his voice, he asked, "Not that I don't think it's a grand idea, but are you sure about this?"

Licking dry lips, she whispered, "Yes." She giggled nervously. "I think."

"You don't sound all that sure," Harry observed. "Not that I can blame you. It's a big deal to cross this line. At least to us. To hear Dean and Seamus talk, though . . ." He grimaced.

"Parvati, Lavender, and Rebecca, too."

He grunted. "Well, I'm only worried about you and me." He sighed. "Maybe this is a line we shouldn't cross."

"Yet."

"Yes, yet," he agreed.

"Meanwhile," she ran a finger under the hinge of his jaw, "I'm sure there are other things we can do to amuse ourselves."

He groaned. "You just enjoy winding me up, don't you?"

"We'll talk about releasing some of that tension later." She gave him a quick kiss and stepped back. "I'd better get going. Shall I come back Thursday morning for another lesson? Apparition lesson that is?" she added with a grin.

Harry grimaced at her comment for a moment before his eyes again became intent. "I was serious when I said I'd be happy if you moved in."

She nodded. "I would be, too. We have to get my family comfortable with that idea before springing it on them, though. I'll work on them and then be back Thursday after breakfast."

Harry nodded agreement. After a hug, she headed toward the parlour as he went to the dining room.

"Hey," Remus greeted him, looking up from a tome. He frowned at Harry's expression. "Are you okay?"

Harry sighed and dropped into a seat. "Yeah, I will be. Ginny will be back for the next training Thursday after breakfast."

Remus waved it off. "That's not what I asked. What's wrong?"

Harry buried his face in his hands. "I love her, Moony. I want nothing more than to show that. But I don't know if I should. The twins and Arthur having giving us their blessings only makes it worse. I'm just so . . ." he trailed off with a shrug.

"The fact that you haven't jumped into anything speaks well of your character, Cub," Remus calmly marked the place in the book and moved it to the side. "Your emotions and hers come into play. You're wise to recognise that ahead of time."

"If you don't mind my asking, how did you and Dora know it was the right time for you?" Harry asked hesitantly, afraid of offending the man.

"We're in a different situation. We're older and, to put it bluntly, more experienced in these sorts of things. We know better what we're getting into. I know this doesn't help you. Sorry." He leaned back in thought, staring at the ceiling. "I can't really think of anyone to help you out. Ron would be the obvious choice if it weren't Ginny."

"Hermione, maybe?" Harry asked, wondering if he'd ever have the gall to talk about his sex life with his other best friend.

Remus considered that. "Probably a good choice. She tends to think with her head a bit too much, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing in a case like this."

Delly came out with the first lunch trays.

"I wish I could help you more, Cub. I'm always here if you need to talk."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Thanks, Moony." He took a breath and went on in a more normal tone, "So what's the plan this afternoon?"

"Animagus training, if you're up to it," was the answer as Tonks entered, carrying a handful of parchment.

"Whatcha got there, Tonks?" Harry asked, finally settled enough to take a bite of his sandwich.

"Defense essays. I have to do something while you two are off making animals of yourselves."

Harry grinned at that description. "You're welcome to join us."

She shook her head. "Naw, can't."

"I thought it was possible for anyone," Harry commented in surprise.

Remus shook his head. "Actually, no. Some conditions or inherent abilities prevent it, lycanthropy and Metamorphmagus being two. At any rate, it's apparently very difficult to do. I was honestly surprised when Peter managed it, since it takes such a strong wizard to pull it off. On top of that, some wizards never have an animal totem choose them."

"Animal totem choose them'?" Harry echoed with a frown.

"You realise that the animal chooses the wizard rather than the other way around, right?"

Harry nodded.

"Think of totems as the supra-conscious manifestation of the essence of each animal type. If you're suited to one or another, the one that most fits

you will pick you."

"Are these totems conscious and sentient?" Harry asked, intrigued with the concept.

Remus frowned. "Not really. Thinking of them in this way is an easy way to deal with them. They aren't conscious in the sense that they make decisions or communicate. On the other hand, James and Sirius said there was SOMETHING guiding them when they were in Animagus form."

"Animal instincts?"

"Something like that. But where did James get the instincts of how a stag acts? How to move on four feet? Walking, cantering, galloping?"

"Sirius said he kept his own mind," Harry objected.

"Oh, yes, the wizard's mind stays with them, but the basic instincts change to the form's."

"This is starting to sound confusing."

Remus smiled. "Not really. It's all perfectly natural to the form you're in at the time."

Harry shook his head. "If you say so. What's the plan?"

"I'll cast a charm on you. A totem will pick you a form tonight if you have one and send it to your subconscious in the form of a dream." He leaned back in his chair. "The rest of today is self-transfiguration theory. You said you've read Padfoot's journal already, right?"

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Remus recognised Harry's pensive expression the next morning even before Harry sat down at breakfast.

"Aw, Harry misses his teddy bear," Tonks teased.

Harry snorted. "Unlike some, my preferred bed partner wasn't here last night. Speaking of which, Tonks, please remember the Silencing Charms next time, huh? Someone crying out Remus's name at two in the morning isn't something I'd really like repeated."

Both Remus and Tonks blushed.

Harry grinned widely. "Ah, HA! I wasn't even sure it was possible, but I finally got Nymphadora Tonks to blush."

Tonks muttered something under her breath as she reached for her tea. She blithely ignored the butter that smeared all over her elbow.

Remus cleared his throat, fighting his blush down. "Other than being awakened by rowdy neighbours at two, how was your night? Did you have an Animagus dream?"

Harry grinned. "The word you wanted was 'randy', not 'rowdy'," he teased.

Tonks stuck her tongue out.

Harry chuckled at her antics before sobering. "Yeah, I think I did have a totem dream. I was walking through a field with Prongs. At least I assume it was Prongs. He looked just like my Patronus but looking real instead of silver. Anyway, we were walking along beside each other calm as could be. No threats were around us. From a nearby copse, a reddish brown mare stepped out, head turned toward us." He frowned. "My reaction was kinda strange. I somehow knew I was both a follower and an equal. Prongs simply started grazing nearby, but he was clearly deferential. The dream ended at that point."

"You could tell the horse was a mare?" Tonks asked, resting her head on a propping first.

Harry blinked in surprise. "Yeah, I guess I could. How could I do that? I don't know anything about horses."

"Let me guess, dark red mane?"

Harry sighed. "Yes, I have that one figured out already, Dora. Thank you ever so much for the psychoanalysis."

Both Remus and Tonks smirked. "You understood Prongs's attitude?" Remus went on.

Harry nodded, still confused.

"Were you bigger or smaller than they were?"

Harry thought about it for a moment. "Same size."

"Huh. A horse Animagus. I wouldn't have thought of that for you."

Harry almost bristled, feeling unaccountably defensive. "Why not?"

"No slight against you," Tonks explained. "Horses tend to bolt from trouble rather than fight. Defense is a last resort." She turned to Remus with a grin. "You owe me a galleon."

Harry frowned. "What's that?"

Tonks answered while Remus sighed. "Oh, he thought he knew what your Animagus form was going to be. He didn't get it, though."

Giving a half-smile, Harry turned to Remus. "What'd you think I was going to be?"

"A large canine."

"Granted that you're partial to big dogs, but why?"

Remus started ticking points off. "Social, loyal, powerful and ferociously protective."

"You know, this does simplify my Christmas shopping, Harry," Tonks teased. When Harry looked toward her with a raised eyebrow, she explained, "I'll just get a bridle set for Ginny."

Remus laughed, and Harry groaned at the pun.

The Unknown Power Christmas to New Year's Day

Between Apparition training, Animagus training, duelling and holiday studies, the time until Christmas flew by for Harry. Ginny had come over every other day as promised, though she hadn't stayed another night. She thought her mother was softening toward them but hadn't pressed the issue yet.

Christmas morning dawned bright and clear. Harry stumbled down from his bedroom, still yawning as he entered the dining room. He found a woman whom he didn't immediately recognise listlessly eating breakfast. Her mid-back black hair and grey eyes in a long and pretty face were unfamiliar. Harry blinked at her for a moment before remembering Tonks's promise from the Yule Ball.

Studying her intently, he slowly sank into a chair. "Wotcher, Tonks."

"Wotcher, Harry," she responded, looking at him nervously. "What's wrong?"

Harry almost grinned. "I've never seen you, have I? I can see the resemblance to the Black side of the family, I think. Eyes and hair, especially." She frowned.

Harry raised a hand. "That wasn't an insult, Dora." He looked at her for a moment longer and gave a sharp nod. "Thank you for showing me."

She looked relieved at his acceptance before turning back to her interrupted breakfast.

After a leisurely breakfast, the two house-mates moved to the tree in the parlour. Remus, stiffly sipping from a steaming mug, was waiting out there for them.

Tonks curled up next to him, running one hand over his arm.

"Happy Christmas, Moony," Harry said, looking at his friend in concern. "Rough night?"

Remus nodded. "Yeah, Cub. I'll be okay. Despite appearances, the potion really does make it better. I'll be good by tomorrow." He gave an exhausted grin. "It's fundamentally unfair for a full moon to ruin major holidays, you know."

Smiling back, Harry handed them the gifts he'd gotten the two of them. Harry had gotten Tonks an unbreakable, ever-full quill. She'd kept spilling her inkpots, so Harry figured it was something she would appreciate. He'd cast an unbreakable charm upon it for the simple reason that it was Tonks. For Remus, he got two cloaks, one mid weight and one heavy, both with all the optional charms that Madam Malkin's offered. Though Harry had been paying Remus for the tutoring and housework for months, Remus's wardrobe still hadn't recovered from the years of poverty.

Tonks got Harry and Ginny a copy of 1001 Things to Do Before You're Ready for That Last Step by Ivana Trialott.

Confused, Harry opened to the middle of the book, only to slam it shut immediately. This was definitely something he wanted to read either alone or with only Ginny in the room. "Erm, thanks," he croaked out, unable to look at Tonks, who was laughing loudly.

Remus sighed and ran one hand down his face in resignation. He waited until Tonks's laughter had died down and Harry's blush receded before he handed over his gift to Harry. It turned out to be a glass sphere with a scene etched within. Prongs and a noble looking stallion were standing side by side, apparently looking off into the distance. Harry smiled up at his godfather. "Thanks, Moony."

Remus chuckled. "You know, I've been trying to think of a Marauder's nickname for you. What do you think of 'Clopper'?"

"Mr. Ed?" Tonks joined in.

"I'm not about to recommend 'Silver'," Remus objected

"Trigger?"

"Bolt?" Harry offered, trying to get at least something that didn't sound awful.

"BOLT?" the other two chorused in shock.

Tonks shook her head. "Naw, that sounds too cool."

Harry sighed and the other two laughed. Waving his wand, he vanished the boxes and wrapping paper that the three had accumulated. "Hey, what did you two get each other?"

Tonks grinned. "No offence, but do you really think we're going to show you?"

"What, afraid you're going to corrupt my innocent mind?"

Remus picked up Harry's new book and flipped casually through it. "It IS a little late for that, Dora," he dryly remarked, raising an eyebrow at a few of the pages.

Tonks just smirked. "Hey, I haven't corrupted Ginny's mind. I have yet to ask her if he's hung like a horse."

Remus started coughing violently. Harry flushed scarlet.

Tonks roared with laughter over their reactions.

Shaking his head over their antics and fighting the blush, Harry desperately tried to change the subject. "What's your plan today?"

"Staying here and nursing this old wolf back to health."

"Old?" Remus asked in a soft growl.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, Moony, but the morning after a transformation you look like hell."

"Thank you so much, Cub. You're making me feel so much better."

"What, you want me to lie to you? Seriously, any potions I can get for you?"

Remus shook his head and leaned back tiredly. "I've already taken everything I can. I'll heal, Harry. You go along to the Weasleys and enjoy your Christmas." He turned to Tonks.

She shook her head before he said a word. "No. We already talked about this, Rem. I'll see my mum tomorrow. You need me here right now."

Remus's jaw was set in a stubborn line.

"Give it up, Remus," Harry stated authoritatively yet kindly. "Let those of us who love you take care of you when you can't take care of yourself."

Remus sighed and seemed to slump a bit.

"Besides," Harry added maliciously, "this way you can visit Tonks's mum with her."

Tonks grinned widely and threw Harry a wink.

Even Remus grinned a little.

"Come on, old man. Let's get you back up to bed."

"There are some things about his recuperation I really don't want to know."

Tonks threw Harry a dirty look, but Remus gave a dry chuckle.

"I'll be going to the Burrow shortly. I've no idea when I'll be back. Give a shout on the mirror if there's anything I can do to help." Harry hated seeing his godfather in such a state, but he knew there was nothing he could do to help beyond what Tonks was already doing.

Tonks didn't look back from helping Remus up the stairs. "Will do. Have fun. Don't forget to take our gifts for them."

Once he heard their bedroom door close upstairs, Harry raised his wand. "*Accio* presents." Six flat packages and one squashy package came zooming down the stairs at him.

"Rully, Delly, Borry, Scully, Tarry, Winky, Dobby."

All seven elves appeared. "Master Harry called for his elveses?" Rully asked.

Harry nodded. "I have Christmas presents for you."

Six of the elves looked totally shocked at this. Only Dobby didn't appear surprised.

Harry turned to him and held the lumpy package out to him. "Happy Christmas, Dobby."

Tearing up, Dobby opened the package to find a pair of mismatched socks. Every year he'd gotten the same thing for the elf, and every year Dobby behaved as if it were the most precious gift in existence. This year was no exception. "Master Harry Potter sir is a great wizard," exclaimed the sobbing Dobby. He fell to the floor right there and pulled the new socks on over his old ones, twisting his head around in an attempt to admire them from every angle.

Chuckling over Dobby's antics, he turned to the other six. They were all looking at him with concern. "These are NOT clothes," he stated, holding the six boxes up. They all immediately looked relieved. Looking at the tags, he passed the boxes out and leaned back to watch their reactions.

Winky was the first to summon the courage to open the box up. "Oh!" she squeaked. She looked up at Harry with large tears leaking out of her eyes.

Harry smiled at her and said quietly, "Happy Christmas, Winky."

Sobbing, the elf threw herself at Harry and hugged him about the knees. "Master Harry is being too good to Winky!" she cried.

"Nonsense. You seven are a great help to me. I couldn't live here without your assistance. Winky, your history with the unfortunate choices by Barty Crouch don't matter to me. You are a good and loyal house-elf."

The other elves had by now opened their packages, revealing nearly identical gifts in each. Modelled after the tea towels all Hogwarts elves wore, Harry had produced similar uniforms for his six elves, using the Potter crest instead of Hogwarts's crest. Each elf had two of them, with their name sewn onto the breast. In addition, each elf had a small pendant with their initial and a length of necklace chain.

"Each of you has a choice," Harry explained. When he had their attention, he continued, "You decide on how or if you want to wear those initials. You can do necklaces, earrings, rings, whatever you're comfortable with, if anything. You each have a length of chain to do with as you wish." He turned to Dobby. "Yours is in my bedside drawer. Feel free to retrieve it at your convenience." Harry stood and smiled down at the stunned elves. "Happy Christmas. I'll probably be late at the Weasley's. Remus and Dora are upstairs. Have a nice day." He picked up the bag of presents he needed to take and threw some Floo powder. "The Burrow!"

Thump.

"Oh, thank you, whoever did this."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked him from her place on the couch. Harry knew she was scheduled to get to the Weasley's sometime during the day for the rest of holiday. She'd apparently preceded him.

Harry picked himself up and brushed soot off. "Someone put a Cushioning Charm on the floor right there."

"You're welcome," Arthur said, entering the room with a wide smile. "Happy Christmas, Harry!" The sentiment was echoed from various points in the house in various voices.

Ginny, looking unspeakably cute with a smear of flour on one cheek, entered the room from the direction of the kitchen. Without a word, she jumped up and onto Harry, forcing him to catch her. "Happy Christmas, love." Before he could say a word in response, she sealed his mouth with hers.

Harry vaguely heard, "She must have missed him?"

"Can't imagine why."

"It's been a whole three days since she's seen him, after all."

"Bloody hell, Harry. Come up for air, mate."

"Lack of oxygen. He's getting befuddled."

"Think we should rescue him?"

"Not on your life, brother mine. Ginny would never forgive us."

"Too right."

"Three days? It's been much longer since I've seen him and you don't see us snogging like that."

"A fact for which I'm eternally grateful."

These last two lines, from Hermione and Ron, were what brought Ginny out with a chuckle.

"Oh, look! There's Harry. I was beginning to think I wouldn't see him today."

"Hi, George," Harry said, turning to the rest of the room but not releasing Ginny.

Amused expressions covered the faces of Arthur, Fred, George, Ron and Hermione.

"Happy Christmas, everyone," Harry greeted them with a wide smile.

Chuckles and reciprocal well-wishes came back.

Ginny stepped back from him. "I'm helping Mum in the kitchen. Put those away and then come in and help us."

He nodded. "Sure."

Ginny turned and re-entered the kitchen.

When the door closed behind him, the three remaining Weasley children chuckled. "Oh, she has him whipped but good."

"Definitely, my dear brother, definitely."

"In the right hands, a whip can actually be a lot of fun," Harry retorted calmly, placing packages under the tree.

Dead silence answered him. When he finished unloading the bag he'd brought, he looked up to the dumbfounded expressions on Ron, George and Fred's faces. Hermione was grinning, and Arthur was shaking his head in amusement.

Waving cheerfully, Harry left for the kitchen.

"Happy Christmas, Mrs. Weasley," he greeted the Weasley matriarch.

"Happy Christmas, Harry." She moved away from the bowl she was stirring and enveloped Harry in a hug. "And my name is Molly. We're well past the point that you should be calling me by name."

Harry nodded agreeably. "Ginny said you could use some help in here?"

Molly shook her head. "Not really, but I did need to talk to you two."

Harry and Ginny shared a trapped look.

"Ginny, will you be staying at Harry's tonight?"

Harry nearly fell over. Ginny's jaw dropped open in shock.

Molly chuckled at their expressions. "I do have eyes, dears. Arthur told me some of what he found the morning after your house-warming party, Harry. I can't say I'm surprised, all things considered. Like Arthur, I'm happy that you're taking precautions at this stage, though I would like some grandchildren in the future." She pierced the blushing teenagers with a stare. "The far distant future," she emphasized.

Harry cleared his throat. "Understood, ma'am, err, Molly. As far as where she sleeps tonight, that is up to her, but she is quite welcome at the Manor."

Molly nodded and turned to her daughter with a raised eyebrow.

"If it's okay with you, Mum?" Ginny asked cautiously.

"I wouldn't have asked otherwise," Molly said, turning back to her cooking.

Blinking rapidly, Harry shot a questioning look at Ginny. Ginny just shrugged back.

Gathering his composure, Harry again asked if he could do anything to help. Molly shoed him back out to the living room.

In a state of bemused shock, Harry went back out and took a seat next to Hermione on the couch. She closed the book around a finger and turned to him. She raised an eyebrow at his expression. "What's wrong, Harry?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing's wrong. Just surprising."

"What's that?"

He just shook his head. "If you're staying until tonight, you'll find out then, I suspect. It's nothing bad, I promise."

Shrugging away the mystery, she asked, "How are all of your house-elves getting along?"

Harry shot her a concerned glance, but she didn't appear to be in a crusading mood at the moment. "Pretty well. I gave them Christmas presents before coming over here."

"What did you get them? I mean aside from Dobby and his socks?"

Harry explained the presents, and she nodded approval.

"You know, I expected more of a reaction from you, Hermione, what with SPEW and everything in our fourth year," he observed cautiously.

She sighed. "I've been thinking about what you and Ron have been saying about them being happier this way. I got a book on their society and read up on that. I also can't forget how Winky acted after she gained her freedom. Ginny says Winky is much happier now that she's joined a household again. I can't ignore all of this proof, Harry. I disagree with the situation in principal, but it seems they are truly happier this way."

Harry let out a breath. "You can come over and talk to them about it, if you want to."

"I might do that," she agreed. "So, what are you, Professor Lupin and Professor Tonks getting yourselves into with all your free time?"

"Remus is giving Ginny and I Apparition training," Harry explained.

"Hmm. Good idea. That doesn't cover much time though, Harry."

Some duelling, too," Harry added.

She looked at him for a moment before saying, "You forgot to mention the Animagus lessons."

Harry gaped for a moment before quickly recovering his composure.

She grinned. "No, Ginny didn't tell me, which is your next question. I was here when you got the notebook from Snuffles, remember? I can't imagine you're NOT training with Remus."

"How do you do that?" Harry demanded.

"I've been practising my mind powers for years."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Funny."

"Seriously, I know you, Harry. It didn't take a lot of imagination to figure out what you're probably doing."

Harry nodded at that answer. "Please don't tell anyone, though, okay? Nobody else knows."

"Sure. Do you know your form yet?"

He frowned. "Probably, but I'm not sure yet. I won't finish until well after term starts, so I'll probably need to go to McGonagall to continue the training. Apparition, though, is nearly done. Ginny and I are planning on taking our exams before the end of holiday."

"Good luck."

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Charlie and Bill came over a few hours later, just before lunch.

At this point, happy mayhem ensued since the gifts started to be opened. The twins did not try to rig Harry's present this time, much to his relief. They got him an assortment of new Wheezes plus a summary of the store's accounts. Harry was vaguely amused that he was making more money passively from the store than he'd been spending, even considering how much he'd paid to bring the Manor back to a habitable state. Hermione got him a book detailing how to produce a family clock like the one the Weasleys had. Ron got him a box of Chocolate Frogs and the newest Cannons poster. Bill, Charlie and Arthur went together and got him a pair of dragonhide boots. Reading through the informational tag that came with it, Harry concluded that in addition to being more than passable defensive armour, they'd likely last him the rest of his life due to durability and sizing charms. Molly gave him another emerald green jumper and a tin of homemade fudge.

He was surprised to find a small gift from Ginny in the stack. They'd previously agreed that the magical focus pendant plus earrings for her and the formal robes for him would count as their Christmas gifts toward each other. Shooting her a frown across the room, he held the present up in question. She merely waved at the package, eyes sparkling. Removing the wrapping, Harry was shocked and amused to find a jar of chocolate sauce. Realising the questions that would result if anyone caught him with this, he tried to hide it.

"Harry, what's that?" Ron asked from three places down.

George deftly intercepted Harry's hand as he tried to slip the jar away. George pulled it up as Harry sighed in resignation. After examining the jar in confusion for a moment, he looked from Harry to Ginny to Ron. "Chocolate sauce?"

Hermione started laughing. Ron made strangled, gargling noises.

Fred turned to Harry. "Okay, what's the story? Why would our sister get you chocolate sauce? More importantly, why is Ron reacting like that to it?"

Harry clamped his mouth shut.

"Nothing! Never mind. It's nothing," Ron managed to say.

Hermione was laughing so hard that she was forced to hold onto Ron's shoulder to stay upright.

Ginny just smiled at Harry.

And then the pin dropped.

"TM!!" George, Fred, Charlie and Bill all chorused, wide-eyed.

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The rest of the afternoon flowed by pleasantly for everyone. Harry was highly amused to find a **Ginny Weasley** card among the Chocolate Frogs Ron had gotten him for Christmas. He even made a grand presentation out of getting her signature for it, much to Ron's annoyance.

Alicia and Angelina showed up for a few hours, taking the twins with them when they left.

When Bill started making motions to leave, Molly turned to Ginny. "Why don't you pack a bag, dear?"

Movement all around the room stopped. Harry gave a soundless groan at Molly's timing.

"Why does Ginny need to pack a bag?" Ron asked in confusion.

"She's staying at Harry's house tonight," Arthur answered.

Ginny looked at Harry with a clear question in her eyes. He nodded, and she moved toward the stairs to go up to her room. After a moment, Hermione threw a glance at Harry before following Ginny.

"She's staying at Harry's tonight?" Ron asked in a strangely calm voice.

"That's the plan," Harry confirmed warily.

"Where in your house is she staying?"

"That is none of our concern," Molly immediately answered.

Ron whirled in place to stare at one parent then the other. "You're both OKAY with this?" he asked incredulously. "What did she tell you she'd be doing? What possible reason did she give you for doing this?"

"She loves him, and she wants to spend time with him," Molly calmly answered.

Bill and Charlie shared a look and quietly sat down on the couch.

"She says she loves him and wants to spend the night in his house. Do I have to spell this out for you, Mum?" Ron asked with an edge to his voice.

She winced slightly. "No, you don't, Ron. I am not that naïve. However, I feel they're both adult enough that they can make this decision without any fight from me. You didn't throw this much of a fit when she stayed after the house-warming party."

"They slept on the couch all night!"

"Not all night," Harry contradicted him quietly.

"WHAT?" Ron roared. "Then where the bloody hell did you end up sleeping with my sister?" Ron asked, voice dropping into a quiet growl.

"My bed," Harry steadily answered.

One of Ron's fists clenched, clearly visible to everyone in the room.

"Ron -" Arthur started.

Harry held up a hand in a silent request for Arthur not to interfere. "Ron, if you want to take a swing at me, then I won't stop you. Just think about two things. First, absolutely nothing is being done against Ginny's wishes. Second, your parents already knew about this, and they aren't objecting." Having said his piece, Harry clasped his hands behind his back and stared his best friend in the eye.

The parade of expressions across Ron's face fascinated Harry. Anger, love, fury, loathing, fear and surprise each made a brief appearance. All emotion suddenly evaporated from Ron's face. "Just remember what we said to you on your birthday," he pleaded in a quiet voice. Getting a nod from Harry, Ron spun on his heel and went into the kitchen.

"He's likely to want to sleep with Hermione tonight just to prove some kind of point," Bill observed calmly.

Harry shook his head, still looking at the kitchen door. "She's too smart to let him do that just because he's pissed at me." He hoped.

"I'm sorry I had to put you through that, Harry," Molly said, wincing at everything just said.

He looked over at her. "You knew he'd react like that."

She sighed and nodded. "He had to be told sooner or later. Sooner, with everyone still here, was probably best."

"Yeah," Harry grudgingly admitted. "I'm still not all that comfortable talking with you all about it, though."

"You think it's easy for US to hear these things about you and Snapdragon?" Charlie asked with a slight grin.

Harry turned to Bill and Charlie. "Are you two okay with this?"

Bill sighed. "I'd rather this hadn't happened until she was older, honestly. Early thirties, maybe."

Charlie snorted in humour while Harry smiled nervously at Bill's joke.

Smiling himself, Bill admitted, "To be fair, though, she stopped being a kid after all that Chamber shit happened her first year."

"Bill," Molly chided her son's language.

"Sorry, but it's still the truth."

Harry grinned slightly. "Yeah. That's one of the arguments I used on you all, remember? Back on All Hallow's Eve?"

Everyone smiled briefly at the reminder of the Order meeting held immediately after Voldemort's defeat.

Bill stood and approached Harry, hand held out that Harry immediately shook. "I'm sure you've already been given a warning or two, right?"

Harry nodded ruefully. "Hardly two, but yes."

Smiling in sympathy, Bill went on, "Just take care of her, Harry. That's all I ask."

Charlie followed right behind his older brother, also shaking Harry's hand. "YOU get to explain all this to the twins."

Harry smiled faintly. "They won't make me suffer; they'll just kill me outright. Percy, on the other hand, will give me a three hour lecture about responsibility -"

Everyone in the room gave a melancholy little laugh, thinking about the Weasley son who'd long since thoroughly divorced himself from the family.

Hermione and Ginny came down the stairs, a small bag slung over Ginny's shoulder. Both girls looked calm, so Harry was comforted that they hadn't had a fight of any kind.

Ginny started moving around the room, giving everyone a hug goodbye.

Hermione hugged Harry. "Have a good night," she whispered with an audible grin.

Harry nervously chuckled back before sobering. "Ron's torqued off at me for all this," he warned his other best friend quietly. "Don't let him talk you into anything for the wrong reasons."

Hermione pulled back and nodded, following Harry's line of reasoning easily.

"Potter Manor." Ginny left.

Waving to everyone still in the room, Harry followed his girlfriend back to his home.

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Harry slowly drifted back to consciousness. He was warm, comfortable and utterly relaxed, he gradually realised. As his senses started reporting in, he determined that he was lying in bed, eyes surrounded by a haze of red, nose full of Ginny-scent, and a LOT of bare skin pressed up against his arms and chest. This last fact finally forced his mind up the last few steps to full alertness.

He was lying in bed, spooned up with Ginny. A Ginny who was as nearly-naked as he was.

After a few seconds of thought, he decided that this was a very good thing.

"Hmm. I could definitely get used to this," Ginny mumbled.

"I second the motion," he agreed, not wanting to move for the next decade or two.

After getting back to the Manor, they'd curled up with Harry's gift from Tonks. Whereas the twins' birthday gift to Harry was aimed at the wizard trying to court the witch, this book was intended more for established couples who still wanted to stop short of total intimacy. More than one page contained instructions or images that caused the pair to blush, but it did have many suggestions that the two were interested in trying. For their first full night "together", they'd decided to give each other massages. After reading the appropriate chapters and studying the diagrams, the couple changed into boxers and t-shirts before nervously crawling into bed.

Ginny started out rubbing her hands over Harry's back, trying to knead the muscles. After the initial nervousness faded and he relaxed some, she frowned. "Take off your shirt."

Harry tensed right back up.

"I can't massage through the shirt, Harry. Besides, you taking off your shirt isn't a big deal, right?"

After a few more moments, he'd done as she asked. She proceeded to give him a very relaxing massage.

After she was done, they traded. It took only a minute before Harry said, "I see what you mean about the shirt."

She hesitated for a moment before quietly asking, "Would you still be comfortable if I took it off?"

His hands stopped moving. "If you are," he cautiously answered.

After a moment's more hesitation, she silently pulled the shirt off, dropping it onto the floor beside the bed.

Harry was presented with the sight of her bare back. Taking a breath to keep his emotions and libido under control, he started rubbing her back again, finding it much easier without the material of the shirt in the way. He caught himself counting freckles and forced himself to keep his thoughts on massaging with his hands.

Finished with her back and neck, he hesitantly worked his way down her legs and then arms, massaging all the way. The only hitch they ran into was when he discovered that she was ticklish along her ribs.

Unwilling to go any further without some clear sign from her, he leaned over and kissed her back, just below her neck. "G'night, love. Nox ." He laid down, carefully pulling the blankets up to cover the both of them. He curled up on his side so he could leave his hand touching the exposed skin of her back.

Lying like this, the two faded off to sleep.

Sometime during the night, they'd ended up on their sides, spooned together, her back pressed against his chest, his hand dangling against her bare stomach.

Which is where Harry found himself as they started to stir the next morning. The problem was that he was having a perfectly natural reaction to having his almost naked girlfriend lying in bed with him.

He hoped that she wouldn't notice.

Ginny slowly stretched, still lying on her side. This caused his hand to bump and rub against various parts of her anatomy. Other parts of his anatomy were also being bumped and rubbed by her motion.

She rolled away under the covers so she was facing him, his hand falling away from her with the movement. Holding the blankets up to her chin, she asked, "So, is that a wand in bed with us, or are you just happy to see me?" Moments later, she burst into laughter at his mortified expression. "Oh, Harry, you are too easy to tease."

He rolled over onto his back with a groan.

"Aw, I hurt poor Harry's feelings? Here, let me kiss and make it better." Scooting over and lying fully on top of him, she started pressing light kisses into the hollow of his neck.

"Ginny?" he asked in a strangled voice, trying desperately to ignore the thoughts of what exactly was being pressed against his bare chest.

"Hmm?" she asked between feathery kisses.

He held himself perfectly still, trying not to scare her away. "Please don't start anything we can't finish," he whispered hoarsely.

She paused and sighed with regret. "I keep doing this to you, don't I?"

Harry didn't answer, still holding himself motionless by sheer force of will.

"I'm sorry," she said, gingerly lifting herself off of him before moving to the side.

Harry's heart rate started coming back down, and he stared at the ceiling as she curled up under the covers again. "It's not so much that I mind it," he started trying to verbalize his confused feelings. "It's just that my self-control can only take so much. I don't want to try to do anything that you're not ready for."

"What about what you're ready for?" she asked calmly.

"I'm the one having self-control issues, remember?"

"You know what I'm asking," she chided him.

"My brain and my hormones are on opposite sides of this fight," he admitted.

"I know what you mean," she agreed, running one warm hand over his near shoulder.

He let out an aggravated breath. "For Merlin's sake, you're fifteen, Ginny. I really shouldn't be thinking and feeling these things," he moaned

"Don't you dare beat yourself up for your thoughts, Harry," she said sharply. "I'm hardly innocent of trying to provoke them."

He turned his head. "You're TRYING to provoke me?" he asked in mock incredulity.

"You mean you haven't noticed? I must be doing something wrong." She made a face at him, and he chuckled along with the joke. She went on, "Besides, you said yourself that we haven't been kids for a long time." She paused before continuing delicately, "It's society that's telling us that I'm too young. Our bodies - BOTH of our bodies - are telling us something completely different. Not to mention our emotions"

A long pause stretched as he thought this over. "What, precisely, are you saying?" he finally asked, trying to keep his tone neutral.

"Age of consent is sixteen," she pointed out. "I'll be there in eight months anyway. However, legally we're both adults, so we could ignore that fact if we wanted to." Harry made an indecipherable noise in the back of his throat that she ignored. "To be honest, I'm uncomfortable crossing that last line, right now." Her hand's motions expanded to cover his chest. "On the other hand, there's an entire book on other things we can try out."

Harry repeated his earlier noise.

She rolled out of bed, making no effort to cover herself from his hungry eyes. She padded to the bathroom door before pausing and looking over

her shoulder at him. "I'm going to take a bath, Harry. It's a pretty big tub, though. You're welcome to join me." Throwing him an impish smile, she turned and went into the bathroom, leaving the door open behind her.

The water had just started running by the time Harry gathered enough of his composure to follow her.

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The couple, hand in hand and looking much more relaxed about life, entered the dining room two hours later to find plates of food waiting for them.

"Good morning," Tonks said, looking up at the two from a stack of parchment. Rascal was sitting on the table, overseeing her actions.

"Good morning," Ginny cheerfully answered, sitting in the chair Harry held for her.

"Aren't you in a good mood," Tonks observed.

"Why shouldn't I be? It's still Christmas holidays, and I'm with Harry."

Tonks studied the young witch and wizard for a moment before turning a devilish grin to Harry. Timing it carefully, she asked, "Should I ask her that important question today?"

Harry, immediately remembering the question Tonks threatened him with when his Animagus form was discovered, sprayed pumpkin juice across the table.

Unfortunately, the spray caught Rascal's tail in addition to the tabletop. Hissing, the kneazle bolted from the room.

Coughing fit to bring up a lung or two, Harry brought a hand to his mouth, head held down. He didn't dare look at either Tonks or Ginny.

"What in the name of Magic are you talking about?" Ginny asked, eyes full of concern as she watched Harry still going through convulsions.

"Nothing important," Tonks laughingly replied. "Harry will explain it eventually, I'm sure."

"Harry?" Ginny turned her attention to her boyfriend.

Harry, still looking down and trying to breathe normally, just shook his head.

Seeing he wasn't in imminent danger of choking, Ginny slowly relaxed.

"So did you two have a good time yesterday?" Tonks asked neutrally.

After a quick look, Harry determined that the question was innocent. Well, as innocent as any question from Tonks could be. "Yep. Ron nearly blew a fuse when he heard Ginny was coming over last night," Harry reported.

"Blew a fuse?" Ginny asked blankly.

"Muggle term," Tonks waved it off. "Means he got very angry."

"That's right, your father was a Muggle-born, wasn't he?"

She nodded. "I thought Molly was the other potential problem for you two kids."

Ginny grinned. "Who do you think told him that I was coming over last night?"

Tonks's eyes grew wide. "She didn't."

"She did. Right in front of Bill, Charlie and Ron. Dad already knew, of course, and Hermione didn't act all that surprised."

"And you survived this with all your limbs intact?" Tonks asked Harry incredulously.

"Bill and Charlie were pretty cool about it. Ron almost slugged me, but he calmed down a little before he did that. I just hope Hermione survived the night okay."

Ginny blinked. "Hermione? She was fine with it. She came upstairs to help me pack, after all."

Harry slowly shook his head. "In the words of Bill to your mother, 'He's likely to want to sleep with Hermione tonight just to prove some kind of point.'"

Ginny groaned. "I just hope my git of a brother didn't do something to hork her off."

"That's assuming they haven't already slept together," Tonks pointed out mildly.

Harry shrugged. "True. Like I said, I just hope she's doing okay, one way or another." He turned to the entering Rully and grinned. "Rully! I see you're wearing my gifts."

Rully nodded and smiled. "All of Master Harry's elveses is all wearing them, Master Harry. What would Master Harry and Mistress Ginny want for

breakfast?"

"I'm your mistress?" Ginny asked in surprise.

Rully's eyes darted from Ginny to Harry and back again. "Is Miss Ginny not Mistress of Potter Manor?"

"Close enough," Harry agreed, wondering if they really were being teased by a house-elf.

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Later that day after Ginny returned to the Burrow and Remus and Tonks went to visit her mother, Harry was left to his own devices.

With the free time, he started a project that he hoped to be able to complete before the holidays finished. He sat down in the parlour and opened his copy of Constructing a Family Clock.

He rapidly learned that these clocks were easy, if time consuming, to produce. Each hand required no less than ten separate charms to work properly plus a drop of blood to tie it to the person in question. The clock itself was actually the easiest part to charm.

Taking the blank carriage clock that Hermione had also given him, he started casting all the appropriate charms upon it. For the initial categories, he put **Home**, **Hogwarts**, **Work**, **Travelling** and **Unknown**. He left a few spots blank, knowing that more could be added later and the clocks themselves occasionally added categories. Once that was accomplished, he sent Hedwig off with an owl order for six clock hands.

Not being able to advance further with the clock, Harry went up to his room and pulled his father's school trunk out of his closet. He left it sitting on the floor and sat down on his bed. It innocently sat there, representing such a large emotional subject to the young wizard staring at it.

Finally deciding he'd rather do this by himself and not wait for Ginny or Remus, he reached down and pushed the trunk open.

His first thought was that the contents of this trunk weren't all that different than his own. It had the same mish-mash of textbooks, loose parchment, broken quills, small cauldrons and a broken telescope. Harry smiled at this. He started sorting through the items, looking for anything of interest.

The textbooks were merely previous editions of the same ones he had in his own classes. His father had apparently taken Muggle Studies where Harry had taken Divination, however.

Opening the copy of Standard Book of Spells: Year Seven at a loose sheet of parchment, Harry found just the kinds of things he wanted. In the margins of the chapter on conjuring metals, his father had apparently played two games of hangman against someone. Whoever was playing had gotten the word "Animagus" but hadn't gotten "apothecary". Harry vaguely wondered if it was his mother who had taught his father about the Muggle word game.

On the facing page's margin, a simple heart contained the inscription **JP & LE**.

Smiling at the inconsequential little doodlings of his father, he looked at the loose sheet of parchment in his other hand. It was a letter to his father from his mother, thanking him for the wonderful time she'd had at Hogsmeade.

Harry spent hours thumbing through the textbooks and reading the asides and looking at the doodles. He found Quidditch plays, an artistic drawing of a Snitch, several sketches of the Marauders in animal forms, one letter from Sirius complaining bitterly about the detention he'd had to serve with McGonagall, several half-formed prank ideas, plans of exploration during full moons and all the petty thoughts, gripes and dreams of a teenage boy.

Silent tears fell at the glimpse he finally had of his father.

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Over the week between Christmas and New Year, Ginny stayed over at the Manor as often as not. Though their relationship certainly wasn't what one could call totally platonic, it never crossed the point of no return. It wasn't so much that they didn't want to as they were waiting until the time was "right".

The clock hands arrived and Harry enspelled each of the six hands as far as he could. He then drew one drop of his own blood, dripped it into the indentation on the back of one of the clock hands and sealed it with another spell.

The clock hand glowed for a moment before dimming again.

Harry turned the hand over and found a small portrait of himself, smiling in contentment. He put the hand upon the clock and cast a final spell to integrate the two. The hand spun around the entire face three times before stopping at **Home**. Hardly conclusive, but at least it appeared to be working. He laid the other five hands down in front of the clock and made a mental note to speak with Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Remus and Dora when he next saw them.

With nothing else to do for the next few hours, Harry wandered outside to a spot that he'd been avoiding, consciously or not, since Remus told him about it after moving into Potter Manor.

He stopped in front of a pair of headstones in a small, family cemetery.

"Hi, Mum, Dad," he whispered, looking back and forth from one stone to another.

He gave a sudden nervous chuckle. "It's funny. I don't even know what to say. I mean, it's not like you can talk back, so why should -" He stopped

and took a breath. "I'm babbling. Sorry about that. Never done this before, so I don't really know how to act.

"Anyway, I dreamed of meeting you for years. I suppose all orphans dream of meeting their parents, though. I just wanted you to show up out of the blue and rescue me from the Dursleys.

"Sorry, I'm rambling again. If you've talked with Padfoot recently, he can give you some of the highlights of my life over the past few years.

"Since he joined you it's been even more active, amazingly enough, what with falling in love with Ginny and then killing Voldemort and all.

"Ginny's great. Another redhead, Mum. Ginny Weasley. Remus told me that all Potters fall for redheads. Something like a family curse, but falling to this curse is just fine with me. She's stood by me through everything. Doesn't let me sink into my moods. Helps me stand up to her brothers, which is a bigger deal than it sounds like. And she was the only one who could help me kill Voldemort.

"Yes, I said kill. I killed a man. Well, not so sure he was a man, but you know what I'm saying. It was self-defence, so I'm not in legal trouble for it. Besides, this IS Voldemort we're talking about. Got the Order of Merlin out of it, even. But that doesn't help, you know? I look down at my hands and can almost see the bloodstains on them. The whole bloody world is celebrating what I did and I cry myself to sleep sometimes over it. How's that for irony?

"Remus is dating. I think you knew her. Nymphadora Tonks. Sirius's first cousin once removed or something, but her mother was disinherited from the Black family so she's okay. Metamorphmagus, which can be a lot of fun, but she's a good person. Auror, of all things, and teaching us Defense this year. Anyway, she's good for him.

"What else? The Manor is in good shape. Got most of the house-elves back except for Rarry. She died defending Granddad, I understand. The other five are here again, plus Dobby and Winky. Those two are stories unto themselves, though.

"I suppose I should explain Dumbledore. I keep acting like I'm mad at him. When I tried explaining it to Ginny or Remus, I don't think they believed that I'm not mad at him. I suppose I can see how they would think so, though. Mostly it's to show him or those around us what he's doing, though.

"Sorry, maybe I should back up. Ever since he had Hagrid pull me from the wreckage of Godric's Hollow, he's been dictating my life. Making me live with the Dursley's, which has been awful for all involved, let me tell you, was only the first step. Yeah, he told me, eventually, why I had to live there. Your sacrifice, Mum, and the blood link to Aunt Petunia. He didn't bother to explain it, though until the end of fifth year.

"Anyway, he keeps telling me things but never the reasons for them. Occlumency, no owls over the summer, keep going back and living with Dursleys and all that. He only tells me as much as he thinks I should know. If he'd told me everything . . . Well, that's one of the reasons Sirius is up there with you guys.

"Hey, if you see Padfoot, tell him that we caught Wormtail and stopped Voldemort, okay? Bellatrix is still loose, but I think she's the only ranking Death Eater left running around. If she's ever caught, I can't quite decide if I'd like to strangle her myself or let Neville do it and cheer him on.

"Sounds strange, huh? I'm complaining that I still have nightmares over killing Voldemort but then turn around and say I'd like to kill her. Come to think of it, maybe just locking her into a room with dementors and throwing away the key is better. If there's anything closer to hell on Earth, I haven't heard about it.

"I know, Mum. I shouldn't want to hurt someone that much. She killed Sirius and effectively orphaned Neville, though. Who knows what else she's done.

"Much as I'd like to say I'm ashamed of what I want to do to Lestranger, I'm really not.

"Fortunately, though, I have Ginny, Remus and all my friends. I've finally found love. Amazing how you can go years without it and then when you have it, wonder how you lived without, isn't it?

"Dad, I'm really not ignoring you. Everyone says I look like you, so I get stories from everyone about you. Professor McGonagall especially has some pretty good ones." Harry laughed aloud. "Some of them are even complimentary.

"Prongs is also the form of my Patronus. Actually, that's kind of weird. I didn't even know who Prongs was at the time and yet my Patronus is you? Did you have anything to do with that, Dad?

"Oh, you'll be pleased, though Mum might not, that I'm studying to be an Animagus myself. Horse Animagus, I think.

"Anyway, I'm living here now. It's Christmas holidays of my sixth year, so I'll have to be leaving again soon. When I'm here, I'll try to come out and visit you.

"It's been great finally talking with you, but I think I need to be going in now. Love you two. Bye."

Shortly, Harry Potter was slowly trudging back toward the Manor, leaving behind a single conjured lily.

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First thing in the morning of New Year's Eve, Harry and Ginny visited the Ministry to apply for their Apparition licenses. Per normal security procedures, their wands were weighed at the reception desk before they made their way toward the magical licensing department. For the next few hours, they were directed from one line to another, filling out paperwork for indifferent Ministry workers.

The Ministry itself was calmer than usual, as Fudge was out of the building campaigning for his re-election. Why he was bothering was a mystery to

Harry. Ever since Halloween, Fudge's approval rating had never made it above ten percent of the wizards and witches of the United Kingdom. The avalanche of scandals that Harry had triggered had rendered Fudge effectively powerless. The next day's election would merely make it official.

Finally through the gauntlet of paperwork, the two took the written test. When that was turned in to the examiner, they were given directions to a large examination room.

A middle aged witch entered from the other side, looking immensely bored. She glanced up at Harry and Ginny and the boredom vanished as if a switch were thrown. She blinked rapidly a few times before abruptly shaking her head and reaching for the paperwork they were carrying.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?" Ginny asked, referring to the witch's reaction on seeing them.

"I'm sorry, dear. It's just that you're younger than I'm used to seeing here for this test. I was about to throw you both out before I recognised you. Thank you, by the way."

"You're welcome," Harry said politely, used to such reactions.

"Mr. Potter, let's begin with you. Please Apparate from the circle here to the square on the floor over there. You can walk over and examine it if you wish. After the short range accuracy is verified, we'll move on to distance testing. The first test needs to be completed within two minutes, starting NOW." She turned a small hourglass over and waved Harry to begin.

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Pop-pop. Harry and Ginny grinned at each other, arriving exactly where they had planned, on the lane to the Burrow.

Harry took her hand and leisurely started walking down the lane, stepping around the snow and ice that was still on the roadway. "I wonder if our auras being so close matters in Apparition," Harry absently wondered.

"We can ask Remus," Ginny suggested as they approached her home.

The door to the Burrow swung open. "Harry, Ginny! What are the two of you doing out here? Why didn't you Floo in?"

"Hi, Mum. We decided to Apparate instead," Ginny explained.

"You both passed on your first try?" Molly asked excitedly, ushering the two in.

"Passed what?" Ron asked, entering the kitchen. He smiled a greeting at his sister and best friend.

"Apparition license," Molly explained.

Ron's eyes widened. "You can both Apparate? Legally?"

Harry nodded with a wary look. It was always hard to guess what things Ron would get angry over. He just hoped this wouldn't be one of them.

"Is THAT why you've been going over to Harry's house all holiday?"

Ginny's lip twitched. "Mostly, yeah. Remus trained us both."

"Good to hear you two didn't spend all your time snogging."

"Ronald!"

Harry was staring in astonishment. "Is that what you thought we were doing every time she came over?"

Ron shrugged, a bit embarrassed. "That was the polite version, yeah."

"Ronald!" Molly said again, rolling her eyes.

Ginny chuckled. "You didn't see me taking my textbooks every time? I do a lot of OWL revision over there, Ron. It's quieter there than it is here. Harry, Tonks and Remus are all good teachers as well."

"Hmm. Good point. Err, points," Ron acknowledged.

"I'm so relieved that I have your permission," Ginny said dryly.

"Oh, you know what I meant. Hey, Harry, could Remus teach me how to Apparate?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't see why not, but you need to ask him, not me. I hired him to tutor me in various things. He was kind enough to include Ginny in the Apparition portions. If you want private tutoring, you need to speak with him about it. It's not like I own him, you know. Even so, you can't get your license until you're seventeen."

"Charms class covers it at the end of seventh year," Molly interjected. "Most everyone just waits until then to learn it."

"Hmmp," Ron was disappointed.

Turning his head slightly, Harry asked, "Molly, may I speak with you for a moment?"

Ginny gave him a curious look, which was ignored.

"Certainly, Harry," Molly agreed, shoos the two others out.

Molly held up a hand when Harry opened his mouth. Grinning, she counted down silently on her fingers from five. On zero, she pointed her wand toward the door. "Accio Extendable Ears."

An indignant squawk sounded from the other room, and two Extendable Ears flew into Molly's open hand.

Smiling, she turned her attention to Harry. "What would you like to talk about, dear?"

He broke into laughter. "Now I know where Fred and George get it." He wiped the tears from his eyes.

Molly didn't answer, simply smiled wider.

Calming himself, Harry explained what he wanted to talk to her about. "Ron will be receiving an invitation today to a party that I'm throwing tonight. I'll be inviting him, Ginny and Hermione to spend the night if they want, since the party probably won't get out until late."

She nodded. "I won't expect any of them back until late tomorrow morning, then." Her face fell into a melancholy expression. "When you said you wanted to talk with me privately, I must admit that I had hoped it would be a different subject."

Looking at his girlfriend's mother, Harry didn't have any problem divining what she subject she had hoped for. He smiled, a little nervously. "It has occurred to me, Mrs. Weasley," he admitted.

"You are supposed to call me Molly," she reminded him.

"For this conversation, calling you Mrs. Weasley is more appropriate," he pointed out. "As I said, I've considered it. Still am, truthfully. But what do I know about love and long term commitment? I certainly didn't have any good role models growing up."

She nodded. "Since then, however, I'd like to think you've seen a few better examples. You've heard about your own parents. You've seen Tonks and Remus."

"You and Mr. Weasley," Harry added, nodding. "Yes, I've SEEN stable marriages and relationships. I'm just not used to it or how to be in one."

She looked sadly at him. "She's not going anywhere, dear. If you need more time to become comfortable with it, that's fine. At your ages, it's probably for the best. It's just the mother in me hoping for something else, I suppose."

He smiled nervously.

"For what it's worth, you have my blessing, Harry. Now," she went on in a less emotionally charged tone, "I'm sure you have a thousand and one things to do for tonight. Are you taking Ginny with you now, or should she come over later with Ron and Hermione?"

"I'll probably be taking her now if that's okay with her. Please don't tell Ron or Hermione about the overnight offer, okay?"

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"Why are we going to Diagon Alley?" Ginny asked her boyfriend.

"I have some things to pick up," Harry easily answered, twining her fingers in his.

She peered at him closely. "You're hiding something from me."

"Yep," he cheerfully admitted.

She huffed in exasperation. "Are you going to tell me what it is?"

"Maybe," he teased. "What'll you give me if I tell you?"

"I WON'T hex you if you tell me."

"Jeez, love, no need to get violent. To answer the question, I'm picking up the supplies."

"Supplies?" she asked in a leading tone.

"Yes, supplies."

She sighed. "Harry, I'm going to hurt you very badly if you don't tell me what you're talking about."

"For the party, of course," he went on, unfazed by the threat.

"What party?" she asked through gritted teeth.

Instead of answering directly, he withdrew a rolled up parchment from his robes and handed it to her.

Bitting back the growl of frustration, she saw that it was addressed to: **The gorgeous redhead beside me** . Losing some of her ire at the blatant compliment, she unrolled the parchment and read the invitation. "You prat," she grumbled half-heartedly, no longer truly angry. "Who all is going to be there?"

"Last year's DA plus dates. Everyone's responded except Ron, Hermione, Colin and Dennis."

"Ron and Hermione haven't responded?" she asked in surprise.

"Well, that's probably since they're just now getting the invitation . . ."

"Prat," she muttered again before tucking herself under his arm. "For the record, I'd be delighted to attend. So where ARE we going?"

"I already told you: we're getting the supplies." As they got past the particular fence post that marked the outer edge of the Apparition Ward, he dropped his arm. "Diagon Alley Apparition point?"

She nodded and disappeared. He appeared next to her at the designated incoming Apparition zone near the portal to the Leaky Cauldron. Instead of heading down the street, he went toward the pub. After a few quick words with Tom, he called Dobby and pointed the appropriate items out to the elf. The liquid refreshments taken care of, the young couple headed back to Diagon Alley.

"Now where?" Ginny asked, eyeing the mostly empty street. One or two witches recognised Harry and moved toward him, but a poisonous look from Ginny turned them back.

Oblivious, Harry was answering her question, "The family business. I'd like to talk with your two favourite prankster brothers."

Harry was relieved to find an empty store on this trip. Last time it'd been wall to wall customers. This time it looked like he'd actually be able to talk to the two owners.

Fred looked up when the front door announced a visitor (by sounding a loud raspberry). Smiling, he turned toward the half-open door behind him. "Oy, George! We have distinguished guests! Put away those ledgers and get out the fake ones!"

Laughing, Ginny threaded her way through the tricky maze of moving shelving that was the WWW store and gave him a hug. "Is that anyway to greet your favourite sister?"

"Our only sister but who's counting?" George laughed, coming out from the back, followed by Lee Jordan. The two Weasley boys each hugged their sister.

"Still planning on coming over tonight?" Harry asked the three.

After glancing at Ginny, Fred nodded.

"Is there anything I should be warned about?" Harry asked calmly.

The twins grinned in a way that any Gryffindor who went to school with them would recognise and fear.

Ginny and Lee snickered.

Harry winced. "Okay, let me re-phrase that. Is whatever you're planning to do going to require a trip to St. Mungo's or major structural repairs to my house after you're done?"

The twins laughed.

Lee shook his head. "Naw, not that bad. They DO have something planned, but it isn't dangerous."

Ginny asked, "Is this 'not dangerous' in the same way that Hagrid's pets are 'cute and misunderstood'?"

Lee and Harry laughed.

The twins shook their heads. "Nothing at all dangerous."

"On our word of honour."

"We wouldn't do that to our favourite sister's main squeeze, after all."

"The fact that he's our major investor has nothing to do with it, either."

"It's just the first in our line of party entertainments."

Harry figured he should've expected something like this. He did, after all, invite them and even indicated his expectation of their antics in the invitation. "How much time do you need to set it up?"

They shook their heads. "No time at all."

"Well, unless you need us to take something back with us, we'll be on our way. See you before eight?"

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With Remus and Tonks standing guard over the fireplace, all of the expected guests arrived without incident that evening.

Everyone exclaimed over the Manor, and the party slowly spread out until it covered the entire floor.

It didn't take long for several enchanted sprigs of mistletoe to appear at various locations, courtesy of Tonks.

Games sprung up in different rooms. Hermione and Padma had teamed up and were taking on all comers in a magical version of Trivial Pursuit. Ron was nearby, playing chess against Terry Boot and Ernie Macmillan simultaneously. Most of the remaining Quidditch players took over half the parlour and engaged in good-natured ribbing of each other's houses.

Harry and Ginny spent most of the time floating from one discussion to another, rarely spending a lot of time in any one place. When Harry suggested she could spend time in whichever group she was most interested, she merely kissed his cheek and stated that she was where she wanted to be.

Remus and Tonks circulated among their students and former students for several hours before they quietly left and started patrolling the grounds.

Once they left, Fred stood on a coffee table in the parlour. Raising his wand, it gave a series of five musical tones. After a moment of stunned silence, every Muggle-born in the room broke into laughter, recognising the tones from a popular science fiction movie. Everyone from the other rooms drifted in to see what was up, almost everyone carrying a drink of one variety or another.

"Now that all the responsible adults are gone, we can have some fun."

Everyone laughed.

"With the permission of our gracious host," Fred nodded to Harry, "Weasley Wizard Wheezes would like to introduce our newest product: the Cup of Companionship."

"Dare I ask?" Harry wondered aloud.

"I'm so glad you did."

"Even though he didn't," Neville muttered.

Oblivious, Fred went on, "Each person only needs to write their full name and date of birth on a slip of parchment."

"All the slips go into this Cup," George held up a wide-brimmed chalice.

"Named, ironically enough, the Cup of Companionship."

"Who would've guessed?" Ron observed blandly.

Ignoring the snickers, George continued, "After all names are put in, my devastatingly handsome identical twin will cast a charm."

"Out of the Cup will come a list for each person."

"These are the best personality matches within the group."

"Now, there are a few rules."

"Full names only."

"Accurate birthdays are a must."

"Otherwise, the results will be messed up."

"How does it work?" Hermione asked.

"It compares personalities for compatibility."

"My personality can be determined by my name and birthday?" Harry asked dubiously.

"According to the ancient and honoured art of astrology, yes."

Three quarters of the room burst into laughter. Parvati and Lavender, each on the arms of young wizards that Harry didn't immediately recognise, glared around the room, insulted by the slight against their favourite subject.

"Seriously, the charm and the Cup of Companionship magically determine your five best matches."

"No astrology charts are harmed in the testing of this charm."

No astrology charts are used in the casting of this charm, either."

"It determines our five best friends?" Susan asked dubiously.

"Friends, significant other or snogging buddies, yes." A few snickers ran around the room.

"Just write our name and birth date?" Harry asked.

Both twins nodded, heads moving at the same rate, but offset. One head was down when the other was up. It was strangely disconcerting to watch.

Curious, Harry took one of the offered slips of parchment and wrote:

Harry James Potter

July 31, 1980

He dropped the slip into the Cup where it promptly vanished. He moved to stand beside Fred as Ginny moved forward with her slip of paper. "I'm curious to see what you've cooked up," he whispered as, one by one, everyone else came forward when their curiosity overcome their hesitancy.

After all the names were in the Cup, Fred waved his wand over the Cup and muttered a long incantation. Once he was done, the Cup glowed bright white for a few seconds. Once it was back to normal, Fred reached in and withdrew a slip. Clearing his throat dramatically, he said, "According to the Cup of Companionship, my best matches in this group are as follows: George, Angelina, Lee, Alicia, and Ginny."

Harry supposed that made sense. The first four were his best friends and then another family member.

Parvati, apparently coming to the same conclusion, gave a little squeal and reached in and withdrew a slip. There was a minor rush as everyone else also withdrew their own slips.

Harry withdrew a little and read his own slip.

Cup of Companionship December 31, 1996

Matches for Harry James Potter

1) Hermione Jane Granger

2) Ginevra Molly Weasley

3) Neville Frank Longbottom

4) Padma Inra Patil

5) Michael Frederick Corner

"So how'd I do?" Ginny was looking down at her own slip.

"Second after Hermione. Me?"

"Third. Hermione, Hannah surprisingly enough, then you."

"Oooh, guess what, Harry?" Lavender gushed, rushing up and batting her eyes.

"The stars have fated that we're to be together?" Harry asked in such a bland voice as to be sarcastic.

The sarcasm was totally lost on her, however. Lavender squealed, causing Harry to wince and Ginny's mood to rapidly darken. "See, you DO believe in astrology!"

"Not necessarily," Hermione smoothly interrupted. "He's on my list, too, Lavender."

"Mine, too!" Parvati added with a pout.

Turning to Harry and rolling her eyes where only he and Ginny could see her, Hermione raised her voice, "Fred, George, what does it mean if multiple people all have the same person on their lists?"

One of the twins answered, "Then he or she gets along well with many others. Who is it?"

"Harry!" Parvati and Lavender chorused.

Harry blushed deeply when everyone in the room turned to him with grins. He shrugged to Parvati and Lavender's dates.

Fighting his smile, Fred walked over. "Harry, my fine young man. Are you happy with your results?"

He nodded. Some of them were unexpected, but he had no objections.

"Regardless of the results, do you still intend to date my one and only sister? As you answer, please keep in mind that there are three male Weasleys and one female Weasley in the room who are very interested in your response."

Harry nodded solemnly amid the chuckles running around the room. "I have every intention of continuing to date her. Ginny is second on my list, incidentally."

Fred nodded. He turned to Parvati and Lavender. "These lists are potential only I'm afraid, my dear. My first match is George. That doesn't mean I should marry him."

"I should hope not!" Angelina, Alicia, and George shouted amid the general laughter

Now grinning, Fred went on to the room at large. "You're under no obligation to disclose your lists to anyone you don't want to. It doesn't take current friendships into account."

Harry interjected innocently, "You're saying that just because Hermione is first on my list, I shouldn't start snogging her?"

"NO!" Ginny and Ron chorused.

The room laughed.

"There you have the verdict rendered, Mr. Potter," Fred rendered in his best courtroom voice. Going back to his regular voice, he went on more seriously, "This is just a party trick, folks. Don't think of it as 'should be', think if it as 'could be'."

"That was entirely too serious for a party!" George objected. Before anyone could react, he'd pulled his wand and hit his brother with a spell.

Blinking away the spots, Harry looked at the young man standing nearby and broke into laughter, along with most of the rest of the audience.

A spotlight came out of thin air above them, showing a much changed Fred. His hair was up in a heavy wave, his pants were form-fitting black, tucked into what Harry recognised as black and white leather cowboy boots. His shirt was now very wide necked, the sleeves (ending in lurid ruffles) extended to his fingertips, and the shirt itself was covered in so many silver sequins that he was dazzling to look at with the spotlight trained on him. In short, he looked ridiculous.

He looked around the room and gave all the girls saucy smiles and winks. "Witches and wizards, it's a pleasure to be here. Shall we get the dance started?"

Fighting back his tears of laughter, Harry called out, "Dance floor and wireless are down the stairs located in the kitchen."

Most of the crowd started moving in that direction. Harry was astonished to see the spotlight follow Fred's movements. He made his way toward Lee Jordan in the flow of people. "What DID George do to him?" he asked quietly.

Lee smiled widely, teeth showing clearly against his dark skin. "Nothing. They set this up ahead of time. It's just an illusion. Fred's playing the part voluntarily."

Chuckling over the twins' antics, Harry stepped out of the flow of people in the kitchen momentarily. He gestured Rully toward him as the last of the students filed past and the wireless started up downstairs accompanied by Fred's surprisingly good singing.

"Master Harry wishes to speak with Rully?" the elf asked.

"Is everything going okay?"

Rully nodded. "Everything is well, Master Harry. Master Harry's elves is making and delivering the food as it is being eaten by Master's guests. Nothing is being broken. Mistress Tonks told Tarry that all is well outside."

Grinning, Harry patted the elf on the shoulder. "Let me know if there's a problem, okay?"

Surprising Harry, Rully solemnly shook his head. "This is Master's party. Master and Mistress should enjoy their time and not worry. Rully will take care of it all."

Harry thought for a second. "If a security threat from outside occurs, have one of the elves tell me, even if Remus or Dora tell you not to bother, understood? Any other problems I'll leave to your discretion."

Rully bowed, humbled by the trust being shown him. "It will be as Master says."

"You're the best, Rully!" With one final smile, Harry went downstairs.

Someone had created a small platform on one end of the duelling chamber cum dance floor and Fred was standing there, crooning along with the wizarding wireless. Harry was glad to see that the spotlight that had followed Fred had dimmed to an appropriate level for the now darker room. Only a few glowing balls of light in strategic locations provided more illumination, leaving the room with low light appropriate for slow, romantic dances.

Harry found Ginny standing beside the drinks table, laughing along with something Hermione had just said. "Would the lovely lady honour this

humble wizard with a dance?" he whispered into Ginny's ear from behind.

She shivered at his breath over her ear. Rapidly composing herself and turning in place, she smiled at him. "The lady accepts the gentleman's gracious offer. Lead the way, milord."

Chuckling lightly, Harry led her by the hand to an empty spot among the dancing couples. Pulling her into his arms, they started gently swaying to the song. After enjoying the feel of her soft body pressed against his, he quietly asked, "I thought you said the twins had bad singing voices."

She didn't look up from her head tucked under his chin, but he could hear the amusement in her voice. "They do. He isn't singing, he's faking it along with the wireless."

The song ended and another started up. It was a Celestina Warbeck song that Harry vaguely recognised. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Fred continue his lip-synching, ignoring the fact that the most definitely feminine voice contrasted with the male singer.

"Your brothers are crazy."

She laughed. "This is just now occurring to you?"

They danced three more slow songs before the music changed over to a faster pace.

"I'm going back upstairs," Harry whispered. She nodded, so he led them up the stairs. As he went, he saw George modifying the light globes to pulse along with the faster tempo.

Neville and Eloise came up right behind Harry and Ginny. "You aren't up to the fast dances, either?" Neville asked Harry.

At Harry's enthusiastic agreement, the two girls caught each other's eye. In unison, they rolled their eyes and muttered, "Boys!"

All four had a good laugh.

Once they were back up in the kitchen, Harry said, "Neville, Eloise, I actually needed to talk with you. Is now a good time?"

After looking at each other for a moment, the two shrugged. Harry nodded and waved them toward the stairs. "Ginny, you are certainly welcome to come along if you want to, or you could stay here and enjoy the party instead."

She shook her head. "I know you're planning something big, but I don't know what. I'm curious."

Nodding agreeably, Harry pulled out his wand and temporarily brought down a barrier ward, allowing the four to go up the stairs.

"You're keeping everyone downstairs?" Neville asked.

Harry smirked. "With so many couples, don't you think I should keep the party away from the spare bedrooms?"

Neville and Eloise chuckled nervously.

Ginny pouted. "You're no fun, Harry."

Harry snorted in good humour. "I'm just afraid Pomfrey and McGonagall would have my hide if I didn't take SOME precautions."

The other three laughed as Harry opened the door to the study, ushering them past. Once everyone was comfortably arranged on conjured loveseats, Harry pointed his wand at the door. "*Colloportus*." As the room sealed, the noise from outside dropped to nothing.

Neville raised an eyebrow. "What's with all the secrecy, Harry?"

Eloise, though still shy around the Gryffindors she didn't know well, looked equally interested.

Harry leaned comfortably back, gently pulling Ginny's head to his shoulder. "Before we left Hogwarts, I asked Professor Sprout for the best Herbology students for a project I had in mind. She gave me two names. It shouldn't surprise you two to learn that you're the best herbologists in the school."

The young couple smiled a bit timidly at the praise.

"She added something interesting, though," Harry continued. He smiled at Eloise. "It seems that YOU are also a gifted potion brewer, which is something else I'll be needing."

Eloise, now blushing spectacularly, dropped her gaze to her hands.

Neville turned to his date in surprise. "You're good in Potions?"

She gave an embarrassed little shrug but looked pleased.

Harry raised his wand. "*Accio Moste Potente Potions*." The thick book jumped from its place on the desk and flew through the air at him. He caught it easily and handed the tome to Eloise, who was staring in astonishment. "I marked a page. Given the ingredients, do you think you could learn to brew that potion?"

Eloise blinked a moment before shaking her head and opening it to the mark Harry had left in it. She stared at the potion name for a moment before looking up at Harry. "You're kidding me, right?"

Harry calmly shook his head.

Neville's face slowly cleared of the shock that the potion had instilled in him as well. He gave a solemn nod and smiled. "Where'd you get the book, Harry? It's really rare."

Harry gave his friend a humourless grin. "That is one of the more benign items I got from the Black Estate."

"What is it?" Ginny burst out, finally out of patience.

"Wolfsbane," Eloise breathed, reading avidly.

"Wolfsbane? But Remus already gets Wolfsbane from Snape," Ginny objected, looking at Harry.

"Yes, by Dumbledore's orders. Now that the war is all but over, how long do you think Snape will continue? You know how much he hates Remus." Harry sighed. "Remus is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg, though." Taking a breath, he revealed his full plan. "I want to help all werewolves, not just him. The quickest way to help them is through Wolfsbane. I just inherited more money than I know what to do with. I figure I can buy someplace, set it up right, and have a single place for werewolves to go every full moon. That's just in the short run, though. I'm also going to try to get the laws changed. With a few precautions around the full moon, there's no reason to continue to treat werewolves like they're being treated right now. The restrictions Remus has to live with are beyond inhumane."

"Sounds like you've found your crusade," Neville observed simply.

Harry let out a breath he didn't even realise he was holding. "Yeah, I guess I'm a little worked up over it. Remus is the only link I have left to my family -"

"No need to say more," Neville quietly interrupted. "So, you need me to grow the ingredients and Eloise to brew this every month, is that the idea?"

Harry nodded. "That's the idea. The mark she took out is a list of the plants. Neville, I'd like you to begin making a list of what you'd need in order to grow those in the quantities I've indicated."

"If you're serious about changing the laws," Ginny said thoughtfully, "you'll need to bring Hermione into the conspiracy. Her work with SPEW two years ago shows that she cares. She could easily run that end of the project. With your fame, you can certainly bring the issue the attention you'll need."

Neville grinned. "His fame? How about both of you? You helped bring down You-Know-Who, you know."

Ginny made a face.

Chuckling, Neville started looking over the list.

"Maybe," Eloise finally said.

"Maybe? What does 'maybe' mean?"

"This is a very difficult potion to make, Harry. I'm not sure I could get it right the first time." She took a breath. "Honestly, I'd feel better if Professor Snape helped me the first couple times I brewed it."

Harry grimaced. "I was afraid you'd say that. I suppose it makes sense, though. I wonder how I could get him to help . . ."

"Let me work on that?" Eloise suggested. "No offence, Harry, but I think he likes me better than you."

Neville laughed out loud. "Eloise, Snape likes Blast-Ended Skrewts better than he likes Harry. Why is that, anyway?" he turned to Harry with a questioning expression.

Harry sighed. "Remember me telling everyone on Halloween that Snape was in Peter Pettigrew's year at Hogwarts? Well, Snape had a blood feud going against a group of Gryffindors in his year. One of them was my father, another was my godfather, and the last is Remus. Considering that, is it really surprising he would cheerfully use me as one of his finely diced potion ingredients?"

Eloise's lip twitched. "No, I suppose not."

"Getting back on topic, I'd like to hire the both of you over the summer. I'll provide all the supplies. You, Neville, grow everything on that list and harvest it at the appropriate times. Eloise, you brew Wolfsbane for full moons."

"If you're going to have a full greenhouse setup, since I assume you'll want to do this year-round, there are other things you can grow at the same time as all of this," Neville waved the list slightly, "that will pull in some sort of income for you."

"Grand idea, Nev. Could you put together some possible lists? Better yet, could you and Professor Sprout get together and figure out exactly what, and in what quantities, we'll need and then what will be the most cost effective after that? You have carte blanche to list anything and everything you'll need."

They haven't agreed, Harry," Ginny dryly remarked.

Harry looked momentarily sheepish. "Sorry, I got carried away. Would you two be willing to work for me doing this?"

Neville and Eloise broke into laughter at Harry's enthusiasm.

"If I can get Professor Snape to help me, yes," Eloise said, calming herself.

Neville nodded his agreement as well. "The lists you want me to put together depend on how much greenhouse space I have, Harry."

"Whatever two herbologists can deal with," Harry answered, eyes shifting back and forth between him and Eloise.

"Anything else?" Harry asked after a brief pause. When they shook their heads, Harry stood and helped Ginny up. "Incidentally, please don't mention this to anyone except Professors Sprout and Snape. I'd prefer this project doesn't go public quite yet. I'll be bringing more folks into the plans, Hermione and Remus for instance, but if this leaks out then the Werewolf Regulation Department will probably get in my way."

"My lips are sealed," Neville offered.

The two girls nodded agreement.

Harry removed his privacy spell and led the four back downstairs. Without any real direction, they ended up clustered around the tree in the parlour.

"Ten minutes until midnight!" Fred's amplified voice came from the dance room.

Slipping his arms around Ginny, Harry asked, "Are there any wizarding customs about New Year's that I should be warned about?"

"Have you heard about New Year's Resolutions?"

Harry nodded.

"There's one more, but I'll wait until midnight to explain that one to you."

"So long as it involves kissing a devastatingly cute redhead, I'm all for it."

"I'll be sure to let Ron know," Ginny teased.

Harry made a face that caused Neville and Eloise to chuckle.

Everyone started drifting toward the stairs. By the time everyone from the party had packed into the dance floor, the live Wizarding Wireless feed from Diagon Alley was announcing it was only one minute until the new year. The excitement gradually picked up until everyone was counting down the seconds.

"... Three ... Two ... ONE ... HAPPY NEW YEAR!" Sparks of every colour imaginable came from all directions. Fred and George used their wands to create loud bangs for a few seconds before Alicia and Angelina pulled them into searing kisses.

Harry turned to the young woman in his arms. "What's this tradition you were talking about earlier?" he asked quietly.

"This," she breathed, pulling his head down for a long, sensuous kiss of their own.

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"Great party, Harry," Ernie complimented him an hour later. Things were slowly drawing to a close and Harry was saying goodbye to each of his guests as they Flooed out.

"Thanks for coming, Ernie, Hannah," he nodded and smiled at the couple.

Rully entered the room unobtrusively and tugged at Harry's pant leg as Ernie and Hannah left.

Harry knelt down. "Is everything alright?"

"Master Harry wished to know if anything happened outside?"

Harry gave a sharp nod, eyes suddenly hardening.

"Mistress Tonks was telling Delly of an attempt by dark wizards to enter Potter Manor. Mistress Tonks is saying everything is under control, but Mistress Tonks wishes for some assistance."

Harry nearly panicked. If Tonks was asking for help, it must be pretty bad.

"Master Harry," Rully quickly squeaked. "Mistress Tonks is saying all of the invaders is being taken care of. Mistress Tonks is asking for the help in moving them. There is no fighting being needed, Master Harry."

Harry sighed, knowing that he couldn't leave unless it was a true emergency. Absently thanking Rully, Harry looked around the room. Stepping to Hermione quickly, he whispered into her ear, "Get Fred and George up here right now. Don't cause a panic, but I need 'em up here."

Hermione nodded and moved toward the kitchen without a word.

Harry bid a distracted goodbye to Luna before Fred and George appeared, sans costume. Their merry expressions evaporated as they caught sight of Harry. Pulling them to a secluded corner, he told them what he knew, sending them out the front door to help Tonks and Remus. Fortunately, they left without anyone having taken great note of it.

"What's up?" Ron asked quietly, Ginny and Hermione looking worriedly on.

"I don't know, completely. Tonks asked for a hand outside." Harry pulled out his mirror. "Remus Lupin."

Remus came onto the other end immediately. "It's under control, Harry. We just need a hand moving the bodies."

"Bodies?" Harry asked in alarm.

"Stunned bodies," Remus assured Harry.

"Fred and George are on their way. Do you need more help than that?"

"That'll be fine. Enjoy the rest of your party, Harry."

Harry made a face but put the mirror away without argument.

"Why'd you send them?" Ron asked.

Hermione shot him a reproving look. "They're Order members. We're not."

Harry nodded. "Let's start working on clearing the folks out. You three please stay, as well as Alicia and Angelina."

The remaining guests only put up token resistance as Harry good naturedly shooed all of them home. Every one of them thanked Harry for a good party and said they looked forward to seeing him back at Hogwarts.

Finally everyone else had left and Harry collapsed into a seat.

"We've been patient, Harry," Alicia said, still standing. "NOW will you tell us where George and Fred are?"

"With those two, it's hard telling," Ginny said humorously, curling up next to Harry and trying for a bit of misdirection.

"Then why did you ask us to stay?" Angelina calmly asked.

"Because he can't bear to have us leave?" George guessed as he strode into the room.

"We are, after all, two of his favourite people," Fred said, coming in just behind his twin.

"Yeah, that must be it," Harry agreed in good humour. "No, actually, I would like to invite you all to stay the night. I've more than enough guest rooms, and it's getting late."

Ron frowned.

Harry said, "Molly is okay with it, Ron, Hermione. I told her about it earlier."

Ron waved that off. "Where's Ginny sleeping?"

"Harry's bed," Ginny answered with a growl, causing skyrocketing eyebrows from Alicia and Angelina. "Is that quite alright with you, RONALD?"

Ron's face fell into a mulish expression.

"On second thought, I don't care if it's okay with you," Ginny decided. She turned to Harry. "I'll be in bed, love. Come on up after you have everything taken care of here. I'll be waiting." She turned and strode regally up the stairs.

"Bloody hell," Alicia whispered, wide eyes still tracking Ginny.

George chuckled and draped an arm over her shoulder. "It isn't news," he assured her. "She's been coming over here all holiday." He turned to Harry. "Spare rooms?"

Harry nodded. "Upstairs, first two rooms on the right are available."

"Well, that'd be the four of us, then," Fred said, wrapping an arm around Angelina and steering her toward the stairs. "Night, all."

The girls called their own good nights, Alicia blushing faintly.

"Don't forget your Silencing Charms," Harry added, trying to get a rise out of the twins.

Their laughter echoed back.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione. "Second and third rooms on the left are available upstairs as well." He paused. "Or you could share a room if you'd prefer."

They both flushed but didn't react otherwise.

Smirking, Harry turned toward the front doors. "Good night, you two. Do have fun," he tossed over his shoulder.

Outside, he looked around for a moment, quickly spotting someone walking across the lawn with a body floating along in front of them under control of the wand held up. Advancing cautiously, Harry recognised Remus and called out for him to stop as he caught up.

"Hi, Harry. Happy New Year, by the way. Everyone go home already?"

"Happy New Year. Hermione, Alicia, Angelina and the four Weasleys are staying the night. Everyone else has left."

"Purely out of curiosity, how many rooms are they using?" Tonks broke in, directing another floating body.

"We're all paired up, if that's what you're asking," Harry said mildly. He looked at the two bodies, not surprised that they were both wearing black robes. Their heads were hanging forward far enough that he didn't see either face. "What happened?"

Tonks grinned evilly. "Ten of 'em. They tripped one of my Perimeter Charms at the east edge of the property. The spread of Stunning Spells I had got all of 'em, though. Bunch of bloody amateurs, really."

Three of the elves, not immediately identifiable in the low light, were directing the remaining eight bodies with pointed fingers.

"These is the last of the dark wizards, Master Harry."

Harry sighed and looked at Tonks. "How do I get a hold of Aurors at this time of night?"

Tonks's grin ratcheted up a notch, both in size and wickedness. "Don't bother. Let's stash 'em in the duelling chamber. Take their wands and seal the room, and none of 'em'll be able to do anything except scream at each other. That is if any of 'em wake up before dawn, which I really doubt."

"Then turn them over?" Harry asked, becoming concerned about her expression.

Remus shook his head with a chuckle. "No. While they were helping us find our stunned guests here, Fred and George had a good idea. Dora and I will take care of them. Don't worry about it."

Harry frowned at Remus. "Do I want to know?"

"We'll explain tomorrow at breakfast," Remus promised, grinning in a way to prove he was indeed a Marauder.

Harry sighed. "Fine." He knew he could trust the two of them with his life, so he wasn't worried about the Death Eaters getting loose.

The werewolf, the Auror, and the three elves moved past and entered the side door straight into the kitchen. Harry followed them downstairs only to find that the remaining four elves had been busy. All the detritus from the party had already been cleared out of the room, restoring the entire space into empty stone walls, floor and ceiling. The ten wizards were laid out on the floor side-by-side, hoods removed.

Harry wasn't surprised to recognise Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Ted Nott, Pansy Parkinson, and Millicent Bulstrode. The remaining four weren't immediately identifiable, but were a bit older. Harry checked each arm, moderately surprised that none of them were Death Eaters.

"Wannabes," Tonks mentioned, holding up a white mask. "They don't have the Dark Mark, but they dressed the part."

Harry's face twisted in disgust.

"Go on to bed, Harry. We'll take care of them for now. Tomorrow, we'll deal with them more permanently," Lupin said.

Shrugging, Harry bid the two of them and all the elves a good night. Walking upstairs, he wasn't all that surprised to find all four kneazles in the kitchen, staring at the doorway leading to the stairs he'd just climbed. Their hair was standing straight up and they were all emitting low growls.

One more flight of stairs, and Harry walked down the silent hallway before entering his bedroom.

He smiled when he spotted Ginny in the bed, her bare arms out from under the comforter as she held Sirius's Animagus notebook.

She looked up and smiled at him. "Hey. You get everyone settled?"

Harry nodded, sitting on the bed as he pulled his shoes off. "Yeah. Our sleeping arrangement sure surprised Alicia, though."

She smiled at that before her face creased in concern. "What happened outside?"

Harry's wand went onto the nightstand opposite Ginny's. He started stripping off his clothes and tossing them down the laundry chute. "Dora's Perimeter Charm and stunning barrage caught ten of the DEiTs. Dora, Remus and the elves have them in the duelling chamber now. They said they have some plan to deal with them. It'll wait until tomorrow, though." Down to his boxers, he crawled into bed as Ginny put the book down beside her wand. "Nox."

As he got comfortable, she rolled over on top of him and started dropping kisses on his neck and upper chest.

With a start, he realised she hadn't worn anything at all to bed, a first for her. He ran his hands along her back, enjoying the feel of the warm, bare skin under his hands.

She continued to rub up against him, wrecking havoc with his nervous system.

"Ginny," he croaked, rapidly losing the ability of intelligent speech, "what are you doing?"

She gave a throaty chuckle. "If you have to ask, Harry, I'm not doing it right."

He cleared his throat. "No, I mean -"

"With your permission, Mr. Potter, I'd like to fulfil one of my New Year's Resolutions," she whispered, gazing up at him.

His eyes pinned her in place, first wide with surprise before softening. "Are you sure?" he asked quietly, one hand coming up to gently trace down the side of her face.

Eyes shining, she nodded.

"*Silencio*."

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Harry and Ginny, arm in arm, entered the dining room the next morning to find everyone else already seated. "Morning, all," Harry greeted them as he held a chair for Ginny.

Answers ranged from Tonks's chirpy return well wish to Ron's semi-intelligible grunt.

Harry said, "As host, I suppose there's one last item, or two as the case may be, that I should offer to my guests to assure they have everything they may need. So with that in mind, do any of you gentlemen need a Nonpater Potion?" Harry fought to keep his face politely inquisitive instead of blushing a shade to rival his girlfriend's hair. He realised making such a straightforward offer was of questionable taste, but he was also insanely curious to see how Hermione, and more importantly Ron, would react.

Fred and George quirked an eyebrow, but both politely declined.

Harry turned to Ron, still holding his questioning expression.

"Huh?" Ron asked. "Nonpater? What's that?"

Clenching his jaw to keep his expression neutral, he turned to Hermione. "Does he need one?"

Her eyes fell to her plate, refusing to look at any of the highly amused expressions aimed at her. She merely nodded.

It was only through sheer force of will that Harry's expression did not change. "Ladies, Prophylaxis Potion?"

Alicia and Angelina shook their heads, still looking toward Hermione.

For her part, Hermione merely muttered, "No, thank you. My last dose is still good."

Nodding and trying to still keep his face under control after the revelations, Harry turned to Borry who was placing his breakfast plate down. "A Nonpater Potion for Ron, please, Borry."

Borry nodded. "At once, Master Harry." The elf cracked out, only to reappear five seconds later to put a goblet on the table next to Ron's breakfast tea.

Ron looked at it then to Hermione and finally to Harry. "What is this?"

"Nonpater Potion, my dear brother," Fred answered, eyes rivalling Dumbledore in a good mood.

"I know that, you prat. I just want to know what it is."

"Nonpater is in Latin, Ron," Harry nudged him in the right direction, savouring the situation.

Sighing in exasperation, Ron leaned back and frowned for a moment. Muttering aloud, he pieced together the puzzle since everyone was refusing to answer him directly. "Nonpater. Non is not. Pater is father. Not father? A potion to cause . . ." He trailed off and his eyes bugged out.

"Yes, it is what it sounds like," Remus confirmed.

Ron's eyes shot from Ginny to Harry and finally to Hermione. Everyone could nearly see the thought processes going on behind Ron's eyes. Sighing in defeat, he took the goblet and tossed it back. "Hmm, not bad," he muttered, blushing furiously.

"No, doesn't taste all that bad, does it?" Harry agreed.

Ron muttered something and went back to attacking his breakfast.

"Well, now that we know we all had such a . . . relaxing night -"

Remus stopped speaking as most of the room broke into laughter.

Ron and Hermione kept their heads down through the commotion, red-faced.

"Sorry, Ron, Hermione," Harry apologised when he calmed. "I didn't mean to embarrass you so."

"What a momentous occasion," Fred mimed wiping a tear from his eye.

"Our ickle-Ronniekins is all grown up," George agreed with a look of pride.

"We should do something to celebrate."

"What is that Muggle custom? Passing out cigars?"

Harry, Tonks and Remus broke into fresh laughter. Hermione appeared to be laughing as well, but she still kept her head down.

Taking a breath to calm herself, Tonks explained to the pure-blood magicians wearing confused looks, "I think you've got the wrong custom. You pass out cigars at the birth of a child."

Fred and George roared with laughter at the irony of picking that particular custom incorrectly. Even Ron managed an embarrassed smile.

"As I was saying," Remus tried again, "now that we're all awake, we need to decide what to do with our guests."

Alicia and Angelina were confused.

Seeing their expressions, Ginny hastened to explain, "No, not anyone at the table. The ones in the duelling chamber."

The girls continued to look confused.

Remus and Harry looked to the twins.

Fred subtly shook his head.

Without missing a beat, Tonks explained to the two girls, "Last night as the party was winding down, Fred and George helped Remus and I with a little problem. Knowing how high profile the group here was last night, I'd set up Perimeter Charms around the property. We managed to catch ten Death Eater wannabes. They're currently in the duelling chamber."

"I just want to know how they knew about the party," Ginny grumbled.

"Colin and Dennis never responded to the invitation. I can ask them if they even received them. If not, I think that's the culprit," Harry guessed, already having thought about the same thing.

Tonks nodded. "Could be. At any rate," she turned back to Alicia and Angelina, "your boyfriends came up with an idea of what to do with them." She explained on for a few minutes, drawing incredulous looks from the girls and Harry.

"Bloody brilliant," Ron decided.

"It does solve the problem, Harry," Remus said. "Time it right and there's no way it could be traced back to us."

Harry's mouth slowly curved into a grin. "What time does the voting poll open?"

"Ten."

"Well, we'd better get moving so we're there on time, hadn't we?"

Remus stood and moved toward the kitchen. Tonks went to the parlour to make a couple of Floo calls.

The Unknown Power January 1 to January 25

Apparating to the designated area outside the Ministry of Magic's wards, Harry, Ginny, Dora and Remus followed the signs to the polling place. It was voting day for wizarding England.

Since the rooms off the Ministry lobby could be expanded to allow a hundred people to vote at once, the Ministry of Magic had never had a need to set up a second polling place. Therefore, anyone who voted had to go to the same place in order to do so.

Unsurprisingly, the Aurors, under the command of Kingsley Shacklebolt, had set up significant security arrangements.

Instead of the normal one guard station in the lobby, there were Aurors stationed every fifteen feet around the perimeter of the room. The centre of the large, circular room, which once contained the Fountain of Magical Brethren, was now cordoned off as a new centrepiece for the room was debated. The line of witches and wizards waiting to vote followed the curve of the room, going from near the massive fireplaces around to behind the security stand. There, everyone identified themselves by having their wand weighed. Anti-illusion charms suffused the area, cutting down the possibility of fraud. Once positively identified, the magician was ushered into individual hallways and from there to private rooms to cast their votes. The line was moving along briskly.

"We're only voting for Minister?" Harry asked. He'd been reading the [Daily Prophet](#) for the past few months, trying to get a feel for all the positions to be decided and who was running for what. The problem was the only position the articles mentioned was for Minister of Magic. Cornelius Fudge was being challenged by Amelia Bones of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry would've voted for Fluffy the three-headed dog before voting for Fudge, so his position didn't take long to decide.

Remus, standing just behind Harry and Ginny, answered Harry's question, "The Minister appoints all the department heads. The Wizengamot can remove anyone they feel is unfit afterwards. The Wizengamot itself selects new members for themselves as the need arises. There is a lot of political manoeuvring for those seats, but it isn't decided by votes from the wizards and witches on the streets." Remus glanced down at his watch. "Any second now," he muttered.

With a muted pop, a body appeared in the cordoned area.

Startled, all the Aurors and a quarter of the citizens in the room pulled their wands and pointed at the unexpected noise. Most of them, after getting a good look at the disturbance, started laughing.

Vincent Crabbe, Slytherin classmate of Harry's, was lying flat on the floor. He appeared to be unconscious, lying spread-eagled. He was also stark naked, his modesty protected only by a white mask which had been strategically placed.

Valiantly trying to maintain his composure, Kingsley approached from the direction of the security stand with his wand raised. He cast a few spells before assuring himself that the boy was indeed unconscious. He signalled for a medi-wizard when he determined nothing untoward (aside from the appearance of an unconscious body) had happened.

As Kingsley waited for the arrival of the medi-wizard, the crowd rapidly grew. Nobody seemed to want to leave the room to vote, and everyone arriving from outside or from just having voted stayed to see what was happening. A handful of reporters and photographers were already elbowing their way forward. Their scratching of quills and clicking of photographs was inaudible below the buzz of conversations and speculations taking place all around the room.

The medi-wizard arrived in a rush of flames within minutes. Spotting Kingsley waving him over, the medi-wizard moved through the crowd. Blinking in surprise at the scene in the middle of the room, he waved his wand around a few times. "He's just stunned," he announced, looking up at Kingsley. "Who is he?"

"Vincent Crabbe," Tonks spoke up. She shoved her way forward to the edge of the roped off area. "I'm Auror Tonks, and I'm teaching at Hogwarts this term," she explained to the room at large. "He's a student there. Slytherin, sixth year."

Kingsley, not in the least surprised to see his former partner there, nodded and turned to the medi-wizard. "Can we just Enervate him?"

The medi-wizard nodded. "*Enervate*."

Crabbe's eyes sprang open. Within a half second, he'd jumped to his feet, hand out in front of him as if he were still holding a wand.

Unfortunately, in the process of standing up, the mask slipped to the floor.

He was rather slow to realise this, not to mention his empty wand hand. His eyes were just adjusting to the crowd of people all staring at him when they all began reacting to his lack of clothing.

Chuckles, guffaws, expressions of dismay and noises of disgust overlapped.

"*Obscuro*," the medi-wizard cast in a slightly belated action.

"Uh . . ." Crabbe looked around with a dull expression. He finally noticed his lack of wand and then his lack of clothing. "Err . . ." His hands came down in a far too late attempt to cover himself. The medi-wizards' Obscuring Charm had already formed a grey "cloud" that his hands now dove into.

"This way, lad," Kingsley gestured toward one of the hallways not being used for voting.

The instant Crabbe, Shacklebolt and the medi-wizard exited the roped off circle, another pop sounded.

Kingsley instantly had his wand pointed toward the disturbance. He lowered it just as quickly with an audible sigh.

The crowd again started laughing. There in the middle of the circle was again an almost naked young man.

Kingsley looked toward Tonks.

She studied him for a moment. "Not a student, but isn't that Dauphin?"

Kingsley looked closer as the medi-wizard again went through his diagnostic series. "You're right, Tonks," the bald senior Auror agreed. "There's still an outstanding warrant for his arrest for illegal potion distribution."

"Stunned again," the medi-wizard pronounced.

Kingsley summoned an Auror to take the man into custody.

When everyone again left the circle, all eyes were aimed at the centre, awaiting the next development.

The crowd wasn't disappointed. An unconscious female form appeared, modesty protected by a white mask and her own hands.

"Millicent Bulstrode," Tonks reported after a short glance. "Another Slytherin sixth year."

Kingsley ignored the medi-wizard's actions and the increasing noise from the reporters and crowd. He was studying the two previous masks, casting a series of charms over them. Giving a sharp nod, he banished them down a hallway.

The medi-wizard cast on Obscuring Charm before waking Millicent. She also jumped to her feet as if defending herself. Her eyes widened considerably when they took in the scene. A moment later, each of her hands started moving rapidly, moving from one of three points to another in an unnecessary attempt to cover herself.

Six more forms appeared one at a time in the same way. Three of them were wanted criminals and were duly taken off to holding cells, the other three were students.

"Now for the big one," Remus muttered into Harry's ear.

Sure enough, Draco Malfoy appeared in the centre of the room in the same manner that all of the others had. By this point, the room was packed with people, including many more reporters, photographers, Ministry workers, Minister Fudge and Headmaster Dumbledore.

When Tonks calmly stated the identity of the latest one to appear, whispers flowed around the room quickly. First Lucius Malfoy was definitely shown to be a Death Eater and now his son was apparently caught up in something with several wanted criminals. The reporters were all nearly bouncing in anticipation of the stories that would result.

Once awakened, Draco shouted, "Perimeter Charm! Look out for -" He abruptly stopped as he realised his surroundings didn't match what he was expecting. He slowly looked around, pale features losing what little colour they had. "I demand that my wand be returned," was the first thing he said as he slowly stood, holding the white mask in place.

"A total of ten wands were on the front steps of Hogwarts this morning," Dumbledore announced to everyone. He stepped forward and handed the first full to Kingsley. "As it happens, I believe that Mr. Malfoy's is one of them."

Malfoy glared at Dumbledore as he stalked over to Shacklebolt. "I demand my wand back," he snarled, trying his best to ignore the hundreds of eyes upon the small drama being played out.

Harry thought he could hear Malfoy's teeth grinding.

Shacklebolt adopted an innocent expression. "Don't you want us to investigate how you and your . . . friends were Portkeyed into the Ministry in such a state?"

Malfoy glanced among the faces of everyone watching, apparently missing Harry several rows back, before stopping at Tonks. He glared for a moment before turning back to Shacklebolt. "No, no investigations. I don't want to press charges against P- whoever did this."

Shrugging agreeably, Kingsley waved Draco toward the same hallway he'd sent the other arriving students toward. Together, the two went that direction. The crowd parted before them, but then turned back toward the closed area, hoping for more arrivals. When nobody new appeared, everyone slowly dispersed. The voters went back toward the security desk, and the reporters toward the fireplaces. Everywhere, conversations,

rumours and speculations started up.

"Well, that was most entertaining," Fred observed, joining the small group as they got back into line to vote.

Nobody dared comment further.

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After voting, Harry made it back to his Manor before breaking into laughter. Tonks, Remus and Ginny, the only other three keyed to Apparate through the wards around the house, appeared near him in the parlour and everyone collapsed onto handy furniture before they, too, started laughing uncontrollably.

Ron and Hermione, the former grinning widely, joined them from the direction of the kitchen.

"How'd it go?" Ron asked excitedly.

Ignoring Hermione's disapproving glare, Harry said, "Brilliantly! Must've been a hundred reporters and photographers there by the time Malfoy appeared. He didn't say anything incriminating, though, unfortunately." He turned to Tonks. "Was Simon Firthquill one of your Floo calls earlier? I noticed he was one of the first ones there."

She affected an innocent expression. "Who, me?"

Harry, Ginny and Hermione rolled their eyes.

"When do the returns start coming in?" Hermione asked.

Remus and Tonks shook their heads. "Results aren't announced like in Muggle votes. It's all tallied at once tonight after the polls close. The WWN will announce the results just after nine tonight."

"So we have ten hours," Ginny observed. She stood and grabbed Harry's hand to pull him upright. Once he was up, she headed toward the stairs, still dragging him along.

"Should I ask?" Ron wondered aloud, clearly unsure whether he should be speaking up at all.

"After what I saw when Crabbe stood up, I need something to blot out that image. I've decided that the manly hunk of wizard here will have to do just that."

Ron winced, head in hands.

Tonks and Remus broke into laughter at the expression on Harry's face.

"You go and try your hardest at that, Harry," Hermione called with laughter in her voice.

"I can't believe you're encouraging them," Ron moaned.

Once they were far enough away that they couldn't hear, Harry whispered, "I can't believe you're teasing them like this."

She gave him a wicked grin as she pushed the door to their bedroom closed behind herself. "Serves Ron right. With what he and Hermione admitted to compared to how he reacts to US, he deserves anything we do to him."

Harry chuckled. "True enough. Now, what was it you really wanted me up here for?"

She looked at him in wide-eyed innocence. "What makes you think I didn't bring you up here to have my wicked way with you?"

He made a face at her expression. "Because if you wanted to do that, it would've happened last night. What was that you were saying about your New Year's Resolution, anyway?"

She gently pushed him until he fell onto his back atop the bed, not that he was resisting. "I said that was ONE of my resolutions." She climbed up onto the bed, straddling his hips before leaning down until her mouth was hovering a bare inch above his. "My next resolution will have to wait until my birthday. Until then, we're only a third of the way through that book Tonks gave you."

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During lunch, Harry was pensive while Remus, Tonks and Ginny all spent their time winding Ron up.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked him quietly.

His reflexive answer of, "I'm fine," didn't make it past his lips. "I'm thinking of going back to the Dursleys and pick up the rest of my stuff," he answered instead.

"What all is left there?"

Harry frowned. "Not much, probably. Some parchment, ink, stuff like that, I think."

Hermione shrugged. "Why bother? I know you'd be happier if you never had to see them again."

"I should also tell them that I'm not coming back at the end of the school year."

She made a face. "Again, why bother? Send them a note saying 'good riddance' and be done with it."

"You're talking about the Dursleys?" Ginny entered the conversation.

Harry nodded. "We have hours yet until the vote is announced. I doubt I could concentrate enough to do any of our tutoring, Remus, so I may as well get something useful accomplished."

"You helped Ginny get over her trauma, what more do you want to do today?" Ron asked in a surly tone.

The other five people at the table grinned.

"Well, I'd actually like to go with you," Ginny announced. "I'd like to meet them, just to know what they're like."

Remus sighed, and Ron shook his head. "No you wouldn't," Ron disagreed. "I've seen them, remember? I have no wish to subject myself to such an ordeal again."

"You're getting better," Ginny teased. "You're using bigger words now."

"Hermione must be having a good effect on him," Tonks thought out loud.

Ron made a face at them while Harry fought his snickers.

Lupin was still thinking about the Dursleys. "I agree with Ron on the Dursleys. I only met Petunia once, and that's more than enough. I'm with Hermione, Harry. Send them a note and be done with it."

"I feel I owe it to them to do that face to face." He allowed a slight grin to form.

"Would you like some company?" Remus asked, eyeing Harry in concern.

"I'll be with him," Ginny announced.

Remus nodded. "Still."

"We'll have our wands, Remus. We'll be fine," Harry tried to reassure his godfather.

Hermione made an undignified noise of agreement.

Remus dryly replied, "It's not you two that I'm worried about."

Tonks smirked but hid it immediately.

"I promise I won't kill them," Harry said with a chuckle and a smirk.

Rully, Dobby and Winky came in to begin clearing the dishes.

Remus spoke up, "Rully, thank you for your help this morning. Everything went perfectly with the Portkeys I gave you."

The elves gave toothy grins and bowed to Remus. "Rully is happy to be helping Master Remus. Bad wizards are being taught their lesson?"

Remus shrugged. "I don't know for sure but probably. They have to know who did it but can't say anything without implicating themselves of trespassing at the very least. I think we're okay for at least a while. When we're all gone, you're authorised to defend the property with any and all needed force, of course."

Dobby's eyes took on a hardness that looked decidedly out of place on his usually open and happy face.

All three elves looked to Harry for permission.

Harry thought about it for a moment. "Even if we're here, you're permitted to act in non-lethal defence of the grounds and all living beings within. Your own lives are more important, however. If a fight ever reaches the point that you're in mortal danger, you're under orders to escape by all means necessary. I would recommend Hogwarts to inform Dumbledore, but successful escape is your primary goal at that point. I will NOT allow you to get into a fight that could kill you."

Rully and Winky looked upset at the orders, but nodded their understanding.

Dobby slowly shook his head. "Dobby will not run when Master Harry is in danger," he stated flatly.

Everyone except Rully and Winky looked at him in surprise. It was the first time in memory that Dobby had flatly refused an order from Harry.

It was Winky who spoke next. "Winky and the other elveses will do as Master Harry orders. Winky is being hoping, though, that Master Harry will be permitting his elveses to fight for him properly. If any of the elveses die in that fight, then the elveses will die happy."

"This is starting to make sense," Remus said thoughtfully. "Harry, in addition to Joining your House, they're also trying to pledge their lives to you. By ordering them to run if their lives are threatened, you're essentially insulting them." He raised a hand at Harry's look of shock and anger. "I know you didn't mean it that way. You're trying to look after their best interests, but look at it from their point of view for a moment. You're essentially saying that they're more valuable as personal attendants than as fighting comrades."

Harry's eyes widened as he realised what an insult he'd paid to them when it was phrased that way. He turned his head. "Rully, Winky, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that about you. I hope the situation never comes up, but if you're willing to fight, I won't forbid you from doing so."

Rully and Winky relaxed, and their smiles returned.

Harry looked at Rully. "Same orders to Delly, Borry, Tarry, and Scully. I will not order any of you to fight, but I won't forbid you either."

Rully nodded and cracked out.

Harry turned to Dobby as Winky resumed clearing the table as if nothing had happened. "I'm not upset, Dobby, but why did you refuse my earlier order?"

Dobby shook his head slowly. "Dobby is a free elf, Master Harry. Dobby chooses to defend Master Harry."

"As a free elf, he is not obliged to follow your orders, Harry," Remus explained. "He has chosen to do so, but he can refuse any orders he wants to."

Dobby nodded agreement at the explanation. "Dobby will follow all of Master Harry's orders, but not if they is not being good for Master Harry."

Harry slowly nodded and smiled as it all sunk in. "Thank you."

Dobby, Winky and Delly, who'd appeared to help clear the table, bowed deeply then resumed their work.

"I didn't realise they were all so loyal to you, Harry," Hermione said in awe.

The three elves hitched for a moment in their movements. They glanced at each other and shook their heads.

Hermione, frowning, just about said something when Delly turned to her. The elf shook her head sadly. "Miss Hermy is trying to be a friend to Master Harry, so the elveses have been ignoring Miss Hermy's words and actions. Miss Hermy does not understand house-elves."

Hermione looked insulted.

Ron sighed, resigned. "Hermione, weren't you listening? Harry inadvertently insulted them when he tried to protect them. Their loyalty to a House and their Master is what defines a house-elf. By questioning that loyalty, you're insulting them in the worst possible way. With the whole SPEW thing two years ago and trying to trick them into accepting clothing, you've been insulting house-elves since you knew they existed."

She looked stricken. "But I didn't mean -"

Delly nodded. "The elveses know Miss Hermy does not mean to hurt the elveses with her words. That is why the elveses forgive her. Miss Hermy does not understand house-elves," she repeated. With that, Delly turned and continued to clean the table.

Near tears, Hermione opened her mouth.

"Don't," Ginny and Tonks interrupted her. Ginny continued, "Just leave it, Hermione. You can't do any good right now. Just leave them alone for a while."

Hermione leaned back in her seat, face somewhere between thoughtful and a pout.

"Harry, Sirius's death wasn't your fault, you know," Remus said quietly, knowing they were going to repeat an oft-argued point.

"WHAT?" Harry's head snapped around.

"The way you phrased your original order to the elves," Tonks explained calmly. "'I will not allow you to get into a fight that might kill you,'" she quoted.

Remus nodded agreement. "You couldn't have kept Sirius out of the Department of Mysteries that night, Harry. I know; I tried."

"But he wouldn't have had to come if I hadn't been suckered in," Harry said bitterly.

All five glared at him.

"Do we really have this out again?" Remus asked.

Harry let out a slow breath, visibly relaxing. "No," he said. "Thank you, though."

Ginny squeezed his hand. "Are you okay?" she asked in concern.

Harry managed a sad smile for her and nodded.

That was overly emotional," Tonks remarked after a few moments of silence.

Ron grunted in agreement.

Remus turned to Harry. "You're going to visit the Dursleys?"

Harry and Ginny nodded.

"Sure you don't want someone else to come along with you?"

Harry shook his head. "We'll be fine."

As Harry and Ginny stood, Dobby entered the room with their heavy cloaks over his arms.

Shaking his head in continuing amazement at the perceptiveness of house-elves, Harry thanked Dobby and helped Ginny with her cloak before putting his own on.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

He opened his mouth before snapping it shut again. He shook his head. "That's right, you've never been there, have you?"

"You could try Apparating to Harry after he's gone," Remus offered.

Tonks and Hermione looked at him strangely.

"What?" Ginny asked in confusion.

"As Harry Apparates, concentrate on him and then Apparate to HIM instead of to a location," Remus explained as if it were obvious.

"Why haven't you told us about it before?" Harry asked in curiosity.

Remus waved it off. "The chaser has to be very familiar with the leader. That's why it's uncommon except with couples who rarely need it anyway."

Harry and Ginny shared a mutual shrug.

"May as well try it," Harry said. "Follow me in a couple seconds?"

She nodded.

Remus, wearing a mischievous grin, watched both wink out at the same time.

Pop-pop.

Harry looked over at her in surprise. "I thought I asked you to follow in a few seconds?"

She shrugged, frowning. "I was going to. I must not have wanted to leave your side." She grinned at him before looking around. "Where are we?"

Harry waved a hand. "Welcome to the Little Whinging Municipal Park, such as it is. We're about a mile from my uncle's place." He nodded toward one of the exits and the couple walked out, arm-in-arm.

Ginny was looking around in unabashed curiosity at the deadly dull and repetitive Muggle neighbourhood as they advanced.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"You don't have to answer this if you don't want, but what did Remus mean about having it out with you again? I presume he somehow convinced you that Sirius's death wasn't your fault?" she asked tentatively.

Harry sighed and his shoulders slumped. "Yeah, he did." He took a calming breath and explained, "Over the summer he asked how it was my fault Sirius died. I explained how I didn't confirm his location. He pointed out that I did when I asked Kreacher. The fact that that evil little creature lied is irrelevant. I couldn't have known that. I next told Remus about not learning Occlumency. He pointed out that a student failing to learn is at least half, if not more, the teacher's fault. Then I told him about the mirrors. He pointed out that we'd never used them, and I hadn't touched mine in months, so I wouldn't have had them in mind."

"Is that when he fixed yours?" Ginny asked. She'd heard he'd destroyed his, but then she'd watched him use it on Halloween.

"Yeah, he fixed it and then put special pockets in all my robes for it." He touched a spot on his robes to show that he was carrying his mirror now.

She nodded. "Did all of that convince you that you weren't at fault?"

Harry shrugged ambiguously.

"It wasn't your fault, you know," she stated firmly.

"Yeah, Remus continued his arguments. Let's see . . . It could've been Snape's fault for failing to teach me Occlumency and goading Sirius, Sirius himself for running off half-cocked, McGonagall's for having gotten hurt earlier and was therefore not available to me to help, Dumbledore for not having told me more, Remus's for not stopping Sirius. No, let's get to the ones really at fault. Kreacher for lying. Malfoy for telling Kreacher to lie. Voldemort for telling Malfoy. Voldemort again for sending his Death Eaters into the Ministry in the first place. Most importantly, though, Bellatrix Lestrange for casting that spell during their duel." He paused for a moment in thought. "I'm glad that we stopped Voldemort, even if I have the occasional nightmare about it."

"I know you do. I've held you through a few, if you'll recall."

"As I've held you through some of your own."

She nodded in acknowledgement of his point. "All of Remus's arguments are right, you know. Do you actually believe them?"

He let out a slow breath. "I'm getting there." He looked forward and slipped an arm over her shoulder. "I'm getting there," he repeated in a whisper.

After a few moments, Harry spoke up again. "In addition to Sirius, I wish you all hadn't gotten hurt."

Ginny blew out a breath in frustration. "What if Ron came up and told you that he knew Charlie had just been kidnapped by Death Eaters and that he was going to rescue him?"

"I'd go with him," Harry answered automatically. Indeed, no thought was required for such a question.

"Right. Now, he tells you that you shouldn't go because he was afraid you'd get hurt."

"Wouldn't matter. I'd go anyw -" He stopped abruptly.

"NOW will you let that guilt go?" she asked, having gotten her point across.

Harry smiled slightly. "Caught me in my own trap, you little witch. Okay, you've made your point."

"Have I?" she asked quietly. "Sirius's death, our injuries, none of it was your fault. I hope you start believing that sooner or later."

The sadness in his eyes and the tense set of his shoulders lowered by degrees. "Yeah," he said quietly.

Feeling him finally relax again, Ginny turned back to study the Muggle homes they were walking past. A couple of blocks passed, the couple not at all bothered by the silence.

Harry noticed in passing that Mrs. Figg's house was up for sale.

"Hey, are you okay?" Ginny asked a block later.

"Yeah," he said, surprised to notice how tense he was again getting at the thought of the upcoming confrontation. "I'm just not sure how to react to the Dursleys, I guess."

"We don't have to do this if you don't want to," she offered, pulling him to a stop.

He shook his head with a tiny grin. "Naw. I have one or two things I'd definitely like to discuss with them."

She smiled with a wicked edge to it and resumed walking. "I knew you didn't just want to say goodbye. There had to be more to this visit. Do any of these things you want to say have the Weasley Wizard Wheezes trademark on them by any chance?"

Harry smiled back. "Nope, though you've got the right idea."

"This could be fun. Can I help?"

"Feel free to do anything you want to, dear." He suddenly stiffened, and Ginny followed his eyes to a home that was nearly identical to the ones on either side of it. The large number 4 on the door told her the importance of that particular home.

Sighing in resignation, Harry trudged forward, head down.

She stopped him before his finger hit the doorbell. "Harry, don't let them get to you. Please remember three things. You took down the most powerful, evil wizard just three months ago. Every remaining evil wizard in the world is deathly afraid of you. Last and most important, I love you." She leaned in and gave him a lingering kiss that warmed him from his hair to his toenails. She pulled back and evaluated the effect she'd had on the wizard in front of her. Nodding in satisfaction, she said, "Now take out your wand, get in there, and tell them what you think of 'em."

Harry laughed, hugging his girlfriend on the front steps of his uncle's house without reservation. How he deserved such a person loving him was beyond his understanding.

Without warning, the door beside them jerked open and Vernon Dursley stuck his large purple face out. "What do you two think you're doing, making such spectacles of . . . Oh," he went on in a flat tone. "It's you. I thought I wasn't going to see you until that freak school of yours let out in June."

taking strength from the small but powerful form beside him, Harry stood straight and smiled. "So very nice to see you, too, Uncle Vernon. May we come in?"

Vernon harrumphed but stepped aside after looking up and down the street. Mustn't give the neighbours the wrong impression, after all.

"Hey, Dad, who's that?" The large form of Dudley Dursley came stomping down the stairs, chocolate smeared around his mouth and one hand. He stopped at seeing the slight, pretty redhead entering the front room. In what he thought to be a smooth tone, he said, "Well, hello there, gorgeous. I'm called Big D. What should I call you?"

Ginny, all bright eyes, wide smile and manic energy, started talking very rapidly, "Oh! You must be Harry's cousin Dudley. He's told me SO much about you. Like the times you beat him up and the times you and your gang chased him and how he had no friends because of you and the time he saved you from a dementor after you wet your britches. Oh, sorry, my name is Ginny. I'm Harry's fiancée. How do you do?" She held out a hand to him.

Dudley blinked. She was speaking so quickly that he'd barely caught all of it. His hand automatically came forward while he tried to process everything he'd just heard. "Wait, fiancée? A gorgeous little thing like you is engaged to HIM?"

"Yep! Isn't it great? I'm SO lucky to have caught such a prize as Harry. I mean I have six older brothers; I think you met Fred, George, Ron and my dad, didn't you? Anyway, I have six brothers, so I know a thing or two to look out for in a man. Harry is everything I could ever want. He's SO nice to me, buying me expensive presents, has his own castle, great kisser, even better in bed and all. He's famous in the wizarding world, you know, after what happened when he was a child. Then just a few months ago he and I fought and killed Voldemort. His name is really Tom Riddle, you know. Or you probably don't, do you? You're a Muggle, poor thing. Anyway, it's Tom Riddle, but everyone calls him You-Know-Who like just saying his name is dangerous or something. Anyway, we killed him Halloween morning, just the two of us. Of course we had to be kidnapped first, but that's neither here nor there. He had us kidnapped and we cast a couple of spells at him and boom. No more Tommy." She giggled, a high pitched sound that sent shivers down everyone's spines.

Harry vaguely wondered how she could say all of that without appearing to have taken a breath.

Ginny was already off again, still grinning in a very unsettling manner. "Hagrid told me about you. You remember Hagrid, I'm sure. Really big guy, waves a pink umbrella around? Anyway, he told me about giving you a pig's tail. I promised I'd complete his job if I thought you deserved it. And to be honest, I think I do. I mean, look at you. I've seen Hungarian Horntails that weighed less. But you wouldn't know what a Hungarian Horntail is, would you? Poor Muggle, never seen a dragon, I bet. My brother works with them, you know. Actually, more than just the Horntails, but I was talking about dragons in general."

Dudley was staring at her with an open mouth and didn't respond.

Ginny turned to Harry with a pout. "HARRRREEEEEE!" she whined. "You promised I could play with him. He's boring."

Desperately trying to keep a straight face at her act, Harry shook his head. "Sorry, love. He's usually more active than this. Of course you're the first witch he's ever met, so he's probably a little intimidated."

Ginny turned back to Dudley and stomped one foot. "Say something," she demanded.

"W - Witch?" Dudley stuttered.

"Yes, a witch. You know, a female magician. You do know what a female is, don't you?" she asked in a scathing tone.

"YOU BROUGHT ANOTHER OF YOUR FREAK FRIENDS INTO MY HOME?" Vernon bellowed, finally finding his voice.

"*Volucris Phantasma*," Ginny snarled, suddenly pointing her wand at Vernon. The grey light of the spell flashed across the room and impacted Vernon. Immediately, a swarm of amorphous shapes started flying around his head, batting at his face.

"AAAHHHH! GET THEM OFF ME!"

"*Silencio*." Vernon's cries were suddenly cut off, but his arms continued thrashing about, smashing into the cabinets and knocking pictures from the walls.

Harry headed toward the stairs, not bothering to look at Vernon. "I'm going to check my room, love. Enjoy yourself down here."

"Oh, I'm sure I will," she chirped, grinning in demented glee. "Dudley, I'll give you a five second head start."

Shaking his head, Harry went up to his old room, ignoring the loud sounds and high-pitched giggles coming from the front room. Once into his barely furnished room, he pried up the loose floorboard to his secret hiding space. He thought he'd collected everything when the Order's escort team showed up in late July, but he just wanted to make sure. Two owl treats, a sheet of parchment that looked like it had Quidditch doodles on it by his hand and a broken quill were the total contents of the hiding place. Satisfied that nothing of value had been left behind, Harry put the floorboard back in place and glanced around the room. After a moment, he shook his head and left. There was nothing left in the house for him.

Halfway down the staircase, he put his planned revenge into action. Pulling out his wand, he counted the steps and cast a spell at three of them. Satisfied, he put his wand away and entered the front room, wondering how much of his uncle and cousin Ginny had left.

Both were sitting on the couch, looking scared and haggard, but otherwise well enough. Ginny had apparently reversed her Bat-Bogey Hex while he was upstairs.

She was now venting her anger at them. "... of the most generous people I've ever met. How he could be this way after having lived with YOU is something that I'll never understand. You're a disgrace to humanity. I'd put you out of my misery, but frankly you're not worth my time." She saw Harry standing there with a wide smile, and her ire abruptly evaporated. "Did you get everything taken care of upstairs?"

Harry nodded and turned to his terrified uncle. "I'm moving out. I'm never coming back, which I'm sure is what you've wanted for the past decade and a half. I have no idea where Aunt Petunia is, but tell her that I can't imagine how she and my mother came from the same home. Good riddance."

Reaching over, he took Ginny's hand and Apparated to the parlour of Potter Manor.

Ron and Remus looked up from their chess game and smiled.

"Anything left of them?" Ron asked cheerfully.

Harry shrugged. "Oh, they're fine. Nothing was left in my room, so no reason to ever go back."

Ron's face fell. "You didn't do anything to them?"

"I didn't say that..." Harry trailed off with a smirk as he sat on the loveseat.

Remus leaned back. "Are you going to tell us the story or not?"

"After convincing them that she was insane, I saw her cast a Bat-Bogey Hex and Silencing Charm on Uncle Vernon. I went upstairs at that point. I don't know what else she did to them." Harry smiled proudly at Ginny as he gently pulled her down to recline against his chest.

She snuggled against Harry and made a contented noise. "Nothing they don't deserve," she said after settling herself properly. "Your cousin should start turning into a pig about now. It'll be a slow transformation and only last for an hour, though."

Harry, Ron and Tonks broke into laughter. The girls were just entering the room from the direction of the stairs and had apparently heard what Ginny said.

Remus was trying to fight a smile, but Hermione was upset. "You could get in real trouble for that, Ginny."

"Only if they complain," Tonks pointed out. "I can't see them doing that, though."

Harry shook his head in agreement.

Tonks turned to him. "What were you doing during this time?"

"Nothing so dramatic as Ginny, here. Just Spouting Jinxes on the third, sixth, and tenth steps."

"Uh, oh," Ron grinned. "Saying what?"

"'Harry Potter is a wizard' on the third. 'Warty, warty, Hogwarts' on the sixth, and 'Magic makes the world go 'round' on the tenth."

Everyone, even Hermione, laughed. They were sure that the rabidly anti-magic Dursleys would loathe the fact that they'd feel compelled to spout off the specified phrases every time they touched the steps in question.

Harry turned to Ginny. "Not that I'm complaining, but what was that you said to them about being my fiancée?"

She smiled innocently. "Oops. Did I say that out loud to them?"

Tonks, Hermione and Remus smiled. Ron paled.

Harry looked at her for a moment. "Was that a proposal?" he asked, a curious expression on his face.

Ron's face went through several weird contortions, but he didn't make a sound.

"Hmm," Ginny thought about it. "Not quite yet, but we'll discuss it later."

Hermione sighed, eyes slightly glazed over.

"I have a couple questions," Remus said. "What was that about convincing the Dursleys that Ginny was insane?"

Harry grinned in remembrance. "Ah, the brilliance of my girlfriend. Picture the air-headedness of Lavender, the flakiness of Luna, and the energy and enthusiasm of Dennis all rolled into one and multiply that by about ten. THAT is what she was like."

His audience chuckled at the mental image.

"Okay, my other question is about you two dual Apparating."

The couple blinked. "We dual Apparated?" Ginny asked.

"Twice now, so it couldn't have been a fluke," Remus confirmed cheerfully. "When I told you to Apparate TO Harry, which is impossible by the way,

you disappeared at the same time as he Apparated out. You didn't wait a few seconds. I can only assume he Apparated the both of you. Then when you Apparated back, you were holding hands. That can't have happened unless it was dual again. Ginny, did you intentionally Apparate either time?"

She shook her head, eyes wide.

Remus leaned back in his chair, nodding in satisfaction.

"But isn't that really difficult?" Ron asked with a frown.

"Yep. For a sufficiently powerful wizard it IS possible, though. You two already having worked together to bring Voldemort down and your already close auras make it easier. That's probably why you didn't notice the extra power you had to spend, Harry."

"You made it sound like it was easy to Apparate to him," Ginny objected.

"I lied," Remus admitted without a trace of guilt. "I actually wanted you two to dual Apparate. Like I said, it's tough, but I knew it was possible for you two."

Ron slowly shook his head with a grin. "Nothing is ever just 'average' with you, is it, Harry?"

Harry made a face at his best friend.

Hermione poked Ron's shoulder. "You know how much he wants to be normal, Ron. Stop teasing him like that."

"Yes, dear."

Harry grinned at Ron. "Oh, she has you whipped but good."

Ron grinned back. In a voice that was a passable imitation of Harry's, he retorted, "In the right hands, a whip can actually be a lot of fun."

The two friends chuckled, Hermione smirking along.

"Should I ask?" Tonks wondered.

Ginny was also looking confused.

"Never mind," Harry waved it off. "Remus, what are your plans after holidays?"

Remus shrugged. "If Amelia Bones wins the election, I'm going to start lobbying for increased rights for werewolves. I figure she's a more receptive Minister."

Harry grunted. "A mountain troll with hemorrhoids would make for a better Minister than Fudge."

"Granted."

"Hmm, okay," Harry said thoughtfully. "I have a few ideas for you, then. First off, you're welcome to live here. I need someone to keep an eye on the place. The elves are fine to keep the place ticking over, but we may as well have someone getting some use out of it. Who better than my godfather? Over the summer, we can talk about more duelling tutoring." Harry took a breath. This next part was going to be more difficult.

Ginny squeezed his hand. "It's okay, Harry. They'll support you."

He shot her a grateful smile. Turning to his confused werewolf friend, he glanced between him and Hermione. "This one actually could concern both of you."

Screwing up his Gryffindor courage, he plunged in. "Starting this summer, I'm going to have Neville and Eloise running a greenhouse for me. In it, they're going to be growing a lot of belladonna and various other things."

"Belladonna is a poison, Harry," Ron cut in, in confusion.

Remus and Hermione were looking at Harry with wide eyes, clearly knowing where this was going.

"There is one medicinal use for belladonna, Ron," Tonks said, eyeing Harry in pleased surprise.

"Wolfsbane," Ginny nodded.

"Which is incredibly generous, if wasteful, if it's just for me," Remus whispered.

"If on the other hand I have enough made for dozens of werewolves every full moon . . ." Harry led Remus in the correct direction

"That is . . ." Remus, wide eyed, couldn't seem to finish his sentence.

"Why?" Tonks asked bluntly.

Ginny, Ron and Hermione turned to her in shock. Remus looked betrayed.

Harry just nodded, knowing she was playing the part of devil's advocate. "This is the most immediate way to help werewolves. I'm also going to try to get the laws changed about their employment. If they have a supply of Wolfsbane and prove they've been taking it consistently and have a safe place in case something goes wrong, then there is no reason they all can't be employed." He leaned forward, eyes on Remus. "Think about it. It would still have to be known to the employer due to days lost at the full moon, but other than that you've already proven to be a fine professor, let alone any other employment. If we can get those barbaric 'Lycanthropic Regulation' laws repealed, the entire werewolf population could be freed."

Hermione said, "That would take changing laws, which means lobbyists and a public relations campaign."

Harry nodded. "Which is where you would come in. With the SPEW thing our third year, you proved you have the heart of a crusader. With my public image," his lip twisted in wry amusement, "I could bring public attention to just about anything I wanted. Remus here is a prime example of what a werewolf COULD be if these ridiculous laws were removed."

Hermione nodded. "Second thing they would need is the Wolfsbane supply. That's expensive, but you're apparently going to cover this yourself, at least for now?"

Harry nodded. "Once the werewolves start working, I'd ask for payment for the continuing costs, but for the time being I'm going to foot the entire bill."

Hermione nodded, not the least bit surprised at Harry's stunning generosity. "Next is someplace to do all this. You'll need the greenhouse, a decent potions lab and somewhere to house the werewolves during the full moon." She looked at Remus in apology. "For safety, this would just about have to be a kennel or something similar. Individual cages, maybe silver bars. If the Wolfsbane doesn't work for whatever reason, then keeping them all separated from each other and from all humans is absolutely vital. If everything goes well, releasing them all into a central yard or something would be more humane."

Harry nodded. "I've already asked Gringott's to look into purchasing some land near Hogsmeade. I was thinking about a large spread and then fencing it. Let all the werewolves roam free during the full moon."

"You'll need help to run this," Tonks put in.

Harry sighed. "Yeah, including security. There will be enough people who dislike the idea that I'd need guards on the property. During full moon especially, but full time, probably." He grinned at Tonks. "Maybe Aurors who are already familiar with werewolves and have a vested interest in their well-being?"

Ron and Ginny snickered as Tonks rolled her eyes. "Subtle, Potter. Real subtle."

"Thank you. Anyway, what do you all think of the idea?"

Remus was staring, mouth slightly agape.

Tonks smiled at his expression. "It'll take some planning and a lot more work than you've mentioned, but I'm willing to pursue the idea."

Hermione nodded. "You'll need at least one potions master brewer, preferably several."

"When I asked Professor Sprout for her recommendations for the greenhouse, she gave me the names of Neville and Eloise. That didn't really surprise me. What DID surprise me was that she mentioned that Eloise was also the top of her class in Potions. I asked her about brewing the Wolfsbane and she said she'd give it a shot but would like Snape standing over her shoulder the first couple of times."

Remus grimaced. "I bet he'll love that."

Harry nodded agreement at the sarcasm in Lupin's words. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Eloise said she'd talk to Snape about it. For some reason, she thinks he'd be more receptive to her than me."

Ron grinned. "Snape would be more receptive to that troll you mentioned earlier than he would to you, Harry."

"Hence Eloise talking with him instead," Harry agreed. "Anyway, Hermione, I know you're good enough to brew it as well if you wanted to try."

Hermione nodded slowly. "She and I could brew it when needed but each do other things for you when we're not brewing." She looked up at him. "You wanted me to run the public relations and lobbying effort for this?"

"Yeah. I can't think of anyone better suited."

"Well, I don't know about that," she demurred, blushing at the praise. "At any rate, we'll need to hire a public relations firm. Also, I'll need to talk with a lobbying group to learn what I can do on that end."

"Albus," Remus stated firmly. "Albus can help you out with that, Hermione. He can put you in contact with the appropriate people." He turned to Harry. "Talking with the appropriate people on the Wizengamot is only part of the battle, though, Harry. Public opinion will be what really drives this."

Harry nodded. "That is where you and I come in, Remus. You're popular among your former students and the Order. Much as I hate it, my fame means I can bring public attention to just about any issue."

Hermione nodded. "With the right speech and a few press conferences, you could push this issue a long way, Harry."

Me, too," Ginny added.

"You, too," Hermione agreed.

"This summer," Harry reminded them. "The nursery in Diagon Alley can't get the seedlings to me earlier than that."

"Is that the only place you asked?" Remus asked.

Harry nodded.

Remus chewed on a lip. "What all do you need?"

Harry shrugged. "Neville, Eloise and Professor Sprout are going to put a total list together. He mentioned that once we had the full setup there, we may as well grow some other things to make at least some money."

"Once he has the list, let me know. I might be able to hurry some of this along. Also, once you have a property, I can spend some of my time getting it ready."

"What are you going to call this, anyway?" Ginny wondered.

"Wolfden."

Remus smiled. "Very appropriate. Any other surprises in store for us?"

Harry smiled mysteriously. "Oh, one or two."

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Harry read the story in the Daily Prophet in satisfaction. True to Remus's prediction, the WVN had announced Fudge's overwhelming defeat the previous evening. Fudge had apparently only gotten seven percent of the popular vote. Amusingly, write-ins for Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore combined were at nine percent. Amelia Bones was the clear winner with the remaining eighty-four percent.

The story went on with a list of changes that Minister Bones had promised to implement including financial and security audits of the Ministry and an investigation of former Undersecretary Delores Umbridge.

The story Harry was reading wasn't a surprise either, but it did put a serious dent in Malfoy's public image.

... the appearance of young Mr. Malfoy in the same manner as four wanted criminals, one is forced to wonder how close of a connection the member of the powerful and influential Malfoy family has with these members of the criminal class.

With Lucius Malfoy in Ministry custody and under a mountain of evidence of being a Death Eater, now Draco Malfoy's at least circumstantial connection to other criminals in an undisclosed action that led to their obvious capture, this reporter wonders how much of the Malfoy fortune and influence has been won by legitimate means.

With the largest proponents of Pure-blood supremacy under such a cloud of suspicion and new Ministry leadership about to take control, wizarding Britain is sure to change.

Three of the biggest names in Britain, namely Minister-elect Amelia Bones, Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, and the Boy Who Won Harry Potter all agree on one thing. "The changes coming are all for the better."

- by Simon Firthquill

There. THAT should put Malfoy in his place. Which, in Harry's opinion, was under the slimiest rock that could be found. Harry was so satisfied with the article that he wasn't upset with Simon for putting words into his mouth.

"Good quote he got from you, Harry," Tonks said with a grin as she read the article.

"Isn't it? Too bad I don't remember giving it."

Tonks chuckled along before turning the page. She abruptly jerked forward. "Bloody hell!"

Almost afraid to know what would get that kind of reaction out of the normally easy-going Auror, Harry hesitantly turned the page of his own paper.

Escaped High-Ranking Death Eater Apprehended

Harry rapidly devoured the article. It was actually quite short, stating only that Bellatrix Lestrange had been caught by Ministry Aurors in Knockturn Alley after a short but vicious duel. Her trial was to start the first week that Hogwarts was back in session.

"How about that?" Harry whispered with a grin.

"She was the highest one left, wasn't she?"

"Far's I know, yeah," Harry agreed. "Questioning her and Malfoy under Veritaserum will answer that better, though." His face slowly fell as he realised what else Bellatrix could tell a questioner.

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Harry closed the sliding door on the Hogwarts Express with a frown. "I talked to Colin. He and Dennis never received their invitations," he announced.

Tonks nodded. "That's what we figured."

Sighing, Harry flopped into the seat next to Ginny. "Yeah. I just wish I could owl my friends without worrying that it'd be intercepted by Death Eater wannabes."

"Calling them 'dews' instead of 'dee-its' at least sounds better," Ron commented with a grin.

Harry made a noise of amusement.

"Face it, Harry. You're just too popular for your own good," Ginny teased him. "After all, Malfoy wanted to attend the party so badly that he stole an invitation."

Harry tried not to smile, but had to settle for letting it out twisted. "Yeah, well that kind of popularity I could do without, thanks."

"What're we going to be covering in class, Professor?" Ron asked, changing the subject.

"I gave you a syllabus at the beginning of the year, Ron," Tonks said in mild confusion. "This term for sixth years is recognising the effects of dark potions to identify them."

"Thank you, Tonks," Ron answered, "but I'm afraid it wasn't you I was asking." Harry blushed as Ron grinned at him and raised his eyebrows.

"Stop it," Harry ordered.

Ron just grinned wider.

Harry rolled his eyes and answered the question. "For the next couple weeks, I figured I'd get fourth and lower level fifth years using the Levitating Charm as a defence. The rest will be working on the Patronus. We still don't know that the Aurors rounded up all the dementors, and I'd really rather not leave anyone defenceless to those monsters."

Tonks asked, "Just out of curiosity, has your memory changed?"

Harry looked at Tonks in confusion, peripherally noting that Ginny flushed and looked down.

"For the Patronus," Tonks explained in innocent query. "You know, your happiest memory. I was just wondering if you had a new, more recent one."

Refusing to respond to Tonks's teasing, Harry calmly responded, "As it happens, I very well might. I'll have to experiment a bit, thanks for reminding me." He turned to Ginny and leaned so he was whispering into her ear. "Do you think you can produce one now, love?"

Without looking up, she gave a small nod, blushing even more brightly.

Harry turned. "How about you, Ron, do you think you have a sufficiently HAPPY memory now?" Harry's eyes flickered to Hermione and back.

Ron glowered. "Yes, Harry, I do have a few recent very happy memories. Satisfied?" His gaze shifted back and forth from his best friend to his sister. "I do NOT want to hear about what memories the two of you might be using." He shuddered.

"Not even if they involve chocolate sauce?"

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That evening after he'd finished dinner, Harry walked to the head table. Dumbledore looked up and watched the student approach, but if someone were looking closely, they would see the moment of disappointment in his eyes when Harry ignored the headmaster in favour of the deputy headmistress.

"Professor McGonagall? I was wondering if I could have a word with you privately?"

She looked at him in slight confusion. "Certainly, Professor Potter." She got up from her empty plate and led the way out of the Great Hall.

In passing, Harry waved and smiled at Susan Bones, who was starting to look overwhelmed at the attention her fellow students were suddenly paying her now that her aunt had won the election.

She mouthed, "Help."

Harry just shrugged sympathetically to her.

Once out of the Great Hall, McGonagall's path took them toward an area of the castle that Harry knew about, but had never had cause to visit. She stopped in front of one of the row of doors and muttered a password that Harry didn't catch. As he followed her in, he saw the nameplate, **McGonagall**, out of the corner of his eye.

She waved him to an overstuffed chair and seated herself behind a full but still organized desk. As he was seating himself, he cast a quick glance around her sitting room. He'd expected more Gryffindor colours, but it was done in a wood-brown motif instead. In addition to the chair and desk, there were many bookshelves, a small fireplace, and two doors in addition to the one he'd entered through.

"Nice apartments," he commented after she'd given him time to examine his surroundings.

She smiled. "Not up to the level of Potter Manor, perhaps, but they are quite comfortable for an old witch like me, Harry. Now, what can I do for you?"

He frowned. "Wait, you've been to Potter Manor?"

She laughed. "Oh, heavens yes. I was a dorm mate of your grandmother's. Victoria and I visited each other after we'd each gotten married." She smiled in remembrance before shaking it off. "But that was a long time ago and is neither here nor there. What can I do for you, Harry?"

He shifted slightly. "At the press conference, do you remember me mentioning Sirius's Animagus notebook?"

"Yes. I believe I expressed an interest in reading it."

Harry nodded and produced the notebook from within his robes. "You certainly may if you wish. I only ask for a couple of favours in return."

Her hand had been reaching forward but stopped at hearing this. "Conditions, Professor Potter?" she asked guardedly.

He smiled slightly. "You were calling me Harry earlier, Minerva," he pointed out, uncomfortable using her given name but knowing he had the right. Besides, he was trying to make a point. After she gave a slight nod in acknowledgement, he went on, "Not conditions, actually. You're welcome to read the notebook regardless. I'm requesting two FAVOURS," he lightly stressed the last word.

Her hand finished coming forward and took the notebook from his hand. She placed the slim journal on her lap and folded her hands over the top of it. "What might those be, Harry?"

"Please let me know if there are any errors in it. I'd like to have it published."

Her eyes tightened and she opened her mouth.

Harry held up a hand. "Not to sell to the public. I recognise the danger of unlimited numbers of student Animagi, Professor. I was thinking about selling it only through permission from Transfiguration professors for advanced students. Aurors would probably like to buy some copies, too."

She pursed her lips and thought about it. "Perhaps we could offer a supplemental course for the best seventh year Transfiguration students," she allowed.

Harry nodded. "Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, Salem and the other schools could as well. Sirius wrote that during his third through fifth year, so it's aimed for students to understand."

She inclined her head in what he took as agreement. "Why don't I save us some time and let me guess at your second favour, Harry. You would like me to train you to be an Animagus."

Harry studied his Transfiguration teacher for a moment, trying to determine if she was upset or not. Her impassive gaze left him no clues. "Close," he finally admitted. "Actually, I'd ask you help to COMPLETE my Animagus training."

One eyebrow came up. "You've already begun?"

"Over the holiday," he confirmed. "Remus was present for all of the Marauders' training, so he knew what to look for. He's also a good teacher even if he isn't an Animagus in his own right."

"True," she allowed. "May I assume you've already had your totem dream?"

Harry nodded. "Horse."

She nodded with a faint expression of surprise. "How far have you gotten in transforming?"

"All four legs, neck, and ears. One at a time, I can do all of them, but I haven't been able to transform all of them simultaneously. I can HOLD them all just fine, though."

"For only a month of practise, you've come amazingly far, Mr. Potter."

"I'm no longer Professor Potter or Harry?" he asked with a quirky grin.

She gave him an admonishing but still affectionate glare. "My student is called Mr. Potter, socially you're Harry, professionally you're Professor."

"I'll keep that in mind. At any rate, I've been working on my torso, but it hasn't quite worked yet. I know what I need to be doing, but Remus made

me promise to have you nearby when I practised. Either for the Animagus insight or to undo any . . . unfortunate partial transformations."

"Yes," she agreed dryly. "After decades of teaching youngsters Transfiguration, I daresay I know how to undo most errors. Were you planning on registering?"

"After graduation, probably. With ol' Moldywart gone and his merry band of reprobates in Azkaban, I don't see why I shouldn't."

Her lip twitched even as she nodded agreement. "We'll save off that paperwork until next year, then. In the meantime, when would you like to have your practises? I have Monday and Wednesday evenings or most of Sunday afternoon available."

Harry thought about it for a moment. "How about Sundays after lunch in your classroom?"

"Very well. I shall see you in class then, Mr. Potter. I daresay that this will be educational for the both of us."

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Monday breakfast was going smoothly until well after the owl post arrived. Harry, not expecting anything of interest, barely looked up. For a minute, only the normal soft

murmuring of conversations and rustling of parchment was heard.

First Ginny then Harry gradually became aware of a silence spreading among the students, only punctuated by soft exclamations.

"Oh, dear," Hermione whispered from across the table. Bypassing the "what is it?" stage, she merely turned her copy of the Daily Prophet around and pointed to a particular paragraph. "It's an article on Lestranger's imprisonment."

Harry and Ginny huddled over the paper in growing horror.

In a strange twist, Lestranger insists that Harry Potter, whom she claimed duelled her in June in the Ministry of Magic, cast an Unforgivable Curse upon her during that duel. No statement is available from The Boy Who Won at this point, but it seems that an investigation would only be prudent.

"Shit," Harry whispered, drawing twitches of shocked surprise from the two girls.

Harry himself was thinking rapidly. Right now he had to show a mask of indignant anger to the world. If he looked ashamed, he'd be assumed guilty. If there was only one thing he'd learned about the press over the last three years, it was that appearances were everything. He had to get out of this room rapidly, and he had to get Ginny and Hermione somewhere where he could grovel for their forgiveness.

Standing, he remoulded his face into a look of anger. He stomped to the front table with the rolled up paper in one hand. "What the bloody hell does she think she's doing?" he demanded of Dumbledore, waving the paper theatrically.

For a fraction of an instant, Dumbledore looked surprised. It was gone so quickly that Harry wasn't completely sure it had ever been there at all. Standing, Dumbledore intoned solemnly, "I do not know, Professor Potter. Please come with me. We shall investigate."

He swept around the table, heading out of the Great Hall, a fuming Harry Potter following in his wake. Without any bidding, Ginny and Hermione followed behind.

The instant the four were alone in the Entrance Hall, Harry's expression changed to a mix of shame and fear.

Upon seeing this, Ginny's voice was on the far side of alarmed. "What's going on?" she asked in a whisper.

"Not here," Dumbledore curtly ordered, leading the way to his office rapidly.

The four entered Dumbledore's office without another word. The instant the door was closed, Harry pulled out his wand and cast the strongest Privacy Charm he could manage. That done, he slowly sunk to his knees beside the sitting Ginny and laid his head upon her lap. "Forgive me," he moaned.

Ginny and Hermione shared a shocked glance. "You mean it's TRUE?" Hermione asked in a horrified gasp.

"Not entirely," Dumbledore answered in his usual unflappable manner as he sat at his desk. He did not appear surprised by the turn of the conversation. "Please recall that this took place moments after Harry witnessed Bellatrix push Sirius through the Veil of Mysteries. He had chased her back out to the Ministry Atrium before he could get a spell off at her again. For good or ill, Harry lost control of his darker side for a moment and attempted to cast a Cruciatus upon her." He held up a hand to forestall an interruption that the two stunned girls were in no condition to raise. "Please note that I stated that he ATTEMPTED to cast this spell. He did not do so successfully. At worst, the result was the equivalent of a Stinging Hex. At best, it failed utterly." He peered at Harry over the tops of his glasses. "Is this correct, Harry?"

Harry nodded miserably. He'd not told Dumbledore about what'd happened in the Department of Mysteries. It was possible that he would have done so afterwards in Dumbledore's office, but discussions of the prophecy and Sirius had taken over events instead. "It doesn't matter that it failed," Harry mumbled without raising his head. "I WANTED to hurt her. I WANTED to cast the Cruciatus on her."

"Yet you did not," Dumbledore retorted. "Your heart does not hold the necessary hate to successfully cast that spell. I do not doubt that you have the power, so it must have been the missing emotion that caused the spell to fail."

Does it matter? I attempted an Unforgivable Curse on her," the self-loathing dripped from his words.

"On the contrary, it does matter. An unsuccessful attempt is not a crime."

Harry looked up, anger forming in his red-rimmed eyes. "So I'm not going to Azkaban on a TECHNICALITY? Oh, that is SO much better. I suppose I should be thankful for the Ministry's incompetency for once. After all if this loophole didn't exist then you'd be legally bound to hand me over to the dementors for a life sentence. Instead I'm just going to be a pariah for the rest of my life."

Ginny grabbed his chin and nearly wrenched his neck as she jerked his head around to look at her. "Now you listen to me, Harry James Potter," she stated, staring hard into his wide eyes. "You are NOT going to give in to this. You are going to stop taking your anger and fear out on Professor Dumbledore as he doesn't deserve it. You are going to go back out there and hold your head up. You are going to testify at her trial. If her claim comes up, you are going to simply state that you did not successfully cast an Unforgivable. We can worry about the repercussions after this reprehensible woman is rotting in Azkaban like she deserves. Until then, no snivelling little Death Eater is going to drag my fiancé down to her level. Get this through your thick skull, Harry Potter: You. Did. Nothing. Wrong. Now you pull yourself together so we can figure out how to deal with this."

First shock, then utter gratitude, then surprisingly amusement washed over Harry's face. "Why, Miss Weasley, I do believe that that's the second time you nearly proposed to me."

She blinked once, still holding his chin and looking into his eyes from a distance of twelve inches. "Well, you know what they say. Third time's the charm," she quipped.

Harry grinned, all traces of his previous mood disappearing. He leaned forward and gave her a long, sensual kiss, totally ignoring Dumbledore and Hermione's presence in the room. Finally he pulled back with a sigh and rested his forehead against hers. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"You're you," she simply answered, gently pulling him up and into the seat next to her.

Dumbledore gently cleared his throat, bringing the students' attention to him. A benevolent smile was his only reaction to the touching scene he'd just witnessed. "Harry, I am afraid that you will indeed need to testify at Bellatrix's trial. It had been a possibility that you could have been spared that chore, but with this article -" He stopped when Harry nodded.

"Yes, I understand."

"Very well. I shall inform you as to the particulars when I learn them. In the meantime, I believe you three have classes to attend?"

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The next two weeks dragged by, or at least it appeared to from Harry's point of view. He kept waiting for the Aurors to come barging in to drag him away to Azkaban.

His tension and moping did not go unnoticed by his best friends, of course.

"Harry, if you don't calm down, everyone is going to think you have a guilty conscience," Hermione informed him calmly after Harry jumped for the third time merely from the portrait hole opening on Thursday afternoon.

Harry spent a moment to close his eyes and take a deep breath. He even managed a small smile when he opened them back up. "Yes, dear."

"Wrong person," she said, looking up from her Potions essay with a mischievous smirk. "Ginny is 'dear' unless you meant your father, who was a 'deer'."

Harry winced. "Stag. He was a stag. You might as well have called Sirius a poodle."

She waved that off. "He didn't have the legs for it."

Harry snickered.

"Besides," she continued, "a stag is just a male deer." She cocked her head. "Please don't take this wrong, Harry, but that's the first time in months that you've referred to Sirius without breaking down."

"Yeah. I'm slowly getting better, I think. Remus has helped a lot to get things into perspective for me. Don't get me wrong, it's still tough, but it's getting better."

She gave a half-smile. "Yeah. I lost a close uncle a few years ago. Not as close as Sirius was to you, but you know what I mean. It IS difficult, but it does get better."

"Yeah," he agreed quietly. Instead of the look of misery that she was used to him wearing whenever Sirius came up, though, he had a small smile on his face.

This was the scene that a second year Gryffindor found as she came up to the two. "Harry, Professor Dumbledore wants to speak with you."

Harry's eyes flickered for a moment. He stood and said, "Thanks for letting me know, Janice."

The young Gryffindor nodded and headed toward the girls' dormitory.

Harry took a breath. He looked down at Hermione and said, "Wish me luck."

She fought valiantly to keep the anxiety off of her face. "Yeah. Good luck."

Harry, with an almost imperceptible straightening of his shoulders, turned to the portrait hole and walked out of the Gryffindor common room.

It wasn't thirty seconds later when Ginny came down from the stairs and came over to the table where Hermione was sitting. Instead of the work in front of her, though, the older girl was staring away through space.

"Hey, Hermione, what's wrong?"

She started. "Ginny? I thought you were in Potions?"

The redhead shrugged. "Cancelled at the last minute. Something happened in the previous class and there was a heavy purple fog in the room. It smelled awful, and Snape cancelled our class." She looked at the second set of books laid out on the table. "Where's Harry?"

"Oh! You just missed him. Dumbledore sent for -" she didn't bother finishing her sentence to the girl who was already running from the room.

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"Harry! Wait up!"

Harry turned from the gargoyle statue. He was relieved that something had pulled his morose attention away from it. He'd already spent nearly a minute staring at the statue guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office. It wasn't that he didn't know the password, it was that he didn't want to enter. Therefore, any distraction was welcome.

Especially this one. "Harry! I'm glad I caught you before you went in."

"Me, too," he sighed, gathering her into a hug.

She returned the hug for a moment before stepping back to examine him. "You think this is it, don't you?"

"Don't you?"

She shrugged. "Naw, could be for any of a number of other reasons. He could be telling you that you've been named next year's Head Boy. Maybe Snape's repented and wants to swear undying fealty to you. Or maybe Skeeter's been caught in her Animagus form and Dumbledore wants you to keep her as a pet."

He finally managed a smile.

"There," she stated with a firm nod. "That's better. Now, remember what I told you last Monday. She's a small person and is trying to drag you down to her level. Don't let her. You did nothing wrong, Harry. Just keep your head up, and you'll get through this."

He simply stared for another few moments before pulling her into another tender hug. "You're amazing. How did you know what to say that would make me feel better?"

"Chronic Boy Who Lived syndrome. I've been studying you so long, I know you too well. Now get in there and get this over with."

He gave her a quick kiss. "I've no idea how long this'll take. Don't wait up. Love you."

"I will anyway. Love you, too. Now go."

"Yes, dear," he teased. He called out the password and went up the moving staircase in a decidedly better mood than he'd approached the gargoyle.

"Enter," Dumbledore called in answer to his knock. "Ah, Harry. I see Miss Douglas found you. As you may have guessed, I asked you here due to Bellatrix Lestrange's claim against you. Her own trial has already been concluded and shall be reported in tomorrow's Daily Prophet. As it turned out, there was no need for you to testify at her trial as there was abundant evidence of her Death Eater involvement without bringing you in to testify. She shall be in Azkaban for the rest of her natural life. Now, the last item resulting from this is her claim that you used an Unforgivable Curse upon her. In effect, she is the primary witness in a prosecution against you."

"A Death Eater as a witness? A CONVICTED Death Eater as a witness?"

Dumbledore nodded. "You have reached the crux of the issue, Harry. Yes, it is generally accepted that she is an unreliable witness, which is why she will be given Veritaserum before any questions are put to her. Unlike your trial the summer before your fifth year, this will not start out being a trial by the full Wizengamot. If the situation starts leaning toward the possibility that you are indeed guilty, then the judge will suspend the trial and bring in the full court. As Amelia was just inaugurated, she cannot interfere in this case if the worst comes to pass. To be quite honest, nobody expects this to go anywhere, however. As to the specifics of the trial: There will be one judge, no solicitors and no jury. The judge will question Mrs. Lestrange, and then you shall have the opportunity to question her as well. If, after that point there is still the question of your guilt, the judge will question you. After that, he may bring in the full court if the situation warrants. Do you have any questions of me at this point?"

Harry thought for a moment, a plan beginning to form. "Will I be required to sit in that chair with the manacles?"

"All witnesses being questioned sit in that chair. Due to your status, it is unlikely that you shall be required to wear the manacles."

"If I am questioned, will I be required to take Veritaserum?"

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, one long finger running through his beard. "I am uncertain. It is possible."

"With my knowledge of the Order, that could be -"

Dumbledore held up a hand, stilling Harry. "I have already considered this. If you are forced to take Veritaserum, I shall attempt to either keep any confidential information from coming out or at the least seal the transcript. This is all secondary, Harry, to your fate. I am gratified that you are thinking of the security of the Order, but you do not need to concern yourself with that. You must instead concern yourself with your own situation."

"Yes, sir." He thought for a moment more. "What is the scope of the questions I may ask of her?"

Dumbledore looked at him curiously. "Anything that you can convince the judge is pertinent to the investigation. State of mind, magical skills and similar topics."

Harry nodded, a plan settling into place. "Okay, I think I'm ready."

Dumbledore did not comment upon Harry's suddenly confident expression. Instead he simply held out a sheet of parchment. The instant Harry touched it, the jerk of a Portkey pulled both men out of the office.

Thump.

"Ouch. Dammit."

"Are you hurt, Professor Potter?" Dumbledore extended a hand to help Harry back up.

"Floo and Portkey. Every time I travel by Floo or Portkey, I end up falling over. That's why I love Apparition so much."

"Indeed. However, as we would have had to leave Hogwarts grounds . . ."

"I know, I know." Harry looked around to orient himself and found that the Portkey had taken them to the Ministry Atrium. Fortunately, the Portkey didn't take them into the centre of the room, where a large scale Privacy Charm was in effect. Harry vaguely wondered what was being put up to replace the destroyed Fountain of Magical Brethren.

Dumbledore and Harry approached the security stand and relinquished their wands before the Auror could ask for them.

After identifying the wands and returning them, the man asked, "Your business in the Ministry today, gentlemen?"

"I believe I'm on trial," Harry answered. He was tempted to add, "again," but decided to not take out his frustrations on this innocent Auror.

The wizard hardly batted an eye. He turned to Dumbledore, silently asking the same question.

"I wish to attend said trial," Dumbledore told him.

The guard simply nodded and waved his wand below their line of sight, mumbling. He handed two silver tags up, one stating **Harry Potter, on trial** and the other **Albus Dumbledore, trial spectator**.

The Auror started to give directions to courtroom 4, but Dumbledore waved him off. "Thank you, Mr. Reeves, but I know the way. Good day."

Harry let Dumbledore lead him through the labyrinth without comment, trusting his headmaster to get him to the correct room quickly.

Sure enough, minutes later they entered through the double doors that were clearly labelled. The instant the two had entered, the dozen gathered reporters started asking questions.

"Mr. Potter, what do you think of the charges?"

"Mr. Potter, what do you think of Bellatrix's sentence?"

"Mr. Potter, would you do it again?"

Harry just waved them off. "I have no comment on the trial at this time."

Dumbledore led him past the clamouring reporters and leaned in. "I am gratified to see that you are learning to handle the press, Harry."

"Survival skill, sir. With my plans, I figure I'll need to get used to it at some point."

"Future plans?"

Harry stopped and graced Dumbledore with a bemused smile. "Don't tell me you don't know about everything I'm doing."

Dumbledore just tilted his head and twinkled. Instead of commenting, he held up one hand and pointed. "That seat is for you, Harry. I shall be sitting directly behind you. I shall intervene only under the most dire of circumstances, as you appear to have a plan. I wish you the best of luck."

Harry nodded, touched. Dumbledore was finally letting Harry fight his own battles. It only took a criminal trial to bring it out, though. Much as Harry wanted this whole thing to go away with a wave of Dumbledore's hand, he knew that fighting this battle on his own would give him a level of public respectability that he would need in the future.

Harry had no sooner seated himself than an Auror entered. "All rise for the Honourable Judge Frederick McWilliam."

Everyone stood and a plainly robed middle-aged man entered, followed closely by two Aurors flanking Bellatrix Lestrange. They immediately led her to the witness chair, and it shackled her into place.

Harry studied her as the judge settled himself. She was looking even more unkempt and wild-eyed than he'd seen her in the Ministry. The smirk she fixed on him answered one of his questions: Why was she doing this? Just because she could and wanted to make him miserable.

The judge explained the fact that this was a preliminary trial and what would be expected of Harry. Harry nodded his understanding, having just heard basically the same things from Dumbledore. The judge then ordered the Veritaserum administered. After that had been done to an unresisting Lestrange, he asked for her account of the night in question.

She spoke for ten uninterrupted minutes. She did little to hide her own guilt but did not name any of the other Death Eaters. Other than that omission, her account fit with what Harry knew and remembered.

McWilliam nodded when she wound down at the point of Voldemort dual Apparating them out. "Very well. Mr. Potter, you have the right to question the witness. Do you wish to do so?"

"Yes, Your Honour," Harry said, standing and wishing he knew the correct niceties of the situation.

"The floor is yours."

"Thank you, sir." Harry stood and approached Bellatrix, stopping well out of arm's reach even if she hadn't been restrained. He studied her for a moment, trying to calm his rapid heartbeat and convince himself that the strategy he'd mapped out in his mind would actually work.

"You were one of the Death Eaters whom tortured Frank and Alice Longbottom into insanity, weren't you?" Harry started.

Even through her blank expression, she appeared surprised at the unexpected question. The judge certainly did. "Yes," she dully answered.

"Were you aware that one of my roommates and friends is their son, Neville?"

"Yes."

"Were you aware that Sirius Black was innocent of the crimes for which he was imprisoned?"

"Not at the time."

"When did you learn of Sirius's innocence?"

"After My Lord was reborn."

"So during our fight at the Department of Mysteries and the Atrium, you knew your cousin Sirius had been innocent all along?"

"Yes."

"Were you aware that Sirius Black was my godfather?"

"Yes."

"Were you aware that he and I had met, were communicating and had a happy, friendly relationship?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Potter," the judge interjected, "these questions seem a bit far afield of the charge of you using an Unforgivable Curse upon the witness."

"I will be making the connection momentarily, sir. It goes to my state of mind."

McWilliam raised an eyebrow at the surprising comment. "Proceed, then, but know that I will not look favourably upon this line of questioning if it turns out not to have bearing upon the case."

"Yes, sir. Bellatrix Lestrange, given the fact that you were participating in a fight that had just injured four of my close friends AND you had effectively orphaned a friend of mine AND I had just witnessed you kill my godfather, do you believe that I could have hated you at that point?"

"Yes." Her eyes managed to look triumphant.

Harry glanced at the judge.

McWilliam gave him a short nod to acknowledge that the point had been made.

Harry turned back to Lestrange. "Very well, so at the time I allegedly cast the Cruciatus Curse upon you, I hated you. Tell me, what is the primary

requirement to casting a Cruciatus Curse?"

"Power."

The answer threw Harry for a moment, but he didn't let it distract him for long. "What is the secondary requirement?"

"Hate."

"So in order to cast the Cruciatus, a wizard or witch would have to be powerful and have enough hate in them, correct?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that I'm powerful enough to cast it?"

She took a moment to answer, appearing to honestly be thinking about it. "Yes."

"Do you believe I had enough hate to cast it at that point in time?"

"Yes." The look of triumph was back.

"And since I had my wand in hand, I had the means. You agree I had the motive. We both agree I had the opportunity before Voldemort appeared in the Atrium. I do not dispute any of this."

Harry looked around at the other people in the room. The judge was wearing a blank mask, listening intently. Dumbledore was looking vaguely worried. The reporters were almost salivating.

Harry smiled confidently and turned back to the witness. "But now we get to the really important part. Have you ever been subjected to the Cruciatus Curse?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been subjected to a Stinging Hex?"

"Yes."

"Now, based on what you felt, did my spell feel more like a Cruciatus or Stinger?"

"Stinger." Her face was going through a few strange contortions, but the words were in the same, flat tone she had been using all along.

"How long did the pain last?"

"Less than a second."

"Based on how long it lasted, was my spell more likely a Cruciatus or Stinger?"

"Stinger."

Harry turned to the judge and spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "By her own admission, I had the means, motive, and opportunity, yet the spell I hit her with was a Stinger instead of a Cruciatus." Harry walked back to his seat.

Dumbledore gave him a subtle wink before Harry turned around and sat down.

The judge's voice came immediately. "Harry James Potter, you are found innocent of the charge of casting an Unforgivable Curse. This court is adjourned. Aurors, please administer the antidote to the witness and escort her back to her cell."

The instant the antidote was in her, Bellatrix started ranting. "You whelp! I hope you're satisfied with yourself, wee baby Potter! The Dark Lord will return and you will all pay for this!" The Aurors finally got her up and were bodily moving her toward the door that they had entered through. "Do you hear me? He will be back and I will make you regret -" The door finally closed, cutting her off.

Every reporter bolted for the door except for Simon Firthquill. The rest of the spectators, including Remus and Tonks Harry belatedly realised, left in a more orderly manner.

Dumbledore also got to his feet. "I shall see you back at Hogwarts, Professor Potter?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. Thank you for accompanying me today."

"Not at all, dear boy. Not at all." He turned and left after a pleasant nod to Firthquill.

Once the last person had left the room, Simon smiled at Harry. "I'm beginning to see why my daughter is so taken with you."

"Samantha's your daughter?" Harry asked, remembering a Hufflepuff seventh year in the DA with the same name.

"Yep, but I think you're in the wrong house."

Harry looked at him quizzically but didn't speak.

"One thing that you didn't address in your questioning, nor admit to. What incantation did you use on her?" He smiled into Harry's suddenly blank face. "Yep, should've been a Slytherin. You have a good day, Mr. Potter." He turned and left.

Harry let out a breath before slowly following. In a daze, Harry returned to the Atrium and turned in the temporary identification tag at the security desk.

"Good day, Mr. Potter," the Auror guard politely bid him.

Harry absently returned the greeting, heading toward the designated outbound Apparition point. At the last moment, he changed his destination from Hogsmeade to Diagon Alley.

He had something to buy.

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The next morning's Prophet had an article on the trial, written by Simon, that clearly stated that Bellatrix was simply trying to smear Harry's name with her unfounded accusation.

Harry was smiling at the article when another owl landed on the table beside his breakfast plate. The large, distinguished owl held out a leg to Harry. The parchment bore the mark of the Ministry. Once Harry untied the roll, the owl took off.

Dear ~~Mr. Potter~~, Harry,

Harry's curiosity was piqued by the cross out and handwritten change.

As you're aware, the Fountain of Magical Brethren was destroyed this past June.

The Ministry of Magic has decided to install a new fountain in the Atrium. The subject of the new fountain has yet to be decided. One suggestion was James and Lily Potter with Sirius Black. Another suggestion was life-sized statues of yourself and Miss Weasley. Other possibilities would be considered if yourself or Miss Weasley would care to put any forward.

In any case, the Atrium Restoration Committee requests your presence at the dedication ceremony to be held at eleven o'clock on Saturday, March the twenty-second of this year.

Sincerely,

**Atrium Restoration Committee
Chairman Arthur Weasley**

PS: Harry, please do not dismiss this out of hand. As chairman of this committee, I can easily have the subject changed to something else. All you or Ginny have to do is give us another idea. Due to your recent exploits against the Dark Lord, the Ministry is bound and determined to honour you, so that's why the initial suggestions were so focused upon you two. Any suggested changes would be most favourably received. I'm aware of your distaste for the level of public attention being paid you, so I implore you to pick some other subject for the fountain. - Arthur

Harry's face had gone from curiosity, to anger, to disgust and ended with laughter.

Needless to say, this made Hermione insanely curious. "What on Earth did the Ministry say to get you to laugh, Harry?"

Instead of answering, he handed the letter over to her to let her read it. While she was doing that, Harry turned to Ron at her side. "What's your dad doing?"

Ron's face went from curiosity to a proud smile. "With what you and Ginny did to ol' . . . what was that you were calling him?"

"Moldywart."

"Yeah, Moldywart. Anyway, with what you two did, and the fact that Ginny is his daughter and you're almost another son, his reputation has gone way up. Officially, his tasks haven't changed much, but he's gotten a good raise and a few plum assignments. One he's working on right now has something to do with a memorial to the final battle, and another is about the new fountain in the Ministry Atrium."

Harry nodded. "That fountain is what the letter's about. His committee wants to put me and Ginny as the subjects."

Ron laughed out loud. Nearby, Neville and Seamus did the same thing.

Harry grinned back. "Glad to hear that I'm not the only one to think that's a bad idea. My reaction was closer to blazing anger, though."

Ginny came stomping into the Great Hall, waving a parchment of her own. "Did you know about this?"

Harry looked at Ron. "See?" Turning back to his fuming girlfriend, he nodded at the parchment in Hermione's hands. "I learned about it only two minutes ago, love. What do you think?"

She stared at him. "Are you telling me you WANT them to erect statues to us?"

"Of course not! I meant what your dad said afterwards about picking something else."

"Dad?"

"Your dad didn't put a post script on yours?" She shook her head. "Ah. He suggested we give them other ideas. They're apparently bound and determined to honour us. Since neither of us want to have statues to us in the Ministry Atrium until the end of time -"

"Or at least until the next fight against a psychotic Dark Lord in there," Neville put in.

"Or that," Harry agreed. "Anyway, the way it sounds, they'll go along with just about anything we suggest."

"Except leaving us alone," Ginny grumped.

Harry shrugged.

"Poor kids, just too darn popular, aren't you?" put in a voice above them. Harry looked up to find a smiling Tonks reading the parchment over Ron's shoulder.

Hermione had been looking pensive since passing the parchment to her boyfriend. She glanced around before looking toward Harry. "How freely can I talk?"

Harry looked at her blankly for a moment before he understood what she was asking and why. "Contributions toward Wolfden?" Harry asked.

She nodded.

Before Harry could respond, Errol flew into the Great Hall, coming to an undignified crash-landing on Neville's plate of bacon and eggs. Seamus ended up wearing bits of fried egg. Fighting his chuckles, Neville removed the parchment from the Weasley family owl. He glanced at the opening before passing the parchment to Ginny.

While she was reading her letter, Harry was studying Hermione with a thoughtful frown. He saw where she was going with her unspoken suggestion. As the public relations leader for a new foundation, she was just looking out for the interests of the foundation in question.

The thing was, Harry had another idea.

Ginny looked up from her letter, now much calmer. "Okay, this explains why Dad didn't put a post script on my letter from the Ministry. Mum was writing to me, saying basically the same things as Dad wrote you."

"I have an idea," Harry slowly began. When he had the undivided attention of Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Tonks, Neville and Seamus, he said, "Ginny, could you write back to your dad and invite him here on Saturday for us to talk to? I have something major in mind, but it'll take a bit of explanation."

"Bigger than Wolfden?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Not bigger, but different," Harry shrugged.

"What's Wolfden?" Seamus asked in confusion.

"A place for werewolves to get protection and Wolfsbane Potion at full moons."

Seamus frowned at Hermione's answer. "There is no such place."

"Not yet," Harry agreed.

Seamus blinked. "That will . . . Wow."

Harry smiled at his roommate's expression. He turned to Hermione. "Can you go through the DA registry and get me a list of all orphans and Muggle-borns?"

Hermione stared blankly at him.

"What are you up to, Harry?" Ron asked in confusion.

"Something that Sirius, Tonks and her mother will love, but every other Black, past and present, will detest."

"That explains the Muggle-born part," Tonks said. "What are you up to, Potter?"

"Think on it," he suggested, getting ready for his first class.

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Harry was standing with Ginny in the Entrance Hall Saturday after lunch, fidgeting nervously.

"Relax," Ginny admonished him. "He's already on our side, remember?"

"Yeah. It's just that I don't know whether I should have invited him or not."

"Why not? You know as well as I do that we need at least one real reporter on our side. He's already proven he's honest after the interview we did with him back in November. Tonks invited him to the Ministry on New Year's and he came through for us then, too. He's on our side."

"But I haven't told anyone outside of who I'm hiring about Wolfden."

"You know we need to, Harry. Now is as good a time as any. Hermione is already talking to Dad about it. We'll need to start the public debate about it sooner or later. Sooner is better so it won't come as quite so much of a shock when Wolfden opens."

"Yeah," he sighed out. It wasn't so much that he didn't want to tell Simon about Wolfden so much as he didn't want to have to use his unwanted notoriety.

Simon Firthquill came through the huge main doors of Hogwarts, snow dervishes swirling about his feet for the short moments that the door had been opened. Simon pulled the hood of his cloak down and looked around with a small smile.

Harry advanced and stood respectfully near as the older man looked around.

"Warty, warty Hogwarts," Simon said with a nostalgic grin.

"Mr. Firthquill, thank you for coming."

"Of course, Mr. Potter. You have to know that with your reputation, getting an invitation from you is something I'm not about to pass up. The past few months have been most . . . illuminating. Not to mention good for my career."

"Call me Harry. As for my reputation as you call it . . . Well, if you followed the stories about me during the Tri-Wizard Tournament -"

"Rita," Simon growled with narrowed eyes.

Harry nodded, not upset over the interruption. "Yes, Rita. After that, I must admit that my opinion of reporters was somewhere between acromantulas and Malfoys."

Simon barked out a laugh. "All things considered, Harry, I can't blame you. Your treatment of Rita, though, has given you a reputation among the press that I think you'll appreciate."

"What reputation is that?" Ginny asked, stepping beside Harry.

Simon gave her a small bow in acknowledgement and gave her a quirky grin. "Most reporters are petrified to get onto his bad side."

Ginny snickered.

Harry looked chagrined. "I shouldn't have gone overboard with her like that."

"No!" Ginny flatly refuted his statement. "She deserved exactly what she got. You didn't do her any permanent harm, Harry, which is, quite frankly, more than she deserves."

Simon nodded. "She's had a reputation for years, Harry. You were the first person with the status to put her down like that. By the way, on behalf of my colleagues I thank you for doing that."

"For what it's worth then, you're welcome, Mr. Firthquill."

"Simon, please."

Harry nodded.

"Now, what would the Couple Who Won want with a humble reporter such as myself?"

Harry winced. "We can start by getting rid of that ridiculous title."

Simon looked somewhat surprised. "I wasn't aware that you disliked it. My apologies, Harry, Miss Weasley."

Ginny twined her arm through Harry's, trying to calm him down. To the reporter, she said, "It's Ginny. Miss Weasley is what Snape calls me and I really don't want to lump you in with him."

Simon smiled.

"As for the title of the Couple Who Won, it's trite and plays off of Harry's previous title of the Boy Who Lived, which he also hates. They're euphemisms. It's an artificial personality that public can rally around instead of the real Harry Potter. The public has made the Boy Who Lived and the Couple Who Won into these quasi-mystical beings. That isn't us. We HATE all the attention being paid to us for no other reason than having killed Tom in self-defence."

Harry looked at her in pride over her eloquence.

Simon was blinking rapidly as he digested all of that. "Tom? You mean You-Know-Who?"

Harry glared balefully. "If you can't call him Voldemort," Simon flinched, "then at least call him Tom Riddle. It's his name, after all." At Simon's continued blank look, Harry sighed. "I'm surprised Samantha hasn't mentioned it to you. Tom Marvolo Riddle, Slytherin class of '45. Not that it matters, but he was a half-and-half. His father was a full Muggle before Tom killed him."

Simon blanched. "You-Kn-, err, V- Vol-." He closed his eyes and took a breath. "Voldemort."

A gasp from the direction of the Great Hall drew their eyes. Samantha Firthquill walked up to them from amongst a gaggle of Hufflepuffs, staring at her father in astonishment. "Daddy? You said his name?"

"What have I been telling you in the DA, Samantha?" Harry asked her.

"The name has no power over us other than what we give it," Samantha recited.

Simon gaped at Harry. "You've been telling them WHAT?"

Harry shrugged. "Why should we be afraid of the name a sociopath gave himself?"

Simon stared for a moment before giving himself a little shake. "This will take a while to get used to."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Get used to it. It's the way he talks all the time. Why are you here, anyway?"

"We asked him here," Ginny said. "We need to talk to the Prophet and he's our favourite reporter."

"Spreading more propaganda?" Samantha asked with a grin.

"If it's the truth, is it still propaganda?" Harry asked with a matching grin.

Samantha laughed. "This could be a fascinating philosophical discussion, but I have a Potions essay I really need to do. Bye, Harry, Ginny." She gave her father a hug. "Bye, Daddy."

Simon's eyes tracked her as she moved off toward the Hufflepuff tower. He turned toward Harry, wide-eyed. "You're full of surprises, Harry."

Harry's face twisted into a smile. "I've been telling the truth to anyone who asked for years, Simon. Only now people are admitting it's all true."

Simon took a breath before looking back up at Harry. "Let's try this again. What can I do for you today?"

Harry's smile became more natural. "You're resilient. Good. You'll have to be to survive the day."

Ginny smacked Harry's shoulder when Simon's eyes widened. "Stop scaring him like that, Harry." She turned to Simon. "He was speaking metaphorically, not literally."

Simon let out a breath, deflating in relief.

"Sorry," Harry apologised. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. It's just that what we may tell you later will be a lot to take in all at once. If you're up to it, that is."

Simon dug out a grin. "Was that a challenge?"

Harry laughed. "Not at all. Just that I'm going to ask for a few promises before telling you the really good stuff. The problem is that your reporter's instincts probably won't like it much."

"That is unfair," Simon complained. "Using my curiosity against me like that is just wrong."

Harry smiled but didn't dispute the accusation. "How about it? I'm going to give you a lot of information about myself that few other people know. The caveat is that you're not allowed to repeat any of it without asking me first."

It took Simon only a moment to make his decision. "I promise not to divulge any information about you without your permission."

Harry nodded and pulled out his wand. After casting a privacy bubble centered on himself, he waved his hand toward the stairs and slowly led the threesome on a roundabout route toward a specific seventh-floor corridor. "Okay, on background: my Muggle relatives, the ones who raised me, hated my very existence. I grew up without any idea that magic existed, let alone my status in the wizarding world. In my third year, I met Sirius Black, my godfather. Read the story that the Prophet bought from the Quibbler for the full story about that if you'd like. At last, I had someone who was willing to let me live somewhere other than with the Muggles who tried to beat the magic out of me."

"You mean they -" Simon began in outrage.

"Yes," Ginny flatly stated. "Yes, they did." She ignored Harry's silent request to leave the subject alone. "Imagine going ten years living in a cupboard, treated as a hated slave."

"Ginny," Harry said, bringing her to a fuming halt. "You don't have to drag him through this."

"You want to convince him of your feelings for Moony, right?"

Harry nodded.

"Going through Sirius is the best way."

Harry winced but nodded in acknowledgement.

Ginny turned back to the silent but confused Simon. "Back to the story. After living with the worst Muggles in existence, Harry learns of the magical world and starts going to school here. The problem is that he has to keep going back and spending summers with the Muggles who hate him. Literally, they hate the fact that he even exists. Two years later he meets someone who loves him for who he is and offers to take him away from the Muggles. The only problem is that he's wanted for a crime he didn't commit. Two years after THAT, Sirius is killed before Harry's eyes during an ambush that Harry hasn't yet forgiven himself for."

She paused to gauge the effect her words were having on both of the men with her. Harry looked sad and resigned. Simon was wide-eyed with all the information coming at him.

She continued, "During Harry's third year, the Defense professor is one Remus Lupin. It turns out that Remus is an old friend of both Harry's father and Sirius, though nobody bothered to tell him this until it was almost too late. Since meeting him, Remus has been as good as an uncle to Harry. A friendly face through everything, sounding board, giving him extra instruction when Harry asks for it. So what's the problem here? He's a werewolf. But those who know him don't care. The Ministry laws are an issue though, preventing him from even getting a job. After Sirius's death, Remus is named as Harry's guardian after some legal manoeuvring by Professor Dumbledore. At Harry and Remus's joint request, incidentally. Now, do you have an inkling of what Remus means to Harry?"

"Yes, I think I do," Simon said slowly, thinking rapidly.

Harry picked up the thread of the conversation, "So, now that you know I'd give everything for Remus and why, we get to the first announcement I'll be making. I'm going help the werewolves. First through Wolfsbane Potion then I'm going to get the laws changed to repeal those Lycanthropic Regulation laws."

"Just like that?" Simon asked, wide-eyed but sarcastic.

Ginny smiled slightly. "No, not just like that. We realise that it'll be an uphill battle. Remus is popular among those who know him. He's already agreed to be our 'poster boy' for lack of a better term. Once we can hold him up and show what a werewolf CAN be, we can provide the opportunity for all werewolves to be productive members of society."

Simon let out a low whistle. "You're obviously serious about this, but have you really thought this all the way through?"

Harry opened up the door to the Room of Requirement and waved Simon through. For his part, Simon looked around the unfamiliar hallway in confusion before hesitantly sticking his head through the door. He blinked once again in surprise to find Arthur Weasley inside sitting at a round table that could seat ten. Near him, Hermione had apparently been in deep conversation with him before they were interrupted by the opening door. Harry entered the room and took another chair on the other side of Hermione. Ginny seated herself beside Harry.

Surprised by a room that he didn't remember from his own Hogwarts days, Simon slowly entered and extended his hand to Arthur. "Mr. Weasley."

Arthur stood and shook the proffered hand. "Mr. Firthquill. I must admit that when Harry said he was going to invite you, it surprised me."

"You mean with his . . . ah . . . aversion to the press?"

Arthur laughed. "As good a phrase as any, I suppose."

"Hermione," Harry said. "Simon here is expressing concern that we haven't thought Wolfden through." He turned to Firthquill. "Hermione is going to run the public relations for this thing."

Simon shook his head slightly and turned to the witch. "Forgive me, but I'm not used to students acting like adults."

She nodded. "As Harry's pointed out, he and Ginny haven't been children since the first time they faced Voldemort and survived."

He opened his mouth and closed it again. "You mean all the stories are RIGHT? I read the Quibbler article and frankly didn't believe most of it. Are you saying that it's all TRUE?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "If you don't believe everything I've said, Mr. Firthquill, then perhaps I've picked the wrong reporter to work with."

Hermione and Arthur slowly leaned back, metaphorically and literally distancing themselves from the issue in front of them.

Simon held up a hand. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. I'm not saying I don't want to do this with you, Harry. I'm just saying it's a bit unbelievable."

"Either you believe me or you don't. If you don't, then I'm wasting my time," Harry growled.

Ginny leaned over to rest a hand on Harry's arm. "Simon, you have to remember how Harry's been treated by just about everyone in the wizarding world for the past five years. He's gone back and forth from the saviour of wizarding kind to an unstable, attention-craving child. He's been telling the truth for years, even when most everyone didn't believe him. He's suffered, at times literally, for telling the truth. Fudge considered him such a threat that he tried to get him expelled before the Prophet assisted him in a smear campaign against him. Trust is a very big issue with Harry."

Arthur now spoke up. "Mr. Firthquill, I've been a lot closer than most to all of Harry's exploits. I've heard from both Ron and Ginny about all the

adventures he goes through since my wife helped him onto the Hogwarts Express five and a half years ago. I can understand how a lot of it is surprising or even unbelievable, but one thing I've learned about Harry Potter is that he's honest. Everything that he's said that can be proven HAS been proven. Voldemort, Wormtail and dementors included. As for everything else, well, I'm willing to take it all on faith."

Harry almost smiled. Disbelief from someone like Simon Firthquill merely annoyed him. His reaction to Arthur was vastly different. "Which story hasn't been proven yet, Arthur?"

"My Anglia is running wild in the Forbidden Forest?"

Harry laughed. "Well, Ron was a witness to that one. Proof, on the other hand, might be harder to come by. Unless we catch it again, I can't see how we could prove that story." He sighed and turned back to Simon. "My apologies, Simon. I can see how a lot of the stories about me are unbelievable. So, do you have one in particular that you would like proven?"

That rocked Simon back. Here he was, being given the opportunity to prove or disprove nearly any of the stories that had been floating around about the Boy Who Lived. Or Harry Potter, actually. He'd better remember that distinction.

So, what to choose? Any of the stories about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had been proven already. Or at least close enough not to matter anymore. The resurrection ceremony had clearly taken place; Simon was one of the press reporters who had SEEN the body. The exact circumstances were really irrelevant, and Harry's version fit all the known facts. So that one, including that poor Diggory boy, wasn't worth pursuing.

Sirius Black? No, the Ministry had publicly acknowledged that he was innocent of the charges that had caused him to be reviled as a mass murderer and traitor for a decade and a half.

Remus Lupin? No, that was all public information, from his lycanthropy to his having taught a thirteen year old how to produce a corporeal Patronus.

Quirenius Quirrell? No, that body had been examined and all the injuries tallied with the story that Harry had told at the time. That story hadn't been used in the smear campaign simply because Harry's story was as believable as any other.

Barty Crouch, Junior? Again, the body's condition and his possessions fit with Harry's story.

Harry had been calmly studying Simon's face as the reporter thought about Harry's offer. He was vaguely curious to see which story he'd want proof of.

Simon finally looked up. "Were you serious, Harry?"

"Absolutely. If the proof is possible, then I'll show it to you. Some stories don't have physical proof, just my word and some, like the Anglia that Arthur just mentioned, have witnesses."

"I'm curious to know the story behind the Anglia, that's a Muggle automovile isn't it? Honestly, however, I'd rather hear about the Monster of Slytherin."

Ginny froze in place. Arthur and Hermione shot Ginny concerned looks before slumping slightly in their seats.

Harry just raised an eyebrow at Simon's choice. "You've heard the story?"

Simon nodded.

"Will you accept it if I show you the basilisk corpse?"

Simon blinked in surprise, swallowed thickly and again nodded.

Harry shrugged agreeably. "I can do that. Today probably won't work, though. For the sake of school security, I'd think Dumbledore or McGonagall should come along."

"Professor Snape, too," Hermione added. When Harry threw her a questioning look, she explained, "Basilisk fangs, venom, hide and eyes are prized potions ingredients. It shouldn't surprise you how rare they are. Professor Snape could use them."

"Besides, that would make for a good bribe," Ginny added in an undertone that only Harry could hear.

He nodded, following her line of thought immediately. He still needed Snape's help on the Wolfsbane Potion. Leading him to a basilisk corpse would go a long way to earning some goodwill from the Potions Master. Harry turned to Simon. "I'll arrange things here and let you know when we'll go down. Meanwhile, will you take that one on faith, and we could get to why we're all here?"

Simon, having half-way expected to be turned down cold after his request, took a moment to respond. He pulled parchment out of his robes and laid them flat on the table. As he was pulling out quill and inkpot, he said, "You've convinced me that you'd do a great deal for werewolves, specifically because of Mr. Lupin. Now, there's a rumour going around that Mr. Weasley here is in charge of the new fountain to go up in the Ministry Atrium. Can I assume from the fact that he's here that you're going to ask that the statue, or perhaps the donations, go toward your new project? Wolfden, I believe you called it?"

Harry smiled, glad the reporter had put it together so easily. "Good guess. No, actually, it isn't. I asked you, Arthur and Hermione here because I have another idea to run by the group of you."

"Does it have to do with the fountain?" Arthur asked.

"Yes."

"Does it have something to do with Muggle-borns and orphans?" Hermione asked.

"Yes."

"Is it something that almost the entire Black family would loath?" Ginny asked.

"Yes." Harry gave everyone another moment to ask further questions or perhaps make a guess, but nobody spoke. He turned to Arthur. "If a wizarding child is orphaned, what happens to them?"

Arthur frowned a bit at the unexpected tack of the conversation but answered the question anyway. "The nearest relative is found and the child delivered to them. Just as you were."

Harry nodded. "Right. What if no relatives are found, are willing, or the parents have made no arrangements for their child in the worst case?"

"Well, I suppose the child would be put up for adoption. That wouldn't happen, though, with how much extended family any of us have."

"Sure it would. In fact, it did less than a hundred years ago, didn't it?" He turned to Ginny.

She nodded. "Tom Riddle A.K.A. Voldemort."

Arthur and Simon blanched. Hermione looked thoughtful.

"Tom," Harry agreed. "He ended up in a Muggle orphanage, despite everything. Now, am I correct in assuming that there is no such thing as a wizard orphanage?"

"No, there is not," Simon answered. "There's never been a need."

"Yes, there is," Hermione said, still studying Harry. She turned to Simon before continuing, "Tom Riddle shouldn't have had to go to a Muggle orphanage. Harry, though he had some special security concerns, would've been better off in an orphanage than with the Dursleys."

"That's not many kids," Arthur said with a frown.

Harry nodded. "True, which is why it'd be more than simply an orphanage. It could also be a summer boarding house. If it weren't for your invitations to the Burrow, I would've had to spend each summer locked up with the Dursleys. Let me assure you, both they and I would've been overjoyed if I had a different place to go over the summers."

Hermione frowned. "As I said, you had special security concerns, Harry. For the same reasons you couldn't spend all summer at the Burrow, you couldn't have spent it at this hypothetical boarding house."

Harry's face twisted into scowl as he realised that his situation really wouldn't have been improved by this idea after all. "I still think a magical orphanage and boarding house is a good idea."

"Perhaps so," Ginny conceded. "Why don't you put out a notice with St Mungo's, Minister Bones and Headmaster Dumbledore? With all your house-elves and a nanny or two, you have more than enough help available to you to take care of several kids at Potter Manor. If you start to get overwhelmed, I'm sure Mum would be overjoyed to help out. If it turns out to be a higher population than Potter Manor can hold, then you can deal with it later."

Seeing the expression on Harry's face, Arthur added, "We're not saying it's a bad idea, Harry. We're only concerned that the need isn't large enough to turn this into a full scale crusade. Don't you think that Wolfden is a big enough goal for now?"

Harry wasn't terribly happy with what they were saying, but it did make sense. "Okay, I see your point. I'll talk with Madam Pomfrey before approaching Minister Bones and Dumbledore about this." He shook his head and looked up at Arthur. "Well, that changes some things. With Ginny's approval, I'd like to suggest something for the Atrium fountain. How difficult would it be to get the donations to go to Wolfden?"

As Arthur frowned and leaned back, Simon was slowly shaking his head. "I'm afraid that won't work, Harry."

Harry scowled and turned to the reporter.

Simon just raised a placating hand. "I'm not saying it's a bad idea. I know Remus from my own Hogwarts days, and I sympathise. I'm just saying that the wizard on the street won't donate money to make life easier on werewolves."

"How about research?" Hermione asked. "One of Wolfden's other goals is research into Wolfsbane Potion and a more permanent cure."

Simon thought about that for a second. "To make that work, you'd need to cast werewolves as victims instead of bloodthirsty dark creatures."

"Do you have any idea what Remus goes through every full moon?" Harry burst out. "He IS a victim. On top of that, once they have Wolfsbane Potion, they aren't dangerous."

"I'm on your side, Harry," Simon said quietly. "I'm not disputing what Miss Granger said. I'm just making suggestions and observations."

"He's right," Arthur said. "You kids' hearts are in the right place, but you're now venturing into public politics. Until you have more experience at it,

maybe you'd better get for advice and actually listen to it. I know you don't like anyone treating you like a child, Harry, but if you're honest with yourself, you'll know I'm right about this."

Harry took a breath to calm down. "Yeah. I hear you." He gave a wry grin. "I'm too Gryffindor; leading with my heart instead of my brain."

Simon smiled. "You need a few more of us Hufflepuffs around to drag you back down to reality." As the other four chuckled, he went on thoughtfully. "Perhaps a multi-phase campaign? At this point loudly proclaim your love of Remus Lupin. Give all the reasons: He's been a good man to you, standing by Sirius and your parents, popular professor here, part of Headmaster Dumbledore's mysterious fighting force and all that. Play up that you know about his affliction and it doesn't matter to you. He's a victim, just as you said. That'd give the public time to come to grips with your attitude toward werewolves before springing your next surprise on them. Once the fountain is dedicated, THAT is when you announce your plans for Wolfden."

Hermione was looking at him in admiration. She nodded and turned to Harry. "Are you sure you want me running your public relations, Harry? Mr. Firthquill would appear to be a better choice."

"You don't want to work for me on this?" Harry asked.

She waved that off. "That's not it at all. For Remus's sake, he's a better choice than I am."

Simon made a noise of disagreement. "I'm a reporter. While I'd be a valuable ally where I am, I don't have the temperament to be your PR person. I'd be willing to be a freelance consultant for you or your primary news outlet."

"What would you prefer?"

"Ideally, we'd keep having meetings like this where you tell me what's going on, what you want and I write the stories for you for the Prophet."

"Run everything by me or Hermione before you publish," Harry requested. "Remember what I said earlier. Not all of what I've been telling you was for public consumption."

Simon nodded. "Unlike some in my profession, I play it straight with my sources as long as the sources play it straight with me."

Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Arthur all caught the other half of that. If they tried to take advantage of him, he'd turn on them.

"I hear you," Harry acknowledged both halves of what Simon had said.

"The fountain?" Arthur asked, directing the conversation back to his primary concern for this meeting.

Ginny frowned. "Much as I'd like to recommend a werewolf to go with the use of the donations, that wouldn't be taken well, would it?"

"Not hardly," Simon agreed.

"Everyone will have a hard enough time with the donations as it is. Werewolves have a bad enough reputation even after the attention you'll be giving them."

"A war memorial?" Ginny asked, staring off into space. She caught Harry's quizzical look and elaborated, "Something simple in design, but it lists the names of the victims."

"Does anyone else think the combination of war memorial centrepiece but donations going toward Wolfsbane Potion research is a little odd?" Hermione asked.

"No worse than the lie of the five figures that was there previously with donations going toward St Mungo's," Arthur said with a sour look. "Since we're talking about a war memorial, what shape were you thinking?"

"A tombstone?" Harry suggested, though he didn't seem happy with his own suggestion.

Ginny grimaced. "That's TOO morbid. An obelisk, maybe. Not too tall or you can't read the names at the top. Considering how many lost their lives, it would have to be a rotating list of names."

"All of Tom's victims, or just in the past year and a half?" Harry asked quietly.

"Only those who lost their lives, or those who lost their souls or minds as well?" Hermione added.

Arthur was taking notes rapidly. "We'll also list the Muggles as well. That was a good point, Hermione. This way, we can honour people like Frank and Alice Longbottom."

Harry shivered. "I just wish something like this wasn't needed."

Ginny ran a hand over his back. "We all do, love. The fact is, though, that it did happen. This way, we can honour those who deserve it."

"Yeah," Harry quietly agreed.

Arthur rounded the table and put a hand upon Harry's shoulder. "You and Ginny put a stop to him, Harry. This fountain is only to remember the victims who would otherwise be forgotten."

Simon cleared his throat in the ensuing uncomfortable silence. "Am I correct in thinking you'd like a story soon about Remus Lupin? After the unveiling ceremony at the Ministry, we can do another about Wolfden."

Harry nodded, eyeing the reporter in curiosity.

Seeing the look, Simon asked, "What, have I grown horns?"

"I'm just wondering why you're doing this with so little complaint and so much cooperation."

"Couple reasons," Simon answered, not bothered by the implied slight. "First, if I cooperate with you, you're likely to continue to feed me stories. Second, anything I publish with your blessing helps my career and makes my paper happy with me."

Harry nodded, accepting the explanation.

Simon stood, nodding politely to each person and taking his leave.

"You know, it's too bad the magical orphanage idea may not work out," Harry idly said.

"How's that?" Arthur asked.

"Oh, I was just thinking of the fun we could have with that horrid portrait in Grimmauld Place."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked in confusion.

"Put a permanent Silencing Charm on her and put her behind unbreakable glass. Think of all the fun kids could have, throwing eggs at her and making faces at that old hag."

Ginny grinned.

Hermione almost giggled. "With that witch's personality, she'd try to fight back, making faces back at the kids . . ."

"No, Harry," Arthur lightly scolded. "Even silenced, she'd cause too many nightmares among the kids."

All four chuckled at the mental images they were conjuring.

Arthur walked back to his place at the table and started collecting his notes.

Ginny turned to Hermione. "You free to work on that Arithmancy homework you agreed to help me with?"

Hermione nodded and the girls left to the common room, promising to meet Harry for dinner.

Once the door closed behind the two girls, Harry turned to Arthur. "Do you have a few minutes, sir?"

Arthur paused at the overt formality of Harry's tone and slowly sank back into a seat. "I thought I asked you to call me Arthur?" he asked cautiously.

Harry smiled nervously. "For this conversation, you're Mr. Weasley." He took a breath, visibly gathering courage. "Sir, I'd like to ask for your permission to marry Ginny."

Arthur didn't react. In point of fact, he'd been expecting this exact question when Harry had asked him to stay. "Have you spoken to her about this?"

"No, sir."

"Have you spoken to her mother?"

"Not directly, sir, but she already gave me her blessing if I ever decided to ask."

"When were you planning on asking Ginny?"

"When the time seems right. I don't have any particular plan in mind." Harry reached into his robes and pulled out a small box. He opened it and held it out before him.

The door to the Room of Requirement opened.

Harry closed his eyes and hoped that either it wasn't Ginny or that if it was then the floor beneath him would open up and swallow him. The Chamber of Secrets with a big, rotting snake corpse sounded pretty good right now.

The silent tableau held for a few seconds. Harry, finally cracked one eye open and glanced toward the open door.

Remus was grinning widely at the scene. "Harry, isn't that the wrong Weasley to be giving a ring to? I mean, I know you like Arthur and all, but he's already married."

Arthur started laughing, Remus joining in moments later. Harry's forehead made a thumping sound as it hit the tabletop.

Wiping his eyes, Arthur waved Remus toward another chair.

Remus, still chuckling, picked up the ring box before sitting next to Harry. "Pretty," Remus noted, passing it to Arthur.

For his part, Arthur nodded agreement before closing the box and putting it next to Harry's still lowered head. "Oh, look up at us, Harry. You know Remus was just teasing."

Harry turned his head enough to look at Arthur. "How would you have felt if your favourite uncle walked into that same scene with you and Mr. Prewett?"

"Oh, mortified beyond all description," Arthur acknowledged without his grin faltering in the slightest.

"You're not helping," Harry mumbled.

"You're asking Arthur's permission?" Remus asked, eyes shining brightly.

"Yes, he was," Arthur said, leaning backwards. "You know, Harry, this is where I try to make you crack, asking why you think you deserve my little girl, whether you can support her, and so on. Unfortunately, Remus broke the mood before I could grill you properly." He turned to Remus. "I'm not mad at you, though. The look on Harry's face more than made up for it."

Remus snickered.

Harry, head still on the table, rotated his field of vision to glare at Remus.

Sobering, Arthur said, "Harry, you know that Molly and I think of you as another son."

Harry's head came off the table, and he quickly schooled his features.

Arthur went on, "We'd be honoured to have you as part of the family officially. Yes, Harry, you have my blessing to ask Ginny to marry you."

Harry let out a breath.

"You expected some other answer?" Arthur asked in amusement.

"Oh, go easy on the lad, Arthur. He's in love and therefore isn't thinking straight."

"And to think that I once looked up to him for guidance and advice," Harry commented toward the ceiling.

"Ouch." Remus theatrically winced, enjoying the teasing with his godson.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, Remus, but why are you here?" Arthur asked.

Remus indicated Harry. "He asked me to come for the meeting you just had. I thought I couldn't make it in time, but things freed up at the last second. How'd the conversation with Mr. Firthquill go?"

"Good," Harry answered. "He suggested highlighting our relationship for the time being. At the unveiling ceremony in March, that's when I should pitch Wolfden."

"Giving the public time to digest and think about the Boy Who Lived and his acceptance of a high profile werewolf," Arthur added.

"Makes sense. So the fountain donations will go toward Wolfden?"

"So long as it's clear that it's for research."

Remus frowned in thought. "You'll have to get the public to consider us victims."

Harry nodded sadly. "Yeah. That's the plan. I don't like what this will be dragging you through, Moony."

Remus waved that off. "It's bound to happen. Once one of the reporters realises you were honest when you called me your godfather at the press conference and therefore how close you and I actually are, it'll bring me more attention than I've had since I quit Hogwarts."

"When you were forced out," Harry corrected.

"Same difference."

"No, it isn't, and you know it."

"Getting upset over it won't help anything, Harry. It's done. Back to the subject, though, I was bound to get into the press again sooner or later. At least this way it's for a good cause and from a friendly source."

"Yeah, about that. Simon said he remembered you from when you were students."

"Really? He was three years ahead of us."

"The Marauders were apparently memorable."

All three men laughed. "Yes, when I was working here, I recall Minerva and Albus mention us once or twice. I think even Severus had a recollection or two that he brought up with me."

"Hmmp," Harry grumped. "Is that why he got you fired?"

"I wasn't fired. I quit."

"We've already been through that. If it wasn't voluntary, you were fired no matter the actual circumstances."

"Yes, well Severus had a point. As a werewolf, I AM dangerous to the students here. As I proved that night."

Harry frowned, having no real counter to that one. "Why are you defending him?" he asked instead.

"Because I'm trying to keep you from doing something nasty to Severus."

"Remus, if I was going to go after Snape, it would be for his treatment of every non-Slytherin in the school and myself in particular. I was thinking of mixing Gender-Bender, Eternal Love, and Unquenchable Lust Potions and then putting Filch in front of him. What do you think?"

Remus's eyes widened in alarm.

Arthur sighed. "Harry, aside from the morality of doing that, you realise all three of those are illegal, don't you?"

"I'd be the most popular inmate in Azkaban."

"And break Ginny's heart when you get arrested," Remus pointed out.

Harry deflated. "You two just had to ruin the moment, didn't you?"

"You'll be officially joining my family, Harry, but only if you don't get thrown into prison first. I'm just looking after my daughter."

"She needs to say 'yes' first," Harry pointed out, reverting back to an insecure teenager in a blink.

"If you think she'd say anything else after everything that's happened, you need to have your head examined."

The Unknown Power January 26 to June

The next afternoon Harry went to his regular Animagus training with McGonagall. He was just inside the doorway to her classroom when he became aware of the third person in the room.

"Hagrid!" Harry smiled at his first real friend.

"Hiya, Harry. Professor McGonagall asked me ter speak with yeh. She says that yer havin' trouble with yer new form?"

Surprised, Harry shot a questioning look to the Transfiguration professor.

She nodded. "I asked Professor Hagrid here due to his extensive knowledge of animals, magical and Muggle. As you know, you've been able to transform all parts of your body except your torso. You have been stymied at this stage for over a week now, despite your rapid progress on all other stages. I hope that with Professor Hagrid's knowledge and unique perspective, we might be able to overcome this final obstacle."

Harry nodded, turning back to Hagrid. "I hope you can help. This last stage is driving me batty since it just doesn't want to work."

Hagrid asked Harry to recount his totem dream and then transform every part that he was capable of. Through it all, Harry became more and more impressed with his large friend's professionalism.

McGonagall saw it. "Within his field," she whispered while Hagrid was staring at the ceiling in thought, "Hagrid is a widely accepted expert. He has been used by the Auror Division on occasion when one of their trainees is having Animagus difficulties just as you are or with a dangerous or unknown magical animal."

"Harry," Hagrid said with a small smile. "Outside o' classes, wha' do yeh like ter do the most?"

Harry frowned in confusion at the unexpected question. "Well, Quidditch. Why?"

"Quidditch or flyin'?"

McGonagall's face changed into a pleased little smile as she clearly realised something.

Hagrid nodded to her. Turning back to the confused Harry, he said, "Harry, there's a rare breed o' horse that is very differ'nt than regular horses. Horses are norm'lly very shy creatures, boltin' in retreat at the firs' hint o' danger. This other breed is much more intelligent and very, very protective o' its herd. The alpha stallion will lead the rest o' his herd in defence o' his foals or territory if 'is enemy invades."

"Horses are normally very shy and instinctive creatures," Professor McGonagall added. "When you told me about your Animagus form, I must admit that I was surprised. If what Hagrid and I now believe turns out to be the case, it would explain a great deal."

"I'm glad you both think you've figured it out," Harry said in mounting annoyance. "Could you please explain it to me?"

Far from being angry at Harry's attitude, Hagrid merely chuckled. "Yeh always were inpatien', weren' yeh, Harry? 't any rate, I don' think yer a horse 't all."

"But all of my transformations already look like a horse. Everything except my chest."

"Torso," McGonagall corrected.

"What's the difference?"

"Torso is chest and back, Harry. Now what migh' be on a horse's back that has ter do with flyin'?"

Harry's jaw dropped as he finally realised what his friend was trying to tell him. "A PEGASUS? I thought Animagus forms couldn't be magical creatures."

"They can't," McGonagall affirmed. She gave an unladylike snort. "If they could, you'd probably be a phoenix instead of a pegasus. Back to your form, though, a pegasus isn't magical. It's just very, very rare. Wizards have hidden them from Muggles to prevent their being hunted."

"I'm a pegasus?" Harry asked, still trying to wrap his mind around that fact and hardly having heard any of the rest of McGonagall's words.

"I 'spect so," Hagrid said, rummaging around in his oversized coat.

"I would suggest you do a bit of research in the library now that you have a different form to study."

Hagrid withdrew a book from his coat and started flipping through it.

Harry nodded to his Transfiguration professor and was about to leave for the library, but Hagrid spoke up. "Hold on, Harry. I think I have somethin' for you." Hagrid reversed the book he was holding and jabbed a thick finger at a diagram of the skeletal and musculature structure of a pegasus.

Harry blinked in surprise to find exactly what he was after. As he took the book, he glanced at the title, Rare and Uncommon Muggle Creatures . He looked up at Hagrid. "You always carry this book with you?" The one time he'd gotten an inkling of what all was in the coat (immediately before his first visit to Diagon Alley with his new, large friend), it had seemed to hold a whole array of fascinating stuff. A book on non-magical creatures was still a bit unusual.

Hagrid laughed. "Naw. I only had it since I was gonna talk with yeh today about yer Animagus form."

Harry nodded and bent his head to study the diagrams. Fortunately, everything was basically the same as a horse with the exception of the wings and the huge sets of muscles that went with them.

After a few minutes of study, Harry laid the book aside and looked over at McGonagall. He knew that she wanted to watch, and he was making sure she was ready.

At her nod, Harry closed his eyes and envisioned his torso slowly transforming into the new form that he'd just been studying. Once he had the process firmly in mind, he released his magic. He was immediately rewarded by feeling his body thicken and lengthen. When it stopped shifting he opened his eyes and looked.

Sure enough, he was taller (his trunk from shoulders to hip had lengthened considerably) and his torso was a thick cylinder all out of proportion to the rest of his body. Objectively, he knew he looked absolutely ridiculous, but the partial transformation stages frequently did.

McGonagall slowly circled around the standing Harry, nodding in satisfaction. "With wings," she pronounced.

Harry tried to twist around to look, but all the muscles on the newly transfigured portions of his body weren't responding to commands right. Not being successful with that attempt, he tried to move the muscles in the middle of his back.

McGonagall, who was still circling him, was nearly knocked over when one of Harry's wings suddenly shot out to its full extension of nearly ten feet and then held there.

She took a few cautious steps back. "Harry, it might be a good idea to not try to use the wings until you're fully transformed. Your human brain can't cope with this partial physiology very well. When you're a full pegasus, the brain and nerves will know how to deal with them."

Harry nodded and tried to relax his back. The extended wing made one "flap" before settling itself onto his back again.

Unfortunately, the one motion it did perform nearly knocked Harry over and he fetched up against McGonagall's desk. He grunted as he collided with the immovable object.

"Are yeh alright, Harry?"

"Yeah. Just learned that the desk is harder than my leg. I'm okay."

Hagrid nodded and stood from the wall he'd been leaning against since giving the book to Harry. He gathered up his book again and strode toward the door. "Will ye let me see yeh once ye're fully transformed, Harry?"

"Sure thing, Hagrid. Thanks for the help." Harry concentrated for a moment and his body reverted back to normal.

"'s alright, Harry. I told yeh that yeh'd be a thumpin' good wizard, didn' I?"

Harry laughed. "That you did, Hagrid. That you did."

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

Monday evening, Harry entered Dumbledore's office after dinner. "Thank you for agreeing to see me, sir."

"Not at all, Harry. Please have a seat."

Harry nodded to Snape, who nodded back. Since the beginning of the year, they'd tolerated each other but little more. The fact that he'd showed up at all was somewhat surprising and gratifying.

"I'm sure you both recall the events around the Chamber of Secrets," Harry said.

"Distinctly," Snape said, a flicker of interest appearing in his eyes.

Harry turned to him. "I told Professor Dumbledore all of what happened. How much of it do you know?"

"Very little. All that Albus informed the staff of was that the Monster of Slytherin had been slain, the Chamber of Secrets opened and the heir stopped."

"Do you know what the monster was?"

Snape blinked and leaned back in the chair. He folded his hands, staring away in thought for a few seconds. "Evidence supports a basilisk." He saw Dumbledore's nod. "Has the beast been killed?" Dumbledore again nodded. "May I ask why the staff was not informed of this? You know the prices of potions ingredients, Albus. Depending on the size of that corpse, we could save a great deal of money."

"I did not inform the staff for two very good reasons, Severus. I did not want to subject Harry to again visiting that Chamber, as he is the only person I am positive could get us in."

Instead of Snape's expected sneer, he turned inquisitive eyes to Harry.

"The passwords to get in there are in Parseltongue," Harry explained.

Snape nodded acknowledgment and turned back to Dumbledore. "Two reasons?" he asked.

"Unlikely as it may have been, consider the repercussions if Voldemort had learned of the corpse."

Snape shuddered.

Harry was suddenly glad he didn't know all the uses of various basilisk bits.

"So you're now willing to take us down there?"

Harry started slightly at Snape's question. "Yes."

"What changed?"

"Severus," Dumbledore's tone was mildly warning.

"It's okay, Headmaster," Harry said. He turned to Snape. "Frankly, I was asked by someone I need to prove it to. He's becoming an ally, and I need to solidify it. That is the Slytherin reason." Though the tone was lightly sarcastic, Snape nodded agreeably. "The Gryffindor reason is that the Chamber is a potential security risk to the school."

"This is just now occurring to you?"

Harry studied Snape for a moment, trying to decide if that was a sarcastic question or not. "No, it didn't just occur to me. I'm one of only three Parselmouths I'm aware of. Tom is the second. The less attention I drew to the Chamber, the better for all concerned, don't you think?"

"Miss Weasley is the third Parseltongue?"

Harry nodded, not surprised that he had made the conclusion so quickly. "I don't know that for sure, but you have to be a Parseltongue to get in there. As Tom's diary got her to go in, I assumed he had given her the ability."

"Perhaps or perhaps not," Dumbledore said. "It is possible that the diary had been charmed to produce the appropriate sounds, and Miss Weasley was needed to merely carry it."

"If she weren't a Parseltongue, how did she order the basilisk to attack Muggle-borns only?"

"It is possible, even likely, that a Muggle-born's blood smells different than a pure-blood magician's," Snape speculated.

Dumbledore nodded. "Whether Miss Weasley is a Parseltongue or not is immaterial, however. Harry, may I presume you are suggesting an expedition into the Chamber of Secrets?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. Multiple reasons. First, as I said, I need to prove something to Simon. Second, I figured you or Professor McGonagall would like to determine if the Chamber is a weak point in Hogwarts security. Third," he turned to Snape, "I've been told that a basilisk corpse can produce a lot of potions ingredients. You indicated this just a few minutes ago as well."

"Indeed," Snape inclined his head, but Harry fancied that he could see the gleam in his eye from just the thought of what a treasure-trove a fully-grown basilisk corpse could be.

"Before we go, however, I have a request of you, Professor."

Snape suddenly looked a lot more wary.

"I would like you to teach two people how to brew Wolfsbane Potion."

Snape suddenly looked a bit uncomfortable. "Even given my history of . . . denigrating your work, Mr. Potter, I must honestly tell you that you do not have the skills needed to brew it. Neither does Mr. Lupin, whom I presume is the other potential brewer you had in mind."

Harry shook his head, pleasantly surprised that Eloise hadn't yet spoken to him about it. "Not me and Remus, no. Eloise Midgen and Hermione."

Dumbledore twinkled. Snape blinked.

"Hopefully they're going to be brewing Wolfsbane for me every month starting this summer. I'll distribute it to any werewolves who want it. Once I prove that werewolves can be real people too, I'm going to get the laws changed to allow them back into society so long as Wolfsbane is available

to them. Back to the point, though, Eloise has agreed to do this but asked that you supervise the first couple times until she's comfortable doing it on her own. Hermione has agreed to sit in as a backup."

"Yes," Snape slowly said, "Miss Midgen and Miss Granger are adequate brewers."

"That reminds me, with Moldywart doing a fair imitation of fertilizer, you're probably out of a summer job. Would you like the chance to do independent research on the Wolfsbane Potion, aimed at making it permanent or a real cure?"

Dumbledore twinkled brighter. Snape blinked harder.

"This is an honest offer, sir. Much as you and I disagree on a personal level, I DO respect your potions skills. If you don't feel up to it or honestly think someone else would be a better researcher, I'd appreciate another name."

Snape almost smiled. "Appealing to my professional pride, Potter?"

Harry shrugged agreeably. "Whatever works."

Snape stared at Harry so hard that Harry put up his rudimentary Occlumency shields.

"Why?"

That certainly wasn't what Harry was expecting. He tilted his head for a moment in thought at the multi-faceted question.

"Depends on which question you're actually asking. Why am I asking you to help Eloise and Hermione? You're the school's Potions professor and Eloise asked for you. Why am I offering this job to you? I've already told you that you're the best Potions Master I know. Why did I ask you for names of others? You're the ONLY Potions Master I know. Why am helping werewolves? They deserve the same chance the rest of us do, and it's helping to repair some of the damage Voldemort and Fudge have done to them. Why am I doing this for Remus? I love him and Sirius, Mum and Dad would want me to do it. Why am I doing this at all? It needs to be done and nobody else is doing it."

"Bloody Gryffindor," Snape muttered. Instead of the sarcasm Harry had expected from such a phrase, he almost sounded resigned to the situation. Or was that his version of approval?

Harry studied his potions professor in confusion for a few seconds before hesitantly asking, "Professor Snape? Please don't get angry over this question, but why are you nicer to me this year than the past five?"

"Harry," Dumbledore's tone matched what he'd used on Snape not five minutes previously.

"No, Albus," Snape stopped him quietly. "As loath as I am to admit it, it is a fair question." The expression on his face could be called a smile if only the look in his eyes had changed in the least little bit. "More correctly, your question should have been why I dislike you less than previously."

Harry refused to let the grin show, but he did tilt his head in acceptance of the correction.

"Your words at the beginning of the year were correct, Mr. Potter."

Harry knew that that was as close as he was ever going to get to an apology from Snape or even acknowledgment that he was ever wrong in his thinking.

"After that point, I endeavoured to treat you as every other non-Slytherin in the school. After Halloween . . . Much as I may dislike the fact, I owe you a life debt now."

Harry nodded, having somewhat expected an answer like that. "Okay, one last question and we can stop being civil to each other again."

A flash of humour crossed Snape's face so quickly that Harry wasn't sure he'd ever seen it in the first place.

"Why do you treat your Slytherins so differently than the rest of the school?"

Snape sighed. "There are multiple reasons, Professor Potter." The way he addressed Harry told him that the reasons he was going to give were going to be the real, adult reasons and at least as importantly, he'd better treat them as such. "I'm head of Slytherin house and expected to treat them better than anyone else is. I'm showing them that there is someone here in the school that is on their side, always. My hope was that it would either get them to open up to me as needed or perhaps sway some from following a darker path than they otherwise would. Now, before you point out that I could be on their side without being against everyone else including you Gryffindors, there is a reason for that as well. You all need to learn that sometimes the world isn't fair for no other reason than it can be unfair. Most of my Slytherins learned this long before Hogwarts. Most non-Slytherins have yet to learn it."

Much as he disliked it, the reasons actually made a certain amount of sense to Harry. "How do you stand it?" he asked, honestly confused.

Snape cocked his head in a silent question.

"The students. You have to know that every other student in the school hates you for how you're treating us. I know you were a special target of the twins for exactly that reason. The other professors can't like you much better."

Snape sighed, suddenly looking old and tired. "I endure it as I must. Albus knows my reasons as you now do. He at least UNDERSTANDS why I do as I do." He gave a sudden grin that made Harry glad he wasn't in class. "As for the two Mr. Weasleys, I do enjoy a good war. Even if my

opponents don't totally realise it."

Harry laughed.

"I trust you hold this entire conversation in confidence?" Dumbledore ordered in the form of a question.

Harry nodded to the headmaster. He cocked an eye at Snape. "Who would believe the truth, anyway?"

"Indeed," Snape responded, wrapping himself back into the persona that Harry was used to. "I agree to your immediate terms, Professor Potter. In exchange for unlimited access to the basilisk corpse, I shall tutor Miss Midgen and Miss Granger in the Wolfsbane Potion this summer. As for the research position, I shall let you know."

"Within two weeks?" Harry asked. "If you turn it down, I need to find someone else. At any rate, Hermione or I will get the specifics to you in a few days. Eloise also already knows about this."

Snape inclined his head in what Harry took for agreement.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "When shall we go down to the Chamber?"

Dumbledore ran a finger through his beard for a few moments. "I believe the both of you have free periods late tomorrow afternoon, do you not?"

Harry and Snape nodded.

Dumbledore said, "Very well, Minerva shall accompany you. She shall bring brooms as I believe you indicated that there was a significant drop?"

Harry nodded. "I have my own broom, but as I said, I invited Simon Firthquill. Could she bring three brooms?"

Dumbledore nodded. He turned his head and asked, "Fawkes, would you be so kind as to do an old man a favour and accompany them? I do not foresee any difficulties, but one can never be too careful."

Harry smiled at the phoenix. "Besides, you helped me out a lot last time we were in there. You're my good luck charm, Fawkes."

Fawkes puffed himself up a bit and trilled a clear affirmative.

"Two o'clock tomorrow in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom?" Harry asked the two men.

"I wish you the best of luck," Dumbledore bid them.

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"I cannot believe I agreed to do this."

"I can't believe you had a civil conversation with Snape," Ron retorted.

Harry rolled his eyes. He hadn't told his friends all of what had been discussed, but did mention that he and Snape were getting along better than ever.

"You're welcome to come along," Harry reminded Ginny.

She shivered beside him. "Thank you, no. I have many, many memories of that place that I'd rather forget. My one fond memory is easy to re-create outside of that awful place."

"Really? How?" Hermione asked from across the Gryffindor lunch table.

Ginny suddenly pulled her hand back from her plate. "Ouch!"

Harry turned a concerned face toward her.

Ginny smiled at him before turning to Hermione. "There you go."

Hermione laughed.

It took a few more seconds to realise what she meant, but Harry smiled. Ron still looked blank.

"Harry looking at ME in concern," Ginny explained to her dense brother.

Harry rolled his eyes before he glanced at his watch. "Come on, you lot. We have McGonagall for an hour, and then I get to dive into the bowels of Hogwarts to study a rotting snake." He stood and collected his bag, absently rubbing his leg.

"What's wrong with your leg?" Hermione asked.

"Just bumped it on Sunday. I'll be okay."

"I'll rub it out properly later," Ginny offered with a smirk directed at her brother.

Ron grimaced but didn't comment.

Ginny nodded in satisfaction. "You're finally learning, Ron." With a quick peck on Harry's cheek, she moved off toward her Charms class.

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Harry approached the first floor girl's bathroom with his Firebolt slung over one shoulder to find Simon already waiting on him.

"I see you got my owl."

Simon nodded, eyeing the broom in curiosity. "Honestly, I was surprised that we're doing this so quickly."

Harry shrugged. "Why wait?"

"Indeed, Harry. Why wait?" McGonagall asked as she walked up with three brooms. She handed one to the arriving Snape and another to Simon.

Simon looked at the old Cleansweep in his hands with a distant smile.

Harry led the foursome into the permanently out of order bathroom. Fortunately, Myrtle wasn't present and therefore didn't delay them. Harry went directly over to the sink in question. Looking, he spotted the miniature snake scratched onto the side of the tap. Working himself into the correct frame of mind, he hissed, "Open up."

The sink sank into the floor, exposing the large pipe Harry remembered.

Okay, not QUITE as he remembered. It seemed somewhat narrower than he recalled. That, or he'd gotten bigger in the intervening four years.

Harry looked at each person in turn, all still holding their brooms and eyeing the pipe dubiously. "I don't suppose any of you know a good Shrinking Spell, do you?" Harry asked with an apologetic grin. He knew one, of course, but his own attempts with a living subject had been . . . unfortunate.

Simon laughed. Snape heaved a much put-upon sigh.

McGonagall whipped out her wand and waved it over each man in turn, muttering a spell that Harry didn't catch. She shrunk herself last of all.

Harry was still staring at her actions when the sink beside him seemed to grow a great deal taller. He looked at it in surprise before noticing that everything else was also a lot taller, except his three companions.

McGonagall primly mounted her broom side-saddle and said, "I assure you the spell is only temporary, Harry. Please lead the way."

Harry nodded and pulled out his wand. "*Lumos Maximus*." His wand now producing enough light to put a Muggle torch to shame, he hopped onto his trusty Firebolt and floated over to the now comfortably large opening. Exercising all of his considerable flying skill, he floated nearly straight downward, wand light leading the way. He called up a warning to take it slowly before the next flyer ran into him. Remembering his slide downward, he kept to the largest, most direct pipe and ignored all the intersecting pipes. After flying downward much further than he recalled sliding, the pipe levelled out. Harry cautiously moved forward until the pipe ended in a rock tunnel that looked comfortably large.

When the other three had moved out into the tunnel and were hovering around him, Harry asked, "Shall we stay small, or go back to regular size?"

"You told Albus of a rock fall ahead?" McGonagall asked.

Harry nodded.

"I suggest we stay in our reduced size until we're in the Chamber proper," McGonagall said.

Harry and Snape nodded in agreement. Simon was looking around in unabashed curiosity.

Harry again led the way, making good time flying through the damp tunnel. He quickly came to the cave-in and flew through the hole that Ron had dug so long ago. Immediately on the other side he spied the moulted snake skin.

Harry looked at it in surprise, having forgotten about it completely. "Not as decomposed as I would've thought," he said absently, studying the thing.

"Not decomposed?" Snape asked in shock. "It's been reduced to nothing but skin!"

"Oh, it was like this the first time I was through here. The corpse is further along. This skin was just like this four years ago. Doesn't look like it decomposed much, surprisingly enough."

Snape calmed down when he heard it was just a shed skin. He waved his wand over himself and cancelled McGonagall's Shrinking Charm. Again full sized, he withdrew a bag from within his robes. Using waves of his wand, he levitated the basilisk skin, shrunk it, and moved it into the bag, lecturing all the while. "A basilisk is a very magical creature. Various parts of it will have no doubt fallen to scavengers." He indicated the field of rat bones on the floor without commenting on them directly. "Beyond that, other than some of the internal soft tissue, most of the body will unlikely be decomposed to any degree."

"Fawkes destroyed its eyes during the fight," Harry mentioned.

Snape sighed but nodded.

"Speaking of which, where is Fawkes? Professor Dumbledore said he would -"

The sentence wasn't even complete when the phoenix burst onto the scene with his customary flash of fire.

"Hullo, Fawkes," Harry greeted the relatively huge bird.

Simon floated on his broom, mouth agape.

Fawkes chirruped to Harry and McGonagall.

Harry privately thought that the phoenix was laughing at the half-sized humans.

Finished, Snape slipped the bag back into his robes and re-mounted his broom.

Harry led them further down the occasionally twisting tunnel. Around one bend, they came upon a wall blocking their path. Carved into the wall, two entwined serpents with emeralds in their eyes seemed to look with bored indifference at the interlopers.

"Open," hissed Harry.

The wall obligingly slid apart, revealing the opening to the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry landed and looked around. Apart from the size difference, it was the same as he remembered it. He let the other three take in the long room, stone pillars, and carved snakes. After a few moments, he strode forward, bringing them past the pillars and into the Chamber proper.

Directly across from them, the ostentatious statue of Slytherin still stood, mouth hugely agape. Harry pointed at it and turned to McGonagall. "The basilisk came from there."

But she wasn't looking at him. Her attention was riveted to the side of the large room.

Harry turned and saw the basilisk corpse in all its glory. Aside from the ruined eyes and one fang that was on the floor next to a black ink stain and huge bloodstain, the body was in relatively good condition. Harry remembered Snape's comment earlier about scavengers and figured that would account for the slightly deflated look that the body had.

"You beat this thing BY YOURSELF?" Simon asked in an awed whisper.

Even Snape looked vaguely impressed as he turned to regard Harry.

Harry blushed and shrugged.

McGonagall cleared her throat. Turning to Harry, she asked, "It was lairing up in the statue's mouth, you say?"

Harry nodded.

She mounted her broom and floated up.

Snape moved over to the corpse and started pulling bags, jars and assorted tools out of his robes. Simon just drifted around, eyes taking everything in. Fawkes had landed and was walking around the corpse, apparently studying it.

Harry jumped onto his broom and followed McGonagall up. "Is there anything I can do to help, Professor?" he called into the gaping mouth.

Her voice floated back out. "Thank you, Harry, but it doesn't appear to be needed." She came flying back out. "That is merely a nest." She looked around the room and began slowly flying the perimeter, examining the walls.

Figuring she'd give a shout if she needed help with anything, Harry floated down to Snape. "Need a hand?"

Snape spared him a glance. "Thank you, no." If Harry didn't know better, he'd think Snape was in a state of near ecstasy as he was waving his wand at the rapidly dismantling corpse.

With nothing else to do, Harry floated back over toward the entryway and sat down where he could watch each magician work.

Simon finally came down near Harry and hesitantly asked for a narration of the events that had occurred.

Having nothing else to do and no reason to withhold it, Harry told the story to him, starting at the time he entered the room. The only thing he left out was the identity of the duped student. Based on the speculative look Simon had, Harry doubted that minor omission went unnoticed.

At the point of Harry telling how he was dying of basilisk venom, his voice caught. Taking a deep breath, he was about to go on when he heard a soft crooning sound from beside him. Turning, he saw Fawkes standing beside him, having arrived unnoticed during his narration. McGonagall was also nearby, clearly listening to the story.

Harry smiled his thanks for Fawkes's soothing song and completed the story with no further problems.

When he wound down at the point of Fawkes flying the three children and one memory wiped adult back up the pipe, Snape was standing over

Simon's seated form, listening as intently as the deputy headmistress still was.

"Thank you for telling me, Harry," Simon solemnly said.

"Indeed, Harry. Thank you," McGonagall echoed.

Snape didn't say anything, but instead gave Harry an abbreviated bow.

Harry nodded to them. Standing and trying to throw off the unease he felt despite Fawkes's crooning, Harry asked, "Professors, is everything done?"

Snape and McGonagall glanced at each other before both nodded.

Harry jumped on his broom and floated up. "Let's get out of here, then."

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The Sunday following Valentine's Day, McGonagall stood up at the end of lunch. "Are all of the fifth and sixth year students here as requested?" A scattering of affirmative answers floated back from the few knots of students still in the room. She looked around. "Mr. Malfoy, would you retrieve Mr. Nott and Miss Parkinson, please? I require ALL of the fifth and sixth year students to be present."

Malfoy made a face but didn't try to defy a direct order. He slunk out of the Great Hall in search of his two absent housemates.

Idle chatter broke out among the gathered students plus the other year students who were now staying out of curiosity.

"I know that Professor Tonks asked us to stay after lunch today, but I don't know why," Hermione fretted. "Ron, Harry, Ginny, do any of you know?"

The other two prefects just shrugged. When Harry didn't respond, Hermione turned a piercing stare onto him. "What do you know, Harry?"

"Nothing for sure," he replied, totally unconvincingly. He knew this was coming, but still wasn't all that excited about it.

Hermione didn't get a chance to grill Harry further. Malfoy came back in with the two missing students, both looking a bit flushed.

McGonagall nodded as the three Slytherins took their seats again. "To begin, thank you all for listening to your professors and being here for this school announcement. I am going to be telling you about an addition to the NEWT level Transfiguration course. If a student received an Outstanding OWL and has exemplary coursework in their sixth year, they will be invited to take a new, supplemental course that Hogwarts will be offering beginning next year. I am talking about Animagus studies."

An excited buzz went around the room. Hermione and Ginny looked at Harry with wide eyes.

He did his best to ignore them and keep his attention on Professor McGonagall.

"As many of you know, three former students of Hogwarts became unregistered Animagi in your parents' generation. One of them wrote a notebook as he was learning and practising. As it was written by a student, it is easier for a student to follow than some of your other text books perhaps are. For anyone taking this supplemental course, a copy of the notebook will be provided. These three students took approximately three years to learn how to be Animagi. They did not have any assistance from a Hogwarts professor, however. I am confident that with an Animagus professor assisting them, nine months will be sufficient. In fact, I am aware of at least one student who took less than three months to complete his training under similar circumstances." She waited for the excited whispers to die down again. "Now, before anyone gets an idea of transforming into a dragon or some such thing, I would like to warn you that Animagi are always non-magical creatures. Animagus studies are very difficult, so this is not something someone should start on a whim." She nodded toward Padma Patil's raised hand.

"Who is the student you were referring to, Professor?"

McGonagall's eyes turned toward Harry, to nobody's real surprise. He was the one who brought Sirius's notebook to the public's attention, after all. "Professor Potter, would you please come forward and show us your Animagus form?"

Harry shakily stood and walked toward the head table. The students' excited buzz grew once again, and even Tonks, Hagrid and Dumbledore (the only professors left in the room) looked excited.

"POTTER?" Malfoy bellowed in disbelief.

The room quieted and more than one set of eyes narrowed at the arrogant Slytherin. Harry ignored him and continued forward.

"I can't believe that Potter, of all people, has the power or skill to pull off something like an Animagus transformation."

Harry stopped near the head table before turning toward Malfoy and transforming. He'd been practising with McGonagall for weeks and it took less than a second. It wasn't quite as quick as he'd seen Padfoot or McGonagall transform, but the Transfiguration professor assured him that speed would come with further practise.

All of the students were staring. Hagrid was beaming. McGonagall and Tonks looked proud.

Malfoy's jaw dropped at Harry's display. Despite his momentary lapse, he quickly regained his composure. As neither McGonagall nor Dumbledore had reprimanded him for his earlier words, Malfoy erroneously concluded that they tacitly supported him. Summoning his scathing

One again, Malfoy said, "A HORSE? What kind of form is that? How utterly useless can you really get? That is a prey animal, quick to run from danger and totally worthless except as a stupid beast of burden."

"At least he isn't a ferret," Ron commented, his voice easily carrying through the room.

Almost every student laughed.

Malfoy flushed before going on as if he hadn't heard. "The vaunted Boy Who Lived, and he becomes such a worthless, land-bound animal."

Harry, who'd been looking toward Malfoy the entire time without moving, had understood every word. As he'd hoped, Malfoy had just run his mouth off too far. He'd been counting on exactly that when he asked Professor McGonagall not to limit any derogatory remarks Malfoy might make toward him.

Malfoy was still pontificating to his attentive audience, "As proud as he is of his flying, you'd think he'd at least become some type of bird."

Harry spread his wings.

One or two nearby Hufflepuff fifth year girls shrieked at the wings suddenly hovering near their faces. Every other student gasped. Though his facial muscles couldn't support it very well, Harry was smiling widely. Hagrid's smile got wide enough to split his face in two. Tonks stared in amazement before her own room-brightening smile blossomed. Dumbledore's twinkling soared to new heights.

As he'd been directly facing Malfoy since transforming and they had been tight to his back, the Slytherin could not have seen the wings. The students to his sides and the professors behind him could have seen the wings earlier, but had not recognised them against his mottled brown coat.

"I'm afraid Harry has to settle for being a pegasus instead of a bird, Mr. Malfoy," McGonagall said dryly.

Malfoy's mouth gaped open and closed a few times.

"Maybe he'll be a goldfish instead of a ferret," Ron reconsidered his earlier assessment.

This time, the laughter drove Malfoy back down to his seat. He spent the rest of the meeting glaring malevolently at Harry and Ron.

Ginny stood and approached Harry as he folded his wings back. She reached up and ran one hand down his neck, the other rubbing the lightning bolt shaped blaze between his eyes. "So beautiful," she whispered.

Harry nuzzled her head and whinnied softly before transforming back into a human.

"That was . . . wow," Ginny breathed, wide-eyed.

Harry smiled down at her and gently guided her to a nearby seat at the Gryffindor table.

Once all the attention was back to her, McGonagall said, "As you can see, it IS possible for a student to learn to become an Animagus. Heredity does help; Mr. Potter's father was one of the students I mentioned earlier. It also takes skill and commitment to become an Animagus. This course will be by invitation only for exemplary students going into seventh year NEWT Transfiguration. I've included the fifth year students in this demonstration in case any of them were considering whether or not they wanted to take NEWT level Transfiguration next year. Now, I'm sure you all have questions. Let us see if I can answer most of them quickly. Mr. Potter started studying at the beginning of Christmas holidays, though he'd read the notebook prior to that. Once returning to Hogwarts, he continued work under my supervision. He has just finished his training this past week. The exact mechanics of the training are not open for discussion unless you are in my class beginning next year. Are there any other questions?"

"You studied and practised over the holidays? Did you do it alone, or did you have someone helping you?"

"No, I did NOT do it by myself. Sirius's notebook explained one or two examples of their early attempts and some of them were not pretty. I didn't want to try without someone nearby who could help. Professor Lupin stayed with me over the holidays, and he helped me a lot."

"Could we read the notebook?"

McGonagall shook her head. "Copies will be made available to students only once they are accepted into the course. Due to the volatile and potentially dangerous applications of this skill, the notebooks themselves will have many protective and anti-tamper charms upon them, so only the appropriate students will be able to study them and only within Hogwarts."

"It was written by Sirius Black?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. Professor McGonagall has read it and made one or two corrections. I will be adding a few suggestions and observations myself before next year."

A short pause as all the remaining students looked around at each other.

"No more questions?" McGonagall asked. After another pause, she nodded. "Very well. Invitations to the course will come with summer school lists to those who qualify. Thank you all for your attention."

Lavender and Parvati squealed and darted out of the Great Hall, heads together. Just outside the door, they stopped to give Harry dreamy smiles

before intervening students blocked their sight.

The rest of the students made their way out, many stopping to congratulate Harry on his accomplishment. Dumbledore simply laid a gentle hand upon Harry's shoulder and smiled. Hagrid thumped him on the back hard enough to make him stumble.

Once the room was mostly cleared, McGonagall said, "I shall prepare the paperwork for you to register at your graduation, Mr. Potter. Might I impose upon you to assist me next year in teaching the class?"

Harry nodded. "I'd be honoured." He shot a sideways glance at Hermione. "Assuming, of course, any of your current sixth year Transfiguration students are good enough."

Hermione gave a mock pout and a, "Hmmpf, really!" as Ron laughed.

McGonagall fought her grin. "Good evening, Mr. Potter, Mr. and Miss Weasley, Miss Granger, Professor Tonks." McGonagall changed into her own Animagus form of a tabby cat and made her swift and silent way out of the Great Hall.

"Show off!" Harry called after her in amusement.

Tonks came down from the head table, still smiling at Harry. "Remus will be so proud."

Harry shrugged in embarrassment. "It was Hagrid who figured out that pegasus was a better match for me than a horse. Once I knew what form I should be taking, it was all easy from there."

Tonks rolled her eyes. "'Easy,' he says. What Professor McGonagall said about it being difficult wasn't exaggerated, Harry. I've heard that only ten percent of all wizards have the skill and power to even attempt it. Of those, half don't have a totem dream. Few of the remaining five percent have the patience to do it. I think there are only twenty registered Animagi in Great Britain right now."

"Plus one unregistered that I'm aware of plus me," Harry added. "With this course, though, those numbers will go up. Professor McGonagall is expecting about one a year to do serious training."

"Wait, unregistered? Do you mean Pettigrew?"

Harry shook his head. "He's in Azkaban, probably as insane as he deserves by now. No, I wasn't counting him." He held up a hand to Tonks's gathering frown. "Don't bother asking. I'm not going to tell you. I'd rather have the leverage against them than turning them in."

Tonks raised one eyebrow. "How very Slytherin."

"Why thank you."

Tonks turned to Ginny. "So, I've waited months to ask this and now I can."

Harry paled.

"Is he really hung like a horse?"

Hermione broke into laughter. Ron made choking noises.

Harry hoped for a meteor strike, preferably right at his feet.

"No," Ginny answered without batting an eyelash. Harry was just registering her answer when she added, "He's hung like an alpha stallion pegasus."

Tonks and Hermione stopped laughing and their eyes widened.

Ron groaned and put a hand over his eyes. "Bad image, bad image," he muttered to himself.

Ginny turned to Harry. "So when can I ride you?"

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A Saturday in late March.

Normally, that would be a day for Harry and Ginny to practise for the upcoming Ravenclaw Quidditch match, revise, do homework or relax a bit. If it were a Hogsmeade weekend, then perhaps they would be walking hand in hand and going towards the Three Broomsticks and Honeydukes.

In point of fact, Harry and Ginny were indeed walking hand in hand and going toward Hogsmeade.

This did not mean it was a Hogsmeade weekend. Moreover, it did not mean they were happy.

This was because this Saturday, specifically the twenty-second, they had a different obligation to attend to.

"It's for Wolfden. It's for your father. It's for Remus," Harry was muttering. It was unclear whether he was speaking to Ginny or merely to himself.

"This has to be done, and it's for the best," Ginny comforted her boyfriend. It was unclear whether the reassurance was more for him or herself.

Much too quickly, they moved past the Apparition wards around Hogwarts. The couple heaved nearly identical sighs.

"Are you ready for this?"

"Would it matter if I said, 'No'? Best get it over with, though."

They dual Apparated (neither was quite sure who Apparated who, not that it really mattered) to the Ministry incoming Apparition zone.

Predictably, the slaving horde descended.

"Do you know what the new fountain will look like, Mr. Potter?" *Yes, that's what we're here for, isn't it, you idiot?* Both Harry and Ginny were thinking loudly, but they held their tongues.

"Is there any truth to the rumours that you're pregnant, Miss Weasley?" *Wouldn't that have required me to have had sex?*

"Ginny! Look this way!" Flashes and the whir and click of cameras came from all directions.

"Where will the new fountain's donations be sent to?" *Let us through, watch the bloody ceremony, and you'll be finding out.*

"Harry, any truth to the rumours that you're an Animagus?" *Yep.*

"Would you care to comment on Cornelius Fudge's accusations of voter fraud?" Both students were very tempted to start laughing hysterically at the unmitigated hypocrisy of the man. He was accusing someone else of cheating?

"Mr. Potter, what do you think of the sentence handed down to Bellatrix Lestrange?" *Anything short of evisceration by dull spoon is too good for her.* Harry was only slightly ashamed of his opinion.

"Miss Weasley, do you have anything to say about Mr. Fudge's firing of your estranged brother Percival?" *What? Fudge fired Percy? I wonder what that was about.*

"Miss Weasley, any truth to the rumours that your father fought to have the statue be of the two of you?" *Nope. In fact, all three of us fought AGAINST such a blinding show of narcissism.*

"How would you characterize your relationship to Remus Lupin, Mr. Potter?" *Don't you people actually read the Prophet ? Simon wrote it out so even primary school kids know the answer to that one.*

"Mr. Potter, how do you respond to Bellatrix Lestrange's accusations of you having used an Unforgivable?" *I was exonerated, you blistering idiot. Pay attention next time.*

"Mr. Potter, rumours abound about all the job offers you've received. Would you care to comment?" *Nope.*

"Mr. Potter, given your relationship to a known werewolf, what is your opinion on lycanthropes' rights?" *I think you answered your own question, there.*

The two finally broke free of the reporters when the Auror guards let them through their cordon in the lobby. Arthur had already arrived and smiled at the pair. "Ginny! Harry! Thank you for coming."

Harry shook his hand and Ginny gave him a quick hug, resulting in another hundred camera flashes.

Dropping her voice, Ginny asked, "What was that about Fudge and Percy?"

Arthur shook his head slightly. "I'll explain it later. Meanwhile," he waved at the crowd of reporters, Ministry officials and curious public, "we have a statue to unveil."

"Joy," Harry sighed so only Ginny and Arthur could hear him.

Arthur gave him a look of wry amusement, knowing Harry's opinion on all this pomp and circumstance, no matter how necessary it is for the public.

Subtly squaring his shoulders, Arthur walked up to the lectern. "Good morning, witches and wizards, and thank you for coming. As you're all aware, the Fountain of Magical Brethren was destroyed during an attack by Death Eaters and Lord Voldemort last June." Arthur continued speaking through their reaction to the name. "In November, I was appointed to chair a committee to put a new fountain into the Ministry lobby. After consulting with Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley, we chose a form and commissioned its construction by Mr. Hawat," he indicated a large, long faced man on the other side of the lectern from Harry and Ginny. "Mr. Hawat has completed the work and we're now ready to unveil the new fountain. On behalf of the Ministry Atrium Restoration Committee, I give you the Fountain of Remembrance." He waved his wand at the Privacy Shield behind him and the charm evaporated.

A seven foot tall obelisk rising out of a simple fountain was revealed to the audience. The obelisk was four sided, two feet on each side at the bottom and slowly tapering to approximately one foot per side at the top. As they were close enough, Harry and Ginny could read the names and dates that were forming at the bottom and scrolling smoothly but slowly upward, only to disappear at the top. Most of the names meant nothing to Harry, but he did recognise some surnames. Prewett, McKinnon and Bones all were visible from where he was standing. He swallowed thickly as he realised that the dates were all from before Halloween of 1981. He was afraid that the names with dates in the 1990's would no doubt be well known to him, even if these were not.

Arthur turned back forward. "Those of you close enough can perhaps read the names and death dates of the victims of the self-named Lord Voldemort." Again, the audience shivered. "It includes magicians and Muggles, those killed directly by his hands, and those killed under his orders. We also decided to list those people who, while not technically deceased, were rendered into a state that is just as bad. The money donated into the fountain will be going toward a new foundation called 'Wolfden'. The money will be used to research an improved Wolfsbane Potion or a permanent cure for lycanthropy." He paused for a moment. "That is all I had prepared. Are there any questions?"

"How many names are there?"

"One thousand, six hundred and fourteen" Arthur answered. Harry shuddered.

"Who decided on this . . . symbol?"

"Miss Weasley made the original suggestion, I believe. The committee considered it, along with several others. This one was chosen."

"You said it also listed people not technically dead, but just as bad. What did you mean by that, Mr. Weasley?"

"Those who improperly received a Dementor's Kiss at Voldemort's direction, or those whom were rendered into a catatonic state due to prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus Curse, also at Voldemort's direction."

"What can you tell us about Wolfden?"

Arthur looked over at Harry.

Harry nodded and stepped forward. "The Daily Prophet will be running a story tomorrow detailing Wolfden. In short, we invite all werewolves to come every full moon. Wolfsbane Potion will be distributed free of charge. A place to safely transform will be provided to all, whether they take the Wolfsbane or not."

Several reporters babbled questions simultaneously. Harry let them sort themselves out for a few seconds before they came to some sort of pecking order again.

"You said 'we'. Are you going to be a part of this Wolfden, Mr. Potter?"

"I founded it."

"Wolfsbane Potion is expensive and very difficult to brew."

"I'm also funding it for the moment. I'm also examining possibilities for private funding. As for brewing it, Hogwarts Professor Severus Snape, who has been providing Wolfsbane for Remus Lupin for years, will be brewing it initially and teaching others how to do the same."

"Mr. Weasley also mentioned research?"

"Yes. In addition to brewing the Wolfsbane Potion in time for full moons, Professor Snape will be doing research on how to improve the potion, make it permanent, or how to produce a real cure for lycanthropes."

"How is he going to –"

Harry held up a hand, cutting the question short. "Potion research is something I know precious little about. I trust Professor Snape to know what he's doing, though I don't know what or how he's going to do it."

"You're placing a lot of faith into a professor with whom you're rumoured to have an ongoing feud."

"Professor Snape and I have had personal disagreements in previous years. I believe we are over them. As a professional matter, I have always respected his potions skill and knowledge."

"How do you think the werewolves of Great Britain will react to your foundation?"

"I can't speak for all werewolves," a voice said from the side.

Everyone's attention shifted over and Remus made his way forward. He ignored the few gasps and subtle attempts to get out of his way. The Aurors let him into the open space after a nod from Arthur. Harry easily made way to let Remus stand behind the lectern.

"As I was saying, I can't speak for all werewolves, but this werewolf thinks it's a great idea."

"Mr. Lupin, what do you think of this fountain?"

Remus turned and studied it for a few moments. "My own parents' names are up there. There are three more names that were as close to me as family. I think this memorial to them and the others who gave their lives to defeat a dark lord is fitting."

"Could you characterize your relationship with Mr. Potter?"

Remus looked at Harry with a slight smile. "I wish he were my son."

Harry's eyes immediately started tearing, which he tried to unobtrusively wipe away.

"Mr. Potter, are you doing all of this merely for Mr. Lupin's benefit?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Not at all. It's true that Remus is one of the people who will benefit most from Wolfden, but then so will all other werewolves. They have been victimized, persecuted and shunted aside for far too long. They are people, too. It's about time we started treating them as such."

There was a short, uncomfortable silence as the audience absorbed that. Arthur was smiling proudly, as was Ginny.

"Miss Weasley, you have not said anything to this point."

Ginny looked at the young witch who'd asked the non-question. "You're from Witch Weekly, aren't you?"

Unused to answering questions herself, the witch merely nodded.

"Okay, before you think that I'm letting Harry speak for me, he isn't. He's not speaking FOR me, he's just answering the questions the same way I would. Therefore, I have nothing to add." Her eyes narrowed. "And for your information, I am NOT pregnant, so you can keep the rumour-mongering to yourself."

Arthur looked both proud and surprised.

The witch at the receiving end of Ginny's temper shrunk back. The press had long since learned to treat Harry with respect, and it apparently applied to the fiery redhead at his side.

"If there are no further questions?" Arthur asked.

Nobody answered.

Arthur Weasley nodded. "Thank you all for your time." As the crowd slowly started to break up, he turned. "You two want to stay here for lunch? You, too, Remus."

"Leaky Cauldron?" Harry offered. "My treat."

The other three shrugged agreeably, and they all moved toward the outgoing Apparition point without interference from the reporters. Once safely at Diagon Alley, they turned toward the pub.

"I'm relieved to hear you're not pregnant, Ginny, but what brought that on?" Arthur asked as they walked along.

She blushed. "Oh, that was one of the questions thrown at us before we got to where you were standing. Witch Weekly and Teen Witch Weekly are getting upset with me since I keep refusing to do interviews with them. They're accusing me of being a brainless bimbo, unable to think on my own and following the great Harry Potter around just because of who he is. I'm sure you can imagine why they think he tolerates my presence."

Surprising the other three, Remus snickered. "You just had to stomp that idea out of them, then?"

"Something like that," Ginny agreed, giving a small grin that each man was glad wasn't aimed at them.

Once they were into the Leaky Cauldron, Harry turned to the proprietor. "Everything set, Tom?"

Tom looked up from filling the drink orders of the early lunch crowd. "Yessir, Mr. Potter. The private dining area is all set up, and your guest is already here."

"Thank you."

"You planned this," Ginny accused her boyfriend playfully as they headed toward the appropriate door.

Harry shrugged and opened the door to the private dining room.

Ginny walked in and was not the least bit surprised to see Simon sitting at the table. "Hi, Simon."

"Hi, Ginny. Mr. Weasley," he also nodded to the second one through the door.

"Arthur," he corrected, smiling at the reporter. "Anyone who's so clearly in Ginny and Harry's confidence certainly has that right."

"Why are you the only reporter who seems to have two neurons to rub together?" Harry demanded, dropping into a chair.

"Good morning, Harry. How has your day been?" Simon asked as if Harry hadn't spoken.

Harry blushed. "Sorry. Good morning, Simon."

Remus laughed as he took the last seat. "As you can guess, the dedication ceremony was . . . eventful. Your esteemed colleagues shouted questions at them from the moment they Apparated into the Ministry. Most of the questions weren't at all relevant, and the rest showed that the reporters weren't looking for news, but rather sensational quotes."

Simon looked mildly embarrassed. "On behalf of the honest reporters, I'd like to apologise. What all did you get asked?"

Remus started ticking them off on his fingers, "Something about Bellatrix's sentence, her charge against Harry, his relationship to me, whether Ginny was pregnant -"

Simon visibly winced at that one. "Let me guess. Veronica."

"Cute, young, from Witch Weekly?" Arthur asked.

Simon grunted, which everyone took as an affirmative. "She may be cute, but she also thinks that Rita is a real reporter. She can be vindictive, so be careful if you cross her."

"Too late," Ginny cheerfully said.

Simon sighed. "What did you do?"

"She implied I was an airhead with loose morals, so I implied she wasn't a real reporter."

"Fred and George would be so proud," Harry observed.

"How's that?" Arthur asked.

Doing a poor but still identifiable impersonation the twins' voice, Harry said, "Our own little Gin-Gin. All grown up and making enemies in the press."

Arthur and Ginny laughed. Simon, never having been exposed to the twins directly, just looked confused.

"Maybe ignoring Witch Weekly and Teen Witch Weekly was a mistake," Harry pondered. "If you'd given them an interview back at the beginning, maybe they wouldn't be pursuing you like this."

She turned to stare at him. "Are you suggesting that I give them the interview they want, just to get them off my back?"

Harry shrugged. "Welcome to my life. You're in the spotlight as much as I am now. I'm not saying do something you don't want or answer questions you don't like, but giving them an interview just to prove you're not 'an airhead with loose morals' would calm them down."

"If you do the same thing with them that Harry did with the Prophet, maybe not quite so publicly or dangerously, you'll also make it clear you're not going to get pushed around by idiots like Veronica," Simon offered.

Ginny looked thoughtful for a moment before giving a slow nod at the recommendation.

"Actually, the lack of some questions was very disappointing," Harry lamented.

"How so?"

"They didn't question how the werewolves would know it was safe."

Remus snorted. "You think they honestly care about how werewolves will view this?"

Simon nodded. "As much as I dislike it as well, he has a point. The general opinion will be that the werewolves should do it and be thankful to the public's generosity while they're doing so."

"What does the public have to do with this?" Ginny asked in a near growl. "Harry's funding this whole thing."

Simon shrugged. "Werewolves are looked at as so low that they should be thankful that we let them live with as few rights as they currently have."

Tom knocked and entered, levitating a tray with five shepard's pies and butterbeers. He distributed the meals with practised ease and swiftly left.

Harry looked at Remus sadly. "How do you live like this?"

"Because I must," Remus answered, beginning to work on his lunch. After swallowing his first bite, he explained, "If I give up, the Ministry and Voldemort have won. If I let my anger control my actions, the wolf within me has won. Twenty years ago, your parents and Sirius taught me that life was worth living. I'm just doing what I can to do so."

"You're a good man, Remus Lupin," Simon said with a look of respect.

Idle chitchat was the rule among the five until the food was gone. After that Simon and Harry began strategizing at one end of the table.

Ginny turned to her father. "What was that about Percy and Fudge?"

Arthur sighed. "Before he was voted out, Fudge fired Percy. Nobody seems to know why, or at least nobody will tell me."

"What was he working on?" Remus asked.

"Not really sure. Rumour had it he was working against Harry, but I don't honestly know."

"Is he okay?" Ginny asked in concern. Estranged or not, he was still her brother.

Arthur gave a helpless shrug. "I don't know. He isn't answering owls from me or your mother."

"I hope he's okay," she fretted.

"He's a big boy," Remus soothed her.

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Harry had to drag Ginny out of the Gryffindor common room. The OWLs approached, and she was buried as deeply as her classmates into revision. While he remembered his own panic just a year ago, he also knew that a bit of fun was also in order for his overstressed girlfriend.

"I don't have time for this."

"Yes you do. If you keep working yourself at this pace, you'll have a breakdown before you even take the OWLs."

"You three survived it. So can I."

"Taking one afternoon to relax won't hurt. Working yourself this hard isn't good for you, Ginny."

"Now you're the expert on my work habits?" she asked with an edge to her voice.

Harry shut his mouth. He supposed he could press the point, but he'd long since learned that arguing when she was angry didn't lead to pleasant conversations. Knowing when to shut up, he figured, was the primary reason they'd had so few fights since getting together.

Another hundred yards along, she let out a quiet breath. "You're probably right."

Harry did not allow his expression to change.

After studying him out of the corner of her eye, she gave a tired chuckle. "Very good. No gloating. You're learning."

"Thank you," he replied evenly. "Anywhere in particular you need to go? Gladrags, Scrivener's, Honeydukes?"

She shook her head. "A warm butterbeer and some quiet time sounds good, actually."

He frowned at her. "We can get that in my rooms back in the castle."

"True, but we'd be in the castle. I'd feel I have to study. Getting out and not thinking about it all will probably help."

He chuckled and laced his fingers with hers. "Just don't let Hermione hear you say that."

She tiredly chuckled back and brought her other hand up to first stifle a yawn and then to rub her eyes. Blinking them clear again, she looked up and blinked hard. "Harry, is that Percy?"

Surprised, Harry looked up and looked at a man standing at the gates of Hogwarts. His red hair looked unkempt and a scraggly beard added to the appearance of a wizard who was not taking care of himself, but Percy Weasley was indeed recognisable. "What's he doing here?" Harry's tone wasn't accusatory, rather purely curious.

The couple stopped in front of Percy, who had his head up and was looking at the castle instead of at the couple.

"Hi, Percy," Ginny greeted her brother uncertainly.

Percy started and looked down at them. A wisp of a smile appeared. "Ginny." He turned his head, and his expression faded to neutrality. "Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded cordially. "Mr. Weasley."

"Percy, what's going on?" Ginny asked.

His gaze went back up and to the castle. "I don't rightly know," he whispered. "At first, I thought I was here to speak with Professor Dumbledore. Now, though, perhaps I should speak with you two instead."

"Sure," Ginny agreed. She nodded toward Hogsmeade. "Would you like to have a butterbeer with us?"

Percy suddenly looked uncomfortable. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"If it's Ron you're worried about, we'll keep him away from you."

Percy frowned and scuffed his toe on the ground. "No, it's not that, exactly."

Harry looked at the wizard in front of him and noticed not only the messy hair, but also the slightly ragged robes and gaunt features. "I have a better idea," he announced, surprising the two Weasleys. "Let's go to my place. We can have some peace there as well as getting a spot of lunch."

Ginny looked at him strangely for a moment.

Harry gave her his best, "I'll tell you later," look.

She pasted a smile on her face and said, "Good idea. I'll meet you there." She Apparated out.

Percy started. "She can Apparate?"

"Yep. We got our licenses at the beginning of the year."

"I don't know where you live, Mr. Potter."

Harry shrugged and reached out a hand, gripping Percy's shoulder. They were suddenly standing in Harry's parlour.

Percy's jaw dropped as he looked around.

Harry casually leaned against the couch as he allowed his new visitor to look around. He now understood what Remus meant about dual Apparating being a draining experience. Taking Percy along for the ride had been a lot more tiring than he'd expected.

"Did you just dual Apparate us?" Percy asked, wide-eyed.

"Yes, he did," Ginny confirmed, coming into the room. "Lunch will be in a few minutes," she announced. She waved a hand and led Percy toward the dining room.

"Ginny, are you sure you should be taking such liberties with Mr. Potter's home?"

The couple frowned at him. "What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"She Apparated herself into your House, and I presume gave orders to your house-elves," Percy answered as if it were obvious.

"Yes . . ." Ginny trailed off, not seeing the problem.

"Only the Master or Mistress of a House should do such things, Ginny. What you're doing is a breach of etiquette."

Harry sighed as he held a seat out for Ginny. "Percy, she's quite welcome in his House and has been since I moved in. More importantly from your point of view, though, is that the house-elves already view her as Mistress of the House."

Percy's jaw dropped open. His gaze swivelled from one to the other. "You two have . . . Are you two . . . MARRIED?"

"No, we aren't married, but I'm living here as much as at the Burrow," Ginny answered.

Harry noticed her tone was even, but there was just a touch of bitterness that she couldn't quite bury.

Percy looked outraged for a moment, eyes darting back and forth quickly. He abruptly snapped his eyes closed and took a deep breath. "Forgive me, Mr. Potter. It is none of my business."

Giving an impish grin that either terrified or entranced everyone who saw it, Ginny asked, "Perhaps you could convince Ron of that?"

A ghost of a grin appeared. "Everyone knows, then?"

The couple nodded. Harry said, "Ron is less than happy, but everyone else is okay with it."

Percy nodded absently as Borry put a bowl of soup in front of him. He lifted a spoon and started eating as quickly as politeness allowed.

Harry thanked the elf and surreptitiously watched Percy eating. When Borry brought in the bread and salads, Harry whispered into the elf's ear for a moment.

The rest of the meal passed in innocuous if rather forced banter between sister and brother. Without being obvious about it, Ginny brought Percy up to date on the rest of the Weasleys. For his part, Percy told them very little about what he'd been doing.

Putting down his fork after finishing off a piece of apple pie, Harry asked quietly, "Percy, have you worked since December?"

Percy's eyes shot up and grew angry for a moment before he abruptly deflated. "How did you know?"

"The fact that you ate more than the both of us put together," Ginny said.

Percy looked down in surprise. "I did?"

"Mr. Wheezy did," Tarry confirmed, picking up the plates.

"I asked that your portions be doubled and you ate it all," Harry explained. He turned his head. "Thank you for a wonderful meal, Tarry."

"Yes, thank you," Ginny echoed.

After a startled moment, Percy also whispered a quiet, "Thank you."

Harry blushed at the praise. Bowing deeply to Harry then Ginny, he gave a polite nod to Percy and then continued his task.

"Are you doing okay?" Ginny asked.

Percy hung his head. He took a deep breath, visibly steeling himself. "No, Ginny, I'm not."

"Is there anything we can do to help?"

Percy gave a bitter laugh. "Not unless you can go back in time and beat some sense into me."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, I'm sure the twins and Ron would be quite happy to beat some sense into you," Harry observed.

Percy's face twisted as he fought a smile. "Yes, I'm sure they would. It's too late now, though."

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked again.

"What ISN'T wrong?" Percy suddenly exploded, standing quickly. He paced around the room quickly for a few seconds before dropping back into his seat, staring at the tabletop. "Forgive me, Mr. Potter. That was uncalled for."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said. "In fact, why don't you call me Harry?"

"Because I don't deserve it," Percy said, eyes still down.

"Why not?"

"After everything I've done to you for the past two years? Everything you said to me on Halloween was true, Mr. Potter. I had my head so far up my arse that I couldn't see the truth of the world around me."

Shock rode openly on Harry's face.

Ginny merely gave a slight grin. "I'm not going to disagree with you, Percy. What brought this realisation about?"

Percy winced at her words but looked up at her. "Minister Fudge," he answered simply. "After the press conference and the next day's articles came out, he called me into his office. He ordered me to find something to use to discredit you both. I suggested that it might be better if he were to first defend himself against what I took to be your outrageous accusations against him." Percy's face shifted to a bitter smile. "He just yelled at me for a few minutes and called me useless before repeating what he wanted me to do."

"I didn't lie about any of it."

Percy nodded. "I know that now. That means that you were right all along about following Dumbledore and opposing Minis- Mr. Fudge. When he told me that he wanted a smear campaign and then didn't even try to deny your accusations, my faith in him suffered its first blow. Calling me useless hurt, but I didn't know what he meant at the time."

"When you disinherited yourself, he lost what he saw as a spy in the Dumbledore camp," Harry surmised.

Percy winced at the blunt summation. "Yes. Then the later stories came out in the Prophet. The ones told by minor department heads and deputy heads; the so-called 'Ministry Insider Revelation' stories. Some of them I knew to be true, but he talked about firing them for it anyway. When Father was named in one, Minis- Mr. Fudge really came apart. He accused me of having leaked the story and fired me on the spot." He bit his lip. "That was in early December. I haven't worked anywhere since. Saying that I worked for the Ministry under Mr. Crouch then directly for Minis-dammit," he quietly swore to himself. "MR. Fudge. Well, neither reference is exactly impressive to any potential employers."

"You were ordered to find something to smear us with?" Harry asked.

"Yes. I produced several stories against you and leaked them to select members of the Daily Prophet. I apologise for that."

"I don't recall anything printed against either of us."

Percy again gave his bitter smile. "Immediately after defeating He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Plus what you did against Rita Skeeter and your apparent alliance with Simon Firthquill? The press wasn't about to slander you without absolute proof of something, Mr. Potter. The only things I could prove were old news that had already been used against you. I couldn't find anything new."

The three were silent for a moment before Harry spoke up. "You were going to Hogwarts?"

"I was going to ask Professor Dumbledore if he knew of any jobs available anywhere," Percy responded quietly.

Harry was now honestly impressed. Percy had realised his errors and was now going to one of the people he'd fought against the hardest. That was until he bumped into the OTHER person he'd been fighting against. It took a lot of courage to admit his mistakes like this and go to his former enemies for help. Perhaps he was a Gryffindor after all.

"Where are you staying?"

Percy winced but didn't answer.

Harry spoke up. "Dobby."

The house-elf appeared with the usual crack.

Before he could say a word, Harry politely asked him to get the brass key from the nightstand in his room.

Dobby returned moments later with the requested key before bowing and leaving again.

Harry slid the key toward Percy. "Here's the key to your room in the Burrow. I'm sure your parents would love to have you back."

Percy's face fell into his hands. He took several deep breaths before looking up with suspiciously wet eyes. "No," he whispered. "You keep it. You've been a better son to them than I have."

"Stop being a prat and take the damn key," Ginny scolded her older brother.

"But -" he started to object.

"But nothing," Ginny interrupted. "They are your parents. They love you no matter how badly you've screwed up. And screwed up you have, but you admit that now. Tell them the same things you've told us and you'll have a home again." She gave him a grin. "Making it all up to our brothers on the other hand . . ."

Percy paled.

Harry chuckled. "Ron's easy. He'll just break your jaw. The twins will use you for a test subject for a couple weeks then they'll forgive you."

"Maybe if I throw myself onto Professor Dumbledore's mercy, he'll hide me under a Fidelius Charm," Percy mused.

The young couple chuckled.

Sobering, Percy looked at the key in something akin to dread. "I don't know if I can do this," he whispered.

"Yes you can. Your mum will cry, hug you, feed you more than you could possibly eat and then nag you to cut your hair."

Both Weasleys laughed. Percy's was a bit more subdued perhaps, but it was still honest laughter.

"Go," Ginny ordered. "Work things out with Mum and Dad. Once you have a home again, you can start planning properly. Figure out what you want to do and how to get there. If you still need to see Professor Dumbledore, he'll still be there. Right now, though, you need to fix your life before you worry about your job."

Percy stared at his sister for a few seconds before returning his attention to the key sitting on the table in front of him. He studied it for a moment before taking it and slipping it into a pocket. He stood with a new determination. "Thank you both, for everything. May I use your Floo, Harry?"

Harry stood and led him back to the parlour. "Incoming is restricted, but outgoing Floos are open." He held up the ceramic jar of Floo powder.

Percy didn't immediately move to take any. "You and Ginny make for a good couple. I'd just prefer I didn't become an uncle quite yet."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Get out of here," he ordered, not unkindly.

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"Bow to the judges."

Ron and Padma bowed toward the table with Dumbledore, Flitwick and Tonks.

"Bow to your opponent."

The two duellists bowed to each other.

"Prepare."

They both pulled their wands out and aimed at each other. Ron had a look of fierce concentration on his face whereas Padma merely narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Begin!"

Harry backed off immediately as spells started flying. Once safely behind the anti-magic field, he turned to watch in interest. Ron had been relying on power and speed during his matches. Padma was more thoughtful, accomplishing more with fewer spells, but she'd nearly been defeated when she'd faced Dean Thomas, who used tactics similar to Ron's. If she could survive Ron's initial flurry, she was actually Harry's favourite to win the duel. He wasn't about to admit that to Ron, of course.

Frantically dodging and shielding, she avoided everything that Ron threw at her in the first three minutes. Once Ron started slowing down, she began to turn to offence.

Harry sighed and stopped paying close attention. Ron was powerful and would be an asset in a real fight, as he'd proven a year ago in the Department of Mysteries, but he refused to admit that his style left him dangerously exposed if he didn't win the fight quickly. Harry knew several of

the stronger DA members could easily defeat Ron, just as Padma was about to do. Personally, Harry was glad it was going to be Padma and not him, Ginny or Hermione who put him out of the tournament.

True to his prediction, one of Padma's Stunning Spells made it through Ron's defences and ended the match less than a minute later.

Harry moved forward again before turning to face the audience. "Victory to Padma Patil. That ends round four. We're down to eight contestants now. Blaise Zabini, Katie Bell, Cho Chang, Ginny Weasley, Padma Patil, Hermione Granger, Ernie Macmillan and myself. The final seven duels will take place Saturday night and then we'll learn who wins those two tickets to the World Duelling Championship in July that Professor Flitwick has been good enough to provide. See everyone in six days!"

The audience applauded for a few moments before everyone slowly began filtering out.

Harry turned to help Ron up from where he'd been revived by Tonks. "How are you, mate?"

Ron heaved himself up with Harry's helping hand. "You were right, Harry." He shook his head. "I just never thought a stuffy little Ravenclaw could beat me."

Padma, who was nearby and speaking with Hermione, turned. "Ron, I've watched you win your three previous rounds. I prepared for what I knew you would try. If I could last until you started tiring yourself out, I knew I could get you."

Ginny, Harry and Hermione nodded.

Ron sighed but nodded, too. He stepped forward and extended a hand to the petite Ravenclaw. "Good match. You'll forgive me if I don't wish you luck against any of this lot," his hand waved at his fellow Gryffindors.

Padma just laughed.

As the last few students were leaving, Harry and Ginny stayed behind to help Flitwick and Tonks clear the duelling stage.

"How do you think it'll end up?" Tonks asked Harry.

Flitwick paused in his actions to follow the exchange.

Harry sighed. "Padma, Cho and Hermione think too much, so they can be taken down by someone fast and unpredictable. Ernie, Katie and Ginny are all good, but unfortunately somewhat predictable. Blaise is the real wildcard. He can either win the whole thing or fall in the first seconds of his next duel. There's no telling with him."

"And you," Tonks added, nodding at his evaluations. "So it all comes down to how each dueller is able to deal with their opponent?"

"It usually is," Flitwick commented. "As you well know as an Auror, Professor Tonks, the most prepared wizard is usually the winner unless there is a sufficient difference in strength."

"And since none of the ones left are what you could call 'weak', it comes down to preparation?" Ginny asked.

Flitwick nodded. "Indeed it does, Miss Weasley." With a final wave of his wand, the diminutive professor turned to Harry. "I shall see you tomorrow in class, Harry. Good night."

Tonks was also leaving. "See ya, Harry."

"Night, Professor, Tonks," Harry called. He offered his elbow to Ginny. "Shall we?"

She hooked her arm through his and let him lead her out. "So what's your weakness, Mr. Potter?" she asked, referring to the fact that he hadn't evaluated himself.

"Why you, of course," he answered, smiling down at her.

She nudged him with her shoulder. "Prat. I meant, how can I beat you Saturday?"

"If duel seven on Saturday is Potter against Weasley, then my cunning and ingenious plan for ultimate victory will be put into action."

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Can't wait."

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Before Saturday's conclusion of the DA duelling tournament, however, Friday evening saw the final Quidditch match of the year.

"So how've you been, Cho?" Harry asked as the two Seekers paralleled each other in their search for the Snitch.

She grimaced but didn't pause in her search. "Could be better," she admitted.

"Weasley scores! Gryffindor is pulling away with this one," the new commentator, some younger Ravenclaw witch that Harry didn't know, predicted glumly.

"You were saying?" Harry asked.

"I'd really rather not," Cho said. "My life's not going all that well, Harry. Michael and I split up right after the Yule Ball."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said honestly. He spared her a glance to see the real distress in her eyes. "How's the NEWT studying going?" he asked next, struggling to find another topic.

"Just you wait until next year, Mr. Potter," she groaned. "I thought OWLs were tough, but they're nothing compared to the NEWTs."

"Even in Defense?" he asked with a grin.

"That is one course that I'm not quite as worried about," she admitted. "Thank you for that, by the way."

"Glad to help," he said. "However, if you'll excuse me." He pivoted in place and shot off in a different direction.

Giving a wordless cry of aggravation, she turned in pursuit. It was only a few seconds later that she realised that he wasn't out-pacing her. She pulled up and resumed her methodical sweep of the pitch.

Harry was beside her in seconds. "How'd you know?" he asked in curiosity.

She smirked. "I'm on a Nimbus 2000. The only way I could keep up with a Firebolt is if the other flyer is either timid or intentionally not going full speed. It goes without saying that you're anything but timid. The only reason you would not go at full speed is if it were a feint and you wanted me following you."

He laughed. "I'll have to remember that, Miss Chang."

She shrugged even though the two Seekers weren't looking at each other. "No problem. Now I can honestly say that I taught the greatest Seeker at Hogwarts something."

He laughed quietly.

"Great save by Weasley, and Bell takes the Quaffle up the pitch."

"I'm the greatest Seeker in Hogwarts?"

She snorted. "Harry, your replacement last year made me look like an idiot. That's kind of hard for a Ravenclaw to admit, but it's the truth. On top of that, everyone, her included, acknowledge that you're a better Seeker than she is."

"She's a better Chaser, though," Harry said, implicitly commenting on the fact that the Gryffindor Chasers were clearly the best in the school that year.

"True," Cho admitted. "After all, she's been chasing the most elusive wizard for years. Finally caught him, too. Surely that improved her Chaser skills," she added slyly.

Harry groaned at the pun. "That sounds like something the twins would've said."

"I can think of worse things than being compared to those two glib tongued pranksters."

"Penalty to Gryffindor for blatching. It DID prevent a sure goal, so I suppose it made good tactical sense. Bell takes the Quaffle for the penalty shot, and . . . she scores. One fifty to thirty, Gryffindor."

Cho winced. She knew it was up to her to pull a victory from the jaws of defeat, but she had to find the damn Snitch to do that. Unless . . . She turned and shot away from Harry at an angle. The Gryffindor Seeker shot off after her, behind for the first few seconds before his superior broom pulled alongside her. She tried to bump him out of line, hoping that if she could keep him from paying attention to where they were going, she could keep him convinced that she'd seen the Snitch.

Instead of fighting her push, he rolled with it, inverted under her, and corkscrewed back to level flight on her other side. Seeing that she was trying to get her broom back under control and not paying any attention to where she'd previously been looking, he pulled up to continue his searching.

"Good move," she congratulated him when she was beside him again.

"Thank you. Nice feint."

"It would've been nice feint if it had worked," she corrected him.

"True," he admitted. "Excuse me." He turned and took off at an angle.

Instead of moving off in immediate pursuit, she looked along his flight path. Seeing a glint of gold by the Hufflepuff stands, she cursed inventively in Mandarin and took off after him.

With a five second lead and a better broom, he was well ahead.

The Snitch, apparently knowing it was being pursued, shot off. Due to her trailing position, Cho took a shorter path and made up some of the lead Harry had. This three-way game of Snitch-chase kept up for a few minutes, the commentator yelling herself hoarse while the rest of the game came to a virtual stop as the two Seekers raced to decide the game.

Unfortunately, the Snitch was proving to be elusive. Harry kept on its tail the entire time, but kept losing ground to it when it made one of its impossible turns and he had to bank in order to pursue. Cho made up distance in the turns but kept losing it again during the straight-line flight.

The Snitch stopped and reversed direction unexpectedly.

Harry barely had enough time to stop his forward momentum. His trained eye measured distances and directions and reported that he couldn't grab it before it was past him.

The problem was that it was going straight for the rapidly approaching Cho.

Acting entirely on instinct, Harry threw himself back and down. Unfortunately, he neglected to bring his Firebolt with him.

His left hand was suddenly filled with the Snitch.

Cho, still going full speed, collided with the free-hanging Harry.

Her broom went into an immediate dive as the weight it was carrying more than doubled.

Grunting with the collision, Cho pulled up and brought the broom to a mostly controlled landing, spilling both riders into a tumbling heap on the ground.

"Potter catches the Snitch and Gryffindor wins, three hundred and twenty to forty!"

"Ow," Harry mumbled. "What happened?"

All the flyers were landing around the two, Ginny in the lead. "Harry! Are you okay?"

"Ow," he repeated, slowly moving into a sitting position. Fortunately, everything still seemed to be responding to orders.

Cho gave a soft chuckle. "If you wanted a ride, Harry, all you had to do was ask."

"You're complaining that Harry Potter jumped on top of you?" Katie asked in amusement.

Ginny threw a glare at the two seventh years before turning her attention back to Harry.

"Are you going to be okay, Mr. Potter?" Madam Hooch asked, kneeling beside him.

Harry stiffly handed her the Snitch. "I'll be fine. Nothing a Pain Reducing Potion and a hot bath won't cure." He turned his head. "Thanks for the save, Cho. I owe you one."

Cho slowly stood, rubbing one shoulder. She shook her head at him. "No, Katie was right. You're welcome to jump on me whenever you get the urge."

Most of the surrounding players and students, which now included a fair number of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws, snickered.

Ginny pulled out her wand, fire in her eyes.

Harry clamped a hand down on her wrist. "Easy, love," he whispered into her ear. "They're only teasing. Besides, I'm not going to invite THEM to share my bath." As Ginny calmed down, Harry painfully climbed to his feet with a helping hand from Madam Hooch. He draped an arm over Ginny's shoulder so he could favour his left ankle, which was unhappy with the tumble he'd taken. "Thanks for the offer, Cho, but I have everything I need right here."

Cho gave a sad little smile and nodded in acceptance. "Good game, Harry, Ginny. And for what it's worth, I wish you well."

Giving the older girl a nod and contented smile, Ginny turned Harry toward the castle and the waiting hospital wing.

Ron, excitedly chattering about the Quidditch Cup win, floated along above the couple with Harry's retrieved Firebolt.

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The Great Hall was almost at capacity. While only those from the DA who wanted to participate had been involved in the duels, any student who wanted to watch had been welcome. For the final rounds of the tournament, this meant the entire school had turned out.

With the duelling platform behind him, Dumbledore stood and addressed the crowd. "Greetings and welcome to the final rounds of the Defense Association tournament. As a point of order, it was brought up that as non-members of the Defense Association, Miss Granger and Miss Weasley should not have been allowed to participate in this tournament. Professors Potter, Tonks, Flitwick and I all agreed that as adjuncts and researches to the club, they are de facto members and therefore eligible." He glanced over at where most of the Slytherins were sitting. "I trust that this answers the objections to their participation." He paused for any comments or questions and continued when only a muttering could be heard from within the Slytherin group. "As in the previous rounds, the duel is concluded if one or the other dueller loses their wand, is knocked unconscious or concedes." He looked down at the eight students in the front row. "Are the duellists ready to proceed?"

All eight nodded with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Harry and Cho's injuries had been quickly mended by the school nurse and were now completely forgotten.

Dumbledore gave one sharp nod. "The other judges and I drew lots to determine the order of the final duels. Our first duel this evening is Mr. Potter versus Miss Patil."

Harry stood and approached one of the starting positions easily. Padma approached her spot before turning to Harry with something like fear in her eyes.

Ginny could easily understand Padma's concern. Harry hadn't shown any kind of pattern to his actions in the previous duels. If she tailored her duels to the opponent, how would she deal with someone who didn't have a set pattern?

Once Dumbledore had taken his seat at the judge's table, he announced the formalities before, "Begin!"

Padma crouched back just a bit, holding her wand defensively. She apparently wanted to let Harry make the first move.

Seeing this, Harry took a deep breath and concentrated. "*Stupefy* !" he roared, waving his wand in an exaggerated fashion.

The usually bright red spell was nearly blinding and crashed into Padma's shield, overwhelming it and sending the girl flying backwards. Only the protective spells up around the duelling platform prevented serious injury.

Silence from everyone for a few seconds before Dumbledore stood. Still blinking spots from his eyes, he mildly announced, "Victory to Potter."

Harry went over to Padma, reviving her and handing the surprised girl her wand back.

"What was that?" she asked as she accepted his helping hand.

Harry shrugged in embarrassment. "I put more power into my Stunning Spell than your shield could deal with."

"But it's handled Stunning Spells from almost everyone else before! Even Ron couldn't break through it," she objected quietly as they went back to their seats. Katie Bell and Hermione were being called up for the next duel.

Harry leaned over Ginny's lap to whisper, "You gave me a few seconds to concentrate. That allowed me to put more power into it."

"Still," Padma said with a frown of confusion.

"Harry's also the most powerful student here at Hogwarts," Ginny added. "Giving him time just lets him maximize that advantage."

Padma nodded thoughtfully, leaning back into her chair.

Harry and Ginny looked back toward the duel in progress. Hermione and Katie were trading spells quickly. Katie wasn't doing anything very complex, but rather standard duelling practises. Hermione was trying unusual combinations of charms and throwing in random transfigurations, but between Katie's solid defence and her Quidditch reflexes she stayed out of trouble. Harry was particularly impressed by Hermione's attempt to transfigure Katie's robes to stone. It was a novel approach.

Ten minutes into the duel, Hermione started to tire. Another three minutes, and Katie also began to slow down, but Hermione was in worse condition. One of Katie's Disarming Jinxes finally caught Hermione before she could jump aside in time.

Both girls were panting and leaning down to rest hands on knees as Dumbledore stood and announced Katie's victory. Katie handed Hermione her wand back before both girls helped each other back to the chairs before collapsing in exhaustion.

"The third duel will be between Mr. Zabini and Miss Chang."

As the Slytherin and Ravenclaw made their way forward, Ginny and Ernie shared a quick look before both nodding. Ernie looked over at Harry with a slight trace of fear, but Harry smiled to put the Hufflepuff at ease.

"Begin!"

Cho, knowing that Blaise was very unpredictable, started throwing spells immediately. Blaise threw up a shield and waited through the Cho's opening moves. When Cho eventually paused for a moment, Blaise went immediately on the offensive. True to form, he was using strange combinations and more than a few spells that Harry had never heard of. Cho's shield and dodging skills kept her out of the line of fire for more than a few minutes, but one purple spell made it through and impacted Cho's chest.

Nothing seemed to happen.

Blaise appeared to be momentarily surprised.

Cho started throwing spells again. Ninety seconds later, she stopped speaking in the midst of an incantation. She blinked in confusion for a moment before slowly collapsing.

Blaise smirked and lowered his wand.

Harry laughed. "Delayed Sleep Hex?" he called to the victor.

Blaise smiled wider and bowed by way of reply.

As Dumbledore announced the winner, Harry turned to Ginny and gave her a quick kiss. "Luck."

She nodded and calmly assumed her position across from Ernie Macmillan.

This duel was the longest yet. The two traded spells almost in a formalized manner. Neither deviated from the standard duelling routines. At fifteen minutes, Ernie's spells started to lose power, but Ginny was still going strong. Seeing that his power was waning, Ernie started to use lower level spells in order to keep up his rate of casting. Ginny allowed a Jelly Legs Jinx to hit her while she cast a full power Stunning Spell. After Ernie collapsed, she reversed the jinx on her before reviving Ernie and offering him a hand up.

When she'd returned to her chair, she leaned forward, panting.

"Good fight," Harry offered.

She nodded without looking up.

Meanwhile, Dumbledore was calling him back up to duel Katie.

Once he was in position, he called quietly, "I'll accept your forfeit now, Katie."

She grinned. "Naw, I'm gonna make you work for it, Harry. Besides, I may surprise you."

After bowing in the appropriate directions, they assumed duelling stances; Harry with a slight smile and Katie with a look of concentration.

"Begin!"

Harry started quietly casting. And casting. And casting.

Katie had to keep her shield up all the time, never having a chance to do anything except shield herself. The few times she dodged, he had another spell on the way before she could cast anything herself.

After ten minutes of Harry throwing spells continuously, she grew frustrated enough that she jumped out of the way of a yellow spell and threw a Stunning Spell at him, disregarding the red spell that Harry had already thrown at her.

His Stunning Spell hit her fully, dropping her to the ground. At the same moment, Harry dropped to his back, barely avoiding her spell. He rolled over and came up on one knee, wand forward in case his earlier spell didn't work. Seeing her down, he stood and made his way over to revive her.

Her eyes came open and she stared up at him in amazement. "How did you do that?" she asked as Dumbledore was calling Ginny and Blaise up again.

He grinned and whispered his answer, "Most of the spells I threw at you were just light spells. Didn't require any energy at all. I just waited until I saw you get frustrated enough and then cast a real spell."

Surprising the entire audience who were futilely attempting to listen in, she laughed.

Once the two had taken their seats, both Hermione and Padma grinned at him. "Sneaky," Hermione mentioned, having realised his tactics.

Everyone turned back forward as Dumbledore announced, "Begin!"

Neither Ginny nor Blaise moved immediately to attack.

Seeing an opportunity, Blaise took a deep breath and narrowed his eyes in concentration.

Ginny nodded slightly and also concentrated.

"*Stupefy!*" Blaise bellowed.

"*Protego!*"

While still brighter than normal, Blaise's Stunning Spell wasn't as bright or powerful as Harry's. It hit Ginny's shield and ricocheted into the ceiling.

Ginny immediately snapped, "*Stupefy!*"

Temporarily weakened by the powerful casting he'd just performed, Blaise didn't get out of the way fast enough and fell to Ginny's Stunning Spell.

"Victory to Ginny Weasley," Dumbledore announced. "The final duel will be between Ginevra Weasley and Harry Potter. In an effort to give them both a chance to recover their strength after their two previous duels, we shall take a short break. The final duel will begin in ten minutes."

Everyone in the audience stood and stretched a bit. A few circulated to some degree, but nobody moved very far.

Blaise had finished shaking Ginny's hand by this point and came down from the platform. As he walked past Harry, he muttered, "Good luck, Harry."

Madam Pomfrey bustled forward and handed cups of hot chocolate to each of the eight contestants for the evening. Harry and Ginny also received small vials of an orange liquid. "Drink up, all of you," the nurse commanded the group. She turned to see Harry's questioning look as he held up the

vial. "It's simply an energy potion, Mr. Potter. I daresay both you and Miss Weasley need it after two duels and another coming up." She turned back toward her seat along one wall shaking her head and muttering, "Duelling. As if I don't have enough injuries to deal with already."

Chuckling, Harry quaffed the potion and took the mug in hand and wandered among the audience, accepting congratulations and questions regarding the previous duels.

"Harry," Neville greeted his dorm-mate. "What was it you said to Katie?"

Harry chuckled as everyone in ear-shot leaned in to hear the answer. "Now you don't really expect me to give out all my secrets, do you, Neville?"

Everyone else leaned back, mostly with audible sighs. Neville smiled slightly and extended his hand. "Well, good luck, mate."

Harry accepted the hand as if shaking hands with Neville was normal. "Thanks. With Ginny, I'm gonna need it."

"I'll try not to take that personally," Padma said, standing nearby.

Everyone laughed, giving Harry the cover he needed to slip his hand unobtrusively into a pocket. Taking his leave, he moved back toward the front of the Great Hall.

"You do realise what will happen if you and Ginevra duel," Dumbledore said to him in an undertone.

Harry nodded. The fact that Ginny had Voldemort's old wand wasn't common knowledge. "I have a plan," Harry whispered back, covering the words by finishing off his hot chocolate.

Dumbledore nodded. He moved back to the judge's table and raised his hands. "If our two contestants are prepared?"

Ginny moved forward from where she had been speaking with Hermione during the break. Ginny and Harry took their places quickly. Without bidding, they bowed to the judge's table then to each other. Pulling their wands, they faced each other, anticipatory grins already in place.

The audience hushed, eagerly awaiting this duel.

"Begin!"

"*Non Obfirmo Ornamentum*," Harry muttered before Dumbledore even finished his word. He didn't know for sure if Ginny's power channel pendant was still working, but he wasn't going to take any chances over the next few minutes. He also knew that Ginny's blouse was tucked into her trousers so it wouldn't fall all the way to the floor. As the spell didn't leave a visual trace and Harry had cast the spell almost inaudibly, nobody in the audience knew what he had done.

Ginny, meanwhile, was taking advantage of Harry's apparent pause. "*Stupefy!*"

"*Protego*. I will not duel you, Ginny."

She growled in return. "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

"*Protego*. You know we can't really duel."

"*Silencio!*"

"*Protego*. Please, let's just call this a draw, Ginny."

"*Impedimenta!*" She was clearly getting angry at Harry's refusal to fight.

"*Protego*. I'm going to have to use my secret weapon if you keep this up."

"*Expelliarmus!*"

"*Protego*." He sighed. "Okay, you asked for it."

"*Everbero! Stupefy! Revertio Animus!*"

"*Protego*." His left hand went into his robe pocket as his right continued waving his wand defensively.

"*Volucris Phantasma!*" she cried in exasperation.

"*Protego*." He went to one knee and held a jewellery box as far forward as he could yet still remain within his personal shield. "Ginevra Weasley, will you marry me?"

"*Expell* - What?" She'd stopped mid-spell and was now staring in surprise.

He opened the jewellery box and held it further forward. "Will you marry me?"

"WHAT?" Ron bellowed, shooting to his feet.

"Silencio!" At least five different voices had cast the Silencing Charm upon Ron, who was reduced to silent sputtering and wild gestures. Everyone ignored him to look at the unfolding drama at the front of the room.

Harry's attention hadn't wavered. "Ginny, will you marry me?" he asked for a third time, voice now quiet enough that she was the only one to hear him.

Her wand came down, and she took a step forward slowly. She suddenly stopped and raised her wand again. "This had better not be a joke, Harry," she said in a low tone.

"No joke," he assured her, putting his wand back into its holster. Dropping his voice to a whisper again, he said, "I wouldn't joke about something like this, love. Will you marry me?"

Brown eyes studied green for a moment before they widened as she realised he was serious. Wand again coming down, she drifted forward, eyes fixed upon his. Once within reach, her gaze shifted to the ring. Her eyes immediately filled with tears. She gave a quiet gasp, and one hand came up to her mouth. She dropped to her knees and dropped her wand to pull Harry into a hug. "Yes, I will marry you," she whispered for his ears only.

Seeing her actions, every student in the room broke into wild applause.

Gasping, Ginny spun to see the student population of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on their feet and cheering wildly. She turned and buried her face into Harry's robes, totally mortified.

"Hey there, love. No need to be embarrassed," Harry teased. He gently eased her back enough that he could get the ring out of the box. Without further ado, he took her left hand and slipped the diamond ring onto the correct finger.

This, of course, caused a renewed wave of cheering from their audience.

Harry turned and saw Tonks clapping but crying through her wide smile. Professor Flitwick was beaming. Albus was suddenly standing beside the couple.

Harry looked up to see a kindly expression on Dumbledore's face and eyes twinkling merrily.

Surprising everyone, Dumbledore suddenly leaned down and scooped up Ginny's discarded wand. Handing it to Ginny, he quietly said, "Duelling victory to Harry, though I daresay you have both won this day."

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Potter Heir Born

Harry and Ginevra Potter welcomed their son, Orion James Potter, into the world at 10:31 yesterday evening. Orion James was seven pounds, nine ounces and was pronounced in perfect health by St Mungo's Maternity Ward.

Mr. Potter is Hogwarts Duelling Professor, and his wife of five years runs Wolfden Foundation, the highly popular werewolf protection and employment agency.

Neither is a stranger to the public spotlight. In addition to Wolfden, they're part owners in Weasley Wizard Wheezes joke shop franchise (majority owned and run by Ginevra's twin brothers Fredrick and George), manage the Black Muggle-born Scholarship Fund and of course were the couple who defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort eight years ago.

Their spokesman Remus Lupin announced this morning that all three are in good health, and any congratulatory notes that the public wishes to send can be sent care of Wolfden.

This paper and indeed the entire wizarding world wishes the couple and their new child their very best wishes.

- Senior Editor Simon Firthquill

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The End