

Wishful Thinking

Prologue - By My Soul

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October 31st, 1981

The tone of a bell sounded through Godric's Hollow, reverberating through the still air. Silently, James Potter strode up the stairs to the nursery, his face set in a stern mask. He placed a hand lightly on the door and pushed it open, stepping through into the small, bright room.

Lily Evans Potter looked up from the rocking chair in the corner, tears sparkling in her eyes. "It'll be tonight, won't it?" she asked quietly, gazing down at the bundle of blankets wrapped in her arms.

James nodded shortly and lifted her up, sitting down in the rocking chair before settling her in his lap. Lily sighed happily and leaned back in his arms as James placed his hands over hers, stroking lightly at little Harry's bangs. "We'll be ready for him, Lily," he promised.

"I know," she whispered, tears still swimming in her eyes. "But I'm so scared.... James, what if something goes wrong? What if we die? We can't leave him!"

"We won't," James said resolutely. "We won't, Lily." Taking a deep breath, he nudged Lily to her feet and slid the ceremonial dagger from his robes. "Are you ready?"

Lily gulped as she looked at the dagger. She sobbed once and cradled her son to her chest, pressing her lips gently to his forehead. Silently, she gazed at him, brushing the hair from his face.

She looked up with a hard, determined gaze. "I'm ready," she replied evenly, and James nodded.

He turned and walked down the stairs, and Lily followed, their baby held in her arms.

They placed him on a small pile of blankets at the base of the altar they had built in the woods. Silently, the couple stared at the rising sun, their eyes cool and flat. In his left hand, James Harold Potter still held the ceremonial dagger, and when he looked down at his son, his fingers clenched around the handle.

"By my blood, by my magic, by my soul, I swear to protect you," he intoned, lifting the dagger and slicing his palm diagonally, flinching slightly as blood welled up on his skin. Wincing, he passed the knife to his wife, who smiled at him grimly as she placed the knife against her own skin.

"By my blood, by my magic, by my soul, I swear to protect you," she murmured, and with a quick jerk of the knife, she slit her own palm, lifting it to link hands with her husband. Their blood mingled and a soft glow appeared, a nimbus of light ringing their joined hands. Slowly, James stepped forward to stand at Lily's shoulder, and the two wrapped their hands around the dagger, James's hand resting over Lily's on the hilt.

They made a shallow cut on little Harry's forehead, the jagged shape of a lightning bolt, right above and between his beautiful emerald eyes. Too startled to cry, the infant stared up at his parents, shock glittering in his eyes.

"We bind ourselves to you until your task is complete," they said together, "until your mission and your life are fulfilled. So mote it be."

The nimbus of light grew to engulf their son, and Lily trembled as her baby began to cry. The light brightened, then shrank to a thin, faint line before shooting down and into the cut on Harry's forehead. The lightning bolt cut glowed green for a moment, then disappeared.

Lily picked up her baby with a cry of relief, cradling him in her arms. James wrapped his arms around them both, clinging to them desperately.

They went back into the house together, neither noticing the man who stood at the edge of the forest, his eyes dark and turbulent as the couple disappeared into the small cottage.

The man sighed, his hand stroking his long beard, and turned on his heel, vanishing into thin air.

This, he mused, will take some thought.

He wasn't going to win.

James Potter knew that, and yet he fought. Listening carefully for the sound of Apparition, he waited desperately for his wife to escape with their son. But no such sound came. He swore quietly under his breath as he dodged another spell. Voldemort must have set Anti-Disapparation Wards.

"You don't seek to kill me, Voldemort?" he questioned, arching a curious brow as he dodged yet another bolt of red light.

The Dark Lord's lips curled at the audacity of the man standing before him. "I wish to torment you with the knowledge that you failed your son, Potter. That will be much more entertaining for me. And your Mudblood wife... why... the entertainment that can be taken from her alone..."

James saw red and raised his wand, casting a rather severe burning hex Voldemort's way. The powerful dark wizard just waved it aside, smiling in amusement.

"Goodnight, James," he whispered. "You will live to realize your failure. *Stupefy*."

Too startled to move in time, James was asleep before he hit the floor.

Lily... he thought desperately as he fell.

And when Lily Evans Potter fell, her last thought was of James.

Albus Dumbledore strode through the halls of Hogwarts, his face set with ruthless determination. Hagrid had already been sent. Sirius Black would soon be taken care of. Harry was to be taken to his aunt and uncle's house, if he was indeed still alive, which Dumbledore very much doubted. But if he had survived, young Harry Potter would need to be strong.

And forged in the fires of adversity, he will be the One to vanquish the Dark Lord...

And as for the others...

He entered his office, schooling his features into those of sorrowful concern, and bent over the two sleeping figures.

"*Ennervate*," he whispered, and the man and woman jerked awake.

"Albus," the man asked immediately as his wife stared around the room, searching desperately for their son. "What... where is...?"

"I'm sorry," Albus whispered. "We were too late. He's gone."

The woman began to cry, high, keening sounds that tore at his heart. "I think... I think it's for the best if you leave the wizarding world. Without Harry..." Dumbledore's voice trailed off into silence.

Thirty minutes later, Lily and James Potter left Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to go into seclusion... never intending to return.

With a blank expression, Remus Lupin stared around the room he had lived in for the previous three years. It was stacked high with boxes – he hadn't realized he'd acquired so many possessions. With a tired sigh, he considered burning some of them, but instead decided to save them. Someday, Harry would want something to remember his parents by – if Remus ever got to see him again...

He pulled the train ticket from his jacket pocket and studied it carefully. His train to Rumania was set to depart in two hours, and he didn't want to be late. With a wave of his wand, he shrunk his boxes and placed them all in one tattered briefcase, held together by pieces of string – the briefcase James had bought him for Christmas in their third year. "For you, Professor Lupin," he had declared with a broad smile. James, for some odd reason, had always been convinced Remus would one day be a teacher. The briefcase had been beautiful then, made of shining mahogany panels, and had gleamed in the firelight. Now, it was a mere shadow of its former glory.

Just like its owner.

Remus Lupin trudged down the steps of his apartment building with every intention of getting a bite to eat before catching his train.

He'd be damned if he returned to England when he couldn't see Harry.

The sun hovered anxiously in the sky as the young boy worked, a sheen of sweat over his skin. He sobbed quietly, his breath coming in labored pants, his little hands raw and red from pulling roots all day. He had been working in the lawn since seven that morning, and it was approaching five o'clock p.m. His uncle would be home soon, and he hadn't mowed the lawn yet... though how he was going to push a machine bigger than he was, he didn't know....

The sound of a car door slamming sent him into a frenzy, and he shot to his feet, praying that he would make it to his cupboard before his uncle noticed the lawn...

"WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING WITH YOURSELF ALL DAY, BOY?" his uncle roared, and the boy quivered. "WE FEED YOU, CLOTHE YOU, HOUSE YOU, AND THIS IS THE THANKS WE GET?" With an angry snarl, the man swung his beefy hand out, knocking his little nephew to the ground. The boy's glasses cut into his skin as the hand impacted his face, and a trail of blood slipped down his cheek as the boy whimpered.

Harry Potter was five years old.

He should have kept his head down.

He ran, eyes staring straight ahead as Dudley's gang raced after him. He didn't know what he'd been thinking – why hadn't he done poorly on the test? Uncle Vernon would never forgive him for doing better than his own son... He ducked as a rock was flung at his head and put on a burst of speed, finally rounding the corner onto Privet Drive. Gasping for breath, he ran up the steps and through the door, planning to slip into his cupboard –

– He froze in his tracks, eyes wide, as Vernon Dursley stepped into his path, his face an interesting shade of puce.

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS, BOY?” the man roared. “YOUR TEACHER CALLED TO TELL US YOU'VE ACED THE LAST FIVE TESTS IN YOUR CLASS, WHILE DUDLEY HAS BEEN FAILING! SHE HAD THE NERVE – THE ABSOLUTE NERVE – TO TELL US THAT WE SHOULD TRY TO GET DUDLEY TO FOLLOW YOUR INFLUENCE! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO YOUR TEACHER, BOY?”

Shocked, the boy tried to protest, but his uncle ignored him. He struggled when the large man grabbed his arm, but the man jerked the small boy forward and smiled broadly when he heard a bone snap. Chuckling gleefully, he dragged the boy to the cupboard under the stairs and opened the door, flinging the boy in it and closing it with a snap.

“YOU'LL STAY IN THERE, AND THERE'LL BE NO FOOD FOR THREE DAYS, YOU HEAR ME, BOY?” he roared.

The boy curled into a ball on his cot, a spider swinging down to meet him, as he heard the locks slide home. Cradling his arm to his chest, he leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

Harry Potter was eight years old.

It was with a blank face that he sat through the meeting in the principal's office. He stared straight ahead at the desk for the entire half-hour, ignoring the astonished conversation between Vernon and Petunia Dursley and the principal of Stonewall Primary School. No one had any idea how he had gotten into the roof – the boy had claimed the wind caught him mid-jump, but all three adults knew that idea was preposterous. Vernon Dursley was steadily turning purple, and the boy was afraid.

The last time his uncle had been this angry, he had nearly been starved to death. They had thrown him into the cupboard under the stairs with only a jug of water and left him there for ten days. He had had to resort to catching and eating spiders after the sixth day, a thought that saddened him as much as it disgusted him.

The meeting ended, and the boy got nervously to his feet, shoving his hands into his pockets to conceal the fact that they were shaking. He trudged out to the car slowly, speeding to a normal pace only when Uncle Vernon barked at him to stop holding them up.

The drive back to Privet Drive took only ten minutes. The second the door was shut, the man rounded on him and Petunia Dursley, as always, disappeared into the other room.

See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

It worked for some people.

This time, Uncle Vernon didn't even speak. Eyes glinting madly, he pointed toward the cupboard, where a large pitcher of water already sat. The boy didn't need telling twice. Not daring to believe his luck, he raced to the cupboard and threw himself inside it, pulling the door shut behind him and hugging his knees to his chest, staring around at the darkness.

It was fourteen days before they let him out, and there were no more spiders left in his cupboard.

Harry Potter was ten years old.

He returned to Privet Drive beaten, broken, shattered. His godfather was gone, the only adult he'd ever really been able to turn to. Hermione had been right – Hermione, who he had always trusted, always listened to, had been right again. He'd led his five friends into a trap and nearly gotten all of them killed.

He had gotten Sirius killed.

WORTHLESS FREAK! SEE WHAT YOU'VE DONE NOW, BOY? WHO HAVE YOU GOT LEFT? WHO WILL COME FOR YOU?

He sat bolt upright, staring in shock around the small room which was still strewn with Dudley's old, broken toys. He'd never stayed in the room long enough to clean them out – nor had he ever had the time, energy or inclination to do so. But where had that come from? Why had he remembered that?

With a wince, he glanced down at his left arm. He remembered the day it had been broken so clearly, remembering the snap the thin bone had made. It had healed within three days. At the time, he hadn't understood it, but he knew now that it had been his magic which healed him.

He wished it hadn't. His magic had also erased all traces of abuse. Vernon Dursley would be able to start all over with a clean slate every time, because the boy would always heal himself.

That was all he was on Privet Drive. The Boy.

His eyes slid around the room, memories of his early childhood filling his mind. Memories Snape had relished seeing, had gone through with calculating cruelty, had brought the forefront again and again – Snape always went after exactly what he least wanted seen...

He looked at the small digital clock by his bed, eyes gleaming in the darkness.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old.

Wishful Thinking The Man Who Never Learns

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 1 – The Man Who Never Learns

It was with a shaking hand that Remus lifted the lid of the dusty old box.

He knelt gingerly on the floor of the old bedroom, tears prickling at his eyes. The door was shut, but not locked, and all the rest were down in the kitchen. He had been going through Sirius's things for over an hour, but still, he had not found his friend's will. And even though Gringotts would have a copy, Dumbledore had insisted that the Order needed to see it first.

The headmaster had finally confronted Fudge the day before with the news of Sirius's innocence – in front of Rita Skeeter. Surprisingly, the malicious reporter who had made Remus yearn to draw blood in Harry's fourth year was turning out to be quite useful in the long run. Not ten minutes after Dumbledore had given evidence of Sirius's innocence, Skeeter had been racing around the Daily Prophet offices to get her story onto the presses. And only an hour earlier, the Daily Prophet had printed an official apology to Sirius Black from none other than Cornelius Fudge himself.

Too bad Sirius wasn't around to see it.

Remus sighed tiredly, rubbing the back of his neck as he rocked back on his heels. One more box emptied and still, no will. He knew Sirius had written one – he'd seen Sirius write one, and seen him write letter after letter after...

"Remus?" A soft voice interrupted his thoughts, and he turned quickly to see Nymphadora Tonks leaning against the doorjam, a look of quiet concern on her face. "Dumbledore's here. The meeting's starting."

He nodded shortly, rising to his feet and followed her out of the room. But at the doorway, he glanced back, wondering where Sirius had hidden the things Dumbledore so feared.

The gathering was their fourth after the Department of Mysteries fiasco the month before. Remus settled himself into a chair next to Tonks, being careful not to meet Snape's eyes as the bat-like man swept into the room. Ever since their fight on the night of Sirius's death, the man had been even more venomous than usual. The man's hateful, vindictive comments were even beginning to try the patience of easy-going, kind-hearted Arthur Weasley.

Dumbledore, of course, did nothing. He'd never bothered to restrain the man while the Marauders were in school, after all...

The man in question walked quickly to the head of the table before lowering himself into his seat and looking gravely around at the rest of them. "Good evening, friends," Dumbledore murmured, and the Order responded quietly. "I have made a small amount of progress on the matter I have been researching on my own. Sadly, I have discovered that my fears were not unfounded."

Pausing mournfully, Dumbledore leaned forward in his seat, linking his hands and gazing earnestly at each of them. "Lord Voldemort's possession of Harry in the Ministry atrium did, in fact, strengthen the link between them. Unfortunately, this leaves Harry much more open to visions and even, I fear, a second possession attempt. Severus," he began, and the sawn-faced man flicked cold, black eyes in the headmaster's direction, "I will have to ask you to set aside your anger and resume tutoring Harry in Occlumency."

"A marvelous idea," Remus murmured, somehow unable to stop himself, "considering how well that worked the last time..."

"It was not my failing, werewolf, but the brat's," Snape sneered. "I cannot force the idiotic boy to learn that which is beyond him... Of course, he might be more motivated now that he sees the consequences of his selfishness," the man hissed.

Remus glared at Snape, shifting very quickly, but Arthur, sitting across from him, placed a gentle hand on the younger man's arm. "Easy, Remus," the Weasley patriarch said quietly. "Let him say whatever he wants. Everyone here who cares about Harry knows that all he's doing is spouting poison."

"At least I didn't get that mutt killed!" Snape erupted, shooting to his feet, and Tonks' eyes flashed. "At least I face my mistakes and deal with them! But no, Saint Potter, Gryffindor Golden Boy, can do no wrong!"

At this, Albus sighed tiredly. Arthur drew in a sharp breath, the tips of his ears turning red. Kingsley Shacklebolt, eyes steadily on Snape, leaned his chair back on two legs and slipped a hand into his pocket. And Moody, his fake eye settled straight on Snape's face, clenched his hand around his wand, a scowl on his face.

"Face your mistakes, Severus?" Remus replied, arching a brow. "Since when? Even when you came back to Dumbledore's side, you told him that it had been all Sirius's fault you went over to the Death Eaters. You've never owned up to anything in your miserable little existence."

"How dare –"

"Now, now, Severus," Dumbledore cut in serenely, having regained his composure. "Keep in mind that the man is grieving. Do not take his words to heart. And as for you, Remus," the old man peered sternly at Remus over his half-moon spectacles, "I had expected better of you."

McGonagall, to Dumbledore's right, glanced sharply at the headmaster, her mouth set in a thin line.

"Now, as I was saying," Dumbledore continued, even as Emmeline Vance glared over at Remus, "Harry is now much more open to visions and possession. I fear that if one of us were to go see the child, Voldemort may influence his actions via their link, and perhaps even try to possess the boy again. Therefore, I am asking that all contact with Harry be cut off for the duration of the summer."

Kingsley's chair fell on all fours with a dull thud. "Excuse me?" he asked, gazing at Dumbledore in confusion. "Did I hear you correctly, Headmaster? I seem to recall that we had planned to train young Harry this summer."

"Yes," Dumbledore sighed, "I had hoped Harry would be able to benefit from your tutelage, but alas, it seems that such a thing would be too dangerous..."

"Owling him would be too dangerous?" Tonks asked, staring at Dumbledore incredulously. "I'd planned to take him, Ginny and Hermione out shopping for new clothes for the poor kid. You have seen the rags those Dursleys make him wear, haven't you? And now you want to just abandon him there for the whole summer without any word from any of us? Again?"

"Harry does not need new clothes," Dumbledore replied calmly. "His will still fit him for quite some –"

"He looks like a street urchin!" Tonks cut in, still staring at Dumbledore.

"Albus, I think perhaps –" McGonagall cut in, fingering her cane nervously.

"No, Minerva," Dumbledore said sternly. "Harry's well-being comes first. Are you willing to gamble his safety for some new clothes?"

The Transfiguration professor's mouth, if possible, tightened into an even thinner line, but Arthur smiled grimly.

"Exactly, Albus," the red-headed man put in. "Harry's well-being comes first. Are you willing to gamble his well-being for his physical safety?"

"They are one and the same, Arthur," Dumbledore replied smoothly.

"No, Albus, they're not," Kingsley said solemnly, and the Headmaster held up a hand to stop the flow of conversation.

"There will be no arguments," Dumbledore stated sternly. "Harry must remain at Privet Drive for his own good," he stared at Remus, as if daring the man to argue. "He will not be contacted. Severus, you may go see Harry for Occlumency lessons – and no others. The matter is closed."

"You know, Dumbledore," Remus said lazily, tipping his chair back and staring at the ceiling, "the last time I checked, we were your allies–"

Turning his head, Remus stared at the headmaster with a blank face, speaking in a calm, quiet voice, "Not your followers."

A stunned silence followed Remus's words, and as he watched, the headmaster blinked and drew back, startled. Without waiting for anyone to reply, Remus dropped his chair back down to the floor and stood up, striding out of the room. He returned to Sirius's bedroom, rage growing within him, and went back to searching for his brother's will.

And if he found something to prove that Sirius had had suspicions about Dumbledore, so much the better.

Eighty-nine. Eighty-eight. Eighty-seven. Eighty-six...

Harry threw ball up into the air over and over again, catching it lazily every time. He leaned his head back against the wall and sighed, stretching out on his bed with a frown. Glancing absently at the parchment on his wall, he sighed, wondering how long he'd be left with the Dursleys this time...

"Wotcher, Harry," a cheerful voice cut into his thoughts, and Harry stood up quickly, wand in hand, and pointed it at the intruder. Nymphadora Tonks, hands in the air in front of her, stepped carefully through his doorway. "How're you doing, kid?"

Choosing to ignore the nickname, Harry shrugged and absently tossed his ball into the air. "It's boring here," he replied honestly. "I have nothing to do but..."

"Think about Sirius?" Tonks finished softly, her eyes tearing up. When Harry swallowed convulsively and nodded, she took another step into the room and shut the door behind her. "It's okay to grieve for him, Harry," she said quietly. "You have to. But try not to dwell on it, all right? Find things to do. Somehow," she finished darkly.

"I'll manage," Harry replied heavily, and Tonks smiled at him. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

Immediately, the Auror's expression darkened in surprise. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice shaking slightly. "Is anyone...?"

"No one's hurt," Tonks reassured him. "Yet," she added darkly. "Harry... Dumbledore's decided to cut you off again."

Startled, Harry sat down hard on his bed. "What?" he asked, immediately going pale. "For... for how long?"

Tonks winced. "All summer. But Harry – we'll figure something out. Don't worry."

He glanced up, baffled. "But... I thought..." he began, and Tonks grinned.

"I'm here, aren't I?" she asked, her voice chipper again. "Moody's on guard duty, which is how I got in. He, Remus, Kingsley, Arthur and I will work something out, don't worry. We're not going to leave you here until September."

"Thank you," Harry breathed, a smile growing on his face, and Tonks cringed yet again.

"Don't thank me just yet, Harry," the metamorphmagus replied, her hair changing quickly from bright pink to a sky blue. "You see, there's more. Dumbledore's sending Snape to Privet Drive to restart your Occlumency lessons."

Tonks was slightly unsettled by the silence that followed that statement. From all she'd seen and heard, Harry had one hell of a temper, and to hear that no one but Snape would be near him all summer – she watched him warily as he blinked, staring at her, and sure enough –

"WHAT?"

"Harry," she said quickly, grabbing his arm to pull him back down to the bed he'd jumped up from, "we'll figure something out. Moody will stand guard on the days Snape has to teach you, or Remus or I will come with him. We won't leave you alone with that... that... Death Eater."

"I thought the Order all knew –"

"Yes, yes, he's a spy for Dumbledore, he's working for the greater good and he's only a snarky bastard to "maintain his image". I know the whole spiel," she replied impatiently. "But I also know the truth, which is that Severus Sebastian Snape is a foul, vindictive and petty little man, and that's not exactly the type of person I'd trust around you unsupervised. Or supervised, as a matter of fact," she added thoughtfully.

Once again, a startled silence followed her words, but after a moment, Harry began to snicker. "Sebastian?" he repeated. "Severus Sebastian Snape? Wait 'til I tell Ron..."

Eyeing the young wizard warily, Tonks bit back a smile. "I have to go now, Harry," she said quietly. "I just wanted to make sure you knew... We'll be in touch somehow. We just need to figure out what to do first."

"All right," Harry agreed, and he stood up, walking the metamorphmagus to his bedroom door. "Tonks?" he added, and the blue-haired witch turned, raising an eyebrow in question. "Thanks."

She smiled back at him and, pulling a Portkey from her pocket, disappeared.

Tiredly, Harry sighed, rubbing a hand across his forehead, and turned back to his room. He shut the door and settled once more on his bed.

Eighty-five. Eighty-four. Eighty-three. Eighty-two. Eighty-one.

She moved quickly out of the house, her face set in a determined expression. Walking past the large oak tree in the front yard, she murmured softly, "Contact Remus." When the space beneath the tree rustled and a soft pop was heard, she turned and waved a pair of young men out from behind the dustbins down the street.

"All right, Weasleys," she said sternly. "You watch this house until Moody and I come back, got it? We shouldn't be more than an hour or two, and if any other Order members show up, you're to call me on this right away, got it?" Tonks passed the brothers a small hand mirror, waiting while they nodded their agreement. "Good," she murmured, and apparated away without another word.

When she was gone, Fred and George took up their positions below Harry's window and settled in.

"George?" Fred whispered, holding up the mirror and striking a pose. "How do I look?"

"Dashing, Gred."

As always."

As soon as the front door shut behind her, she moved up the stairs as quickly and quietly as possible, pausing only to knock on the door to Sirius's old bedroom. When the door opened, she slipped through quickly, her eyes immediately finding Remus.

He stood by the desk with Kingsley, speaking quietly as they rifled through some papers. A few feet away, Moody stood, his fake eyeball spinning every which way. It paused on her and Moody nodded shortly before resuming his scan of the premises. Bill, who had opened the door for Tonks, walked over to Remus and touched his shoulder, murmuring something to the older man. As he did so, Charlie wandered over to an old armoire against the back wall and began going through it.

“How is he?” Remus asked worriedly, spinning to face her, and Tonks winced.

“He’s...” she began, brushing her hair from her face. Absently, she frowned at it and screwed her face up in concentration, and immediately, her hair turned dark purple. She crossed the room and threw herself down onto the bed, dropping her head down into her hands. “He’s going crazy in there, Remus,” she muttered. “I found him just tossing a ball up into the air and counting... looked like he’d been at it for a while. And when I said Dumbledore had cut him off...” She looked up, her eyes sparkling with tears. “His heart just broke, Remus. It was horrible.”

“Did you tell him about the Occlumency lessons?” Kingsley asked, his deep voice laced with concern.

She nodded. “Yes, and he was furious. It was almost better than... than...”

She broke off, gazing into the distance, and Remus moved to sit beside her, touching her arm comfortingly.

“We’ll...”

“Minerva’s coming,” Moody broke in, and Remus shot to his feet. Immediately, he moved to the desk again, rifling through it, and Tonks moved to help Charlie go through the armoire as Bill checked a small hope chest at the base of the bed.

A sharp rapping sounded against the door, and Remus absent-mindedly called, “Come in!” Through the door stepped McGonagall, her eyes solemn and weary-looking.

“You may stop acting now,” she told them all sharply. “Moody, your shift ends in an hour. Be sure to have the—” she paused, scanning the room, “—Weasley twins out of Privet Drive in half an hour at the latest. Elphias Doge is on the next shift, and he’s always early.”

Ignoring the stares of everyone in the room, save Moody, who was still checking their surroundings, McGonagall shut the door behind herself and frowned. “Do what you can for him,” she said suddenly. “Albus is a good man, but sometimes he forgets—” McGonagall broke off, swallowing. “I told him they were the worst sort... the day we left Harry there. He just doesn’t listen...”

Though Remus was beginning to question the validity of her first statement, he smiled sympathetically at the deputy headmistress and head of Gryffindor House. “We’ll help him,” he assured her. “Don’t worry.”

Swallowing slightly, the deputy headmistress nodded, turned and left the room, disappearing down the stairs.

“Wow,” Tonks murmured, staring after McGonagall. “Who would have guessed...?”

“It’s not much,” Remus agreed, “but it’s a step in the right direction. Bill, would you be willing to swing by Diagon Alley?”

The eldest Weasley son nodded, picking up his leather jacket from where it hung over the back of Sirius’s desk chair. “I’ll check to see if the mirrors are in yet,” he agreed, waving over his shoulder as he left the room.

The group waited for a moment before speaking. Finally, after Moody had nodded to show there was no one else in the house, Remus turned to Kingsley. “Well?” he asked.

“I spoke to Ollivander yesterday,” the Auror replied, settling in Sirius’s desk chair. “He refused to say anything. But I also stopped by Fortescue’s — you remember, he was an Unspeakable during the first war, retired and took over the parlor when his older brother died — he said he’ll pass on whatever he can without breaking the Secrecy Oath. I’m not sure how much that is, exactly, but anything’s better than nothing at all.”

Remus nodded, ignoring the incredulous look spreading across Charlie’s face. “You’ve been at this for a while, haven’t you?” Charlie breathed, staring at them.

“We all thought something was... off about Dumbledore’s orders last year,” Tonks replied absent-mindedly. “Telling us to keep our distance from Harry, give him space... A classmate had died right before his eyes. The last thing he needed was space.”

“Sirius, especially, was right pissed about it,” Remus added. “He started keeping a record of Dumbledore’s orders regarding Harry. I don’t know where he put them, but they’re probably with his will, which is why I volunteered so quickly to try to find it.”

“And Fortescue?” Charlie asked curiously.

“An old friend of Lily’s,” Remus replied. “I contacted him the summer before Harry’s third year — you remember, the one when he ran away? — and asked him to keep an eye on Harry for me. He took a liking to Harry, and he’s been listening very carefully whenever someone mentioned the name “Potter” near his parlor for years.”

“Where’s Arthur?” Tonks asked suddenly, as if just realizing the man wasn’t there.

“He had an idea about Occlumency,” Kingsley replied, grinning. “Have to give the man credit... I wouldn’t do it...”

“Well, he is the only one of us besides Bill and Charlie who needs to learn it,” Remus murmured. “Lycanthropes are immune and you Aurors are all taught a rough version when you join the Auror Corps. He has the right idea.”

“Oh, no,” Tonks breathed. “He’s not...”

Remus nodded shortly. “He is.”

Arthur took a deep breath before knocking on the large wooden door. It had been a long day and he knew he'd have to get home to Molly within three hours at most... if he was home after seven, she'd flay him alive. He tapped his foot impatiently when he heard movement from behind the door, stilling immediately as it opened.

Severus Snape stared at him from his potion's lab, an expression of utter shock on his face.

"What in the world are you doing here, Weasley?" he demanded, and Arthur merely smiled politely.

"May I come in?"

Snape stared at him for a few seconds longer, incredulous, before shoving the door open a few more inches, turning and striding away. Taking that as an invitation, Arthur stepped into the door, shutting the door behind himself.

"What do you want, Weasley?" Snape muttered angrily, bending over a steaming cauldron.

"I won't pretend to like you," Arthur replied shortly. "I think you're a spiteful, bitter and petty old man, for all that you're less than forty years old. I hate the way you treat my kids – yes, that does include Harry and Hermione – and I can't stand the way you treat Remus and Tonks."

Setting a ladle down with a solid thunk, Snape turned to gaze hatefully at the older man. "And I abhor every one of you as well, Weasley, is that what you came here for?"

"But I know," Arthur continued as if he hadn't heard the man, "that you're caught between two masters, neither of whom have much regard for your well-being. Knowing that, I'm sure you can understand why I don't understand the fact that you have no sympathy at all for Harry, who is caught in a very similar situation to yours."

Snape froze.

"Of all of us, you are the only one in a position to truly understand what he's been through, except for those who have been through it with him. You're the only adult he knows who can understand. And yet you hate him because of what his father did, and because of who you've deluded yourself to think he is."

Silence.

"And now," Arthur continued, sitting down on a stool by Snape's workstation, "that I've gotten that off my chest, I have a proposition for you."

The potions professor blinked, startled by the man's audacity. Not fazed in the least, Arthur gazed back at the man, waiting patiently.

"I'm listening," Snape finally replied.

Arthur smiled. "Excellent." He leaned forward slightly. "I can spare you the necessity of teaching Harry Occlumency."

"How?" Snape spat. "Dumbledore ordered that the brat be taught."

"Teach me." Arthur said quietly, and Snape drew back once more, startled, and stared at the man. "I'd have to learn Legilimency as well, but that shouldn't be difficult for a man of your talents." He waited a few minutes before raising an eyebrow. "Well?"

"You will have to come here for two hours before every one of Potter's lessons for your own tutoring session," Snape said finally. "And you will need to use Polyjuice Potion."

As Arthur winced, Snape raised his wand and locked the door.

"Get comfortable, Weasley, you'll be here for quite a while."

Five out of six of the Ministry kids lounged lazily around Ron's room, staring at the ceiling and walls as evening set in.

"What do you think he's doing right now?" Ginny asked from where she lay sprawled across the camp bed, a pillow hugged to her chest.

"Nothing productive, I'm sure," Hermione replied, perching on Ron's windowsill and frowning out at the night sky. "He's likely bored out of his mind."

"Maybe if he gets bored enough, he'll start revising," Ron snickered, "and give you a run for your money."

Hermione sent a dark look Ron's way. "It's not funny," she said sharply. "Sirius just died and they're leaving him alone with people who hate him! It's been a month! What are they thinking?"

"You know," Neville spoke up sadly, "I don't think they are."

Everyone in the room paused at that statement. Hermione blinked on the windowsill, staring at Neville. Luna, lying on Ron's bed, lowered the upside down copy of the Quibbler and gazed at Neville over it. Ron, standing by Luna, sat down hard on the edge of his bed.

"What do you mean?" Hermione demanded, and Neville shifted in his seat nervously before settling down cross-legged next to Ginny.

"Well," he said anxiously, "it doesn't seem like they're really thinking for themselves. Just... they're following Dumbledore's orders, instead. And Dumbledore... well, he's a good man, but he's been leading the Light side so long – I think he's forgotten we're all human, really, especially Harry."

"A scary thought, that," Ron mused aloud as Hermione stood in stunned silence. "What wouldn't he do, then?"

"Good question," Neville murmured, gazing out the window.

"We should go see him," Hermione said suddenly.

"Who, Dumbledore?" Ron asked, his brow furrowed.

Hermione rolled her eyes, leaning back against the frog tank against Ron's wall. "No, you prat," she replied, "Harry."

"How could we get there, though?" Neville asked, frowning.

"If we could get to headquarters," Ginny replied – they had told Neville and Luna of the Order earlier that day – "then we could probably floo to Arabella Figg's house and walk to Harry's."

"Have you ever seen anybody floo in headquarters?" Ron pointed out. "It's probably not even connected to the network."

"And," Hermione added sadly, "we can't just show up unexpectedly... That would cause considerable difficulty for his guards."

"An astute observation, Miss Granger," a merry voice cut in, and all five students spun to see their headmaster standing in the doorway. "But there are even more difficulties in visiting young Harry than those that you have listed. As it so happens," he stepped through the doorway, shutting the door behind himself, "Harry's recent possession by Lord Voldemort makes him more susceptible to future possessions."

"What?" Hermione asked. "But how? Harry drove him out!"

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed, "but it took some time. And this time, if Voldemort were to possess Harry, he would waste no time in making him act. He could kill one of you."

"We're his friends," Ron replied. "We'll risk it. Besides, what are the odds?"

"You will risk it, Ronald," Dumbledore agreed. "I, however, will not. You must not contact Harry – by owl, in person or by any other means."

"With all due respect, Headmaster," Neville spoke up, "you have no authority to order us to cut off contact with him, nor to keep us from visiting him."

"An excellent point, Neville," Luna murmured dreamily, picking up her copy of the Quibbler once more.

"As head of the Order—" Dumbledore began.

"We're not members of your Order, Professor," Ginny pointed out. "Students can't join, remember?"

"I am also the headmaster of your—"

"School is not in session, Professor," Hermione pointed out. "We are not on school grounds, and this is not a subject related to our schooling in any way, shape or form. You're running out of reasons, Professor."

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore smiled at her in a kindly, grandfather-like way. "I understand you are very worried about Harry. The truth is that I am, as well. I feel that he needs space after—"

"What he needs," Hermione cut in scathingly, "is us."

"No man is an island," Luna spoke up dreamily, turning another page in the Quibbler.

"Then I suppose I'll just have to go to your parents about this," Dumbledore said tiredly. "I had hoped I wouldn't need to do that, but as they do have authority over you..."

"I'm seventeen in September, Professor," Hermione said shortly, "and my parents agreed to emancipate me by Muggle law to ensure that I had the same legal status in both the magical and Muggle worlds. And furthermore, they allow me to do what I feel is best. If you go to them asking them to ban me from seeing Harry, you will find yourself forcibly removed from my house."

"Would you really do that to him, Hermione?" Dumbledore asked mournfully, and Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "What if Voldemort were to possess Harry, and he killed you? He could never live with that!"

"So I'm supposed to avoid him for an indeterminate amount of time just in case Voldemort tries to possess him again? I think not, Professor." Rising to her feet, she walked past him to go downstairs. "Thank you for your advice, Headmaster Dumbledore. I'll show you out."

But rather than follow Hermione from the room, the elderly headmaster sighed. "I had hoped it would not come to this," he said, and Hermione turned to watch him with narrowed, frightened eyes. "I will have to bind your magic. I cannot have you going to see Harry – it's too dangerous."

"You can't do that!" Ginny spoke up, shocked. "You have no right! It could kill us!"

Only if done properly, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore smiled indulgently at her, his eyes flickering over to Neville. "I know the correct way to do a binding spell—"

Hermione turned white. "Oh, my God," she whispered. "Oh, my God."

"Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked, his brow furrowed with concern. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, my God," she whispered again, before spinning to scream down the stairs. "Mr. Weasley! Mr. Weasley!"

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed, jumping in shock. "What—?"

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore began, "I assure you that no harm—"

"Mr. Weasley!" she screamed again, and footsteps thundered up the stairs. Reaching up her sleeve, Hermione drew her wand and pointed it at Dumbledore with a shaking hand. "Don't you move," she warned him, her voice quavering. "Don't you dare move."

Dumbledore stared at her, baffled. "Miss Granger, what—?"

A moment later, Arthur Weasley burst through the door, Bill, Charlie, Fred, George and Molly right behind him. "Hermione, what on earth—?"

"He was going to put binding spells on us!" she exclaimed shrilly, her hand still shaking. "He was going to bind our magic! He said he was afraid we'd try to go see Harry and get hurt – he said he'd done it before... He looked at Neville when he said it!" she screamed. "Take it off him, you foul old man, take it off him!"

Bill paled. "Oh, lord," he murmured, and stepped forward slowly. "Hermione," he said gently, laying a hand on her shoulder, "lower your wand. We'll take care of this—"

"Did you put one on Harry, too?" she demanded, staring at Dumbledore – she didn't seem to hear Bill at all. "Did you? Answer me!"

"Hermione," Bill said again. "Sit down. We'll get to the bottom of this."

Her hand shaking horribly, Hermione lowered her wand, staring at Dumbledore with a look of utter contempt. "How could you do this to them?" she asked, her voice still shaking. "How could you do this?"

"I'm wondering that myself, Albus," Arthur spoke up, and he stepped forward, moving to stand between Dumbledore and the students. "Surely you've heard of cases where children have died from the trauma – and of course, the physical trauma – of having their magic bound."

"But that was only—"

"And I happen to know," Arthur cut Dumbledore off, "that you yourself nearly died when you were nine years old, because your Aunt Matilda had chosen to bind your magic, feeling you were dangerous to yourself and others!"

"But that's only when it's done improperly!" Dumbledore exclaimed, looking quite desperate. "I would never endanger these children, or any others!"

"But you have," Ron said quietly, and Dumbledore gazed at him, taken aback. "Come on, Professor, don't tell me you think of the Dursleys house as a safe environment for Harry."

"He has never come to harm—"

"They starved him!" Hermione burst out. "They locked him in that room of his for weeks, feeding him through a cat flap in the door! Fred and George told us! They broke his arm when he was younger – he never told us why or when, but he did tell Ron and me that the Dursleys did it! "Harry Hunting" was Dudley Dursley's favorite sport as a child! And you're saying he's never come to harm there?"

"Hermione, I—"

The bushy-haired witch burst into tears. Crying in sympathy, Molly Weasley moved forward and wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulders, guiding her gently from the room. When the door closed behind the two women, Arthur spoke up again.

"Please remove the binding spells from Neville," he said. "All of them."

Dumbledore closed his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he raised his wand. "I'm afraid this will hurt a great deal," he warned Neville sorrowfully.

Neville bit his lip. "Just do it," he said nervously.

With a few murmured words and a wave of his wand, Dumbledore removed all of the binding spells he had cast fifteen years before. Trying to remain quiet, Neville bit down hard on his lower lip, his teeth slicing right through the skin. As blood ran down his chin, he whimpered, clenching his fists, and Ginny gasped. Finally, the pain became too much, and he screamed and collapsed.

Neville thrashed on the floor, clutching his chest as he screamed. Cursing under his breath, Ron raced forward and hauled Neville to his feet, who whimpered once more.

"Chest... coming apart..." Neville hissed between labored breaths.

Ginny let out a cry and ran to help her brother, supporting Neville on his other side, and the two of them lowered him gently onto Ron's bed. Behind them, Luna threw open the bedroom door, and Hermione barreled through it a moment later, Molly on her heels. Spotting Neville, Hermione ran to the side of Ron's bed and lowered her ear to his chest.

"He's had a heart attack!" she exclaimed. "Ron, pump his chest!"

Nodding once, Ron moved forward to do just that, but Charlie quickly moved to Neville's side. "Let me," he said as he placed his hands over Neville's chest. "We all have to be trained in Muggle CPR at the dragon reservations."

Several tense moments of silence followed as Charlie worked. Abandoning the Muggle method within fifteen seconds, Charlie raised his wand and cast a light electrical charm on Neville. The boy's body jerked, and Ginny, wrapped up in her mother's arms, sobbed. Charlie cast once more and finally, he nodded, rocking back on his heels. Breaking free of her mother's grasp, Ginny ran forward and lowered her ear to Neville's chest, letting out a delighted cry when she heard his heart beating.

"We'll move him into Percy's old room," Bill said tersely, picking up the younger boy. Silently, he carried Neville out of the room, Ginny hurrying alongside him, with his mother, Fred, George, Charlie and Luna in his wake. Ron hesitated, glancing at his father and Hermione, before following.

Hermione gazed after them before turning her eyes to Dumbledore. The man looked horrified, and he swallowed, staring at the bed where Neville had lain moments before, before meeting her gaze. As he did so, Arthur stepped forward. "Explain," he demanded quietly, and Dumbledore nodded.

"In the months before the Potters died and the Longbottoms were tortured to insanity, both Harry and Neville began to have strong surges of accidental magic," he said slowly. "Alice Longbottom came to me against the will of her husband, Frank. She was afraid that Neville might hurt himself or someone else with his magic. She asked me to bind it, and I agreed. I offered to do the same for the Potters, but they flat-out refused. James went so far as to threaten to —" He swallowed, his throat working nervously. "— to threaten to kick me out of their house when I pressed the matter. I never offered again, and I never — I never put any binding spells on Harry."

"Why didn't you remove the spells before?" Arthur asked, and Dumbledore sighed.

"I was afraid," he replied. "Neville's a very powerful wizard you see, and after years of having to perform magic with the bind, his power has increased. He's nearly on par with Harry now, and that is no mean feat — a Patronus at thirteen years old! But I was afraid that if his power was too great, he would attract Voldemort's attention. There were already four marvelous students in my school, you see, who were marked for death by Voldemort, and I did not want anyone else to join their ranks."

His hands white, Dumbledore closed his eyes, awaiting their judgment. After a moment, Arthur spoke, and he opened his eyes. "Please send Madam Pomfrey to check on Neville," he requested. "I must go check on my guest. See yourself out."

Arthur turned to the door and left after Dumbledore nodded dumbly. Swallowing convulsively once more, the elderly wizard raised his eyes to Hermione, who stood staring at him with a blank expression, tears still visible on her face.

"You never meant to hurt Harry," she said slowly, "or Neville, or any of us. I know that. But you have."

Flinching, Dumbledore closed his eyes once more, opening them as she continued. "It almost would have been kinder to just leave him at Privet Drive forever, and never take him to Hogwarts. Instead, you take him away from that Hell every year, only to send him back again, and every time, it gets harder and harder for him to go back. Do you know how many times he's wondered why you hate him so? Do you know how often he's wished someone would save him from that place? Please, Professor," she whispered, "let us save him from that place."

"I can't," he said hoarsely. "The protections, he's only safe—"

He broke off when Hermione shook her head, a look of disgust on her face. "You'll never learn," she ground out, and she swept past him, slamming the door as she left.

The old man flinched once more, the sound echoing in his ears. For several moments, he stood perfectly still, staring straight ahead in silence. Then he reached out and carefully lowered himself onto Ron's bed.

Head in his hands, he wept.

I did the right thing, he told himself. *I did the right thing*.

Wishful Thinking To Set the Record Straight

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 2 – To Set the Record Straight

“Aaaah!” Remus screamed, and Tonks jumped back, staring at the wall as the second glass shattered against it. Eyes flashing, Remus screamed again, snatching up another glass. Hurriedly, Tonks ran forward and grabbed his raised arm, pulling it down to his side and taking the glass from his hand.

“Easy there, Remus,” she said quietly. “Calm down, or you might spontaneously transform. Can’t have that, can we? You’d get fur all over the floor.”

Remus stared at her, his breath still coming in ragged pants, then looked almost hungrily at the glass in her hand. Following his gaze she set it down and steered him into the living room. Away from the breakable objects, he seemed to deflate, and when Tonks pushed him gently onto a sofa, he cradled his head in his hands.

“That was a bit frightening, Remus,” she said softly, lowering herself down next to him. “I’ve never seen you in a rage like that.”

“I’ve never been in one like that,” he replied, his voice muffled by his hands. “Even when Lily and James died, I didn’t scream, didn’t let it out – I’m always so afraid to let it out...”

He was silent for a moment as he raised his head, staring off into space. “Neville was always such a sweet kid,” he muttered. “So timid, so unsure... but such a sweet kid. He was one of my favorites – and I had a great class.”

“And he nearly died!” Remus screamed, shooting to his feet. “He nearly died of a heart attack, for the love of –”

“Hey!” Tonks jumped up, grabbing his arm again. “Easy, Remus!” She pulled him back down to the couch and kept a firm grip on his arm. “Calm down,” she pleaded, gazing at him.

“He’s such a sweet boy,” Remus murmured, “such a sweet boy...” Glancing up, Remus met her gaze, tears sparkling in his eyes. “He owed me after I resigned in his third year, you know. Said he wanted to check up on me. He... he thanked me for helping him find a little confidence...”

“And Dumbledore nearly killed him!”

“Arthur said Dumbledore’s horrified,” the metamorphmagus pointed out quickly.

“He still did it,” Remus growled out. “Don’t go telling me to forgive and forget.”

Tonks drew back, glaring at him. “When did I say that? I’m as angry at him as you are! I don’t know Neville at all, and I wasn’t the best friend of Harry’s parents, but I still care about them! How dare—”

“I’m sorry,” Remus said, and her voice trailed off as she blinked in surprise. “I know you care – I had no right to – I’m sorry,” he finished helplessly.

Tonks was speechless for a few moments, opening and closing her mouth repeatedly. Finally, she huffed out a breath and folded her arms across her chest, glaring at him.

“What now?” Remus asked, bewildered.

“What did you have to go and do that for?” she demanded, a scowl on her face. “I had a perfectly good rant worked up!”

Four hours had passed after Madam Pomfrey had left, suggesting that Neville simply take it easy for a few days. After much fussing from both Molly and Ginny, he was finally allowed to return to Ron’s room. Neville trudged wearily up the steps to the top floor, Ginny hovering beside him warily, and collapsed into the camp bed at the foot of Ron’s bed.

The lights were out, but he could see the gleam of Hermione’s eyes in the darkness. Claiming the students would benefit from solidarity, Arthur Weasley had somehow convinced his wife to let all five students stay in Ron’s room for the night. Though somewhat offended by the impromptu co-ed sleepover, Molly had agreed, on the condition that the children behave and Ron’s door be left open.

As Ginny fell into her bed by Hermione, which Arthur Weasley had levitated into the room an hour before, a voice sounded through the darkness.

We going, then?" Ron asked sleepily.

"Tomorrow," Neville agreed, and Hermione smiled in the darkness.

The sun had just risen over Privet Drive when the scowling man appeared, looking most uncomfortable in Muggle clothes. Pulling a wand out of his sleeve, he waved it in complicated motions, incanting quietly under his breath. After a moment he paused, surveyed his work and nodded in satisfaction before striding down the street.

At number four Privet Drive, rather than knock on the front door, he went around the side of the house. "You're relieved, Fletcher," he hissed as he drew even with the boy's window, and sure enough, an invisible man disappeared with a pop, leaving behind an empty bottle of whiskey.

The man sighed as he lifted the bottle and vanished it. What a wonderful guard Fletcher makes...

In a rare show of sadistic humor, the man smirked slightly as he conjured a large, flat wooden board and stepped onto it, levitating it carefully. Hovering before the boy's window, he rapped sharply on the glass, smirking yet again as the boy started and awoke. Predictably, the boy's eyes widened in shock before his scrambled out of bed and opened the window.

"I... I'm sorry, sir, Hedwig didn't go out last night or I'd have—"

"Quiet, Potter," the hovering man said immediately. "Step aside."

Gulping, the boy moved out of the way, and the hovering man stepped through the open window, bending at the waist to fit through. He shut the window behind himself and looked at the boy, frowning. "Straighten up, Potter, I haven't got all day. Dumbledore has ordered me to teach you Occlumency so we can protect whatever's left of your mind from the Dark Lord. I warn you now, I will tolerate no disrespect or laziness on your part. Since I am given the unenviable task of cramming knowledge into your worthless cranium, you will simply have to keep up with me."

As Harry stared, open mouthed, Snape continued, "And perhaps when we're through, you will show me how the television works, eh, Harry?" The man winked and smiled – a rather frightening sight to see on Snape's face.

Harry's mouth opened and closed several times. "Mr.... Mr. Weasley?" he asked, gaping.

The man grinned. "What do you think of my new look, my boy?" Arthur asked jovially. "Watch this..." He straightened his back, folded his arms slowly across his chest – being sure to drag his fingertips along his robes – and scowled down at Harry. "Mr. Potter, I will not tolerate such abysmal performance from you. Even our new celebrity must perform up to Hogwarts' standards."

Relaxing his posture, Arthur smiled at Harry from behind his curtain of greasy black hair. "Well?"

"The scowl needs a bit of work," Harry told him, smiling broadly.

"What?" Arthur thundered. "I worked hard on that! Oh, how you wound me, Potter! Hours of practicing in front of the mirror, wasted!"

Harry's smile broadened. "Do you think he really does?"

Pausing in his rant, Arthur blinked, confused. "Does what?"

"Practice in front to the mirror."

"Well..." Arthur replied slowly, "yes."

Harry burst out laughing. Smiling, Arthur waited patiently for him to settle down before saying, "I'm afraid this isn't purely a social call, Harry."

"Oh, I know," Harry replied. "I knew there had to be a reason for you to come—"

"Oh no, you misunderstand me, Harry!" Arthur cut in, looking faintly alarmed. "I would come see you for a social call if I could, Harry, but the way things stand right now, there is so much going on that there isn't going to be a day that goes by – for quite some time – when there isn't some news we have to bring you. And I'm afraid today's news is rather poor."

Immediately, Harry paled. "Who's hurt?"

"He'll be fine, Harry," Arthur tried to reassure him, but –

"Remus?" Harry asked, suddenly looking quite lost.

"No, Harry," Arthur replied, wincing. "Neville."

"What?" Harry drew back, reaching behind himself to find his bed, and sank down onto it. "What happened to Neville?"

"Well," Arthur said slowly, "you see Harry, Luna, Neville and Hermione are all staying at the Burrow – they arrived yesterday. We felt you kids needed some time to connect after what happened last month. We wanted to bring you too, Harry, but Dumbledore refused. Anyway, last night Dumbledore showed up and warned the kids not to owl or contact you, and he said something that made Hermione realize he'd had Neville under a binding spell since he was one. I'm not sure how she figured it out, but she did."

Taking a deep breath, Arthur plunged on, well aware that Harry was growing paler by the second. "What you need to understand about binding spells, Harry, is that they trap or bind a person's magic within himself. They're horrible to experience, I'm told, because they close off a part of oneself that a person needs to function. For witches and wizards, magic is natural, and having it stripped from you is horrible. And it's very dangerous to do a binding spell – people have died because too much of their magic was bound for them to survive, or the binding was botched somehow. But while their magic is bound, they never really feel whole, and most people under binding spells are very timid and have little self-esteem. And it's incredibly difficult to cast spells with what little magic is left free of the binding spell.

"Unfortunately, removing the spell is even more dangerous. We had to make Dumbledore do it, of course, when we found out that he had done such a thing to Neville, but... the sudden surge of power when Neville's bindings broke free... Harry, it made him have a heart attack."

When Harry's head shot up, tears in his eyes, Arthur hurriedly continued. "He's all right, Harry. Hermione recognized it for what it was and Charlie knows CPR. He managed to revive Neville, and he's doing all right – he's just very tired. It turns out that Neville's mother asked Dumbledore to place the binding spell on Neville – he just never removed it."

"But Neville's okay?" Harry asked hopefully, having seized on to that portion of Arthur's news.

"He's fine," Arthur agreed, smiling slightly. "We're keeping Hermione for the summer – her parents are on a second honeymoon in Athens – and Molly and I plan to owl Luna's father and Neville's grandmother and ask to keep them, as well."

At this, Harry frowned, glancing down at the floor.

"I promise we'll do whatever we can to get you out of here, Harry."

"I know," the black-haired boy sighed. Standing, he rubbed at his forehead in what Arthur hoped was merely a nervous gesture. "I suppose you're here to make Professor Dumbledore think I'm having my Occlumency lessons?" he added.

Arthur smiled. "Not quite," he murmured. "I'm here to give you your Occlumency lessons. You see, Snape wants to teach you about as much as you want to learn from him, so I struck up a bargain with him. He's teaching me – and I will pass the knowledge I glean from him on to you."

"You'd do that for me?" Harry asked, awestruck, and he stared in confusion at Mr. Weasley. He knew what Snape's crash courses in Occlumency were like.

"Of course, my boy!" Arthur exclaimed. "Now, I want you to brace yourself, and I will explain everything I am doing to you aloud. Pay attention to what I'm saying and try to block me from seeing certain memories at the same time, all right?"

The lesson passed very slowly, but they made a considerable amount of progress, even with Arthur's break halfway through to take his second dose of Polyjuice. Arthur's method of explaining what he was doing and all the ways to counter it helped Harry a great deal, but Arthur was too distressed by Harry's memories to attack with much force. He didn't feel that was a horrible thing – in the first lesson, he hoped to ease Harry into the different Occlumency techniques, rather than take him by the ankle and toss him upside down into the deep end as Snape had done.

But the final memory Arthur had broken into had been one that utterly horrified him. Harry had fought tooth-and-nail to keep Arthur out of that particular memory, but his exhaustion from two hours of Occlumency finally caught up with him.

The Dursleys, it seemed, had not bothered to tell Harry his parents were dead until Harry was eight years old. Until that point...

He didn't even want to think about it.

It was only seven o'clock in the morning and already, Tonks had been dragged out of bed by an angry Gryffindor girl.

Immediately upon discovering that the Floo network did indeed connect to Grimmauld Place, Hermione had floo'd over to headquarters and ran straight to Tonks's door, knocking frantically. When Tonks had stumbled out of bed, she had found Hermione demanding to be taken to see Harry. Groaning tiredly, Tonks had tried to turn to go back to bed, but Hermione had seized her arm and dragged her downstairs, where a very amused Remus stood over a pot of coffee.

Within two minutes of Hermione's arrival, the other students had found their way into Grimmauld Place and had all gathered around Tonks's chair, swarming like an angry pack of bees. Remus simply walked up to Tonks and passed her a cup of coffee before disappearing up the stairs with his cup of tea, humming all the while.

"Thanks for the help, Remus!" Tonks shouted after him.

"Any time!" he shouted back, and Tonks fumed.

She could just hear the smirk in his voice.

Gulping down a swallow of coffee, Tonks sighed and gave in to the anger and determination of Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Neville – and Luna's oddly intimidating stare.

Tonks's voice emanated from his mirror as Harry slipped back into the room, having left to go to the bathroom. Sighing, Arthur lifted the mirror from his pocket and activated it. "Yes?" he asked calmly, ignoring the gasps that sounded from behind Tonks as his face came into view.

"They want to see him," Tonks said frantically, looking rather harried. "Arthur, they'll kill me if I don't at least let them talk to him. I don't want to die!"

"I have another hour, but I think we're done here anyway," Arthur said, and he hesitated, thinking carefully. "Look, send Moody over as the guard so he can keep an eye out for everyone, and send... send two of them over to Figg's house. Use the disillusionment spell on them and have Moody walk them over, all right?"

"Okay, but you choose which two," Tonks warned him. "I don't feel like risking my life right now."

"I have a better – Harry?" Arthur asked quietly, turning the mirror over and pressing it into the bed, so their conversation would be neither seen nor heard. "Listen, we can bring two of your friends over for about an hour – but only two, and no longer than an hour. Who do you want to see?"

"Hermione and Neville," Harry replied immediately. "I'd love to see Ron and the rest but I need to know that–"

"I understand," Arthur smiled. "And what's more, Ron and the others will, too." He raised the mirror once more and said quietly, "Send Hermione and Neville on over," adding before Ron could protest, "He needs to see that Neville's okay, Ronald." When his son nodded, Arthur said goodbye to Tonks and cut the connection, replacing the mirror into his pocket.

And he settled in for a long and uncomfortable ten-minute wait.

Hermione tapped her foot impatiently, staring steadily at Moody as he gazed out from behind the bushes. "I don't see why we're back here," she said finally.

"Watching for any obstacles, girl," he explained. "Got to get you to the house in one piece."

Neville gulped.

"Oh, honestly," Hermione rolled her eyes. "Professor Moody, your eye can see through just about any material, is that right?" Moody's fake eye swiveled to face her. Undaunted, Hermione continued. "Neville just recently had a heart attack, it's highly unlikely that there are any Death Eaters out for an early-morning stroll down Privet Drive, and any attacking Death Eaters would attack at night to make it harder for them to be detected – they do wear black robes, as I'm certain you recall."

"You listen here, missy," Moody began, but Hermione shook her head.

"Come on, Neville," she said, turning to the tired boy. "Let's go see Harry."

Neville nodded once, and they walked away.

"Blast it," Moody muttered, and he darted out from behind the bushes and chased after them, brandishing his wand left and right all the while.

Hermione sighed.

It was a very short walk from Magnolia Crescent to Privet Drive, and within several minutes, they had arrived, Moody ushering them to stand below Harry's window. Conjuring up a large plank, he levitated them up through the window, but only after steadily gazing through the walls of the house. As the board drew level with the window, Hermione jumped off it and into Harry's room, drawing an angry shout from Moody below. Ignoring both Moody and the startling sight of Snape sitting on Harry's bed, she threw herself at Harry and began to talk very quickly as she hugged him.

"Oh, Harry, it was awful, he came into Ron's room and told us we couldn't contact you all summer! He had Neville under a binding spell! He was going to put you under one too but your parents refused and we made him take it off and Neville had a heart attack and then he wouldn't let us take you away from here, it was awful!" Hermione stopped speaking and gulped in air, whimpering slightly, and clung to Harry.

"Wait... what?" Harry asked, and Neville grinned as he stepped into the room. Carefully, Harry pried Hermione off of himself and held her out at arm's length. "Once more," he said, "slowly."

"You already know everything she said, Harry," Arthur spoke up, and Hermione blinked, staring at him.

"You're not Professor Snape," she spoke up. Studying his posture carefully, Hermione blinked in surprise. "Mr. Weasley?" she asked, a slight smile on her face.

"Hello, Hermione," Arthur smiled, and Neville gaped – it was an odd sight to see on the Potions Professor's face, even if it wasn't really Snape. "I'll leave you to your visit, shall I? Coming down, Moody!" he called out the window, and stepped onto the platform, which Moody slowly lowered down. "Remus will come get you two in about an hour, Neville, Hermione. See you in three days, Harry!" he called as he sank out of sight.

"How are you, Harry?" Hermione asked as soon as Arthur was gone.

Harry smiled half-heartedly. "I'm all right? What about all of you?"

"I'm all right, mate," Neville said wearily. "Just tired." Moving slowly, he sank down onto Harry's bed, and Harry shifted slightly to allow Hermione room to join them. Looking slightly nervous, Hermione perched on the side of the bed by Harry's hip, watching Neville anxiously.

"Madam Pomfrey was furious," she said in a low voice. "It was bad enough that he'd had a heart attack, she said, but only a month after being hit by the Cruciatus Curse – she was furious."

“Dumbledore looked right shocked, too,” Neville murmured, and Hermione nodded.

“He was horrified,” she agreed. “But that doesn’t make up for–” Swallowing, Hermione shook her head. “So,” she asked, “what have you been up to?”

“Not much,” Harry replied woefully. “There isn’t much to do around here. The Dursleys have been leaving me alone – they’re all out of here by seven every morning – and haven’t made me do any chores, so I have nothing to do, really. I’ve started revising to occupy myself.”

Neville winced. “Oh, dear,” he muttered, and Hermione shrieked, a delighted smile spreading across her face.

“Oh, Harry, I always knew you’d do wonderfully if you just applied yourself! You’re quite brilliant, you and Ron both, you know, just lazy, the both of you! Oh, Harry, I’m so proud!”

Harry stared at her, slightly overwhelmed. “Well, it’s... it’s not so bad,” he said slowly, “in small doses, I mean, I just do a little at a time–”

“But that’s exactly it, Harry, that’s what you’re supposed to do! A little at a time! Oh, Harry, I’m so pleased!”

She beamed at him. Neville snickered.

Harry sighed.

The house was silent as Arthur slipped through the door, trudging wearily down the hall. In the kitchen, Remus leaned over the stove, glancing up as Arthur entered. “Morning, Arthur,” he said cheerfully. “Cup of tea?”

“Please,” Arthur asked tiredly, slowly lowering himself into a chair at the table as the Polyjuice Potion wore off. Remus handed him a cup, a look of concern on his face, and sat down opposite the older man.

“Are you all right?” he asked, frowning.

Arthur didn’t answer, gulping down a long swallow of tea. Setting the cup down with shaking hands, Arthur closed his eyes. “I can’t believe–” His voice shook and he opened his eyes again, staring almost pleadingly at Remus. “We knew it was bad. The summer after Harry, Ron, Neville and Hermione’s first year, my boys had to pull bars off Harry’s window to get him out of there. And so many times, I almost stormed over there to take him away, but Dumbledore always stopped me – Every time I look at that boy, I remember every day that I almost went and saved him, but didn’t. And every time I look at that boy, I hate myself.”

Remus didn’t want to ask, but– “Was it really that bad?” he asked in a small voice, and Arthur snorted.

“Of course it’s that bad,” Arthur replied. “He’s Harry bloody Potter, what else would it be? I don’t understand why nothing can ever go right for the boy.”

“Some things have,” Remus pointed out. “He has a lot of people who care about him.”

“And have done nothing,” Arthur replied. “Yet.”

Sitting up straighter, Arthur continued. “Hermione came to me last summer, practically begging me to get him out of that house. Did she get you, too?”

“Yes,” Remus winced.

“She was right, too. She warned us – she warned us all – that he’d feel be furious and feel betrayed. She told us what that place does to him. And I – I couldn’t listen,” Arthur said wearily. “I couldn’t stand to hear it, because I knew she was right, and I knew that Dumbledore would never let me get Harry out of that place. I think I forgot for a while that I was my own man...” He picked up his cup again, gazing off into the distance. “Not Dumbledore’s.”

“What we really need,” Remus said mournfully, “is the legal standing to get Harry away from him. If Sirius left guardianship to any of us–”

“I know,” Arthur agreed. “The answer is in that will.” Sighing, he drained the last of his tea and stood. “Let me show you something.”

He led Remus to a room on the top floor, just below the attic, where the Order stored one of its many pensieves. The viewing room was usually used for reporting to Dumbledore, as a private place for a more thorough debriefing. Entering the smaller viewing room, Arthur locked the door behind Remus and keyed it to himself. Often, after stressful missions, Dumbledore would allow the members of his order to choose a viewing room in which to store their memories, and would block it from entry by others. With a few simple spells, Arthur set the room up so only he, Remus, Bill, Charlie, Fred and George, Tonks, Kingsley and Moody could enter. Standing over the pensieve, he placed his wand against his temple with a shaky hand. He withdrew over three dozen memories, placing them all in the pensieve.

When he had finished, he and Remus stared at the pensieve with haunted faces. “I don’t want to go in,” Remus said finally.

“Neither do I, son,” Arthur agreed softly, and they both stepped forward, touching the silvery substance.

They were hurtled, headfirst, into a small, empty crawl-space. As they watched in horror, Petunia Dursley opened the door of the space, an

infant dangling from his hand, and shoved the black-haired baby in. Glaring at the child, she slammed the door, and the baby cried. Harry Potter was only one year old.

It was Christmas, and a small boy peeked around the doorway to the living room, watching as the happy family exchanged gifts. "Why don't I get any presents?" he whispered, and Vernon Dursley looked up. As Petunia looked away, the large man slapped the boy across the face before ordering him back into his cupboard while the "good people celebrate!" Harry Potter was three years old.

"My parents love me," a crying little boy exclaimed, "and they'll come get me and put you in jail."

"No, they don't," Vernon Dursley replied, laughing cruelly. "If they did, they would BE HERE!"

"They love me," the boy said stubbornly, and the man cuffed him across the face.

"Make my breakfast!" he roared.

Harry Potter was five years old.

Staring at the little boy, Remus whimpered, and the memories sped up.

"What's this I hear about you turning your teacher's wig blue, boy?" Vernon Dursley boomed, and the child cowered.

"I didn't do it!"

"DON'T YOU LIE TO ME BOY!" Dursley screamed. "Cupboard! Now! One week!"

Harry Potter was six years old.

Harry Potter was six years old, and crying in the corner of his dark cupboard as a small mouse scurried across his foot.

Harry Potter was seven years old and ducking as Dudley Dursley swung a bat at his head.

Harry Potter was seven years old and watching as Dudley Dursley told the police that Harry, not Dudley, had broken the old lady's headlights.

Harry Potter was eight years old, locked in his cupboard for three days without food because he aced his tests.

"They're – they're really dead?" the boy asked, his voice quavering. "But – but you said –"

"We lied," Vernon Dursley grinned. "Don't ask questions – go to your cupboard."

Harry Potter was eight years old.

"What did my parents do for work?" a frightened little boy asked.

"Your mother was a prostitute and your father was a drunken bum," Vernon Dursley replied from behind his newspaper, smirking slightly.

"My mother was beautiful," the boy insisted, his voice shaking. "She was smart and funny and nice, and she loved me."

"Your mother was a whore, boy, don't question me. Go to your cupboard!"

Harry Potter was nine years old.

Harry Potter was ten years old, and locked in his cupboard for two weeks, forced to catch and eat spiders to survive.

Harry Potter was ten years old, lying on Mrs. Figg's floor and looking through her photo albums, wondering why he wasn't good enough to go with the Dursleys on their vacations.

Harry Potter was eleven years old, running to his cupboard after returning from the zoo, not to be let out until school was over.

"Is it done yet?" Remus whispered, tears running down his face.

"No," Arthur replied shortly.

Harry Potter was eleven years old, struggling as his uncle dragged him to Dudley Dursley's second bedroom and locked him in.

Harry Potter was twelve years old, wondering why no one was coming for him.

Harry Potter was thirteen years old, shaking as Marge Dursley slandered his parents.

Harry Potter was fourteen years old, watching Cedric fall again and again.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old, hearing Mr. Weasley's shouts as Nagini bit him.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old, writing again and again, "I must not tell lies."

Harry Potter was fifteen years old, watching in horror as Ron came stumbling through the Department of Mysteries, giggling madly.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old, watching Ginny sink to the floor of the Department of Mysteries with a broken ankle.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old, watching Luna fall to the floor of the Department of Mysteries, stunned.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old, watching as Hermione fell to the ground and Dolohov smiled.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old, watching as Neville screamed and withered under the Cruciatus Curse.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old, watching as Sirius fell through the veil.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old, raging and screaming in Dumbledore's office as the old man watched him serenely.

"No one will come for you, boy," Vernon Dursley said angrily. "They'll leave you here, to be a burden on us. All you are is a burden. Sooner or later, they'll realize that, and when they do, they won't be rid of you soon enough."

"Moody will come for me," the boy rounded on his uncle angrily. "Remember him? What about Arthur Weasley – he blew up the living room, as I'm sure you recall. Or Professor Lupin – he was my dad and my godfather's best friend, you know... Maybe Tonks, she had pink hair – she's an Auror, you know. They're like the police and the military all in one!"

Paling, Dursley stared at the boy. "Your godfather's better off dead," he spat finally. "All of you are. Parasites on the good, hardworking, normal people. Good riddance to all of you."

The man stormed away, slamming the door. The boy listened carefully, flinching as he heard the locks slide home, and a tear slipped from his eye.

Harry Potter was fifteen years old.

Remus felt a hand on his shoulder and he was pulled from the pensive, landing hard on the floor. Wincing in sympathy, Arthur looked down at the younger man, who stared off into space. "I left him there," Remus said brokenly. "I left him – I could have taken him away... So many times, I tried to go to see him, but I just couldn't face him, knowing I'd have to leave him there, I just couldn't... I left him there, I LEFT HIM!"

"We all did, son," Arthur said sadly. "I didn't know him as a baby, but the second he stepped foot through my door I should never have let him go back to that place. We listened to Dumbledore, and that was a mistake. But we don't have to anymore, Remus."

The younger man shook his head and bit his lip, tears still running down his face. "I'll show this to the others," Arthur said. "We all need to understand what he's been through. We won't show it to Dumbledore, he has no right – but we'll talk to him, Remus. We'll make him understand, and if in two weeks, he hasn't given in, we'll just take Harry anyway. But we need to find that will, Remus. The answer is in the will."

When Remus nodded, shakily, Arthur stood up and moved over to a smaller pensieve sitting in the corner. "Come on," he said quietly, after adding a few memories. "You need a pick-me-up." And they stepped into the pensieve to view some of the truly happy memories Arthur had managed to glean from Harry's mind.

There were none from before Harry's first year at Hogwarts.

It was a somber group that gathered in Sirius's bedroom that night. When Moody, Kingsley, Tonks, Bill and Charlie had returned home from work – or in the case of Charlie, his missions, and Moody, his rest – Arthur had taken them all into the pensieve to view the things he had seen during his Occlumency lesson with Harry. Even after taking them into the happier pensieve, the group was still shaken. Tonks was on the verge of tears, Kingsley looked horrified, Bill and Charlie were white with rage, and even Moody, the eighty-plus year veteran Auror, looked ashen.

But it was Remus who worried Arthur the most. Remus looked as if he'd been shattered.

"Remus, are there any things in this room that won't open?" Tonks asked after an hour of searching, brushing her long blue hair out of her face. "Maybe you need a Marauder password to find it."

"I don't think so," Remus frowned, "he couldn't be sure I'd be the one searching for it, after all."

"Are you certain he would have thought far enough ahead to realize that?" Kingsley pointed out. "You were his best friend, he may have assumed–"

"No, I doubt it," Remus murmured. Spinning around, his gaze landed on the bed and he froze. "Harry," he murmured, a dawning awareness coming into his eyes.

"What?" Arthur stared at him, his brow furrowed.

"Last summer," Remus began, "Harry told – told Sirius and me that he has a loose floorboard under his bed at the Dursleys. He hides his school things and prized possessions–"

"Which is all of them, and few there are," Tonks added darkly.

–under there.” Staring steadily at the bed, Remus took a step forward. “Move the bed.”

They complied, Bill, Charlie, Kingsley and Moody moving to stand on different ends of the bed and levitating it several feet to the right, with Moody staring out the back of his head all the while. As the bed moved, a square mural came into view – an image of the lake at Hogwarts, with a stag, a werewolf and a large black dog standing together by its shore. Remus stared at the picture, tears coming to his eyes, as the image shimmered slightly.

“Like I thought,” Tonks murmured, watching Remus worriedly. “He left this with you in mind.”

Remus nodded mutely before speaking, choking slightly on the words. “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.”

The stag bowed, and the other two animals in the image sank into a crouch. When they stilled in those positions, the floorboard lifted to reveal a small hideaway big enough for several boxes to be stacked side by side.

“Blimey,” Charlie breathed, staring down into the hole.

There were hundreds of rolls of parchment stacked in a pyramidal structure on the bottom of the hideaway, all tied with red ribbon. Next to the parchment rolls were several crates full of Muggle notebooks, as if Sirius had abandoned parchment for a more expedient manner of recording. And lying atop the crates was a single roll of parchment, tied with a silver ribbon.

Sirius’s will.

Remus reached for it with trembling fingers, lifting it from the hideaway.

He didn’t think he’d give it to Dumbledore just yet.

“This is incredible,” Tonks whispered. “How much does he have on...?”

“It’ll be interesting reading,” Kingsley agreed, and Remus stepped aside so they could begin to gather the documents.

“Excuse me,” Bill murmured, slipping around them, and he reached for the tenth roll of parchment on the bottom, unrolling it slowly. It looked slightly more worn than the others, as if it had been handled many times. As Bill scanned the roll of parchment, he paled, and his eyes flashed with rage.

“Bill?” Arthur questioned anxiously, and Bill shook his head.

Looking up, Bill stared at them all. “Why didn’t anybody tell me that the wards on Privet Drive are blood wards?”

“What do you mean?” Charlie questioned, his brow furrowed, but Remus froze. Blood wards...

“No,” he muttered. “No, no, no...” Snatching the roll of parchment from Bill’s hand, he read it hurriedly, cringing at the line written in a heavy hand.

June 24th, 1995

H kidnapped by LV in final task of Triwizard Tournament. Used H’s blood in restoration potion. Successfully touched H without feeling any pain. Now has H & L’s blood in his veins.

*D says wards on PD are blood wards. **Can be breached by LV. Demanded H be moved.***

D refused .

Shaking, Remus dropped the scroll. “I forgot,” he whispered. “Oh lord, I forgot!”

“We have to get him out of there,” Bill said. “Now.”

“Let me see that,” Moody grunted, and he took the parchment, reading it aloud. “Albus, you old fool,” he muttered when he had finished.

“I agree with Bill,” Charlie said, gulping. “We have to get him tonight.”

“Not necessarily,” Kingsley said slowly, and the others stared at him. “It has been over a year, and Voldemort hasn’t touched him there. Maybe he doesn’t know. Look,” he continued. “We have a lot to go through here. We have to figure out where to put Harry and how to placate Dumbledore when we take him anyway. Bill, on Moody’s next shift, go over to Harry’s house and set up some more detection wards. Tie them to you and set up a time-delay on Dumbledore’s wards so we’ll be notified first if anything happens. Let’s wait two weeks like we were going to do. We need to figure everything out, first.”

“Fine,” Remus said slowly. “Fine. But I want to go stay with him until we get him out.”

Arthur shook his head. “Not you,” he said. “I’m sorry, Remus, but we’ll need your help to get through all of these documents. You know Sirius better than we.”

“Fine,” Remus bit out again.

“Charlie can go,” Arthur said. “You wouldn’t mind, would you?”

“Not at all,” Charlie agreed. “My last mission is over and Dumbledore hasn’t assigned a new one to me yet, and I have nowhere else to go besides

the Burrow. I'll see what I can do to get assigned there."

"Thank you," Remus breathed, and Arthur smiled.

"Keep him sane for us, eh?" Arthur asked his son, and Charlie nodded.

"When we bring the will to Dumbledore, I'll ask him about it," the second-eldest Weasley son offered.

"Good, good," Moody grunted. "See, Remus? We'll take care of our boy just fine. Now, let's take a look at that will."

Nodding, Remus unrolled the will on the bed and bent over it, the others gathering around him.

Dated July 17, 1995

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Sirius Orion Black, being of sound mind and body, do hereby bequeath my estate in the following manner:

To Remus John Lupin, I leave one thousand galleons.

To Nymphadora Tonks, I leave one thousand galleons.

To Arthur Weasley, I leave one thousand galleons.

To William Weasley, I leave one thousand galleons.

To Charles Weasley, I leave one thousand galleons.

To Kingsley Shacklebolt, I leave one thousand galleons.

To Alastor Moody, I leave one thousand galleons.

To Hermione Jane Granger, I leave five hundred galleons.

To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave five hundred galleons.

To Ginevra Molly Weasley, I leave five hundred galleons.

The remainder of my estate, including all properties, titles, and possessions, I leave to the current head of the House of Potter.

The guardianship of Harry James Potter, I leave jointly to Remus Lupin and Arthur & Molly Weasley.

Signed 17 July 1995,

S. Orion Black

"That's odd," Remus frowned. "'The Head of the House of Potter'? Harry's the only Potter left."

"It's not that unusual," Tonks corrected him. "A lot of families use formal language like that for the main beneficiary. The Blacks certainly did. Mum told me that there was even some sort of spell which would make the entire will invalid if it wasn't written in that manner. He had to do it that way, or Harry would inherit nothing."

"Mmm..." Remus agreed after a moment, setting the will aside. Sighing, he rolled his shoulders before kneeling before one of the crates and pulling out a notebook. Leaning back against the wall, he sat down and opened the notebook to the first page and began to read, and all the others did the same.

July 15th, 1995

Asked D to move H again. Another refusal. Think Hr is going to go crazy. Says H will be furious, feel betrayed. She's right.

July 16th, 1995

Talked to D again about blood wards. Claims perfectly safe, LV can't get through. Don't think so. Can't find that old tome from Black library. Think Kreacher stole it. Must find it. It had the answers.

July 17th, 1995

*Found book, found wards. Called Ara Sanguinis – Protection by Blood. Uses the shared blood between L and P to protect H **as long as he calls PD HOME**. Second he speaks of it as the D's home, not his, protection disappears.*

"Charlie," Remus spoke up, wincing. "I think we need to go see Dumbledore now."

Wishful Thinking The Head of the Noble House

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 3 – The Head of the Noble House

“And why, exactly, do you need to stay with Harry, Charles?” Dumbledore asked, peering at the man over steeped fingers.

“He could benefit greatly from a bit of fitness training, Professor,” Charlie replied without a hitch. “You’ve already told me I get a few weeks off, so I was thinking I could stay with him for a week or two, maybe get him up to snuff. He’s a pretty scrawny kid, Professor.”

“Yes, he is that,” Dumbledore agreed, smiling. “However, I’m sure you can understand my concerns, Charles – if Voldemort were to find out–”

“With all due respect, sir,” Charlie interrupted, “if You-Know – V-voldemort finds out I’m there, you haven’t warded the area very well. And my family is already at the top of his Hit List. I won’t let that stop me from helping him.”

“But staying with him, Charles?” Dumbledore asked, leaning forward. “Do you really think that necessary?”

“Quite frankly, I do,” Charlie replied, “discounting all other reasons, it’s a good idea for security purposes alone.”

“Hmmm,” Dumbledore murmured, and he spun in his chair, turning to stare out the window. “Were it your younger brothers coming to me with this request, Charles, I would likely be less sympathetic. But as I understand your concerns, and as I know you understand my own, I will grant this request. Please see to it, however, that you do not practice magic on the premises; I’m afraid Cornelius would be quite happy for any reason to prosecute – or persecute, as the case may be – young Harry.”

“Don’t worry, Professor, I’ll be careful,” Charlie soothed, smiling at the elderly wizard.

“Excellent!” Dumbledore smiled brightly. “I’m sure Harry will enjoy your company – see to it that his next few weeks are productive. Shall I see you out?” he added, rising.

“Oh, no, Professor,” Charlie replied, and he clambered to his feet, waving the professor back into his seat. “I’ll just be on my way. Thank you, Professor.”

“Not at all, my boy, not at all!” Dumbledore smiled jovially and, as Charlie left the office, turned back to the large pile of paperwork teetering on his desk.

Charlie waited until he was in the Entrance Hall before speaking again. “‘Scrawny’, my arse,” he muttered angrily. “Malnourished and abused is what he is. I swear that man is blind...”

Shaking his head, Charlie wandered out of the school and made his way slowly to the gates, apparating away to the Burrow to pick up his things.

He’d packed the night before, after all. If Dumbledore had refused his request, he would have gone anyway.

“Is Charlie in place yet?” Remus asked absently, glancing up from the notebook he was reading.

“He’s on his way,” Tonks replied as she turned a page. “Look at this,” she muttered, shoving her notebook Remus’s way. Sitting up slowly, Remus shifted until he was sprawled next to Tonks on the plush rug, and read the last page of the notebook aloud.

“ ‘ July 30, 1995

Walked into kitchen and found DD sitting there, staring at the wall. Didn’t notice me so I backed up and listened from outside the door. Muttered something about failing everyone, sacrificing too many. Said something about stealing something from H... I’m getting worried.

Aside from H’s childhood and peace of mind, I’m not sure what else DD has stolen from him... Afraid to find out. DD seemed more stressed about what he was muttering about than he was about sending H to PD. Can’t be good.

I’m scared for H.’”

Finished reading, Remus leaned back, shock and confusion warring on his face. “What has he done *now*?” he demanded, staring at the notebook. “What *else* could he have done?”

"I don't know, but I need to get to work," Tonks replied, pushing herself to her feet. "I was late yesterday and Dawlish nearly killed me. Good luck," she smiled grimly, rushing out of the room.

"Yeah, nice talking to you too," Remus muttered. Sighing tiredly, he reached for a new notebook, having exhausted the one he'd been reading. The night before, he, Kingsley and Bill had carefully gone through all the scrolls and notebooks, arranging them in chronological order. Moody had begun with the scrolls from immediately after Harry's third year. Arthur, his hands shaking, had begun with Harry's forced entrance into the Triwizard Tournament.

From that point onward, Sirius's records increased greatly in number, and the group had been forced to divide the records from Harry's fifth year among Tonks, Bill, Kingsley and Remus. Remus had quickly seized on to the notebooks chronicling the summer between Harry's fourth and fifth years – he remembered wondering what Sirius had been doing, writing so often. But somehow, Tonks had ended up with one from his pile, and continued reading rather than replace it. Swearing under his breath, Remus rifled through the pile, searching for the notebook which followed after the one Tonks had showed him. After a few moments of frantic searching, he found it and opened to the first page, reading hurriedly.

July 31, 1995

Happy birthday, H. Went to Gringotts today, checked H.'s finances. Whatever DD's stealing, it isn't money. Have a bit of an in with the goblins – promised they'd watch H's accounts carefully. Turns out DD is the executor of the will of L&J. Doesn't sound good, but goblins say nothing fishy has happened with H's vaults, transactions, etc. Asked to be notified each time money withdrawn from H's vaults, goblins agreed.

Whatever DD's stolen, it isn't material. I'm getting very worried.

He turned the page.

August 1 st , 1995

Got in a bit of a row with DD today. H's birthday was yesterday and DD said he'd be moved last night. H still isn't here, no attempt to get him has been made.

Hr frantic – says he'll feel betrayed, wants to talk to him. Trying to think of a way – should have given H my other mirror when I met him. Could be very useful right now.

Following a paper trail. DD accidentally forgot some things here this morning – records, scraps of To-Do Lists... It looks like he's hiding someone in an Unplottable location. Who?

Going to try to get into DD's personal Pensieve Room sometime during the school year. If I can find that –

Heart racing, Remus flipped quickly through the notebook, stopping on the next page that mentioned the word "Pensieve".

August 31 st , 1995

Had a perfect opportunity, so decided not to wait. Got into the Pensieve room, but it was empty. DD's watching me carefully now. Think he thinks I'm cracking. Found nothing new to suggest he's hiding anyone. Don't know what to think.

H leaves for Hogwarts tomorrow with friends. I don't know if he'll be safe there...

He wasn't sure if he should be relieved or disappointed. Slowly, he flipped back a few pages....

August 12 th , 1995

Hearing was this morning. H got off. Looked extremely forlorn when returned, though – asked Hr, she didn't know why. DD hasn't even come to the house yet – wonder what he's up to.

Somehow, I think he's the one who put that confused expression on H's face.

...

August 24 th , 1995

Thinking about pulling H out of Hogwarts. Found out today that D.U. will be teaching this year. DD tried to block, but should have done something. H should be warned. I'll find some way to tell him without saying it outright. He needs to be warned. He'll be her main target. DD says say nothing.

Unfortunately, as an escaped prisoner, I have no legal right to pull H out of school.

If only L&J were here...

Eyes prickling with tears, Remus leaned back, staring at the notebook. How many times had he wished the very same thing?

The sound of the doorbell chimed softly through the small, tidy house. On the front stoop, a stocky red-haired man waited patiently, his eyes roving

around the property as he stood there. After a moment, a thin, bony woman came to the door, peering nervously at him. "Can I help you?" she asked hesitantly, and Charlie smiled.

"My name is Charlie Weasley, ma'am," he said, watching her carefully. "I've been sent by Albus Dumbledore."

The woman looked as if she'd swallowed a lemon. "I see," she said shortly. "My name is Petunia Dursley, Mr. Weasley; please come in."

And she opened the door all the way, turning and stalking off.

"What a welcome," Charlie murmured, and he stepped through the open doorway, closing the door behind himself, and followed the woman into the kitchen.

Fred and George had described the house as unnaturally clean – an opinion Tonks had seconded the night before – and Charlie could see why. Peering around the kitchen, he saw no signs that anyone *lived* in the house; it looked like a show-piece. Biting back a resigned sigh, he turned his gaze on the woman glaring at him from behind the kitchen counter.

"Well? What do you want?" she spat, her face darkening.

"A pleasure to meet you, ma'am," Charlie murmured, trying hard not to snicker. "As I said, my name is Charlie Weasley, and I am here on on behalf of Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix. We would like to maintain a presence here, ma'am, to ensure that no one is harmed in any way in this household."

Petunia Dursley went pale in record time. "Are you suggesting that we—"

"Of course not!" Charlie soothed. "I'm simply here to humor some of the higher-ups, you see; personally, I'd rather be off in Romania right now. I work there, you know, training dragons."

"Drr-dragons?" the Dursley woman repeated, her face, if possible, even whiter.

"Yep!" Charlie replied. "Of course, I'll pay rent and help with paying for the food – I'm hoping to be able to convince Dumbledore that this is unnecessary in about a fortnight. And it would be best, honestly, if you didn't mention this conversation at all – were Dumbledore to feel I wasn't taking this seriously, he might remove me and send someone less... sympathetic," Charlie finished, his voice low and concerned. As he finished his impromptu speech, he reached into the pocket of his coat and withdrew a large roll of pounds, placing them on the counter in front of the woman without ever breaking eye contact.

"Very – very well," Petunia Dursley said slowly, her eyes sliding down to the bills on the counter. "The boy's in his room, up the stairs and to the right."

Check, Charlie thought behind his kind smile. "You don't mind if I look around a bit, do you?" he asked politely.

The woman swallowed. "Not at all," she said stiffly. "Just please stay out of the bedrooms – except the boys' and the guest room, of course."

"I'm afraid I'll have to stay in Harry's room, actually," Charlie grimaced. "I don't much look forward to having to share my space, but at least it's with a decent kid, and it's on Dumbledore's orders anyway."

"That's quite all right," the Dursley woman replied, looking almost relieved. "Perhaps you would be willing to help us make him do his chores? He's such a lazy boy, so ungrateful after everything we've done for him. It's just small things, of course, weeding the garden, doing the dishes..."

"I'll do what I can," Charlie smiled. "Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Dursley," he added, and quickly swept from the room, heading through to the living room to get a feel for the layout of the house.

The first thing he noticed was the photographs around the house. Gazing around the living room, he couldn't find any sign that more than one boy lived in the house. There were pictures of a large pink beach ball lining the mantle, a large, round blond-haired boy on a tricycle, and a boy opening his presents with a mountain of others surrounding him. There were a few family portraits as well as some pictures of the boy with his mother alone and with his father alone.

Harry wasn't included in any of them.

Shaking his head, he walked quickly through the remainder of the bottom level, pausing before the cupboard under the stairs. His hands shook slightly and his jaw clenched as he stared at it – he'd seen all too much of the place in the memories his father had shown him...

All that time, the boy had been suffering alone – and they'd done nothing.

Turning on his heel, he walked up the stairs, glancing back at the cupboard as he went. He'd be sure to leave the Dursleys a going-away present when he took Harry away. With that thought in mind, he smiled as he walked up the stairs and knocked on the door to Harry's room.

It wasn't hard to pick out the right one, after all. Fred and George had told him the summer before Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville's second year that there were locks on the *outside* of Harry's bedroom.

If only he'd believed them.

A somewhat bemused Harry Potter opened the door, staring at the Weasley man. "Charlie?" he asked, gaping, and the second-eldest Weasley son grinned.

"Budge over, Harry," he said cheerfully, and he slipped by the younger boy, shutting the door behind himself. With a wave of his wand, he cast a few detection charms that Bill had taught him, smirking slightly as he saw the results. "Nicely done, Dad," he murmured. "Right!" he added jovially, turning to face the stunned black-haired boy, shutting the open window with a spell as he went. "I've been sent by Dad, Remus, Tonks, Moody and Shacklebolt to stay with you until we can get you out of here. Dumbledore knows; he thinks I'm here to teach you personal fitness – which I *will* do. Dad'll be coming by the day after tomorrow for your next Occlumency lesson, and he'll be teaching me, as well. Oh, and Sirius left everything to you in his will."

Blinking in shock, Harry sat down hard on his bed.

Charlie smiled. He loved having that effect on people.

It was a quiet day at the Burrow. Charlie had left only twenty minutes before to go stay with Harry, Mr. Weasley had left for work ten minutes earlier, Bill was off at Gringotts and Fred and George were at their shop. Sprawled around Ron's room, which they had made their de facto headquarters, the five teens read quietly, searching for something to help their friend.

"If they had any wards based on the blood of friends," Neville said quietly, "a ward powered by blood sacrifice, but not blood of the dead, we could do that."

"But there *are* none that we've found," Ginny added miserably. "And as much as we need to keep Harry safe, we can't kill someone to do it."

"I know," Hermione replied wearily, rubbing her hair from her face, "but we need –"

A knock at the door interrupted them, and Ron quickly invited the person in, turning to see his mother standing in the doorway.

"Hermione," Mrs. Weasley said nervously, "there's been a firecall for you. Remus wants you over at Grimmauld Place."

The others looked up, gazing at Hermione. The brown-haired witch nodded quietly, smiling tightly at the others. "I'll let you know," she murmured and, picking up her sweater and bookbag from the back of Ron's desk chair, and sliding her wand up her sleeve, she followed Mrs. Weasley from the room.

Remus stood back as the fire turned green, watching as Hermione stepped out from the flames. "Thanks for coming," he said tersely, and Hermione frowned.

"It's nothing, Professor, but what's the problem?"

"Remus," he corrected immediately, "I'm not your professor any longer." Without telling her any more, he led her up the stairs to Sirius's bedroom. When he shut the door behind them, Hermione frowned again and gazed around the room.

"This was Sirius's room," she said softly. "Professor – Remus – what's going on?"

When he waved her into a seat, she perched uneasily on the edge of the desk chair, so Remus settled on the dresser top. "We've been watching Dumbledore for a year," he said quietly, "Moody, Tonks, Kingsley, Arthur, Sirius and I. Bill and Charlie have been helping, too," he began slowly.

"You have to understand, Hermione," he continued, "for Sirius and me, Harry has always been the first priority. James was the only one of us to have any children, and despite what Peter did, the four of us were brothers. James's son is the Marauder's Heir, and the responsibility of all of us, whether we like it or not.

"We swore a blood oath, Sirius, Peter and I, to always look out for Harry. We've paid dearly for our failures – Pettigrew, Snape told us, nearly died himself after the end of the Third Task, because he went against his blood oath. He harmed Harry quite grievously. Sirius suffered for thinking of revenge before Harry back in 1981 by spending twelve years in Azkaban. And I –"

He cut himself off, looking away. "Needless to say, Arthur loves Harry like a son, and you like a daughter. Bill, Charlie, Fred and George all see the two of you as siblings – for some reason, Percy never did. They've never sworn an oath, but it wasn't necessary. And Tonks – she likes Harry. So does Kingsley. They both want him to be safe *and* happy. And as for Moody – he doesn't like what he's seen lately. We all know things would be better if the Potters were alive – but that's just wishful thinking," he added bitterly.

He paused there, glancing at Hermione to gauge her reaction. "Sirius, especially, was livid last summer about the way Harry was being treated. We found a pile of records underneath his bed, and his will – we're all going through them right now, but I'm the only one who really has time to do it. Dumbledore's pulled me off active duty to let me grieve. So I need your help – you'll know what to watch for."

Hermione nodded silently as his voice trailed off. Moving to kneel on the floor, she picked up a discarded notebook and began to read.

Sighing in relief, Remus settled in beside her, feeling a weight lift off his shoulders.

"This doesn't bode well for us," Hermione murmured, gesturing to a passage from a notebook Remus had already read.

July 17th, 1995

Found book, found wards. Called Ara Sanguinis – Protection by Blood. Uses the shared blood between L and P to protect H as long as he calls PD HOME . Second he speaks of it as the D's home, not his, protection disappears.

“How long have you given yourselves to get him out?” she asked.

“Two weeks,” Remus replied, “starting the day Dumbledore showed up at the Burrow.”

“You don’t have that much time,” Hermione replied. “Harry *hates* it there, and with his current mood, it won’t be long before he explodes and brings the wards down.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not our only pressing problem,” Remus said in a strained voice. Pulling another notebook over, he opened it to a marked page and passed it to the young witch.

July 30, 1995

Walked into kitchen and found DD sitting there, staring at the wall. Didn't notice me so I backed up and listened from outside the door. Muttered something about failing everyone, sacrificing too many. Said something about stealing something from H... I'm getting worried.

Aside from H's childhood and peace of mind, I'm not sure what else DD has stolen from him... Afraid to find out. DD seemed more stressed about what he was muttering about than he was about sending H to PD. Can't be good.

I'm scared for H.

Blinking in shock, Hermione looked up. “Are there more like this?”

Wordlessly, Remus turned to the next incriminating passage, then the next, then the next. When he had finished, Hermione leaned back, a look of fright on her face. “Whatever Dumbledore’s stolen, it isn’t material,” she quoted. “What could it be? His inheritance?” she asked, glancing at Remus, who shook his head.

“Harry can’t legally touch the Potter vaults until he’s seventeen,” he explained, and Hermione bit her lip, frowning. “Besides, that would be material.”

“Not if you take it to mean his legacy,” Hermione murmured, then shook her head. “It doesn’t fit. What–?”

“I think it has something to do with Harry’s placement,” Remus said quietly. “It’s unusual for Dumbledore to be involved in the custody case of an orphan, and I know the Potters wouldn’t have wanted Harry anywhere near the Dursleys–”

Hermione blinked, staring at him. An orphan. Funny, she’d never thought of Harry as an –

The thought screeched to a halt, and Hermione paled. “No,” she whispered, “oh no, oh no, oh no...”

“Hermione?” Remus questioned nervously, getting slowly to his feet.

“No,” she shook her head. “It can’t–”

She ran, crashing through the doors of the Black family library, and immediately raced to the section about magical artifacts. Rifling through the books, ignoring Remus, who ran in behind her, she finally found the one she was looking for. Setting it down on a table nearby, she flipped through the pages quickly before stopping and skimming a passage midway through the book.

Remus stared, confused, at the heading.

The Mirror of Erised

“Go to Gringotts,” Hermione said, paling even further. “Ask about Harry’s inheritance. I have to go to Hogwarts – Professor Flitwick will let me through – I think... oh, I hope I’m wrong!”

She raced from the room without another word, leaving Remus staring after her in shock. A moment later, he heard her call out “Filius Flitwick’s Office!”, and the house was silent.

Sighing, Remus went to get his cloak. He didn’t know what the girl was on about, but he knew it’d be best to do as she asked.

She was a rather bright witch, after all.

As she had expected, Professor Flitwick had accepted her explanation that she needed to look up some things for Harry. Glancing around nervously, listening for any sound of the Filch or his cat, she came to the seventh floor corridor and stopped, pacing back and forth over a blank stretch of wall three times.

I need to see the current Potter family tapestry , she thought. I need to see the current Potter family tapestry. I need to see the current Potter family tapestry...

A door appeared, and holding her breath, she stepped through it.

It was a little known fact, Hermione mused as she stared at the black tapestry weaved with gold, shutting the door behind her, that the names of deceased members of the family faded somewhat. Walking across the room, she stopped before the hanging tapestry, skipping down to scan the bottom...

...and staring at the three glittering names.

Raising her wand, she tapped it against the first glowing name.

Unplottable , the label appeared.

She tapped her wand against the second.

Unplottable .

The third.

Unplottable.

She stared. Eyes sparkling with rage, she thought clearly, *I need the walls soundproofed* .

And screamed.

The goblins rushed Remus into a private room off the lobby, their black eyes glittering nervously.

“I must say, Mr. Lupin, this is an unusual request,” the head goblin began.

“I understand that, and apologize,” Remus said lightly. “However, Harry Potter has asked me to check into his finances, and I would ask that you inform me of his status and any inheritances he may have.”

“This *is* most unusual,” the goblin stalled a bit longer. Finally, shifting nervously, he asked to see Sirius’s’ will, which Remus held out to him. After scanning the will, the goblin looked up.

“I still don’t see why you’re here, Mr. Lupin,” the goblin replied, his voice now sounding as if he were extremely bored. “The bulk of Sirius Black’s estate does not fall to Harry Potter.”

“What?” With a shaking hand, Remus took the will back from the goblin, reading it again.

‘The remainder of my estate, including all properties, titles, and possessions, I leave to the current head of the House of Potter.’

The current head of the House of Potter.

Trembling, Remus looked up, swallowing nervously. “May I use your fireplace?” he asked, and the goblin nodded.

When Remus had gone, the goblin smiled nastily. “May your gold always flow, Wolf-Wizard,” he murmured, feeling a weight disappear from him. There was a soft sparkle in the air and a glow of green.

The secrecy charm has been circumvented.

The goblin smiled.

He wasn’t sure he remembered where the Room of Requirement was, but nevertheless, Remus raced through the school, skidding to a halt at the landing of the seventh floor. It was somewhere nearby, he knew...

He jogged the halls for a few minutes, searching, before he finally came to the right door. Nervously, he tried the handle – it was unlocked. Taking a deep breath, he stepped inside, shutting the door quickly behind himself.

Hermione spun, tears streaming down her face, and pointed her wand at him for a moment before dropping it when recognition set in. Choking back further tears, she turned and, raising her wand once more, blasted a poor, helpless figurine into oblivion. Remus blinked, admiring her aim for a moment before crossing the room to grab her arm.

“You found out, then,” he said, his voice low. “How?”

Hermione shook her head. “I wasn’t certain,” she said softly. *I need books on the Mirror of Erised* , she thought, and a shelf of six books appeared. “Harry found this mirror for the first time over the Christmas holidays in his first year. He... he saw his parents in it. Dumbledore made him promise to stay away, and it was moved after Harry saved the Philosopher’s Stone at the end of the year.

“This book,” she continued, picking up an old leather-bound tome, “says that the Mirror can show you where to find that which you most desire, if it *can* be found, and you can figure out how to work it. But Dumbledore made Harry stay away from the Mirror – then I remembered the Black family tapestry, so...”

She shrugged, setting the book down, and turned away.

“What are we going to do?” she whispered, her shoulders shaking.

“We’ll find them,” Remus promised.

Nodding, Hermione drew in a breath, staring ahead. Harry needed her help.

I need books on magical tracking , she thought, and the room morphed once more.

Before settling in to work, Remus glanced at the tapestry again, his throat tight as he gazed at the three names...

James Potter — Lily Evans Potter

Harry James Potter

The house was still and silent, as it always was those days, as the red-haired woman gazed out the window. Tears stinging in her throat, she sat in the rocking chair in her baby’s nursery, his blanket clenched between her shaking hands. Softly, she hummed a lullaby under her breath, broken every few seconds by her sobs.

That was how the black-haired man found her when he entered the room fifteen minutes later.

“It’s not right,” she whispered, tears sliding down her face. “It’s not *right* , we shouldn’t be hiding like this!”

“You know Dumbledore said this was for the best,” the man replied, his hazel eyes sad and tired. “They’re all gone—”

“But they’re *not* !” the woman whispered, springing to her feet. “They *can’t be* !”

“Lily,” the man began, but the woman continued on.

“They’re *not* dead, James!” Lily shouted. “I can still feel him!”

James winced, looking away. “Lils, it’s just wishful thinking.”

But Lily wasn’t listening. Rushing past him, she ran down the steps and out the front door, and James stared after her.

“Lily?” he called, and he ran to the window. Cursing as he watched her race across the grounds, he ran down the stairs and after her. “Lily?”

She came to a halt at the base of the altar they had built, all those years before. Head in her hands, she knelt before the altar, weeping quietly.

Swallowing, James knelt behind his wife, wrapping his arms around her from behind, and he smiled slightly when she leaned in to him.

“I can still feel him, James,” she whispered, sobbing. “He *needs* us. We have to go to him.”

Biting back a sigh, James replied slowly, “Lily, dear, he’s—”

“We *have* to check!” Lily insisted, turning to face him. “What if he’s alive, James? What if Dumbledore was wrong?”

“He would have told us by—”

“What if he *didn’t* ?” she demanded. “What if he wanted to keep Harry away from us for some reason, what if—?”

“Why?” James leaned back, perplexed, trying desperately to follow his wife’s train of thought.

“The prophecy,” she replied, and she clenched her hands into fists, blood springing up beneath her nails. Carefully, James pulled her fingers away from her palms and held her hands between his.

“He told us the whole thing, Lily,” James said. “There was no reason anywhere in there to take him away from us.”

“He *didn’t* ,” Lily said desperately. “*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 he hesitated* there, James, he stopped! And *then* he kept going — *The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...*”

James was silent. Absently, he picked p a leaf and twirled it between his fingers. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” Lily replied without hesitation. “There’s at least one line he didn’t tell us... What if the missing line says Harry has to suffer in childhood to win? What if it says he has to be taken away from us?”

“I doubt that,” James began, “but it might — *might* , mind you — say that he’d be guaranteed victory if he grows up in a horrible home.”

“We need to check,” Lily insisted, gazing up at the stars.

Leaning back to recline in the grass, James stared at the altar, remembering the day when they'd given everything they had—

“All right.”

Miles away, Harry Potter looked up from his bed in Little Whinging, Surrey. He glanced over to the conjured bed beside his, where Charlie Weasley was snoring away, and at Hedwig, who was watching him closely, and got to his feet, moving to the window to gaze out at the stars.

There was nothing unusual out there – somewhere below, his latest guard lingered, and as he watched, Dudley walked by with his gang, their voices floating up through the still air of the summer night.

Harry stared up at the stars.

And he wondered why he suddenly felt so much safer.

Wishful Thinking All the King's Men

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 4 – All the King's Men

"Again," Charlie demanded, watching the teen without expression, and Harry stared at him.

"*Again*?" he repeated. "But I've done a hundred push-ups already!"

"You need to learn to keep going when you're exhausted," Charlie pointed out. "You're exhausted now. Again."

Grunting angrily, Harry dropped down onto the floor again and began push-up number one-hundred-and-one. But when he was on number one-hundred-and-seven, a man appeared outside the window, and Charlie crossed the room to let his father, disguised as Snape, into the room.

The face and body of Severus Snape stepped through the window and smiled brightly at Arthur Weasley's son. And staring up at him, Harry found himself saying something he never thought he'd say to Severus Snape's face.

"Thank you!" he gasped, throwing himself at Arthur, and he wrapped his arms around the man's legs. As he did so, he snorted in amusement – Snape had extremely skinny legs, and he highly doubted the man was on any sort of exercise program.

"You'll be doing another hundred when he leaves, Potter," Charlie grinned, "don't go getting complacent on me."

"Complacent? Me?" Harry grinned innocently before moving to sit on his bed. "Okay. What are we doing today?"

"More practice," Arthur smiled, and Harry bit back a shudder – Snape had nasty teeth. "Sit down, Charlie, you need to learn Occlumency too..."

"Joy," the second-eldest Weasley son muttered, and he settled himself cross-legged on Harry's bed.

"It's not that bad, Charles," Arthur tried to soothe his son.

"Unless you're learning it from Snape."

Arthur frowned. "Snape is not very gifted at subtlety in the mind arts. His idea of Legilimency is basically what amounts to mind-rape."

"Does he do that to you, too?" Harry asked, staring at him in shock, and Arthur smiled wryly.

"How do you think I learned it so fast?" he asked. "I've gone for two hours daily and he says I only need about ten more sessions before I'll be done. I had to figure out how to use Legilimency subtly on my own."

"Am I going to learn Legilimency?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Perhaps," Arthur murmured. "Now, Charlie, you need to clear your mind entirely. Even out your breathing and focus on that. In and out, in and out. When you feel a tingling in your mind, followed by the sensation of a presence, I need you to reach out to that presence within your mind and wrap it in everyday memories which you're perfectly comfortable with everyone seeing. Then slowly and carefully push the presence out. Got that?"

Charlie nodded and shifted on the bed, trying to concentrate on his breathing. Smiling, Arthur watched him for a moment before turning to Harry. "Right, then," he said cheerfully. "Ready? *Legilimens*!"

They floo'd back to Grimmauld Place after thanking Flitwick for his help. With a hand on Hermione's arm, Remus led her up the stairs to Sirius's bedroom and shut the door behind them. The second he let the witch go, she walked over to Sirius's bed and fell onto it with a thud, her head in her hands.

"I don't understand," she murmured as Remus perched next to her. "How could he do this to Harry? How could he?"

"There must be a reason," Remus replied. "Dumbledore has evidently done some very stupid, cruel things, Hermione – and likely many more we don't know of – but there's always been a reason, even if it's been a horrid one."

"The Slytherins say he's going senile," Hermione muttered viciously. "That's a reason."

"It's a possibility," Remus frowned, "but I doubt it. No, there's something more here."

“Does it matter?” Hermione asked, springing up. “Who cares why he did it? *Harry needs his parents!*”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t try to find them, Hermione!” Remus said angrily, his eyes flashing. “James was my best friend, and Lily was my sister! I haven’t seen them in fifteen years, and I thought they were dead! Sirius *died* thinking they were dead! I can’t imagine how he feels now... He used to console himself with the knowledge that he’d see them again someday, and now he’s dead, and he—”

The Marauder cut himself off and swallowed, stricken. “I’m sorry,” he said in a low voice. “I seem to be flying off the handle rather quickly these days.”

“No,” Hermione patted his arm nervously. “*I’m* sorry. I didn’t mean to imply—”

“I know,” Remus smiled. “It’s all right, Hermione.”

She smiled slightly before flopping back down on the bed. “So, what do we do now?”

“Call the others together,” Remus replied instantly. “An emergency meeting.”

“Of the whole Order?” Hermione asked, shocked.

“No,” Remus replied, smiling. “Of the Order’s rebels. I just hope I can hold Tonks back – she’s come to view Harry as a little brother. Kingsley and Moody see him as their protégé, and you know how the Weasleys view Harry. It should be interesting,” Remus smiled wolfishly.

“How are we going to tell Harry?” Hermione asked quietly, and Remus’s smile disappeared.

In Auror headquarters, Tonks’ head jerked up and she hissed as the amulet around her neck burned. Bill had picked the amulets up the day before to serve as signals for when the Order’s rebels needed to be called, but weren’t in a position to safely speak. Looking around, she saw Kingsley come out of his office, massaging his chest with a frown. The two immediately made their way to Amelia Bones’ office, got sick leave due to a “mutual friend’s accident” and Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

Neither one wanted to know why they were being called.

In the back of a small shop in Diagon Alley, Fred yelped as the amulet burned, dropping the tray of potions ingredients to the floor. George came skidding into the room, slipping on the eye of newt, and their eyes met. They Apparated away, hoping desperately that Harry was all right.

In a small room in Gringotts, Bill’s head jerked up and he shot to his feet, racing to his supervisor’s desk. He had Apparated away before he’d even finished explaining to the man that he had to go.

Moody jerked to his feet beneath Harry’s window, his wand raised instantly. He knew there was no trouble at the house – no one had gotten past him – so it must have been Lupin, calling them all to Grimmauld Place. With a scowl, he pulled out his mirror and called for Fletcher. “Relieve me,” he ordered when the drunken man’s face appeared, and Fletcher nodded dumbly. His scowl darkening, Moody quickly lifted the disillusionment charm he’d placed on himself upon his arrival at Privet Drive, and not a moment later, Fletcher appeared at Moody’s side. The veteran ex-auror glared at the drunk as he settled in beneath Harry’s window, a bottle of Firewhiskey cradled in his hands. He had no choice. Fletcher was the only one who wouldn’t report to Dumbledore that he’d been called in on Moody’s shift.

The battle-scarred man disappeared with a swish of his cloak.

In Harry’s room, Charlie frowned as the amulet began to burn. He knew Harry wasn’t in danger – he’d been scanning the area every ten minutes, and with Moody there moments before, he knew no one had gotten in – so it must have been Remus calling them all. He wished he could go – whatever it was, it would have to be big. Remus wouldn’t risk alerting Dumbledore to their rebellion over a minor issue. But his orders were clear. He was to stay with Harry until the poor boy could leave the godforsaken shack he’d been dumped into.

Sighing, Charlie looked over at Harry, who was on his one-hundredth chin-up, using a conjured bar. “Again,” he ordered shortly.

Harry groaned, hanging limply from the bar.

“What’s she doing here?” Moody growled immediately as he shut the door behind himself. Hermione sat up from where she’d been sprawled on the floor reading Sirius’s notes and glared at Moody, looking extremely affronted. “Isn’t she the stickler for the rules? She’ll probably run off to Dumbledore before the night’s out.”

“I assure you,” Remus replied evenly, “Hermione is on Harry’s side.”

"Thank you, Remus," Hermione said icily, still glaring at Moody. "I don't think Sirius ever figured it out, by the way – there's nothing in here that could help us."

"It was a long-shot," Remus agreed. "He would have told Harry immediately if he had found out."

"Sirius would have told Harry what immediately?" Tonks asked, looking slightly frightened. "What was a long-shot?"

Remus winced, and he and Hermione shared a concerned look. "Why don't you sit down, Tonks?" he asked nervously, and immediately, Arthur, Bill, Fred and George settled on the floor, eyeing Remus and Hermione with trepidation. Following their lead, Kingsley shrugged and sat on the edge of Sirius's bed, and Moody stumped over to the desk chair.

"I don't need to sit down," Tonks replied, her voice rising in pitch. "I need to know what it is you called us here f–"

"Harry's parents are alive," Hermione said immediately.

A stunned silence followed and Remus spun to face Hermione, throwing up his hands in exasperation. "What happened to easing them in to it?"

"I got impatient," Hermione replied absently, turning back to Sirius's notebooks.

"They're *alive* !" Tonks shrieked, her hair quickly turning from powder-blue to green to red to purple and then neon blue. "*How?*"

"People can't come back to life," Bill muttered. "They just can't. How–?"

"They didn't," Remus murmured softly. "We think they never died."

"But – why would Dumbledore–?" Kingsley began, staring at Remus. "Why would he do this? What could be gained from Harry thinking he's an orphan?"

"We don't know," Hermione began, but Remus cut in quickly.

"Control," he said angrily. "With his parents gone, Harry was left at the Dursleys *by Dumbledore*, so every time Dumbledore either gets Harry or sends someone to get him, he's rescuing the boy. And Harry will look to Dumbledore and see someone to trust implicitly, to follow anywhere."

"We need to find them," Arthur said hurriedly. "We need to find them, and we need to get Harry out of that house."

"Gringotts might be able to help," Bill offered quickly. "They can usually track people down well."

"And I've found an amazing number of books on tracking charms," Hermione added. "We just need the right one...."

"Right now, Hermione, we need to get you back to the Burrow," Arthur tiredly rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Floo back to the Burrow, all right? Molly will have a conniption if you're not back in time for supper."

Hermione hesitated, turning to look at Remus, but he smiled in reassurance. "We'll get you tomorrow," he said calmly, "and tell Molly you're helping on a research project. Don't worry too much about Harry; he's lasted fifteen years, he'll make it a few more days."

Hermione sighed but nodded in acceptance before turning and walking from the room. The others waited in silence until they heard her call out, "The Burrow!" before speaking again.

"How do we tell Potter?" Moody asked, and for once, both his eyes were trained on the person he was addressing.

Remus closed his eyes. "I don't know."

Tonks took the next day off of work to help Remus and Hermione search for clues on how to find Harry's parents. Despite her irritation, after an hour of searching, Hermione agreed to go back to looking through Sirius's records, in search of anything *else* Dumbledore may have done. Their efforts were largely futile, for after an entire day of searching, they had found nothing. Hermione had been sent back to the Burrow ten minutes before and Remus and Tonks were collapsed on a downstairs couch, staring absently at the walls.

"Are you sure we should really be looking for them?"

Blinking, Remus sat up and stared at Tonks in confusion. Immediately, the now canary-yellow-haired witch bounced to her feet and began pacing the length of the room. "What?" Eyeing the witch warily, Remus got to his feet, wondering if he was going to have to spell her into silence. Once Tonks got started...

"I mean, we don't know what they're like now."

"Tonks, they're *Lily and James* and they're alive," Remus said shortly. "That's all I need to know."

"But we don't know where they are. Or what they're like. What if they *did* know you and Harry were alive and just don't want to be near you? What if they've gone crazy, being alone for so long? What if..."

Tonks—

"Or what if they're under the Imperius Curse, and the first second they're near Harry, they kill him?"

"Tonks—"

"Or what if they kill *us*?"

"Tonks, shut up."

"Or what if they've gotten so used to seclusion, they're afraid of us?"

"Tonks—"

"What if they've gone all *Lord of the Flies* on us and have started their own society and are all 'Kill the interlopers!' on us when we get there?"

Blinking in bemusement, Remus stared at her. "You've read Muggle books?"

"My father *is* Muggleborn," she reminded him, and Remus nodded. "They could have turned cannibalistic and killed each other. They could be eating house-elves for food. They could—"

Remus couldn't stand it anymore. Closing his eyes, he rubbed his forehead as Tonks rambled on. Finally, he grabbed her around the waist — Tonks let out a startled squeak — and he kissed her.

When he drew back, Tonks blinked up at him. "Oh, all right then," she said softly, and smirking slightly, Remus leaned down again —

"Hey, wait a minute!" she shouted, and he jumped back, hands over his ears, and winced. "You did that just to shut me up!"

"Er..." Remus muttered, doing his best to look innocent.

"Didn't you?" Tonks demanded, glaring at him.

"Well..." he gulped, "that wasn't... wasn't the only reason."

"Argh!"

Remus cringed — but what the hell, he *was* a Marauder, wasn't he? "It worked quite nicely," he pointed out, smirking at her.

Tonks stared at him. Eyes flashing, she raised her wand, and Remus took a step back, hands in the air.

"Don't hurt me," he pleaded, and Tonks smiled evilly. With a wave of her wand, she conjured up a steel pan, brandishing it in his direction.

Remus did what any smart man would do.

He ran.

Tonks chased him up the stairs, shouting obscenities, and several times, she nearly clipped his ears with the pan. Ducking, Remus raced to his room, but when he went to slam the door, Tonks followed him in. Eyeing him angrily, she slammed his door shut and locked it with a spell, then tossed the pan aside.

Remus stared at her, and then smiled. "Oh," he said, watching her, "all right then."

It was nearing nine o'clock when a furious scream sounded throughout the house.

"BOY!" Vernon Dursley thundered up the stairs and Charlie spun around, wand out, to face the door. Distantly, he wondered what was wrong with the man this time... and distantly, he hoped that Dursley would give him just *one* reason to —

The door slammed open and Harry jumped, startled, as the book he'd been soundlessly levitating fell to the floor. Dursley stared as the book fell before shaking his head and proceeding with his tirade.

"Our next door neighbors saw a drunken bum leaning against our house *all afternoon* yesterday!" Vernon shouted. "What do you have to say about that, boy? *He's one of you, isn't he?*"

Charlie closed his eyes. *Damn you, Fletcher*, he thought angrily, *how could you have forgotten to disillusion yourself?*

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry said after a moment, staring at his uncle. "It's not my fault some drunk wandered off the streets into the yard—"

"You have *no right* to keep bringing strangers in here, boy!" Vernon screamed. "This is *my* house, you follow *my rules*!" The man's face was steadily turning purple. "After all we've done for you, boy!" he spat. "We fed you, clothed you, provided for you over *our own son's needs* —"

And after fifteen years of abuse, Harry finally broke.

“That’s right, *your house* !” he shouted back. “*Your* money, *your* family! What’s mine? *Nothing!* Do you think I *want* to be here? What have you given me besides hatred and belittlement? A cupboard? Table scraps, like I’m some hated stray you keep just to look good for the neighbors? Dudley’s leftover rags? *WHAT!*” he roared, and Dursley drew back, startled even as Charlie silently cheered.

“You *hated* me!” Harry screamed. “Ever since I was a baby, you’ve hated me for something that *isn’t my fault* ! How *dare* you accuse me of being ungrateful, you Nazi! *Howdare you* !

“I’m *forced* back here every summer by a man who claims I’ll be safe here! *I’VE NEVER BEEN SAFE ANYWHERE!* And I’m supposed to call this home? *I HAVE NO HOME!*”

A sudden flash of light quelled Harry’s rage, confusing him. Blinking, he and Vernon both looked up, startled. Cursing, Charlie ran to the window.

“Oh, hell,” he muttered. “Hellfire and dalmatians!” Turning from the window, he ran to Vernon’s side.

“Get your wife and kid and get out of here, Dursley,” he ordered as he shoved Vernon out the door. “The wards are coming down.”

“What?” the large man spat, paling. “Why?”

“Because you were so cruel and petty that you drove your nephew away,” Charlie replied tersely, and he slammed the door in Vernon’s face.

“Get your trunk out, Harry, *now*,” he ordered.

Harry raced to comply, throwing the trunk open. Shaking, he threw himself under his bed and pulled up the loose floorboard, and Charlie quickly summoned everything stored under it, directing it into Harry’s trunk. With a half-dozen more waves of his wand, Charlie summoned the remainder of Harry’s possessions before throwing the window open.

“Come on, Harry, let’s go!” he called as Harry ran to his desk and picked up Hedwig’s cage, the owl hooting madly all the while. With a sad smile, Harry reached down and picked up a single photograph from the surface of his desk, and his parents smiled up at him from the photo.

“Come *on* !” Charlie repeated, and he grabbed Harry’s arm, dragging him to the window. He shoved Harry through onto the floating platform and Kingsley, standing under the window, lowered it quickly, helping Harry off when it landed. He levitated the platform back up and Charlie jumped onto it, Harry’s trunk in hand, and plummeted quickly to the ground.

“Move, move, *move* !” Kingsley shouted as he spelled the window shut, and overhead, a sonic booming sounded. “They’re gonna crash!”

“What—?” Harry began, frightened, but Charlie pushed him along.

“No time, just go!”

The group raced to the street, Hedwig still hooting frantically, as the smell of smoke wafted through the street. Turning back, Harry gazed up at the house, Charlie holding his arm roughly in a tight grip.

The wards were sparkling over the house, brightly-colored white and red lights flying across and over the roof. Everywhere they touched the house, sparks sprung up, and flames licked at every window. Harry watched in horror, Hedwig stilling by his side, the flames reflecting in her frightened amber eyes. Anxiously, Hedwig tried to push her head through the cage to get to her friend, and, after a few minutes, succeeded in opening the latch with her foot, flying out to land on Harry’s shoulder.

She butted her head against his and rubbed against his cheek, hooting softly as Harry stared blankly at the burning house.

“Get him out of here,” Kingsley muttered roughly to Charlie, who nodded mutely. “I’ll see if there are any survivors.”

His hands shaking slightly, Charlie led Harry away, pulling him along faster as the boy tried to look back. As they walked, Hedwig turned on Harry’s shoulder to gaze back at the burning house where her beloved friend had suffered so much.

Ruffling her feathers, Hedwig hooted once in satisfaction, and turned back to what mattered.

Hermione perched precariously on the arm of Harry’s chair, speaking to him in low, soothing tones. She had been trying for half an hour to get through to him, to no avail. Across the room, Neville, Ginny and Luna watched sadly, and Ron paced across the floor, staring out the door as he walked.

Kingsley had searched the house only to find the Dursleys already dead, killed by unknown means. He’d returned to Grimmauld Place to tell Harry, wincing on every third word. The black-haired boy had immediately collapsed. Shaking, he curled up in an armchair in the living room of Grimmauld Place and refused to move or speak to anyone at all.

Ron stopped by Neville’s chair, running a hand nervously through his hair. “Dumbledore’s gonna be here soon,” he muttered, and Neville nodded shortly. “We need to keep him away from—”

Not a moment later, Dumbledore strode through the door, a livid Remus on his heels. “Don’t you *dare* —” Remus began, glaring at the man, but Dumbledore ignored him, coming to a stop directly in front of Harry’s chair. He looked down at Harry, who hesitantly raised his gaze to meet the headmaster’s, and waved his wand, conjuring a chintz armchair that he immediately sat in. Harry’s eyes slid back to the floor and he curled up into

himself slightly, leaning his head against Hermione's arm.

A long, tense silence followed, in which Hermione, Remus, Ron and Neville all glared at Dumbledore, Luna stared off into space, and Ginny shifted nervously. As they sat there, not speaking, Arthur, Moody, Kingsley and Tonks came through the door, followed by Charlie leading the remainder of his family. Still staring steadily at Dumbledore, Remus sat on the arm of a chair near both Harry's and Dumbledore's, poised to spring at a moment's notice.

The door finally closed, and Dumbledore spoke. "I am very disappointed in you, Harry," he said softly.

A hiss emanated from Remus and the werewolf shot to his feet, spinning on his heel and striding out of the room, his robes swirling at his ankles. Glancing after Remus with a startled expression, Dumbledore paused before continuing, his composure regained once more.

"You had only to remain at your relatives for one more summer after this one, Harry, and I am at a loss as to why that task was beyond your cap—"

"No, you're not," Ginny spat, even as Hermione's hand twitched. His eyes latching on to the sight, Ron grinned. Oh, what he wouldn't give to see *that* "You know exactly why that was *beyond his capabilities*, or need I remind you that my brothers had to rescue him from a literal *jail cell* the summer before my first year?"

"And yet," Dumbledore said swiftly, peering at Ginny over his half-moon glasses, "rather than be the... ahem, *bigger man*, Harry succumbed to their pettiness and shouted back. And now, my boy, your only relatives have died. I confess myself disappointed," he sighed.

Harry froze. Lifting his head from Hermione's arm, he gazed at Dumbledore with fiery eyes.

"So did Voldemort," he said, his face expressionless.

The room stilled. Blinking, all the color draining from his face, Dumbledore stared at Harry. "What—?"

"So did Voldemort," Harry repeated. "He confessed himself disappointed with his *minions*, too. After he was resurrected.... Or remade, whatever you want to call it."

The headmaster swallowed nervously. Trying to regain his ground, he began, "I fail to see what—"

But Remus had returned, and he strode back into the room, eyes flashing, a heavy tome held in one hand. With a wave of his wand, he conjured a small coffee table before Dumbledore and slammed the book down on it, open to a page midway through the tome. "*Read it*," he hissed, and Dumbledore gazed at the book in trepidation.

"I really don't see—"

Taking a step closer, Remus turned his wand on the headmaster. "*Read it*," he repeated, and Dumbledore picked up the book with shaking hands.

"*Ara Sanguinis*, The Ritual of Protection by Blood, is a warding ritual dependent on a lack of animosity between the subjects of the ritual. The wards based on *Ara Sanguinis* degrade by a minute amount at every instance of animosity within its bounds. Nothing will destroy the wards save either a crime committed by the protector against the Protected One, though the wards will not fully fall until the crime is confirmed aloud by the Protected One, or a spoken declaration by the Protected One that he can no longer find his home in the protected place. The validity of this statement is tested by the wards, which are marginally sentient," Dumbledore swallowed, "before the wards will truly collapse. If the ritual of *Ara Sanguinis* finds, in testing the protectors, that they have committed grievous crimes against the Protected One, it will eradicate their home, and, if possible, them. This phenomena is known as Blood's Judgment, and has only occurred two separate times in recorded history."

A stunned silence followed as Dumbledore's voice trailed off.

"This was *your* fault and *theirs*, not Harry's," Remus said, his eyes flashing. "Your wards, your inability to understand that *those people hated him* are what killed the Dursleys. Don't you *dare* try to lay the blame for that on Harry's shoulders."

"I—" Dumbledore began, and tears sparkled in his eyes. "I didn't know...."

"And I don't care," Remus replied coldly. "That was *despicable* of you, Albus. *Get out*."

Dumbledore stared.

"You *heard* me, old man. As a trusted friend and mentor of the head of House Potter, I am ordering you to leave this house. Get out, *now*, and don't come back until you're invited back. You will hold all Order meetings at Hogwarts until further notice."

The headmaster drew back, startled, and gazed around the room. Finding no sympathetic faces, he turned to Harry, tears sparkling in his eyes. The teen was curled up in the armchair again, leaning heavily on Hermione, who looked murderous. "My boy," Dumbledore began, "I'm so—"

"LEAVE!" Remus bellowed, and Dumbledore fled.

The front door slammed behind the headmaster, and Harry flinched. The anger fading from his face, Remus walked over to Harry and Hermione. "Budge up," he said with a gentle smile, and Harry shifted. Sighing tiredly, Remus threw himself into the chair beside Harry, placing a hand on his back. "We know better," he said simply, and Harry tried to smile.

Ron, Neville, Luna and Ginny crossed the room to sit at the foot of the chair as Arthur ushered the others from the room, his arms around his

weeping wife. A moment later, Remus followed, glancing back at Harry with tears sparkling in his eyes, and he smiled when Ron took his seat beside Harry.

Within the confines of Hogwarts, Dumbledore wandered wearily to his private quarters. He muttered the password in a choked voice before walking through the opening that appeared, pulling off his hat and throwing it to the floor.

Without speaking, he turned into a small room by his sitting room, pushing the door open hesitantly. A wave of his wand ignited the torches along the walls and Dumbledore stopped in the center of the room.

He gazed steadily at the hundreds of photos lining the walls, his eyes coming to rest on one face, and two that were missing.

Sirius, Lily and James .

Surrounded by the dead and the betrayed, he fell to the floor and wept.

He would have to tell Harry.

But he didn't know how.

"We have to tell him," Tonks murmured in a low voice, and Remus nodded.

"I just... he's already been through enough today—"

"He needs to know," Arthur pointed out. "And who knows? It might actually help him, to give him news like this after—"

"Right," Remus nodded again. "Okay. I—"

Tonks smiled, touching his arm gently in reassurance. "We'll go with you," she said softly, and, taking his hand, she led him into the parlor, where Harry and his friends still sat.

"Harry?" Arthur spoke up nervously. "We need to speak with you. No, no, stay," Arthur waved the others back into their seats as they moved to get up. "He'll just tell you later anyway, and you—" he stopped, swallowing, "you should be here for this."

Harry gazed at the Order members with an expression of dawning horror.

"What is it?" he asked shakily, and Remus winced. "*Who's died now? TELL ME!*"

"Lily, we've been over this a thousand times," James said wearily, brushing his hair back out of his face. "He's dead."

"He's *not*!" Lily insisted, pacing back and forth across the nursery. "I can still *feel* him! And I know you can, too," she added stubbornly.

James sighed, tears prickling at the back of his eyes. "Lils, it's just wishful—"

"It's *not*!" She swung around, glaring at him, but when she saw his face, her eyes softened, and she moved to kneel before him, holding his free hand gently in hers. "We knew the bonding ritual would have this effect," she said in a low, hurried voice. "We knew we'd be able to feel him when he was in a horrible emotional state. And we've searched for him through the bond hundreds of times and *felt him* when we did. Why can't you believe me? It's stronger than ever *right now*!"

James looked away, his throat dry.

"In 1992," she continued, "the end of his first year, we felt him. He was in *danger*, James, you *know* he was! We both woke up out of a deep sleep and you were crying! You were calling for him!"

"It was a dream," he insisted.

"It *wasn't*," Lily replied. "James, we had nothing left to live for, which is why I went along with Dumbledore when he told us to disappear. Voldemort was gone. There was nothing left to fight, and we had little left to fight *for*. He caught us at the worst possible moment, when we were still vulnerable. But what if Harry's still out there somewhere?"

A long silence followed. Finally, James said slowly, "When we woke up the night – the night he died," he hesitated, his breath shallow, "I didn't feel like anything was missing at all until Dumbledore said – the bond, it should have told us right away. But it didn't."

"I know," she whispered. "James, I've been trying to convince you of this for nearly fifteen years, and I've hurt you every time. I never meant to. But... the prophecy, James, Dumbledore hesitated. And the binding – we can *feel* him, James, and that's *not* wishful thinking, no matter what you say. And what about the scars?"

Slowly, she lifted his hand and traced the line left by the bonding ritual all those years ago. "If the bond had failed, this would have faded," she said

softly, and James swallowed.

"Fine," he said slowly, "fine. I'll check. I'll go find Andromeda or Alice and Frank..."

"And a newspaper, perhaps?" Lily asked, her lips twisting in a smile. "It'd be nice to read the news after nine years."

"And a newspaper," he agreed, standing. "Come on, Lils."

She rose, following him from the nursery and down to the front door. James walked outside and she stepped through after him, feeling an odd mix of anticipation and dread. Silently, she watched as James walked toward the gate at the end of the driveway and stood before the gate nervously.

They hadn't gotten further than this since 1986, when they'd returned to England for the first time since the Halloween of 1981.

Smiling at him in encouragement, Lily moved to stand next to James, fingering her wand nervously. He took a deep breath and stepped forward, opening the gate and walking through it – and in the same instant, Lily raised her wand, casting dozens of charms within an interval of less than ten seconds...

There was a soft flash of light and James blinked, confused. Turning slowly, he glanced back at Lily.

"Come on, Lils!" he called, his face lighting up when he saw her. "Let's go for a walk!"

She stared at him. "What are you doing out here, James?" she asked, hoping he would –

"I told you, didn't I?" James replied, his brow furrowed. "Going for a walk. What are *you* doing out here?"

Lily sighed, and carefully, she gestured to her husband to return. She'd have to start all over again –

– but no. The second James stepped back through the gate, his face twisted with rage and tears sprang to his eyes again.

"Dumbledore," he hissed, and Lily nodded.

Biting back a scream of frustration, she raised her wand, waving it in several complicated motions. After a moment, she nodded again. "It's definitely his work," she confirmed. "He must have done it in 1986, when he escorted us here. Remember, when we came back from Ireland? We went to Hogwarts – heavily hooded, of course, so as not to be bothered – and *he* sent us here. He *brought* us here. I never questioned it. It's odd," she frowned, "you've never remembered everything when you came back inside the gate before...."

"Why would he keep us here?" James demanded, and Lily's gaze rose slowly to meet his, her emerald eyes shining in an odd mix of fury and joy.

"Because Harry's alive," she replied, "and we were in Dumbledore's way."

Wishful Thinking The Cottage in the Woods

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 5 – The Cottage in the Woods

The group gathered in the Black family library for the third day in a row. His face set, Harry sat at a large round table near the back of the room, piles of books scattered all around him, with Hermione to his right and Ron to his left. Luna sat next to Ron, Neville next to Luna, and Ginny next to Neville. The group had gone through hundreds of books on tracking, but found nothing of use. All of the spells required a non-magical possession of the subjects of the charm – which let out both the Marauder's Map and Harry's invisibility cloak, the only possessions of his parents that he had.

Harry dove into the research with a frenzied energy that none had ever seen him possess. He often had to be dragged out of the library for meals, and on one occasion, Remus had even been forced to perform a Full-Body Bind and carry the frozen boy down to the kitchen to get him to eat. The night before, it had taken Bill's threat of locking Harry out of the library to get the driven teen to go to bed.

It was nearing noontime and Tonks leaned back in her seat beside Remus, watching as Harry plowed through book after book with single-minded determination. The boy was hunched over a single text atop a pile of haphazardly strewn books, pages marked here and there. He scanned the text carefully before tossing the book aside and grabbing yet another, quickly hunching over it and beginning to pore through the pages. He had done this a dozen times already in the past hour, and Tonks wasn't quite sure what he was looking for.

Remus laid a hand on her shoulder as she sat there, watching the teen anxiously. Her face blank, Tonks turned to look at Remus who sighed and immediately shook his head. There was nothing they could do. But after a few moments, another began watching Harry in concern and Tonks nearly sighed aloud in relief. Hermione would take care of him.

"Harry," the bushy-haired witch began, and Harry glanced up from his book to raise a questioning eyebrow at his friend, "it's nearly lunchtime. Perhaps we should take a break?"

But Harry shook his head. "I can't," he said quietly. "I've almost found—"

"You need to eat, Harry," Hermione cut in gently. "You were here before any of us this morning. Did you even have breakfast?"

"This is a bit more important than—" Harry began angrily, and Tonks held her breath, waiting for the boy's legendary temper to erupt. *Don't get emotional*, she pleaded silently to the younger girl. *When you get emotional, he explodes. Don't do it...*

"I know that, Harry," Hermione said softly, "but you still need to keep up your strength." Behind her, Tonks let out at audible sigh of relief.

"What I *need* is to have my parents back!" Harry shouted suddenly, flinging his chair back as he shot to his feet. "Everything else can wait!"

"Oh, bloody hell," Tonks muttered as tears sprang to Hermione's eyes. "Everybody out!" she ordered and grabbed Ginny by the arm, glaring furiously at the youngest Weasley when she opened her mouth. "Wake up, Ron," she added, shaking the slumping boy. Neville grabbed Ron's arm and pulled the other boy to his feet. Quickly, Tonks herded Ginny, Ron, Neville and Luna from the room, and Remus followed slowly, watching the two teens as they stared at each other. Harry looked furious, Hermione hurt and worried.

Silently, he wondered if Tonks would be willing to bet him on the outcome. He could use a bit more cash...

The moment the door shut behind Remus, Harry flung himself back into his seat, breathing hard as he glared at Hermione. The witch swallowed nervously but met his gaze, and she flinched when Harry snorted and turned away from her, picking up yet another book.

"Put the book down, Harry," Hermione said softly. "Come get a bite to eat. Please. Even if you just bring it up here with you—"

"I'm busy," Harry said quietly. "When I find them, I'll—"

"You can't just stop eating until we find them!" Hermione gaped at him, shocked, and drew back when Harry glared at her.

"I'm busy," he said shortly. "If you're going to distract me, leave."

"No! You can't do this to yourself, Harry! When I'm working too much, you always drag me down to the Great Hall for a bite to eat or outside for a snowball fight – you don't let me run myself into the ground, and I won't let you!"

Silently, Hermione thanked the high Heavens that Harry hadn't exploded yet – it seemed that his hair-trigger temper from the year before had,

thankfully, become slightly less volatile. But if the tightening in his jaw was any indication, Harry was about to get very, very angry with her.

Good , she thought decisively. It'd be the most emotion he'd shown in days.

Harry stared at her for several moments, opening his mouth and then closing it again before jumping to his feet, storming off a few steps and spinning to face her again. "You have *no* right—"

"And you do?" Hermione demanded immediately. "Don't be a hypocrite, Harry. Why can't you just take a break for a while?"

"Because the second I do, I'll fall apart!" Harry snapped, and Hermione stared at him. "Think about it!" he continued angrily. "Think about how much has happened since June! We fought Death Eaters — all of you for the first time. I was attacked by Voldemort again, and Sirius *died* ! And then I go back to Privet Drive and now *they're* dead! And then I find out that hey, guess what? I didn't even need to be there in the first place, because Dumbledore made me think I was an orphan and made Remus think all of his friends were either dead or traitors!"

"Harry—"

"I have *no one* , Hermione!" he shouted, and she jumped, tears springing to her eyes. "*No one* ! Yeah, the Weasleys are great, but they have seven kids of their own! Sirius is dead! There is *no one* in the world that puts me first."

He finally stopped shouting, breathing heavily, and stared at her with wild eyes. Hermione had backed up a few steps, her hands pressed to her mouth. Harry gazed at her, confused, as she choked back a sob. "You're wrong, Harry," she whispered, blinking rapidly. "You're wrong."

Turning, she fled from the room and ran up to the room she had moved into three days earlier. She had left the Burrow to stay at Grimmauld Place with Harry, thinking he would like more than Remus and Tonks for company.

Apparently, she'd been wrong.

She flung her bedroom door open and ran into the room, immediately wrapping her arms around her legs as she sat on her bed. She blinked hard, trying not to cry, rocking on the bed. The door creaked, and she looked up, startled.

Tonks slipped into the room quietly, coming to sit beside Hermione on the bed. "Let it out," she murmured softly, and the bushy-haired witch burst into tears.

Three more days passed with no progress. Tonks had gone with Bill to Gringotts to ask the goblins for help, but nothing had come from their request. In a fit of desperation, Harry had even summoned Dobby to him and asked the house-elf to bring his parents to Grimmauld Place. The house-elf had returned five hours later, bawling, and thrown himself at Harry's feet, begging forgiveness for his failure.

Though Harry had tried to comfort the house-elf, Dobby had sobbed over his feet for over half an hour, declaring that he was not fit to serve "the great Harry Potter, sir." When Hermione, watching them with a frown, had pointed out that Dobby worked for Hogwarts, not Harry, the house-elf had begun to sob even harder.

He wasn't quite sure how it happened, but by the end of the night, he was feeling very dizzy and Dobby had somehow been hired to take care of "the great Harry Potter," his properties and his family.

The following morning, Harry jerked awake when he heard movement in his room. Reaching for his wand, he slowly sat up, looking quickly around the room.

"Harry Potter sir?" a hesitant voice asked, and Harry jumped.

"Dobby!" he exclaimed, and he reached over to turn on his bedside lamp. "What are you doing?"

"Dobby is fixing Master Harry Potter's clothes," the house-elf boasted, and he moved aside to let Harry see the pile behind him. "Dobby cannot let Master Harry Potter wear rags that aren't even fit for a house-elf," the elf declared.

"Don't call me "master," Dobby," Harry said quietly, then stared, his jaw dropping, at the pile of clothes before him.

They'd certainly fit him much better than they had before, but that was their only high point. Piled at his bed were a collection of neon orange, yellow, lime green, pink and purple shirts — as well as some that were all five. His pants had not yet been touched, but every one of his socks had been transformed into mismatched pairs.

"Er..." Harry began, searching desperately for something nice to say. "They... they look.... Hermione!" he called. "Hermione!"

She must have already been awake, because his door opened two minutes later and Hermione ran in, stopping short as she saw Dobby standing nervously beside the pile of clothes.

"Oh, Harry," she murmured, grinning, and Harry shifted nervously on his bed.

"*Help me* ," he hissed, and Dobby's face crumbled.

"Harry Potter is angry," Dobby muttered, his ears drooping. "Dobby goes now. Dobby displeases the great Harry Potter."

No!” Cursing under his breath, Harry jumped from the bed – never more grateful that he still wore pajamas to bed – and knelt next to Dobby. “You don’t, Dobby. You’ve done an excellent job and you’ve always helped me. It’s just – it’s just–”

Trailing off uncertainly, he turned to look at Hermione for help.

“Harry just doesn’t like vivid colors like that, Dobby,” Hermione said quietly. “How about some more – subtle colors? Dark blues and forest greens, things like that?”

“Dobby changes colors?” the house-elf asked, his ears perking up hopefully.

“Yes, Dobby,” Hermione said patiently. “I’ll help you, all right? I’m sure we can come up with some good colors between the two of us.”

“Dobby never knew!” the house-elf shouted, and he began to weep. “Harry Potter is great and good, and his Wheezy is the same, but Dobby never knew that Harry Potter’s Hermie was so kind, so selfless, so–”

“Why don’t you move these clothes to the parlor?” Hermione asked, kindly. “I’ll be there in just a moment.”

“Dobby does as Hermy asks!” Dobby declared, and with a snap of his fingers, he had vanished, taking the pile of clothes with him.

“Well,” Hermione said after a moment, “that was interesting.”

“*Thank you*,” Harry murmured, staring at the spot where Dobby had been. “I don’t know what he would have done if you hadn’t come in here.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, Harry,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “You just would have had to keep him from crying, that’s all.”

“And we all know how easy *that* is,” Harry muttered, and Hermione smiled before turning to go.

“Wait,” Harry said quickly, and Hermione stopped, puzzled. “Can I – can we talk?”

“Weren’t we just?” Hermione asked, but she perched on the end of his bed regardless, and Harry moved to sit beside her.

“I wanted to apologize,” he said quietly.

“For what?” Hermione asked, blinking, and Harry frowned.

“For making you cry,” he replied.

Hermione smiled at him. “Harry, that was four days ago,” she said gently. “I’m fine.”

“I know that,” he assured her, “but...” He shifted nervously, hands clasped in his lap. “It took me this long to figure out *why* you were crying,” he said, “and I gave it some serious thought. After our third year – when Remus never contacted me, I just assumed he didn’t care. But a lot more people care about me than I’d realized. I never would have thought that Remus, Tonks, Kingsley, Moody and the Weasleys would defy Dumbledore for me. I wouldn’t have thought that Dobby would leave Hogwarts for me,” he smiled wryly, “though that should have been fairly obvious.”

“What are you saying, Harry?” Hermione watched him carefully.

“I didn’t mean to say what I did,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like I take you for granted. I *don’t*, Hermione. You’ve done more for me than anyone–”

“Harry,” Hermione smiled, touching his arm. “It’s all right. I know.”

“Good,” Harry sighed in relief, “because I really need you to.”

She smiled at him again, her eyes oddly misty. “Now,” she said, clearing her throat as she stood up, “I suggest you get dressed and get downstairs, before Ron arrives and eats all the omelets.”

“Omelets?” Harry asked, perking up, and Hermione nodded.

“Charlie and Remus are making them – well,” she paused, grinning, “Remus is making them; Charlie’s just trying to sneak jalapeños into them while Remus’s back is turned.”

“Get out, then,” Harry grinned back, “so I can get dressed and get something to eat before Charlie ruins my appetite.”

“I have to go see if I can convince Dobby to take a break until after breakfast, at any rate,” Hermione muttered, and she waved absently before turning and walking out of the room.

Remus and Charlie were gone from the kitchen when Harry arrived, but a plate sat at his usual place at the table. Smiling, Harry sat down next to Tonks and greeted her cheerfully, in a much better mood that morning than he’d been for nearly a week.

Remus walked into the kitchen when he was finishing up his breakfast with Hermione on his heels, arguing with her in low, hurried tones. When the pair saw Harry and Tonks sitting at the table, watching them curiously, Hermione flushed and Remus cleared his throat nervously.

The Marauder pulled several rolls of parchment out of his robes and tossed them onto the table, scowling angrily.

"Dumbledore's been owling me every other day, Harry," the wizard said, tossing himself into a chair across from Tonks. "He wants to see you."

Harry blinked, staring at the man, and sat up straighter. "Do you think he knows where they are?" he asked, and Remus snorted.

"Do you think he'd *tell* you if he did?" Lupin asked, glaring at the parchment rolls.

"It's likely," Hermione replied as she sat across from Harry. "He knows he's crossed the line one too many—"

A crash sounded, and the group turned to see Dobby standing at the sink, a pot dangling loosely from his hand, quivering. The house-elf stared at Hermione before moving his gaze to Harry.

"Dumblydore betrayed Harry Potter?" he asked quietly, and Harry flinched.

"It's not that simple, Dobby," he began helplessly, but Hermione frowned at him.

"Yes, Dobby," she agreed. "Dumbledore betrayed Harry."

The house-elf snapped his fingers, disappearing immediately, and the pot fell to the floor.

Snape sat across from Dumbledore, gazing at the man over the rim of his tea cup. He had joined the headmaster for morning tea, as he did three mornings a week, and had arrived to find the man sulking at his desk yet again. Something was bothering Dumbledore, and he wanted to know what it was.

The only things that really bothered Albus Dumbledore these days were life-and-death situations.

"I have the feeling you're hiding something from me, Albus," he said finally, setting down his tea cup. "What is it?"

"Are you certain I'm the only one hiding things?" Dumbledore immediately countered, his gaze sharp as he looked up from the sugar bowl. "Peeves tells me that Arthur Weasley has been in and out of the dungeons daily for nearly two weeks now. What are you doing down there?"

"Nothing of consequence," Snape dismissed, waving his hand absently. "Weasley merely insisted that I teach him a bit of NEWT Potions. He seems quite convinced that his youngest son won't make the cut for my class."

"And you agreed to this?" Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, and Snape smirked.

"It's a small price to pay to keep them from complaining to the Board of Governors," he scowled. "Augusta Longbottom was just placed on the board, you may recall, to replace Lucius. And with Longbottom's newfound friendship with the Weasleys, Granger, Lovegood and Potter, I had... *concerns* that they might try to force me to accept the boy."

"Now, Severus," Dumbledore began, but Snape shook his head.

"I *will* not lower my standards, Albus," he snarled. "I cannot afford to have such a demanding course bogged down by miscreants and dunderheads."

"Very well," the headmaster sighed, and he stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"What are you going to do about Lupin, Headmaster?" Snape asked quickly, and Dumbledore jerked his gaze up to Snape's, shocked.

"What?"

"The werewolf, Albus," Snape said impatiently. "The one who has been quite rude to you lately. The one who—"

"I know of whom you speak, Severus," Dumbledore said tiredly. "I've been trying to get in touch with him, but he has not replied to any of my missives."

"Then go *find* him, Albus," Snape snarled, and Dumbledore shook his head.

"I fear I am no longer welcome at Grimmauld Place."

"Why the bloody hell not?" the Potions master ground out, his eyes flashing, and Dumbledore sighed.

"I've made an error," the elderly man replied tiredly, "a grievous error, and Remus has discovered it. I must prevent him from—"

"From what?" Snape asked immediately, but Dumbledore shook his head.

"You don't need to know, Severus."

A stunned silence followed his pronouncement.

"Both yourself and the Dark Lord are playing a high stakes game, Albus," Snape finally said smoothly as he steepled his fingers under his chin. "He is gambling with people's lives for his own benefit, and you for ours. But you would do well to remember, Headmaster," Snape continued, and here

he shifted, eyes flashing as he leaned forward, “in a world such as this, the only true division between yourself and the Dark Lord was that once, you would ask rather than order. Has that changed?”

“I—”

“Tell me, Dumbledore,” Snape insisted, gazing at the headmaster, “what exactly is this *grievous error*?”

The only sound was the ticking of the grandfather clock Dumbledore had collected the week before. Snape stared at the old man, willing Dumbledore to —

“The Potters never died,” Dumbledore whispered, his face ashen, and Snape felt all of his strength leave him. “They are in—”

“What?” Snape asked. Paling, he grabbed the arm of his chair and clenched his fingers around it. “All this time, you let me think that—”

“I had to,” Dumbledore replied, though the old man looked violently ill.

“Why? What could justify that? What could possibly—” Snape gasped, shaking.

“Severus, I—”

“*YOU MADE ME THINK THAT I HAD KILLED THEM!*”

“Severus, I *had* to — the prophecy—”

“Not that *bloody* prophecy again!” Snape screamed. Turning on his heel, he swept out of the office, his robes billowing behind him. He slammed the office door and strode down the steps, never seeing the tears that streamed down Dumbledore’s face as the door shut.

Fuming, the greasy-haired man walked down several flights of stairs, his mind far away. All these years, he’d thought he’d killed the Potters — thought he’d made their son an orphan —

“You shall help Harry Potter!” a squeaky voice declared, and Snape spun around, startled. “You shall come with Dobby!”

“What are you on about, you crazed elf?” Snape demanded angrily, glaring at the house-elf who was staring up at him from under a teetering pile of hats.

“You shall help Harry Potter!” the elf declared again, and grabbing Snape’s arm, he snapped his fingers and disappeared.

They reappeared in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place, Snape immediately falling to his knees. The prideful man wrapped his arms around his torso, trying desperately not to regurgitate the crumpets Dumbledore had given him. When his stomach had settled, he looked up to see the crazy house-elf smiling in satisfaction as four people stared at him.

“Dumblydore’s Snapey shall help Harry Potter,” Dobby said proudly. “Dobby makes certain, Harry Potter sir.”

“Er.... Thanks, Dobby,” Harry said nervously, eyeing Snape, and Dobby beamed. “But how can Snape help—”

The Potions master groaned. “Keep that thing on a leash, Potter,” he muttered angrily as he got to his feet. “Famous Harry Potter can’t even control a house-elf...”

“You shall not talk about Harry Potter that way!” Dobby shouted, rounding on the professor. “Harry Potter is noble and brave and kind and—”

“Yes, yes, all right,” Snape said impatiently. “Now what do you want from me, you deranged creature?”

“You is talking to Dumblydore,” Dobby said, smirking happily. “He is telling you things. Dobby saw.”

“You broke into the headmaster’s office?” Hermione gasped, gaping at the house-elf.

“Well done, Dobby,” Remus murmured, smiling at the elf, and Dobby’s smile grew wider yet again.

“You is telling Harry Potter sir what Dumblydore said,” Dobby ordered, shaking a finger at the man. “You is telling Harry Potter sir *right now*, you is....”

“I *isn’t* telling Harry Potter sir a thing—” Snape began scathingly, but Dobby cut him off.

“Snapey is very mad, he is,” Dobby whispered, gesturing to Harry to bend over so he could whisper — quite loudly — in his ear. “Snapey swearing, he was. Snapey yelled at Dumblydore, he did, Dobby saw...”

“Is Snapey?” Remus asked, grinning. “Well, Dobby, why don’t you just have Snapey tell us what he knows.”

Snape scowled thunderously at Remus, who smirked back at him.

“Snapey is telling,” Dobby wagged his finger at the man, “Snapey is telling right now, or Dobby is getting angry, he is...”

Very *well* !” the Potions master straightened his robes, huffing angrily, before turning to Harry. Grudgingly, he muttered, “The Headmaster knows where your parents are, Potter.”

Harry dropped his goblet on the table, pumpkin juice spilling everywhere. “What?” he breathed. “Where? How?”

“I didn’t ask, Potter, I wasn’t in the mood to stick around!” Snape shouted back. “Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“Why were you angry?” Harry asked his brow furrowed. “You hated my parents, why would you—”

He broke off, his face darkening, and glared at Snape. “*You* .”

The Potions master eyed him nervously.

“*You* told Voldemort the prophecy,” Harry continued, his hands shaking.

“What prophecy?” Hermione asked, gazing at him, and Snape swallowed before smirking.

“You didn’t tell her, Potter?” he asked delightedly. “Trouble in paradise, is there?”

“*YOU* !”

“Snapey is going now!” Dobby squeaked, and he snapped his fingers, the professor vanishing before their eyes.

“Harry, what prophecy?” Hermione asked, staring at him, but Harry shook his head.

“Later,” he said shortly. “It doesn’t matter now. Dumbledore knows where they are, Hermione.”

“I heard,” the witch swallowed. “Dobby, would you go get Neville, Ginny, Ron and Luna, please?”

The house-elf nodded, still glaring at the spot where Snape had stood moments earlier, and vanished.

“Remus, I suppose you should call the others,” she swallowed nervously, “so we can – can *confront* Dumbledore...”

Remus nodded and pulled his amulet out from around his neck, immediately pressing in the stone. A moment later, Tonks hissed as she felt the amulet burn, and Charlie and Bill came clambering down the stairs.

Dobby reappeared a moment later, and Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Fred, George and Arthur walked into the room, dusting soot off of their clothes. Less than thirty seconds later, Moody and Kingsley Apparated into the room.

“Right,” Remus murmured. “We’re all here.”

“We’ve had a lead,” Remus announced. “It turns out—”

“Dumbledore knows where Harry’s parents are,” Hermione cut in quickly, and Remus sighed, rubbing his face tiredly as the others stared at her.

“*Why* must you do that?” he asked exasperatedly.

“We’re *wasting time* !” Hermione cried. “Snape *obviously* caught Dumbledore at a weak moment, and the longer we delay—”

“Agreed,” Moody said gruffly. “Let’s get over there before Albus regains his sanity.”

“Don’t you mean before he loses it again?” Tonks scowled, and Kingsley smiled slightly.

“Are we all going?” he asked. “Shouldn’t we—”

“There isn’t much point any longer,” Remus said quietly. “We were going to have to reveal ourselves at any rate, we might as well show the man how much support Harry really has.”

“Can we go now?” Hermione asked impatiently. “Come on, Harry,” she insisted, grabbing his arm and dragging him forward, and she watched as Kingsley made a plate into a Portkey.

“On three, then,” the Auror said quietly, “One... two... *three* .”

The entire group vanished, Dobby following right behind them.

They reappeared just outside the gargoyles guarding the entrance to Dumbledore’s office. Quickly, the Weasley twins ran through a list of sweets and the gargoyles moved aside, allowing them passage into the office. Remus went up the staircase first, with Arthur at his side and Tonks right behind them, followed by Moody, Kingsley, the Weasleys, Luna and Neville. Harry and Hermione came last, with Dobby at their heels.

The procession was rather somber, and made Harry feel even more nervous than he had already been. Glancing over at him, Hermione smiled reassuringly and squeezed his hand.

Remus!" Dumbledore exclaimed happily from behind his desk. "To what do I owe the—"

His voice died as he stared, brow furrowed, at the group of people filing into his office. Seeing the direction of Dumbledore's gaze, Hermione grabbed Harry's hand again, squeezing it harder, and Ron moved to stand behind them, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. Quickly, Neville moved to Harry's other side, with Ginny joining him and Luna patting Hermione's arm in comfort.

But it was Dobby who made the most blatant show of support. The house-elf placed himself in front of Harry, arms crossed as he glared at the headmaster, who was more than a bit disconcerted from the fury in the house-elf's eyes.

"Where are they, Dumbledore?" Remus asked, and the elderly man's gaze slid across the room, to where Arthur Weasley and four of his eldest sons had gathered. Moody stood silently by the door, Kingsley to the other side, and Tonks moved to stand next to Remus.

"What are you talking—?" Dumbledore began, and Remus cut him off.

"I'm not in the mood for your little games, Dumbledore," Remus replies, eyes flashing. "Where *are* they?"

"How?" Dumbledore asked helplessly, sinking into his seat behind the desk. "How do you—?"

"Really, Dumbledore, did you think we'd never find out?" Remus asked scathingly. "Enough stalling. Where *are* they?"

"I don't—"

Remus raised his hand, pounding it on the edge of Dumbledore's large, ornate desk and the wood creaked ominously. "*Where*?"

Dumbledore flinched. He turned his head to look at Harry, who was staring at him with hope, fury and betrayal glittering in his eyes. "The Potters may be found at 1 Griffin Lane, Godric's Hollow," he said softly, and Remus turned on his heel.

"Come on, Harry," he muttered, taking Harry's arm, and Hermione hurried along beside them. The others filed out after them, Moody eyeing Dumbledore with no small amount of disgust.

The door shut behind them, and Dumbledore dropped his head down onto his hands, tears falling once again. A hand touched his arm and he jumped, reaching for his wand, but sighed tiredly when he saw the face of Luna Lovegood watching him curiously.

"Yes, Miss Lovegood?" he asked, blinking away the tears.

The odd Ravenclaw smiled. "It's not too late, you know," she said quietly, and she patted his wrinkled old hand once before turning and walking away.

Dumbledore stared at the door long after it had closed.

"We still need to find them," Remus said anxiously. "Now that we know the Secret, we can get in, but Godric's Hollow is likely still warded by so many spells—"

"What if it's not?" Harry asked as he tossed a book aside. "What if they don't remember me, or they just don't want to leave?"

"Dumbledore wouldn't take the chance, Harry," Tonks pointed out immediately. "He couldn't risk them finding out that you're still alive. So..."

"He likely has the place good and layered," Bill put in. "Maybe a few charms to cause confusion, memory charms all over the exits to the estate. That way, even if they got out, they'd forget *why*."

"It's damn cunning of him," Charlie added, "and those wards must be strong, to have held them for fifteen years."

"Lily must know," Remus said, shaking his head. "It's likely that she hasn't stepped foot outside the gates since they got there, but she's been sending James to do it instead – that way one of them will still remember..."

Bill shuddered. "I just hope he isn't brain damaged, if that's the case. Repeated memory charms? *Not* good."

"Lily would know how to fix it," Remus murmured, and Harry felt a sudden surge of pride and love. His mother *would* know how to fix it – she was the smartest witch Hogwarts had seen in years, everyone told him that....

"Hold still, James," Lily murmured softly. "I need to check you for any lingering side effects."

"I'm *fine*, Lily," James muttered, fending her off with both hands. "Don't tamper with my mind,"

"I'm *not* going to tamper with your mind!" Lily replied angrily, her emerald eyes flashing. "I'm *trying* to make sure Dumbledore didn't do any damage!"

"He *didn't*!" James said angrily. "He *couldn't*, because then you'd notice even though you've been charmed too!"

“Ah...,” Lily looked away quickly, and James stared at her. “Well... you see...”

“You’ve been sending me though that thing?” James asked incredulously. “Lily!”

“One of us had to remember!” she said quickly, tears sparkling in her eyes. “And you don’t know enough about charms to—”

“All right, all right, I get it. But why didn’t you tell me?”

“I did,” Lily sniffled, “the first ten times...”

“The first *ten* times?” James jumped to his feet. “How many times have you sent me to get my mind scrambled?”

Lily looked away again, mumbling something under her breath, and James frowned. “What?”

“Twenty,” she whispered, looking down.

“*Twenty*?” James began pacing up and down the room, sending glares at her every few seconds, and Lily flinched. “Well, have you gotten anything out of it yet?”

“The wards seem to be wearing down a bit,” she said slowly. “But it’d probably take at least twenty more tries to get through it, and it’s just not safe to do it any more than once every six months.”

“At least you’re thinking like a Marauder,” James muttered, scowling. “I don’t look forward to trying to go through that thing again, mind you...”

“We’ll have to figure out another way, that’s all,” Lily soothed quickly. “What if we—”

Frowning, she spun around, staring up at the ceiling. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear wha—?” James frowned. It sounded a bit like static in his head – like one of Lily’s old Muggle radios when the stations weren’t working...

We just need to find a proper Point-Me spell, the voice of an unfamiliar girl sounded. *If we can find that, maybe we could fly to Godric’s Hollow*

Yes, but how would we find the house? A male voice replied, and Lily and James gasped.

“Remus?” James whispered.

If we could catch Pettigrew, another male voice said darkly, *maybe he could lead us there...*

I don’t know, Harry, I doubt Dumbledore told Pettigrew where the Potters are...

“Harry?” Lily breathed, gazing at the ceiling. “James, it’s *Harry*!”

James quickly shook his head. “No, it’s not, we’re hearing things, Lils. It’s just wishful —”

“It is *not*!” Lily cried. “It’s the bond! It must be able to feel us trying to reach each other – it’s trying to help!”

“Harry!” she began shouting. “Harry, can you hear me?”

“Lily, stop it!” James grabbed his wife by the arm and tried to swing her around, but she quickly shook him off.

“Harry? Harry, answer me!”

Harry jerked in his seat, grabbing the arm of Hermione’s chair to pull himself upright. “What?” he muttered, staring at the tabletop, and Hermione gazed at him.

“Harry, are you all right?”

“Mum?” Harry whispered. “Mum?”

“He can hear me!” Lily said excitedly, turning to smile at her husband. “He can *hear* me, James!”

“No,” James breathed. “It can’t – he can’t–” Taking a deep breath, the black-haired man licked his lips nervously. “Harry?” he asked uncertainly.

“Dad?” Harry breathed. “Hermione, I can *hear* them!”

Hermione had already gotten unsteadily to her feet, but at this, she sank to her knees at his side. “Harry, are you certain?” she asked nervously, as Remus stared at them, thunderstruck.

Yes! Mum, Dad, tell me something that only Remus would know," he said quickly, his eyes alighting with excitement.

"James, hurry, think of something!"

"Ah...", the man scratched his head. "Oh! I know! Remus used to have this old stuffed wolf his mother had gotten for him – once I enchanted it to tap-dance on his bed to wake him up in the morning – let's see, I used to call his lycanthropy his *"furry little problem"* and Sirius went around telling everybody he owned a vicious were- rabbit..."

In Grimmauld Place, Harry looked up at Remus, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "Your *furry little problem*?" he repeated incredulously, and Remus blanched.

"Oh lord," the aging werewolf muttered, sinking back into his chair. "It can't be—"

"Some bonding rituals," Bill muttered, "I read about this – they can enable long-distance communication, but I never read anything specific."

"Apparently," Ron said wryly, "telepathy counts as "long-distance communication"."

"Mum, Dad, where's Godric's Hollow? How do I find you?"

After a moment, Harry looked up, his eyes wide. "They said to Apparate to a town called Sancreed," he said nervously. "Do you know where that is?"

"Right by the Drift Reservoir, isn't it?" Remus asked. "Of course! I remember now!"

"They said yes," Harry replied quickly. "They're just about a mile from the reservoir."

"Right," Remus agreed. "Harry, take my arm. Tonks, take Hermione, Arthur, take Ron, Bill take Ginny, Charlie, take Luna and Kingsley, take Neville, would you?"

"Can we follow you like that?" Arthur asked, frowning. "I wasn't aware—"

"No, you're right," Remus sighed. He led the group to a viewing room and quickly, placed an image of a secluded wood near Sancreed's town center in the pensieve. When the others emerged, he grabbed Harry's arm and Apparated away.

The others reappeared only a moment after Harry's feet settled on the ground. He looked around curiously, peering out of the woods. All he could see was a tiny little town – a village, really – with a wide, slightly crowded main street running through the center.

"Right," Remus said nervously, "stay in the woods. We'll have to walk."

He led the large group along a slightly worn path in the woods, making his way steadily through the foliage. Harry and Hermione followed not a step behind, Ron, Luna, Ginny and Neville following directly behind them. The adults of the group hung back, wands at the ready, and studied their surroundings carefully.

Twenty minutes of walking got them to Godric's Hollow, and they skirted around the small village carefully, making certain to remain in the woods. Finally, they reached an area where they could see a small cottage through the trees, and Remus stopped and stared.

"I didn't think," he began, swallowing convulsively, "I would ever see this place again."

Nervously, he stepped forward, crossing onto the property with his eyes closed. After a moment, he opened his eyes and waved to the others. "You can come through," he said quickly. "Dumbledore must have taken down the—"

Harry ran by him, racing across the grounds until he came to the walkway to the cottage. There he froze, staring up at the house anxiously.

"Harry!" Hermione shouted, and she ran after him, grabbing his arm to steady herself when she nearly tripped and fell.

"This is it, Hermione," he whispered. "This is where Voldemort—"

"Harry, forget about Voldemort," Hermione said softly. "This is where *your parents* are."

The door opened a creak as Remus joined them, the others stopping a ways back. Harry watched the door nervously, his breath caught, and a moment later, it opened all the way.

A woman stood there, with long red hair and emerald eyes not unlike Harry's own. She was about Hermione's height and slim, wearing a pair of emerald green robes. Behind her was a man who looked just like Harry, with black, untidy hair, wire-rimmed glasses and hazel eyes. The couple froze on the front steps, staring at Harry and Remus.

"Harry?" Lily breathed after a moment, and Harry nodded, swallowing and grabbing Hermione's hand.

Harry!" Lily shouted. "James, it's Harry!" Grabbing her husband's arm, she dragged him down the steps and, weeping, pulled Harry into her embrace. The black-haired boy stiffened momentarily before closing his eyes and clinging to his mother. James looked as if he wanted to join them, but when he looked at Remus, his jaw dropped.

"Remus," James murmured, "what—?"

"Later, my friend," Remus replied. "Get reacquainted with your son for now."

James gazed at him, his eyes misty, and grabbed the other Marauder in a hug before turning and embracing his wife and son.

No one spoke. Glancing to the right, Hermione saw Tonks step forward and slip her hand into Remus's, leaning her head against his arm. Silently, she turned back to see Harry still standing with his parents, his eyes sparkling happily, crying without the slightest bit of shame.

She stepped back and went over to the rest of their friends, ignoring the concerned glances of Remus, Tonks, Arthur, Bill, Charlie and Kingsley.

"Oh, Hermione," Ginny whispered, and she hugged her friend.

"He doesn't need us anymore," Hermione whispered, blinking back tears.

"Yes he does," Neville said quietly. "He always will. You have nothing to worry about, Hermione. Look at him. He's so *happy*. I've never seen him like this."

"Now all we have to worry about is that bloody prophecy," Ron scowled. "I'm just glad you managed to drag it out of him, Hermione. I have a funny feeling he was never going to tell us."

She nodded absently, straightening up when she saw Harry grab his mother's hand and drag her and James toward them.

"Mum, Dad, I want you to meet my friends," Harry was saying excitedly. "This is Luna, she's a fifth year Ravenclaw... and this is Ron, he's been one of my best friends since first year. He's a Gryffindor like me. This is Neville, also a Gryffindor in my year, and Ginny, a fifth year Gryffindor and Ron's sister. And this is Hermione Granger," Harry smiled at Hermione, "sixth-year Gryffindor and the brightest witch at Hogwarts."

Hermione flushed. "Don't exaggerate," she said quietly as the Potters greeted the other students.

"I didn't," Harry smiled.

"A pleasure to meet you, Hermione," Lily smiled, hugging the girl, and James smiled at her.

"We should go," Remus cut in. "If anyone sees us—"

"Where's Sirius?" James asked suddenly, looking around, and Harry flinched.

"We should go," Remus repeated, and he took Lily's arm, pulling her back. "Fred, George, can you get Harry and Hermione back to Grimmauld Place, please?"

"Certainly," the twins replied with mock bows. Fred taking Hermione's arm and George taking Harry's, they vanished with a sharp crack.

"Grimmauld Place?" James spun around, staring at Remus. "Isn't that where his house was? Is he waiting for us there?"

Remus shook his head. "Tonks, take Lily, will you?"

Nodding, Tonks gestured to Lily, who, looking slightly frightened, took the metamorph's arm. "Remus, what happened?"

"Not here, Lily," he said tiredly. "Moody, would you take James?" Waiting silently, he watched the ex-Auror nod and move forward, and Tonks and Moody vanished with a crack, taking Lily and James with them. A moment later, the others followed.

Remus paused, waiting silently, and a moment later, Bill and Charlie reappeared.

"What do you need us to do?" Charlie asked as Fred and George appeared behind them.

"Lock it down," he replied. "We need to be able to bring them back to get their things," he replied, "without anyone getting in here to steal them or torch the place."

The four Weasleys nodded and immediately set to work, Bill directing his brothers on what wards to use and where to place them. As they worked, Remus gazed into the trees, where he had seen movement not two minutes before.

Albus Dumbledore met Remus's gaze without flinching, his eyes heavy and sad. Without saying a word, the elderly headmaster spun on his heel and disappeared.

**from Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

Wishful Thinking ...and the Mighty Fall

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 6 – ...And the Mighty Fall

They landed with a soft thud in the middle of the parlor of Grimmauld Place, and Harry immediately tore his arm away from George's grasp before running to his mother's side. The woman had fallen to her knees, gasping slightly with her hands pressed to her head, the moment her feet had touched the ground. Beside her, Tonks watched with concern as James swayed on his feet.

"Been a while since we've Apparated," James choked, and he pulled his arm from Moody's grasp, moving to join Harry at his wife's side.

"Mum?" Harry asked nervously as the red-headed woman dropped her head between her knees. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, dear," Lily wheezed, tears sparking at her eyes, "I'm just a bit dizzy – whoa," she mumbled, and grabbed at James's hand. "Where are we? What's—?"

"Mum?" Harry asked, his voice shaking. "Mum, what's wrong?"

"Where am I?" the red-headed witch asked again, and she raised her head, staring at Harry. "James?" she asked shakily, and Harry stared at her, bewildered. "James, what—?"

"Mum, it's me!" Harry choked out, even as his father moved into Lily's line of view.

"No," Lily muttered, and Hermione gasped. "No, it's not. It can't be. He's dead – stop taunting me... *STOP TAUNTING ME!*"

"Harry!" Hermione breathed, and she grabbed Harry's arm, "she doesn't remember!"

"*LEAVE ME BE!*" Lily screamed, and she shot to her feet, swaying slightly. "*JAMES, MAKE IT STOP!*"

"Good Lord!" Arthur gasped, staring at Lily. "James, calm her down!"

"A mild Dreamless Sleep potion, I think," Tonks put in, wringing her hands. "Oh, dear..."

"Were the wards down?" Ron asked, frowning at Lily as she continued to shriek.

"They must have been," Arthur replied. "We got through."

"No," James said quietly as he grabbed his wife's arm. "There are Confounding hexes and memory charms in the wards. Quick, get some Dreamless Sleep..."

Tonks ran from the room and returned a moment later to see Harry staring at his mother, eyes wide with shock as she trembled in her husband's arms. Quickly, she passed the potion to James, and he carefully convinced Lily to drink it. When she had fallen asleep, James picked his wife up and set her gently on a nearby couch.

"She should only sleep for an hour or so," Tonks murmured, watching the older woman. "I found a very small dose."

"Good," Arthur replied, "she'll need to be awake when Remus returns, at any rate. Now, James, explain this to me. If there are all those hexes around the property, why do you remember everything?"

"I'm not certain," James said slowly, and he glanced at Harry, whose arm was still held fast in Hermione's grip. As he watched, Hermione steered his son to the couch opposite Lily before sitting next to him, Ron sitting quickly on Harry's other side and the remaining students gathering at their feet. "I do know that Lily's been sending me through the wards at least once every six months since we arrived back at Godric's Hollow in 1986 – she said I've been through them thirty times. Each time, she's been trying to break through the wards. Apparently, they can only be compromised when they're being crossed, so she's had to wait and cast all her detection charms and try to take it down while I'm leaving the property. I don't remember any of the times I've crossed the wards except—" Here he stopped, swallowing nervously. "About a week ago, she sent me through again. When I stepped back onto the property, I remembered why I'd been trying to leave. I'd never remembered that before. Maybe – I don't know – maybe overexposure to the charms and hexes is making them less effective."

"That's possible, I think," Arthur mused. "We'd have to ask Bill."

"Where have you been all these years?" Neville cut in, watching James carefully. "Were you at Godric's Hollow for all fifteen years?"

James shook his head. "We went to Ireland at first," he replied, "and spent five years there. I ran a bar while we were there – it's called the Golden Stag," he added, smirking slightly, and Harry smiled half-heartedly. "When we came back in July of 1986, Dumbledore sent us straight to Godric's Hollow and told us we should stay there until we had healed fully. Then, of course, the first time I tried to leave, planning to seek out Andromeda Tonks, I lost my memory and Lily had to drag me back inside the wards. She's been trying to break through them by sending me through ever since."

"How did you get food?" Ron asked, and Ginny, Neville and Hermione rolled their eyes at the red-headed boy.

"I don't know," James replied honestly. "The ward never made me forget we needed food. It was just when I went through looking for people other than Dumbledore—"

"How do you know all that?" Moody grunted, eyeing James suspiciously, and the younger man shrugged.

"Lily filled me in," he said quietly before sitting beside his wife, taking her hand. "After we told you how to find us, we had nothing to do but sit around and wait. She told me about every time she sent me through."

"Wake her up," a voice ordered roughly, and the group spun to see Remus striding through the doorway. "We have to talk."

"Are my sons—?" Arthur began nervously, and Remus smiled tiredly at him.

"They're fine, Arthur; they'll be along in a bit."

The red-headed man sighed in relief, but Remus had already turned away. The Marauder stood silently as he watched his best friend shake Lily's arm gently to awaken her.

Lily Potter sat up slowly, eyeing the entire room with trepidation. Across from her, Harry watched as his mother sat up, looking both hopeful and fearful. Hermione squeezed his hand quickly before Lily began to speak.

"James?" she asked questioningly. "Remus? Harry?" The woman's expression cleared quickly, going from confusion to fear and horror. "Oh, Harry! I'm so sorry!" the woman cried. "We never meant – we thought—"

"It's all right, Lily," Remus spoke up quickly. "Harry knows you would never abandon him. Please sit down," he added when Lily moved to stand, "we need to talk."

Slowly, Lily lowered herself back onto the couch, eyeing Remus nervously.

"Where's Sirius?" James asked again, and Hermione grabbed Harry's hand yet again as the black-haired boy flinched. "Remus, is he—?"

"I think you'd best sit down, James," Remus interrupted. "Moody, could you give us a bit of privacy?"

The Auror nodded and moved toward the door, with Luna and Ginny, both looking extremely uncomfortable, following a few steps behind. Ron slowly got to his feet, followed by Neville, but the two glanced at Harry questioningly, and the black-haired boy shook his head. The two boys sat back down immediately, watching Remus nervously as Tonks moved to his side.

Hermione had never once shifted from her seat, and had yet to release Harry's hand.

A long, uncomfortable silence followed. Clearing his throat nervously, Remus glanced over at Harry, who was staring steadily at the floor. "Well—" Remus began, but James cut him off.

"Remus, what is it?"

Harry flinched, drawing back, and lowered his head into his hands. Quickly, Hermione crouched beside him and began speaking in low tones.

"Remus," James persisted, as he and Lily eyed Harry nervously, "why is my son acting as if he's afraid of me?"

Another stifling silence followed as Remus looked pleadingly at Arthur and Tonks. Finally, Remus took a deep breath and said, "Sirius is dead, James. He died in June."

Lily gasped, her hand flying up to cover her face, but James barely even blinked. "I see," the other man replied, his voice cracking slightly. "And why is that making my son afraid of me?"

"Because he forgot the best part," Harry muttered bitterly, and Remus sighed.

"I see we still have some issues to work out—"

"It's not an *issue*, it's the *truth*!" Harry shouted, springing to his feet. "If I hadn't – hadn't—"

His gaze turned to his stricken parents' faces and Harry quickly quieted, swallowing convulsively before backing up and sitting back down.

"He blames *himself*?" James croaked, staring at his son, and Remus nodded.

"But *I'm* the one who—!" Harry began, shaking. "I didn't – I thought – I saw—"

"Harry," Hermione began, "you know you were tricked. It wasn't your fault. It was Voldemort and LeStrange who killed him."

“I—” Harry began to shout—

“WHAT DID THAT MAN DO TO MY LITTLE BOY?”

With a startled yelp, Tonks tripped over her own feet and fell as Ron, Neville and Hermione whipped around to stare at the woman. Lily Potter stood in the center of the room, hands balled into fists, eyes flashing angrily as she glared at Remus. Harry pulled back slightly, yet again, and Hermione gripped his hand tightly. Beside his wife, James Potter took an uneasy step back even as Remus and Arthur watched her with alarm – and no small amount of fear.

“ANSWER ME, LUPIN!” Lily thundered angrily. “WHAT DID DUMBLEDORE DO?”

“I—” Remus began nervously, “well – that is to say – he has managed to instill a strong sense of responsibility in Harry. Too strong a sense,” he whispered.

But Lily wasn’t listening. Her attention had been averted to Hermione, and the red-headed woman’s eyes fixed on the younger girl steadily. “How was he tricked?” she asked.

Hermione hesitated, glancing once at Harry before releasing his hand and turning to Lily. “Voldemort,” she said slowly, “he – broke in to Harry’s mind and showed him an image of Sirius being tortured in the Department of Mysteries—”

“Did Dumbledore go to investigate?” James asked immediately, and Hermione shook her head.

“Dumbledore had been driven from the school by Umbridge,” Ron explained, snarling out the woman’s name. “He didn’t even know—”

“So who went?” Lily interrupted.

Yet another tense silence followed her question.

“We did,” Harry said finally, meeting his mother’s gaze. “We went, and we found out that Sirius had never been there, that it was just a trick to lure us from the school, and Sirius and the Order came to save us, and he died.”

“And no one thought to teach him *Occlumency*?” Lily demanded, looking back to Hermione again.

Silence.

“Snape – Snape did,” Neville began timidly, “but it didn’t work out very—”

Ron snorted, and Lily swung around to stare at him, a frightening intensity in her gaze. When Ron saw her watching him, he swallowed, paling quickly, and quietly asserted, “Snape’s idea of teaching Harry Occlumency was to shout “Clear your mind!” and then mind-rape him in between Harry’s sessions with... dear old Dolores and her quill.”

“I see,” Lily murmured, and she slowly turned her head. “Remus?” she asked softly.

“I didn’t know,” the werewolf muttered, his voice trembling slightly as he spoke. “Lord above, Lily, I didn’t *know*...”

The red-headed woman’s gaze shifted to the woman and man standing beside her old friend.

“We didn’t know either, Lily,” Arthur said wearily, rubbing a hand over his face, “though I *should have* known about Umbridge. It was clear in Harry’s trial that—”

“Trial?” Lily repeated, her nostril’s flaring, and Neville dropped his head into his hands.

“Bloody Weasleys,” he muttered.

“Umbridge sent Dementors after Harry,” Hermione explained when Lily turned to her once more. “He had to use the Patronus Charm to drive them away from himself and Dud—”

“DUDLEY?” the Potters repeated incredulously, and a vase shattered on the mantle. Immediately, Lily’s anger abated, and she stared at the vase shame-facedly.

“*Reparo*,” she incanted quickly, waving her wand at the vase, and the second it was repaired, she turned back to Remus. Beside her, James watched his best friend with tears in his eyes.

“Remus,” James said pleadingly, “tell me he didn’t. Please.”

Remus flinched and closed his eyes.

“Tell me he didn’t send my son to the Dursleys. Remus, please,” James whispered.

On the couch behind them, Hermione flung herself into Harry’s unsuspecting arms and clung to him, weeping. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

Letting out a deep breath, Remus opened his eyes. "He said that if I interfered, he would see that I was sent to share Sirius' cell," the battered man said softly. "He said that if I interfered, I would be as much a traitor as Sirius – he said Harry could only ever be protected at Privet Drive – with his mother's blood. And he said," Remus swallowed, his eyes shining with unshed tears, "that it wouldn't be hard to convince Crouch that I was in league with Sirius all along... I'm a *dark creature*, after all..."

"That's despicable," Neville said quietly, and Remus nodded. Hermione let out a sob and Harry tightened his arms around the girl, still crying into his shoulder.

"Harry," Lily said softly, and the black-haired teen looked up. "Do you trust me?"

"Lils, what–?" James began, but Lily shook her head, watching Harry carefully, and after a moment's hesitation, Harry nodded.

"Will you let me see?" she asked, and Harry flinched and closed his eyes... Hermione held her breath–

"All right," he said slowly, and his eyes opened.

Lily nodded quickly. "It'll be easier if you sit on the floor," she said gently. "Close your eyes and meditate. When you feel centered, open them again. It'll be harder now, because emotions are running high – I assume you know how to–?"

Harry nodded jerkily. "Mr. Weasley taught me," he mumbled, and the Potters cast a questioning glance Arthur's way as Harry shifted to the floor.

"You'll be able to tag along through the bond," Lily told her husband softly. "Just take my hand."

The three settled on the floor, Harry slowly centering himself as his mother and father sat across from him, holding hands. Remus and Tonks moved to the couch that Lily had lain on before, sitting gingerly, and Arthur crossed the room and sat down next to Hermione, hugging the younger girl as her tears slowed. At their feet, Neville and Ron watched, transfixed, as the family gained its focus.

After five minutes had passed, Harry opened his eyes, and his mother reached out, James's hands laced with hers. She pressed her hands to Harry's temples, her husband's hands covering hers...

PAIN RAGE SHAME HURT PAIN SHAME RAGE PAIN SHAME PAIN TIRED SHAME SHAME SHAME...

Shaken, Lily pulled back, tugging James along as she waited, and the whirlwind slowed. She moved forward slowly, James at her side, and tried to project a sense of comfort and safety as she delved into a memory.

Harry stood in a dark room, alone with Snape, the door sealed behind himself. "Clear your mind," the other man snarled, and the pain erupted in his head...

"No one will come for you, boy. They'll leave you here, to be a burden on us. All you are is a burden. Sooner or later, they'll realize that, and when they do, they won't be rid of you soon enough."

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

"Oh Potter, you rotter, oh look what you've done! You're killing off students, you think it's good fun!"

"There is no good or evil, only power, and those too weak to seek it..."

"I am very disappointed in you, Harry..."

And the barriers shattered, and all of Harry's pain came crashing down on Lily and James with the force of a raging tsunami.

Slowly, Lily extracted herself and her husband from their son's mind. She looked down at Harry, collapsed in front of her, and held back the tears. "Get him to bed," she said hollowly, looking up at the Weasley and Longbottom boys, "please."

When they had gone – the two boys helping Harry from the room, Hermione following half a step behind them, murmuring frantically under her breath – Lily turned to her husband, a look of grim anticipation on her face.

"I know," James said quietly. "Remus, you said there were others helping you?"

"Yes," Remus frowned. "Everyone who went to retrieve you from Godric's Hollow."

"Gather them," Lily said immediately. "We need to plan our next course of action."

Remus nodded, reaching for the amulet around his neck, and, as Arthur and Tonks pulled their amulets quickly away from their skin, pressed in the center stone.

They separated in the Entrance Hall, each with a particular destination and goal in mind. Smiling reassuringly at his wife – and hoping she wouldn't lose her temper – James Potter set off for the Headmaster's office.

He hoped that he'd arrive at the Potions Master's office later that day to find the man dead, but James knew that was just wishful thinking.

But in the meantime, he knew, he could entertain himself just fine. And as he planned his entertainment – which he and Lily had discussed quite extensively with Remus and the worthwhile Order members the night before – he smiled.

Their strategy was all mapped out. All that remained was to manipulate the master.

As it was summertime, and there were no students to terrify, James made no effort to disguise his identity. He strode calmly down the halls of Hogwarts, his hood lowered and his face in clear view. As he walked, Sir Nicholas floated by and froze half-way through a wall, his head swiveling on his mostly-severed neck to stare after the Potter family head. Up ahead, Peeves was cackling madly as he unscrewed a crystal chandelier, and James chuckled as he recalled the memory of Harry's in which McGonagall had helped Peeves do the very same thing.

McGonagall. James's face hardened. That would be another stop...

He reached the stone gargoyle and, pulling the Marauder's Map out of his pocket – it had been quite the task to retrieve the map from Harry's friends without telling them why he wanted it – he calmly spoke the password.

"Redemption."

We'll see, Albus, he thought as he stepped onto the moving staircase. *We'll see.*

Lily, for her part, was making quite the scene. The redheaded Potter woman walked calmly down a hallway speaking with the Bloody Baron, who had taken a liking to her – Lily never understood why – in her second year. As they talked, nearby portraits hung on their every word, and Lily relished in the fact. The Baron was thrilled to know that the Potters had not died, and even more enraged at Dumbledore for his deceit.

Lily was quite happily certain that life at Hogwarts was about to get a mite difficult for one Albus Dumbledore.

The Baron left her at the entrance to the dungeons, and Lily gazed down into the darkness for a moment, picturing her son walking down these same steps, his hand still scarred and bleeding from his earlier detentions, to have his mind ruthlessly attacked by a man who hated him, again and again and again...

Shaking her head, she strode down the stairs with slow, even steps, turning immediately into Snape's office. The greasy-haired man was bent over a steaming cauldron, his lank hair falling in his face, swearing profusely. Silently, Lily stood in the doorway, watching him with a raised eyebrow. Absently, she noted the placement of his wand – on a table three feet behind the man.

Our dear Snivellus, she thought venomously, listening as the man continued to swear, *has picked up quite the vocabulary.*

A moment later, she shook her head once more to clear it. *Time to interrupt–*

"Pitiful," she pronounced clearly, her upper lip curling in a sneer, and Snape's hand jerked, just as he was about to add a handful of crushed nettle leaves. They fell to the floor and the Potions Master swore yet again, eyes flashing angrily as he looked up to find cause of his slip-up.

When he laid eyes on Lily Potter for the first times in nearly fifteen years, his blood ran cold.

"Evans," the man choked out, his skin turning a waxy grey, "I – I can explain–"

"Yes, please do," Lily said coolly, shutting the heavy wooden door with a loud *thud*. "Explain to me exactly why you told Voldemort the prophecy. Explain to me why you sent him after my son. But some other time, Severus," Lily continued, and Snape's look of fear changed to bafflement, then concern. "That's not what I'm here for."

She flicked her wrist expertly and her wand slid into her fingers from the rather expensive holster James had bought her nearly seventeen years before. Snape's eyes watched her movement like a frightened bird, and his gaze rose to her face as she raised her wand.

"Clear your mind," she ordered sharply, and understanding and horror dawned in Snape's eyes.

She attacked before he even grabbed his wand.

With ruthless deliberation, she sent every single memory of Harry's Occlumency training into Severus Snape's mind. All the pain, all the humiliation, all the fear and all the rage melded with Snape's own memories, and his shields collapsed.

"Where is Lily?" Dumbledore asked after a moment of silence, gazing steadily out of his window in an attempt to avoid James's accusing eyes.

"Oh, she and Snivellus are having a little chat," James replied, waving a hand absently as he tipped his chair back on two legs. "She'll be along shortly, I'm certain..."

"Severus?" Dumbledore gasped, spinning around, and he quickly made for the door–

James moved with all the speed of a striking snake, his chair thumping to the ground as he raised his wand, hardened eyes leveled on Dumbledore. "Sit," he ordered, and the headmaster froze.

“James, I—” he began, but the Potter elder shook his head, gesturing with his wand toward Dumbledore’s desk.

“Sit.”

A moment’s hesitation, only, and Dumbledore did as he was told. James was slightly disappointed – he’d hoped for an excuse to curse the old man.

Wishful thinking..., he reminded himself.

“We need to discuss the running of this school,” James said evenly, even as Dumbledore’s eyes lit up with concern and a touch of fear, “as well as your treatment of my son and my friends.”

“James, I’ve only ever—”

“Headmaster, you’ve only ever allowed Harry to come to harm, if not outright caused it,” James interrupted. “And as for my friends – Sirius had just barely escaped from one hellish prison before you had confined him within another, and you’ve done the same to my son his entire life. And Remus...”

James stood in a single, fluid movement and crossed the room, calmly opening the doors to Dumbledore’s pensieve cabinet. Raising his wand, he pressed it to his temple and added the silver string of memory to the basin. A tap of his wand, and Remus was rotating above the pensieve as Dumbledore watched in horror, giving voice to his tearful confession.

“He said that if I interfered, he would see that I was sent to share Sirius’ cell. He said that if I interfered, I would be as much a traitor as Sirius – he said Harry could only ever be protected at Privet Drive – with his mother’s blood. And he said that it wouldn’t be hard to convince Crouch that I was in league with Sirius all along... I’m a dark creature, after all...”

As the small image of Remus floated above the pensieve, repeating his words – James had yet to stop the memory – the Marauder gazed steadily at Dumbledore, who looked as if he desperately wished to sink into the floor.

“James,” he croaked as tears began to spill down his beard, “I—”

“Save it,” James said harshly, striding back to his seat as Remus continued to revolve over the pensieve. “I don’t want to hear your excuses. You are invited to dinner at Grimmauld Place tomorrow evening and you can make your excuses then. For now, you are not going to speak,” James continued, settling himself in the chair across from the desk, “you are going to listen.”

Smiling slightly, James propped his feet up on the edge of Dumbledore’s desk before picking up a small dish and holding it out to Dumbledore. “Lemon drop?” he offered, smirking at the older man.

Dumbledore reached out a weathered hand and plucked a candy from the dish, looking as if he’d already swallowed something far too sour for his tastes.

The Potters met up again just outside their destination, each surprised to see the other.

“Great minds think alike,” Lily murmured softly, grinning at the black-haired man. “How’s the chess master?”

“Horribly shocked,” James replied. “I don’t think he even knows what hit him yet. I almost feel a bit guilty – the old codger really does think he was doing it for the “greater good”.”

“He’ll just have to learn, then,” Lily said briskly. “And if not, then he won’t go near Harry.”

“At least we don’t have to worry about him trying to send Harry to the Dursleys’ again,” James said tiredly. “I mean, I’m sorry you lost your sister—”

“Don’t be,” Lily muttered, her eyes flashing as some of Harry’s memories floated through her mind.

“—but at least now we can give him an actual home.”

“On that subject,” Lily murmured, “we need to have a serious talk with Harry about where we should live.”

“I think we should stay in Grimmauld Place,” James frowned. “Even though he misses Sirius, and it’ll hurt him at first, in the long run, he’ll probably be happier being close to Sirius, or at least his things.”

“We’ll need to redecorate, then,” Lily mused, “but we still need to talk to Harry about it. We don’t want to start acting like Dumbledore, after all. Harry’s been looking after himself for fifteen years. He needs support and guidance, not orders.”

“Agreed,” James said immediately, “and maybe we should include Remus and Tonks in that discussion, and the Granger girl, too.”

“Bright one, isn’t she?” Lily smiled slightly, and James smiled.

“Especially considering the stress of the situation,” James added. “Myself, I’m more interested in Tonks. Moony finally bagged a—”

All around them, the portraits – which had been hanging on to their every word – cringed, and several of the males in the portraits took a quick step

back.

“Watch your step, Potter,” Lily hissed, eyes flashing, and she turned on her heel and walked away.

“Right, right,” James agreed, chasing after her. “So, Lils, how’s Snivellus?”

Lily smirked, raising an eyebrow at James before turning the next corner.

“Slytherin looks good on you, Lils,” James smiled, and grabbing her arm, he faked a leer...

“Watch it, Potter,” Lily warned again, and she carefully tapped her wand against his thigh.

“Watching, watching!” the Marauder replied quickly, holding his hands up in the air. Lily watched him steadily for a moment before turning and knocking on the nearest door. A moment later, a stern voice called for them to enter, and Lily opened the door, James at her side.

“Hello, Professor,” Lily smiled at the gaping deputy headmistress. “Rumors of our deaths have been greatly exaggerated.”

“Right,” Remus said tiredly, passing the final document to James for his signature. “You have now officially evicted Dumbledore and the Order from Grimmauld Place. Now what?”

“Redecorating,” James replied. “Lily’s got that mad elf, Dobby, and his friend Winky helping her. And with Hermione, Ginny and Luna determined to help—”

“Shouldn’t take long,” Remus agreed.

“Has Arthur told his wife that we’re alive yet?” James asked with a frown, and Remus immediately shook his head.

“He’s not quite certain how to tell her that she can’t pretend to be his mother anymore,” Remus muttered. “Molly is a wonderful woman, but she’s very overbearing, and if she had her way, Harry would be locked as far away as possible from the war, the prophecy be damned. She also tends to act like no one else cares about Harry – it used to drive Sirius to drink.”

“How will she react to Lily and me, then?” James asked quickly, sitting up and frowning when his chair creaked.

“Oh, I’m certain she’ll *try* to be endlessly polite – but she’ll also give you a list of his favorite foods, tell you how often he needs his laundry done and make it *perfectly* clear that no one can care for Harry like she can,” Remus replied, his mouth twisting in a grimace.

“Wonderful,” James muttered, “just what we need. When is Dumbledore due?”

“In less than an hour,” Remus replied, glancing at his watch. “We’d best go down and see how the demolition’s going.”

They were greeted by an absolute madhouse when they reached the first floor landing. Cursing under their breath, James and Remus wafted the soot and dust out of their eyes, coughing madly as they tried to see through the smoke. A few feet away, Lily stood, flanked by two house elves.

“Ready?” she asked her miniature army. “On three.... One.... Two...”

“THREE!” Lily and the house-elves shouted together, and as Lily brought her wand swishing down, the two house-elves snapped their fingers –

Mrs. Black’s shrieking portrait, and the entire wall which held it, exploded into a fine cloud of dust.

“Why didn’t I ever think of that?” Remus asked mildly, staring at the empty space where a wall had once stood.

Lily grinned at him, shaking wood chips out of her hair. “You really need to learn to think outside the box, Remus. If you need to get a painting off the wall, just take the whole wall down. *Scourgify!*”

The wood shavings disappeared from the floor as James blinked, staring uneasily at his wife. “Lils, are you certain you should be blasting down walls?”

Lily frowned. “Why shouldn’t I? Besides, I only blasted this one—”

A creak sounded overhead, and Harry, Ron and Hermione, who had been running down the stairs, froze half-way down.

“Mum?” Harry asked shakily, “you just got me back. Why are you trying to kill me?”

Lily glared at him. “Well, how was I to know that nothing else was holding the ceiling up in this area?”

Remus sighed tiredly, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “Dobby, Winky, if you will,” he murmured, and the two house-elves nodded, snapping their fingers once more. A new, completely blank wall appeared in Mrs. Black’s previous space, and the creaking stopped.

Harry, Ron and Hermione let out loud sighs of relief, and Ron let go of his friends’ arms, relieved that he wouldn’t have to throw them off the stairs to safety. Clambering down the stairs, the Trio stopped in the entrance hall to survey Dobby and Winky’s work.

"Nicely done, you two," Ron grinned at them, and the house-elves beamed, Winky dropping into a neat curtsy. "I didn't fancy having to dive down a floor—"

Lily swung at him, and Ron ducked and ran, Harry and Hermione laughing happily as their friend bolted into the kitchen.

"Right," Ron said when Lily had followed him huffily into the kitchen, Harry, Hermione, James and Remus trailing behind, biting back their laughter. "Why are there nametags at every seat?"

"We need to give a good show," Remus replied, absently fingering a nametag. "When Dumbledore arrives, our alliances will be clear right away. Not to mention, we need to make it clear that Harry and his parents are already bonding and *will not* be separated. Besides, it'll look *incredibly* good if his parents are getting along with all of Harry's friends."

"Exactly," Lily agreed. "Harry, dear, you sit here," she said quickly, pointing to a seat at the center of the table. "Ron, on his left, Hermione on his right. Ginny, Neville and Luna will be across from you three, with your brothers, Ron, spread all over the place. Moody and Kingsley will be down at the end, near Dumbledore, Arthur will be next to Ron, and Dad, Remus, Tonks and I will be sitting next to Hermione and Luna. See?" Lily questioned, pushing her hair back from her eyes. "We're sending a message."

Harry, already seated at his place at the table, had not been able to stop smiling since Lily Potter had said the word "Dad".

"Harry?" the man in question asked, and Harry glanced up quickly. "Are you certain you'll be all right?"

Harry shrugged. He didn't want to see the man who'd blamed him for the Dursleys' deaths, yet –

"I have to be here, Dad," he said quietly. "If I'm not here, then it will be no better than—" His voice trailed off and he winced, rubbing absently at his forehead. As he did so, Hermione glanced at him sharply, but Harry shook his head.

"Not if we tell you all about it," Remus murmured, watching Harry with concern in his eyes. "There are certain crystals which can be spelled to record events, I'm certain there's one somewhere in this mausoleum."

"No," Harry said quietly. "I'll stay."

"All right then," his mother quickly agreed. "Winky, how is the roast doing?"

The house-elf looked up from her work, smiling brightly. "Winky is almost done, Mistress Lily," Winky replied. "Winky needs ten more minutes."

"Dobby?" Lily turned to the excited elf. "The rest?"

"Done, Mistress Lily!" Dobby said excitedly, and Lily breathed a sigh of relief – it had taken hours to convince him that all the epithets he so loved to use were unnecessary.

"Excellent," Lily smiled. "I just need to finish up my desert, then..."

"Y'know," Ron mumbled as he sat heavily at the table, "if you'd just told my Mum about this, she could have helped."

The three adults exchanged worried glances before Remus, newly designated spokesman, sat down across from Ron, watching him carefully as he spoke.

"Ron," Remus said slowly, "you know your mother can't be involved in this right now. She's too blinded by Dumbledore, and while I agree that knowing what the man's done to Harry would wake her up—" he hesitated, uncertain how to phrase his thoughts, "your mother has always been – possessive of Harry. She loves him deeply, and we'll always be grateful to her for taking Harry into your home, but Ron, she's not his mother. Your father doesn't think – and we agree with him – that she'll be able to let go and let *Lily and James* be Harry's parents."

"She had this plan," Ron muttered. "Harry was supposed to marry Ginny and I was supposed to marry Hermione, so she could have "both of her surrogate children"," Ron mimicked his mother's voice, "in the family."

Absently, he paused, and then glanced at Hermione. "No offense," he said lightly, "but it would be like marrying Ginny."

Hermione's lips quirked. "None taken," she replied easily.

"Is he here yet?" an excited voice demanded, and the group spun around to see Fred and George stride into the room.

"Yes, yes, where's our new tester?" Fred asked, grinning wickedly as he rubbed his hands together.

"Quiet, boys," Arthur said wearily as he led his two eldest into the room. "Molly's gone for an evening out with Lavender Brown's mother," he told Remus, Lily and James. "She doesn't know we're here."

"Good," James said ruthlessly, and Lily frowned.

"You're going to have to tell her, Arthur," the red-headed witch murmured, and Arthur sighed.

"I know," he said quietly, "I just don't think Harry needs—" he broke off, glancing sharply at Harry to see the boy engaged in conversation "—to see her fighting over him as if he were some sort of possession. She would hurt him terribly without even realizing it."

"Hey!" a voice called out from the entryway, and the group turned to see Tonks, grinning, saunter into the room. "Where'd the troll leg go?"

"In the rubbish bin," Remus replied, his lips twitching. "Why? Did you make it inside without injury? Is the world due to end?"

"I'll deal with you later," Tonks warned him, pulling a carrot off of a plate and brandishing it at him. "Moody and Kingsley are on their way in," she added, smiling absently at Lily. "Should be an interesting night, eh?"

"Just as long as it isn't a bloody night," Hermione murmured, looking at Remus, James and Lily anxiously.

"That remains to be seen," James replied evenly, and Hermione winced.

"Now, now, James, don't get blood on the floors," Lily admonished with a slight smile, and her husband glared at her.

"Why not? You're just going to tear them up and redo them anyway!"

"An excellent point," Remus added, his eyes glinting. "However, killing Dumbledore – or charging him with a crime – though satisfying, would be quite the foolish move... for now, at least. He wanted to use Harry to his advantage – so we'll simply use him to ours."

"Well spoken, Lupin," Moody growled as he stumped into the room. "What do you think, eh, Shacklebolt?"

"It sounds like a sound plan to me," the bald black Auror smiled. "How much longer?"

"Twenty minutes," Lily said quietly, glancing at her watch, "but he's usually earl–"

The sound of the doorknocker reverberated through the house, and James smiled wolfishly.

"Harry, Lily, would you get the door please?" he asked, moving to stand at his place at the head of the table, and Harry and Lily nodded, Harry glancing nervously at Hermione on his way out of the room.

The pair crossed the entryway quickly, coming to a pause in front of the door. "Ready?" Lily asked, smiling at Harry, and the black-haired teen nodded, taking a deep breath.

He reached out and pulled the door open, stepping back to let the headmaster in.

Wishful Thinking The Marauders' Playground

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 7 – The Marauders' Playground

"Headmaster!" James said jovially, a smile lighting up his face as the elderly man stepped into the room. "Welcome to our humble abode. You've been here before, haven't you?" he asked politely, and not waiting for Dumbledore to reply, he immediately gestured to the seat at the foot of the table. "Come in, come in, have a seat!"

Dumbledore, wrapped in midnight blue robes with sparkling golden and silver threads running through the fabric, moved carefully to the seat to which he was directed, watching James warily. "Good evening, James, Lily, Harry, Remus," he said politely, before nodding in greeting to the others. Lily and Harry moved back to their seats at the table silently, and it did not escape Dumbledore's notice that Harry was avoiding his eyes.

"Dumbledore," Remus replied evenly, smiling at Harry as the boy sat. The werewolf looked up at Dumbledore with expressionless eyes, and he gestured lightly to the chair by which Dumbledore stood, ignoring the man's uncertainty as he looked warily down the table. "Please. Have a seat."

And though he had only humored James, Remus had made it clear that he would not be argued with. So accepting the inevitable, Dumbledore sat.

"The roast is all finished," Lily said brightly, smiling at the occupants of the room. "Winky, would you help me, please?" she asked the house-elf kindly, and Winky beamed as she moved several of the platters to the table with a flick of her wrist. "Thank you, Winky," Lily smiled, and tears filled the house-elf's eyes. Seeing his friend about to break down in hysterics, Dobby moved in quickly, pulling Winky from the room.

"Help yourselves, everyone," Lily said quietly, gesturing at the food, before pulling back her chair beside Hermione and sitting down. Though Dumbledore gazed anxiously at the red-headed woman, he picked up his knife and fork, accepted the platter that Charlie passed his way, and hesitantly began to eat.

"This is wonderful, Lily," Dumbledore said eventually, as he reached for a second helping of the roast.

"Thank you," Lily smiled at him, pausing. "I had a great deal of time to perfect the recipe, so I'm quite delighted that it came out well."

As one, Ron and Neville sucked in a breath, and Dumbledore froze with his hand halfway to the platter, a stricken look on his face. When Lily just smiled and returned to her food, and James and Remus did not even look up, Dumbledore released a breath shakily and continued on with his meal.

But none of the students were eating – Ron and Neville were watching anxiously as Hermione tried to get Harry to eat something, speaking to the black-haired boy in low, anxious tones, and Ginny, Fred and George were looking nervously back and forth between Dumbledore and Lily, James, Remus and their father.

Whatever they had expected, this stilted, uncomfortable meal had not been it.

For her part, Hermione was impressed as she finally convinced Harry to take a slice of roast. She had not expected Lily and James to begin with psychological warfare, so to speak, though she might have expected it from Remus. But the look on Harry's face was getting more and more pained by the second, and as the mostly-quiet dinner progressed, she found herself wishing someone would say something – *anything*

"I can't do this," Harry said roughly, slamming his knife down on the table, and Hermione whipped around to stare at him, Luna cutting off her one-way conversation with Kingsley Shacklebolt, as Lily, James, Remus and all of the other adults set their utensils down. Across the table, Neville, Ginny and the twins smiled slightly, and Ron winced. This was *not* going to be pretty.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Lily asked softly, and Hermione's eyes flashed – hadn't they had enough yet?

"I can't stand this... this uncomfortable silence," Harry said angrily. "I grew up with this! I'm tired of waiting."

"Very well," Remus said quietly. "After all, it is you who deserves an explanation the most." The werewolf Marauder turned to Dumbledore with an expectant air, smiling inside at the headmaster's rabbit-in-the-*Lumos* look. "Well?"

Slowly, the headmaster set down his fork, his hands trembling slightly. Harry watched him with sad eyes, feeling a veil of exhaustion drop over him. In the rather large kitchen, the air felt uncomfortably heavy – though that might just be the mood in the room.

"I don't know what you want me to say," Dumbledore began softly. "I did what was best – I *tried* to do what was best–"

"Start by explaining why you lied to us all," Lily replied, and Dumbledore looked a bit startled – the bright, cheery voice from before was gone, along

with the smile.

"I can't – the prophecy," Dumbledore stuttered, and Lily shook her head.

"Explain yourself. What did you neglect to tell us about the prophecy, Headmaster?"

"It is very – complicated, Lily," Dumbledore replied hesitantly, but Lily didn't budge.

"Then *un*-complicate it, Albus," James demanded immediately, and Dumbledore sighed.

"I'm afraid I cannot speak of this around so many people," the headmaster began. "Sensitive information–"

"We all know the prophecy, Headmaster," Tonks spoke up flatly, and Dumbledore blinked at her in surprise.

"That – that's impossible," the headmaster stuttered. "The danger – it's far too dangerous for you all to–"

"It's done," Lily spoke up harshly. "And it will not be undone. Do you understand me?"

"I – yes," Dumbledore sighed tiredly, his face falling. "Yes, I understand."

"Good," Lily said calmly. "Now, explain."

"What would you do," Dumbledore asked mournfully, "if you were faced with a child whom you loved as your own grandson, yet you knew that to allow this child a happy childhood would be to damn the entire world?"

"I don't know," Lily replied evenly. "This was your dilemma, then? Did you leave something out fifteen years ago, Albus?"

"Yes," he agreed. "Yes, I did."

"Tell us," James said quietly, his eyes never leaving Albus's face. "All of it."

A long silence followed as Harry stared at the headmaster blankly – he couldn't follow the man's logic at all. He loved Harry like a grandson and, because of that, chose to leave him to suffer for ten years? He couldn't reconcile the two ideas in his mind....

"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 forged in the fires of adversity, he will be the One to vanquish the Dark Lord...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

Dumbledore's voice trailed off at the end of the prophecy and he closed his eyes tiredly.

"So you – you sent me there to fulfill the prophecy?" Harry asked shakily, staring at the elderly wizard, but before Dumbledore could reply, Remus cut in.

"Quite brilliant, actually," he said evenly. "That single line practically guarantees victory should Harry suffer in childhood... It was quite the gamble..."

A startled silence followed as nearly the entire table stared at Remus with absolute shock in their eyes. Something flashed across Tonks's face and she shot to her feet, moving to Remus's side with more grace than anyone had ever seen from her before, but too late –

"HOW COULD YOU?" Remus screamed. **"HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO HIM, TO US? HOW COULD YOU GAMBLE FIVE LIVES FOR YOUR SO-CALLED GREATER GOOD? FOR A PROPHECY?"**

"Remus," Tonks began slowly, grabbing his arm. "Remus, calm–"

"I am calm," he ground out angrily, a vein throbbing in his neck, and Tonks rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, you're the picture of serenity," she replied dryly. "Sit *down*, Remus."

Grumbling angrily, Remus did just that, taking the time to glare at Dumbledore as he did so.

"I'm afraid I see no sense in your contradictory actions, Headmaster," James spoke up calmly. "You claim to love Harry, yet told Lily and I that he was dead, that Sirius was dead and that Remus was dead. You told *everyone* that we were dead, and then you locked us away – for the express point of making Harry have a horrible childhood?"

"That was the means," Dumbledore murmured. "Not the purpose."

"And I suppose the ends justify the means?" Remus sneered, and Dumbledore straightened up, gazing at Remus sadly.

"No," he replied. "Never. But some things must be done, with or without justification of any sort."

"If this is how you treat people you love," Ginny said venomously, "I'd hate to see how you treat your enemies."

Dumbledore flinched. "I did what I thought was best–" He cut himself off, sighing heavily, before turning to look at Harry. "I never meant to hurt you. You have been kinder, stronger, *better* than I could ever have imagined," he said hoarsely. "But when I looked at you as a baby, and when I heard

that prophecy, I saw a child who would one day bear a heavy burden no matter what I did. I had to choose between two different kinds of pain for you – suffering at the hands of your relatives for your entire childhood, or suffering for your entire *life* with the knowledge that we could have won the war, saved hundreds, maybe even thousands of lives, had you lived with the Dursleys. And that knowledge *would* have destroyed you, Harry. It's just the way you are.

"Of the two," Dumbledore continued, clearing his throat nervously, "I felt that you would more easily recover from the former than the latter."

"I understand your reasoning," Harry said quietly, and Hermione spun around to glare at him as Ron raised his eyebrows. "And if – if I'd been able to make the choice, that's – I hope that's what I would have chosen. But Headmaster, I *didn't* make the choice. You made it for me, and took away–"

"I understand," the elderly man said quietly, and it seemed to Hermione, glancing back at the man, that he had aged more than thirty years before her very eyes. "I do not presume to ask for forgiveness, Harry."

This time, Harry smiled. "Try again in a few months, sir," he said softly, and Dumbledore's head shot up, the elderly man staring at Harry incredulously.

"I'm tired," Harry said quietly, looking at his parents and Remus. "May I be excused?"

Lily, James and Remus nodded. "Go ahead, all of you," James gestured at them, and Hermione sprang to her feet beside Harry, the trio quickly leaving the room, followed by Neville, Ginny and Luna. When the kitchen door had shut behind them, Lily smiled and James leaned forward, rolling his shirtsleeves up with one hand.

"Now," James began, "let's talk about how this school year is going to go, Headmaster..."

It was a very anxious Harry Potter that paced up and down in the Black family parlor, his friends sitting in chairs all around him. None of them had spoken since they had left the kitchen, and they were all anxiously awaiting the moment when Harry revealed what was on his mind. It was obvious to anyone who knew him that Harry was deep in thought about something – all that remained was to find out *what*.

"Do you know what this means?" he asked abruptly, and Hermione sat up.

"No," she said quietly, "what does it mean?"

Suddenly, Harry smiled. "It means I can win."

"We already knew that," Neville and Ron said as one, and Harry's smile widened.

"Yes," he replied, "perhaps. But I didn't."

The next morning at breakfast, Lily Evans Potter leaned back in her chair, watching Dobby carefully. She had received an owl a moment earlier which she had found amusing, but desperately needed confirmation. However, out of courtesy to her husband, she waited until he, along with Remus, Tonks and Harry, was seated at the table before speaking up.

"Dobby?" she spoke slowly, and the house-elf immediately appeared at her side.

"Yes, Mistress Lily?" the excitable house-elf asked.

"I received some interesting news from Hogwarts this morning," she said calmly, lifting up her letter, "from Professor Flitwick. He told me something about Professor Snape."

At this, Harry, Remus and James immediately looked up hopefully, gazing at Dobby with expectant faces.

"Dobby, why was Professor Snape found dangling from the Quidditch goal post the day before yesterday?"

Harry choked, setting down the glass of orange juice he had just picked up, and Remus and James both patted him roughly on the back.

Dobby blanched. "Did Dobby do wrong? Dobby is such a bad elf!" He looked about for something to punish himself with until Lily stopped him.

After a few seconds, Harry settled down and the three men returned to watching Dobby and Lily hopefully.

"It was not a bad thing," Lily reassured the elf. "In fact, it explains why it was so easy for me to do what I did when I visited him. But I'd like to know why they found him there before breakfast."

"Because, Mistress Lily," Dobby replied earnestly, "no one is going out to the Quidditch Pitch that night. Professor Snapey is having to wait to be found."

"I see," Lily replied slowly. "And why was Professor Snape dangling from the Quidditch goal?"

"Because Dobby had to move Professor Snapey quickly or Professor Snapey would get hurt," Dobby answered.

When he was in the kitchen?" Remus questioned, and Dobby nodded.

James looked at Remus with puzzlement.

"This was when he spilled the beans about Dumbledore having shut you two away," explained Remus. "I thought he sent Snape back to Hogwarts, but I guess he had a different idea."

This time, the house-elf had the grace to be ashamed. "Dobby makes Snapey invisible, he does," Dobby said in low tones. "Dobby is hiding Snapey, so he won't be found, he is..."

"Why?" Lily asked tiredly again, as a smile blossomed on Remus's face. "And *when*?"

"Dobby is making Professor Snapey invisible when Master Harry Potter and his friends is making plans – just in case he is needed again. Then when Master Harry Potter and his friends is gone looking for Mistress Lily and Master James," Dobby replied, bouncing on the balls of his feet, "Dobby is thinking he must be getting Snapey back to Hoggwarts for Snapey's own protection, and must be going quickly. Dobby is hearing that Hoggwarts looks pretty from up there, Mistress, and sunset is nice. Dobby is merely wanting to share and protect." The house-elf smiled. "Professor Snapey is not appreciating sunset. He is not appreciating sunrise, either. Is saying vile things, he is."

"Is Snapey?" Remus grinned yet again. "Dobby, I could kiss you."

The house-elf looked horrified. "Oh no, Master Remus, that is not being proper!"

"He was kidding, Dobby," Harry quickly assured the house-elf. "But Dobby – thank you."

The house-elf's eyes quickly filled with tears. "Harry Potter is *thanking* Dobby! Dobby is not deserving – Harry Potter is good and brave and noble and kind and–"

"So are you," Harry replied with a grin, and Dobby froze mid-sentence, gaping at the black-haired wizard.

"My goodness, he made the little guy stop talking," Tonks breathed in shock. A moment later, Dobby burst into joyful tears.

"No, Dobby, get off – Dobby, I *need* that leg – Dobby! Mum – Dad – Remus – Tonks – anyone – help!"

Chuckling, all four rose and left Harry to Dobby's mercies.

They appeared directly in Madam Bones's office, wands at the ready even as they landed. A quick sweep of the room showed no one hiding and no recording or eavesdropping devices of any kind. Letting out a sigh of relief, Remus dropped into a nearby chair and covered his hands. "This isn't going to be pretty," he murmured tiredly, and Lily knelt beside him.

"It will be fine, Remus," Lily soothed, taking his hand, "Amelia Bones does not allow prejudices to affect her work. Not in things like this."

"I certainly hope not," James muttered darkly, "or we'll have to pull Harry out of Hogwarts, and somehow convince the Grangers, Weasleys, Augusta Longbottom and Otto Lovegood to do the same. I don't look forward to *that* conversation..."

"We could easily tutor them or hire tutors effective enough," Lily replied with an absent wave of her hand. "Their educations would likely be better than what they'll receive at Hogwarts."

"You could just go without me–"

"*NO!*" Lily and James both shouted immediately, and James, his face flushed, calmed first.

"We're not leaving you behind, Remus, even *if* you have Tonks now," James said quietly. "We just got you both back. Don't ask us to give you up."

Remus gazed at him as the door opened and a woman with a monocle walked in.

"Ah, good, you're here. The Portkey worked, I assume?" Without waiting for an answer, the woman dug a vial from her pocket. "I must verify your identities, as I'm certain you understand."

Lily and James stiffened but nodded even as Remus straightened up, rising from his chair.

"We'll start with you, sir," Amelia Bones gestured to James, who immediately dropped into the chair Remus had vacated. A moment later, three drops of Veritaserum had been placed on James's tongue and Bones leaned against her desk with her arms folded, her eyes never once leaving James as two Aurors filed into the room.

"Auror Tonks, Auror Shacklebolt," Bones commanded in a deep, booming voice, "please restrain Mrs. Potter and Mr. Lupin." The two Aurors nodded immediately, Tonks taking Lily's arm and Kingsley taking Remus's. The moment Bones turned away, Tonks grinned at Remus and winked. Lily and Remus barely bit back exasperated sighs.

"What is your name?" Bones asked James sternly.

"James Harold Potter IV," James replied in a robotic voice, and Bones blinked.

“Where have you been for the past fifteen years?” she continued, and Lily flinched.

A long silence followed before James replied, “I cannot say.”

“Why not?”

“I cannot say.”

“Were you in the service of the He Who Must Not Be Named?”

“No.”

“Have you ever served the He Who Must Not Be Named?”

“No.”

“Have you ever knowingly aided the He Who Must Not Be Named?”

“No.”

Straightening up, Bones glared at Lily. “I suppose you cannot say, either?”

“Yes, Madam Bones,” Lily agreed before taking a seat next to her husband. A moment later, Bones recited the same list of questions, received the same answers save the name of Lily Marie Evans Potter, and reacted in the same manner.

“Lupin! Or whoever you are,” Bones boomed, “you’re next.”

James stirred in his seat as Remus’s expression changed to one of panic. “Madam Bones, you mustn’t!” James pleaded. “He’s allergic to—”

“Ah, that’s right,” Bones murmured softly, her mouth twisting in a grimace. “I had forgotten. Veritaserum is toxic to your kind, is it not?”

Remus nodded grimly even as Lily, beginning to recover from the serum, spluttered in indignation at Bones’s phrasing.

“Pity,” Bones murmured, blinking rapidly. “Very well, Mr. and Mrs. Potter; how would you like to approach your return to the Wizarding World?”

“We have a reporter friend we can speak to,” Lily replied, still glaring at Madam Bones. “She’ll see to it that we’re announced.”

“Very well, then,” Madam Bones agreed as a sly smile slid across James’s face. “Enjoy your day, Mr. and Mrs. Potter.” Completely ignoring Remus, she rose to her feet. “Shacklebolt, escort them out. Auror Tonks,” she added harshly, “stay a minute.”

Kingsley glanced at Tonks worriedly before leading the Potters and Remus from the room. Tonks didn’t look up, her gaze firmly fixed on her boss’s face, and Bones stared steadily back at Tonks.

“Auror Tonks,” Bones began icily. “If you think I did not notice the way you looked at Lupin, you are many times the fool.”

“I was not aware, Director,” Tonks replied evenly, “that my personal life is any of your business.”

“It is when you’re lowering yourself to such—” Bones exploded, but Tonks cut her off.

“Lowering myself to *what*?” she demanded angrily. “Madam Bones, I am *not* consorting with a Death Eater! Anything more than that is none of your concern!”

“He’s a *werewolf*!” Bones snarled.

“I know what he is!” Tonks shouted. “But more than that, I know *who* he is! And he’s worth it!”

“Is he really?” Bones replied sarcastically. “I certainly hope so, Auror Tonks. You know the penalty if you choose to marry that – that—”

She froze, her face flushed, breathing heavily, and stared at Tonks. Suddenly, she began blinking, her eyes watering, and shuddered. Something flashed in her eyes – rage, Tonks assumed – then immediately disappeared.

“That *what*?” Tonks asked in a deadly quiet voice. “Say it. Go on.”

“If you marry that *beast*,” Bones spat, “your contract will be forfeit.”

Tonks closed her eyes, her outrage slowly dissipating into exhaustion. “Any comments about marriage are premature. And Madam Bones, the world would be a much better place if there were no bigots holding public office.”

“You will hold your tongue, Auror!” Bones shouted. “One more comment from you and you’ll be on suspension!”

Slowly opening her eyes, Tonks gazed at the woman steadily. “Is that all, ma’am?” she asked lightly, and Bones growled.

“Go,” the woman ordered, and Tonks nodded in acknowledgement and turned on her heel.

Oh, and Auror,” Bones began as Tonks reached for the door, “if I find out that Lupin is living with the Potter boy, I’ll have the werewolf and Potter’s parents hauled in for neglect and child endangerment charges. After fifteen years of abandonment, it would certainly be easy enough. And if I find out you know about it, I’ll toss you in Azkaban with all three of them.”

Immediately, Tonks forced down her rage. “I don’t know where Remus lives, ma’am,” she smiled sweetly. “We only ever spend the night at my place.”

With that, she left the office, smiling in fierce pleasure at Bones’s outraged spluttering. A moment later, Hestia Jones emerged from a nearby office.

“Come on,” Hestia said softly, taking Tonks’s arm and steering her down the hall. “I have this old lamp my aunt gave me last Christmas – honestly, I gave it to her for her birthday five years ago! You can take your frustration out on it.”

The two Aurors ducked into Hestia’s office, and moments later, the unmistakable sound of a Blasting Hex echoed off the walls.

“James! Lily!” Rita Skeeter exclaimed, rushing up to the front doors, and she stood there, beaming at them, as the couple made their way up the steps. “What an absolute *honor* to meet you! I’ve met your son several times, you know; such a *brave* boy, he never once shed a tear during our interview back during the Tournament, though I could tell he was close. Come in, come in! We can talk in my office!”

Lily and James were quickly ushered up three flights of stairs and into the back corner. As soon as the door had shut behind them, Rita smiled and settled happily behind her desk.

“Your son got this for me,” Skeeter smiled. “Cushy corner office, my own secretary – media’s a stormy business, my friends, your luck can change in a heartbeat. We’re all lucky that your son knew he could trust me.”

“Because his best friend discovered that you’re an illegal Animagus,” James pointed out, sitting in a chair across from Skeeter’s desk.

The reporter’s brilliant smile dimmed for a moment before she laughed, waving her hand absently. “Details, details!” she exclaimed. “Whatever his reasons, Harry came to me after the interview he had with me the year before. Obviously, he knew he was getting the best.” Neither James nor Lily replied. “And such a *brave* dear, giving up his parents like that so they could fight for the greater good, having to pretend all the while that they were dead—”

“Yes, well, Harry’s a strong boy,” Lily replied impatiently. “Could we get to the interview, please, madam? Harry, James and I have a great deal of catching up to do.”

“Of course, of course!” Skeeter replied, wiping crocodile tears from her eyes. “What a beautiful reunion you must have had – it warms my heart to see things finally going right for the boy.”

She sniffled dramatically before riffling through her crocodile skin handbag, quickly extracting a lurid green quill. “Now,” she smiled brightly, “where do we begin?”

“We begin,” James said, eyeing the quill dubiously, “by putting that away.” He reached into his robe pockets and withdrew a phoenix feather quill. “And using this. A gift,” he added, smiling at the woman, “for all you’ve done for Harry.”

Skeeter frowned momentarily before regaining her bright smile, carefully taking the quill from James. “Thank you!” she exclaimed quickly. “You shouldn’t have. Is it genuine?” she asked, fingering the gold tip of the quill.

“Of course,” Lily replied evenly.

“It’s a lovely gift,” Skeeter murmured. “Just lovely.” Clearing her throat, she straightened up, the phoenix feather quill held carefully in her hand. “Now,” she smiled brightly, “tell me everything.”

An hour later, the Potters left the *Daily Prophet* building, walking down Diagon Alley in broad daylight without any disguise.

“Okay, Potter,” Lily said sternly as people gasped and veered quickly out of their way, screaming about ghosts, “out with it. What did you do to that quill?”

Smirking, James looked down at his wife and replied, “Absolutely nothing. It’s a political situation – an even better prank. Skeeter will have to use that quill now, or we’ll be ever so upset, you see. Phoenix feather quills are extremely rare – a phoenix has to give up the feathers for a quill willingly, so there are no stores which sell them. There aren’t any phoenixes which will be willing to hang around and be plucked to make quills, you see. So not only will she have to use it, but she’ll have to use it in public, where she can brag about the quill and from whom it was a gift. Which means,” James grinned broadly, “she won’t be able to use that Quick Quotes Quill of hers all the time. A few of her articles may actually be factual every now and again.”

Pausing midstep, Lily turned to stare at her husband. “And you did all this without a single spell?” James nodded, and she smiled sweetly. “Mr. Potter, I absolutely *love* the way you think.”

“Really?” James waggled his eyebrows. “Well in that case, why don’t we just—”

“I have a date tonight, James,” Lily said calmly, and James started at her.

“*What?*”

“With our son,” she continued before turning on her heel and walking off.

“Oh. Hey, I’m coming too, aren’t I? Lily? Lily!”

Smiling serenely, Lily led her flustered husband to Ollivander’s shop to get some information and some wand care kits.

Prongs: 0, Evans: 1 .

They perched on the edge of his bed, watching him carefully as he leaned back against the wall.

“We don’t know what to say, Harry,” Lily murmured finally.

Though only two days had passed since Lily and James had visited Harry’s memories, the two had felt it was better to have a heart-to-heart with their son sooner rather than later. But somehow, they were finding that that was easier said than done.

“We didn’t know,” James said tightly, and Harry looked up at him. “You’re aware that we didn’t know, aren’t you?”

Harry nodded, smiling slightly for a moment. “It was a bit obvious,” he murmured, and Lily choked out a laugh.

An uncomfortable silence followed, and Lily and James looked nervously from their son to each other. “I hate this!” Lily burst out suddenly, and her son and husband jumped. “We’re tip-toeing around each other like absolute strangers! I hate it!”

“Technically speaking, Lily, we *are* strangers,” James pointed out sadly. “It’s only been two days.”

Lily ignored him. “We saw your memories,” she said shrilly. “Why won’t you *talk* to us? Have you talked to your friends about the – the – about my *sister*?”

Harry looked away. “A – A bit,” he said softly, and Lily glared at him.

“That means no,” she replied angrily. “Harry, you need to open up to somebody. If it’s not us, at least talk to Hermione, but *please*, Harry,” she whispered. “We want to help you.”

For several minutes, Harry didn’t reply. Instead, he stared at the wall opposite them, the flickering in his eyes showing that he was reliving things long passed.

“I remember when I was three,” he said finally, “the – the Dursleys started making me do the weeding in the garden then – they said I was big enough. One day when I came inside, I accidentally tracked dirt, and there was this worm that fell out of my clothes – Aunt Petunia hit me with a skillet and tossed me into the cupboard. She literally picked me up and threw me.”

Hesitantly, James reached out and placed an arm around Harry’s shoulder, and smiled as the boy leaned into him. Heartened by her husband’s success, Lily scooted across the bed and began playing with Harry’s hair as she leaned against the wall beside him.

“I’m – I’m glad they’re dead,” Harry said, swallowing convulsively. “They hurt me so much, but worst of all, they made me think that I *deserved* it, for a while. They – they should have loved me, and they didn’t. And I’m glad they’re dead. What does that make me?”

“Human,” Lily replied. “It makes you human. Listen to me!” she said roughly as Harry looked away. Moving forward on the bed, she seized his shoulders and turned him so that he was facing her. “Your father and I are glad they’re dead. We *want* them dead. What does that make *us*? When we heard that you’d been living with them, our first thoughts were about how to *repay* them for their treatment of you. Dudley’s fate is a sad one, because he was a product of his environment. His parents made him what he was – they took advantage of his gullibility, of his ignorance and of his age to make him into the bully you knew. But as for Vernon and Petunia, they got what they deserved.”

“It’s only natural to be grateful that they can never hurt you again, son,” James said quietly, squeezing Harry’s shoulder. “It’s certainly nothing to be ashamed of.”

Silently, Harry squeezed his eyes shut and flinched. “I miss Sirius,” he whispered, and Lily’s heart broke.

“Oh, Harry,” she murmured, gathering him into his arms, and finally, for the first time since the night of Sirius’s death, he began to weep.

A soft thud sounded outside the door, and slowly, James rose to his feet. “Did Tonks go to her apartment?” he asked, and Lily nodded. Taking a deep breath, James opened the door and looked down.

There Remus stood, his tail wagging uncertainly as he gazed up at his only true living friend. The werewolf looked passed James to Harry, whimpering softly, and James smiled.

“Have you taken your Wolfsbane, old boy?” he asked, and Remus barked in agreement. Chuckling slightly, he pulled the door open and Remus padded in, leaping up onto the bed. The werewolf settled himself beside Harry, whining softly, and rested his head on Harry’s legs. James climbed back up onto the bed, sitting down beside his friend, and wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders again.

Hours later, Harry finally drifted off to sleep, his head pillowed in Lily’s lap. The Marauders’ Queen – as Peter had once called her, to his immediate dismay – idly ran her fingers through Harry’s hair and leaned back against her husband, her eyes closed. Remus licked Harry’s face three times

before curling up at the foot of the bed, his ears down and relaxed but his gaze steady and alert. Eventually, all of the Potters had fallen asleep, and Remus rose to his feet, leaping off the bed, and went into the hallway to nudge the bedroom door shut. He sat by the door, guarding his sleeping family, with every intent of slipping back to his own room before dawn.

They couldn't see – especially Harry. He wouldn't allow it.

Arthur Weasley watched his wife nervously as they readied for bed. He had been observing her bubbling cheer for hours that day – from the time the children had returned from visiting Harry, she had been exuding happiness and energy. But Arthur knew his wife, and he knew when she was hiding something. Molly knew there was something going on, and she was none too happy about being kept in the dark.

Nor, he realized, was she happy about their daughter's new relationship. Ginny and Neville had announced that they were dating at dinner that evening – Neville with a panicked glance at Ginny's five brothers in attendance at the meal – and though Molly had acted as though she were happy for them, Arthur had seen it in her eyes.

Neville wasn't Harry. And in Molly's mind, that meant he wasn't good enough for their daughter.

What he had to tell her was not going to help her mood any, but he could not delay any longer.

"Molly, dear?" Arthur began anxiously, and she turned around and smiled at him. "Er... I have something to tell you. And you – may not like it."

His wife's expression immediately darkened. "Is it about that new secretary in your office?" she spat angrily, her face turning red, and Arthur stared at her.

"Molly, I wish you wouldn't be so insecure," he said heavily after a moment. "I would *never* do that to you."

His wife's face fell. "I'm sorry, Arthur," she sniffled. "I'm just so—"

"I know," he said gently, "just please, Molly, think better of me." When his wife continued to sniffle, he continued. "It's about Harry, and it's a very good thing, for him. Unfortunately, it means that our relationship with him may change."

"What?" Molly straightened up immediately, her face paling. "What is it, Arthur? What's happened?"

Arthur stood for several moments in silent contemplation before, finally, choosing to use Hermione's – rather blunt – approach. "We found his parents."

"Oh, the poor dear!" Molly cried. "His parents' bodies? Had they been dug up? Did You-Know-Who turn them into Inferi? Oh, how dreadful!"

"No, no, Molly, that's not it!" Arthur cut in quickly, and he grabbed his wife's arm, stilling her frantic pacing. "Molly, we found *his parents* . They *never died* ."

Silence.

"No," Molly said tremulously. "No, Arthur, the Potters are dead. They died heroically, saving that poor dear from You-Know-Who, and Harry is an *orphan* . I won't have you confusing him like this. I *won't have it* , do you hear me?"

"They're at Grimmauld Place right now," Arthur continued, ignoring the blow his wife had just struck at him. "Amelia Bones confirmed their identities using Veritaserum. It's real, Molly. They're alive."

"A-alive?" Molly whispered, rocking back on her heels, and Arthur watched her anxiously. "*HOW DARE THEY?*" she erupted suddenly, and Arthur stepped back in shock. "Why, I'll tear them apart! I'll *bathe* in their blood! I'll—"

"MOLLY!" Arthur shouted, and his wife fell into startled silence. "They didn't know."

"What do you mean, they—"

"They weren't killed fighting V-voldemort," Arthur swallowed, "protecting Harry. But they were knocked unconscious. And when they awoke, Dumbledore told them that Harry was dead, and Remus and Sirius as well – he sent them away and trapped them in Godric's Hollow, surrounded by wards layered with memory charms. And he told everyone else—"

"That the Potters had died," Molly whispered, stricken. "Oh lord, Arthur, why?"

Arthur swallowed convulsively. This was the hardest part...

"You remember that I was guarding something on occasion last year, Molly?" When his wife nodded, Arthur continued, "It was a prophecy. This is *top secret* , Molly. No one must know. It practically guaranteed Harry's victory if he were raised in an... unpleasant home."

"The Dursleys," Molly murmured, and Arthur nodded. "I don't know what to think. Oh, that poor, poor boy."

Smiling sadly, Arthur climbed into the bed and pulled his wife into his arms.

She wept half the night.

Severus Snape paced restlessly in his rooms, glaring through the darkness. His arms were still horribly sore, and glancing down, he could still see the red marks on his palms from trying to cling to the goal post. Hesitantly, he rubbed his thumb over the marks on one palm and winced – they still stung, even after four days and many applications of healing balm.

But not quite as much as his pride.

In two days, he was taken down by first a house-elf, then Evans.

Snakey is staying here, the foul creature's voice echoed in his mind. *Snakey is being found... eventually. But Snakey is not leaving until Snakey is found. Dobby makes certain.*

And then...

Pitiful. Clear your mind.

Her voice rang through his mind, again and again, judging him, finding him wanting – casting him aside without a second thought. Making a ruthless attack upon his mind – the only thing left sacred for him. The only thing he still controlled in his life.

Clearly, the Mudblood thought she was getting vengeance for her son.

An eye for an eye, he remembered her saying once. She had denounced the idea, as a child, without a second thought.

As a woman, evidently, she relished it.

An eye for an eye, he thought again, and her voice whispered across his mind.

Pitiful. Clear your mind.

He sneered. *All right, Evans*, he thought coldly, *if that's the way you want to play it...*

She'd wounded him for her son. That maniac elf had wounded him for her blasted son.

An eye for an eye indeed.

He ran before he could change his mind, racing through the halls of Hogwarts and out onto the grounds. Moving swiftly, he disappeared into the Forbidden Forest and Disapparated with a quiet *pop*.

He appeared again at the base of a hill, beside a sign that read "Little Hangleton". His robes billowing around his body, he strode up the hill and knocked on the door of an old, rotting mansion. A moment later, the door was pulled open and Snape stepped through the doorway, sneering at the man before him.

"Tell our Master that I bring news," he drawled, and the man hurried off. Not two minutes later, he returned, gesturing for Snape to follow him.

They stopped before a door on the second floor, and nervously, Snape pushed the door open with a creak. Inside, he could see a large chair silhouetted against the flickering flames of the hearth against the opposite wall. A tall, thin frame emerged from the chair and turned to face him, and Snape gazed at the Dark Lord.

"Severussss...", Voldemort hissed. "Welcome. Avery says you have news for me?"

"Yes, my Lord," Snape replied immediately. "The Mudblood girl's parents are traveling in Greece – on a second honeymoon," he sneered. "They are unprotected."

Voldemort's eyes gleamed. "Sit, Severus," he ordered, and with a wave of his wand, he summoned a chair from the opposite side of the room.

Nearly trembling in relief, Snape did as ordered.

Wishful Thinking A Quickly Blurring Line

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 8 – A Quickly Blurring Line

She'd always loved the silence of the night.

Hand clenched around her wand, Bellatrix peered carefully around the side of the house, watching for her back-up. They were supposed to have shown up an hour before – never before had they been so late. The Dark Lord would be furious...

He would be furious.

A harsh wind blew across the way and she shuddered, pressing her legs together as she struggled against the unexpected cold of the night. The thrill of a raid had always excited her, but tonight, with the sudden chill, she found that dreadfully inconvenient. Just once, just this once, she wished she could be as cold and aloof as Lucius –

Something wasn't right.

She froze where she stood, eyes fixed straight ahead as her ears strained in the darkness. Whatever it was, it had been slightly to the left behind her –

Spinning on her heel, she gripped her wand tightly and glared through the darkness.

"Who's there?" she demanded hoarsely. "Answer me!"

Nothing.

"I won't hurt you," she lied as she continued to gaze through the darkness, eyes narrowed. "Just come out and—"

"Ah, Bella, Bella, Bella," a smooth voice sounded through the darkness, and a chill went down her spine as her eyes widened with shock. "You never *did* know how to bluff, did you?"

"My – my Lord?" she whispered, peering anxiously through the darkness. "Where are you, my Lord? What of the raid?"

"The raid?" the Dark Lord's voice replied, and Bellatrix started as she felt breath against her ear. "My dearest Bellatrix, there is no raid."

"But—" She shivered violently, goosebumps appearing on her arms as the blunt point of an invisible wand traced along her collarbone. "But what of the amulet, my Lord? You need – you wanted—"

"There *is* no amulet, my dear," he breathed, and she closed her eyes. "What there is," he said slowly, "is the need for a discussion."

"A – a discussion, my lord?"

"Yes, a discussion," he agreed. "We need to discuss your failure, Bellatrix."

"My failure, my Lord?" she asked anxiously. "But I thought I was already—"

"Oh, certainly, you were already punished," he said softly. "But you were not yet taught. Do you remember when I used to teach you, my dearest little warrior?" he asked, and snaking an invisible arm around her waist, he pulled her back against his skeletal frame, chuckling yet again as she shuddered with fear. "Do you?"

"Y-yes, my Lord," Bellatrix said shakily, swallowing back her fear. "I remember perfectly, my Lord."

"Well," the Dark Lord breathed. "It seems, my dearest Bella, that it is time for yet another lesson." With a careless thrust of his free hand, he flung the woman to the ground, his invisibility charm still intact.

"A warrior you may be, my dear," he continued, "but there is another use for you."

Curled up on her side where he had thrown her, Bellatrix watched as the grass flattened where the Dark Lord stepped, circling her with an easy stroll.

She didn't dare fight.

This, she knew, was going to hurt.

He woke to the sound of screaming.

Cursing wildly under his breath, Remus scrambled out of bed and threw an open robe over his shoulders, fastening it quickly around his neck as Tonks drew her wand out of the holster ever-present on her arm. They raced for the door, cringing as the alarms started keening.

By the time they reached Harry's room, his door was already wide open. Skidding into the room, Remus stopped dead at the sight of the boy thrashing wildly, his eyes still screwed shut, as frantic screams streamed from his mouth. Behind him, Kingsley strode into the room, took one look at Harry and strode back out.

"I'm going to go check the perimeter!" he called back over his shoulder. "Tonks!"

"Right, on it!" she agreed, and ran after him, throwing a worried glance over her shoulder. Remus ignored them both, moving forward and gesturing Ginny to move aside from where she had perched on Harry's bed.

He froze in place, staring in shock as Harry's mouth opened and a serpentine voice spoke.

"Do you see, Potter?" the voice hissed, and Remus went rigid with fury. "Do you see what I do to those who are loyal to me? This is nothing to what your Mudblood whore will get, boy – *nothing*. And the littlest Weasley, and the Lovegood girl – why, I could let them live for *months* before I'd allow them the escape of death. *Do you see what you are to me, Potter?*"

Harry's back arched. With a guttural scream, he rose off the bed, a strange red light glowing around his body. His eyelids fluttered rapidly, his throat working as he struggled to fight off the intrusion. The room began to shake, windows and doors rattling in their frames. Remus swore, reaching for Harry's shoulders, and pinned him down to the bed, holding the boy in place as he tried to thrash right off the bed.

"Where are Lily and James?" he shouted as Hermione crashed through the door, and the bushy-haired witch shook her head, pushing past him with a single-minded determination, an odd-looking stone held in her hand. With a pained grimace, she looked at Harry, tears in her eyes, and pressed the stone to his forehead.

"*Expulsi!*" she shouted, and a bright green light flashed along the lightning bolt scar on Harry's head.

Harry collapsed, panting heavily as tears leaked out of his eyes.

Backing away from the bed with a gasp, Hermione pressed her hands to her mouth, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Hermione?" Remus questioned gently.

She shook her head. "No," she said softly, "I don't know where they are."

"Are you all right?" he asked, and she shook her head, moving forward yet again to check on Harry.

The trembling boy had fallen asleep yet again, his right hand curling inward and uncurling fitfully as he slept.

"Oh, thank god," Hermione murmured shakily, and she brushed her hair out of her face with a shaking hand. Reaching out carefully, Remus wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest, cradling her against him as he murmured soothingly to her.

When she had fallen silent, he glanced down carefully at the girl, smiling sadly as he felt the parental instincts stirring. His curse had left him sterile, but Remus had always felt that the Golden Trio – as Minerva had told him they were known throughout the school – were as good as his. Fighting back the sudden swell in his heart, Remus carefully lifted the drowsy girl and carried her back to her own bed, returning to Harry's side as soon as she was settled.

Remus stood silently, staring at the boy for what seemed like ages.

When he found Lily and James, he decided, there would be hell to pay.

They waltzed in four hours later, wands in hand as they staggered into the front hall.

Remus smiled darkly as he felt the ward trip – he loved the irony of using one of Lily's own spells against her. Rising carefully to his feet, he gave Kingsley a meaningful glance, nodding in thanks as the Auror straightened from his position by the wall and moved to sit beside Harry's bed. Tonks eyed Remus nervously before shifting her own position, settling herself on the end of Harry's bed in a cross-legged sprawl.

The three of them hadn't left Harry's side all night, regardless of the fact that he'd not been attacked since Hermione had expelled Voldemort. His sleep was still deeply disturbed, and the sight and sound of his tossing and turning and tears was enough to keep them on a constant bedside vigil.

Frowning angrily at the prospect of having to leave Harry's side even for long enough to ream out his best friends, Remus descended the stairs and stopped on the second-floor landing, gazing down on the Potters with an expressionless face. James was practically carrying Lily, he noted absently, who looked as though she was very nearly falling over drunk.

They hadn't seen him, he realized. Perfect.

"Have fun?" Remus asked coolly, arching an eyebrow as Lily jerked out of James' grasp and spun in the entryway to stare up at him.

"Remus!" she exclaimed. "What are you-?"

"I shan't stay long," Remus replied immediately. "I need to return to my vigil. But I just thought you'd like to know that your son was attacked tonight by Voldemort through the link they share in his scar. I hope you enjoyed your evening."

Turning on his heel, he strode back up the steps, into Harry's room, and shut the door behind himself with a final *click*.

His friends, he decided, needed desperately to grow up.

"What happened?" Tonks asked softly, and Remus shook his head.

"They went out and got drunk," he replied wearily. "They weren't here for Harry because they went out to get drunk."

Settling himself back in his chair, Remus propped his elbows up on Harry's bed, staring blankly at the boy, and dropped his head down into his hands.

Breakfast in the Great Hall was something of a strained affair.

Frowning absently, Albus reached for the porridge as his colleagues talked quietly among themselves. He wasn't quite certain whether his exclusion from their conversations was intentional – but intentional or not, he didn't much like it.

His days had been quite stressful even *before* the Bloody Baron had floated into the Great Hall bellowing at the top of his non-corporeal lungs about the Potters. Things had only escalated since then.

He tried not to think about it, he truly did, but...

Harry.

He wondered about Harry every second of every day. Not Remus, not Lily and James, but Harry. Distantly, he wondered if the boy was doing well – if he'd been to Diagon Alley yet, if he was prepared to return to Hogwarts in a few weeks' time ... if the boy would even *look* at him when he arrived ... He wondered what Remus and the Potters were planning, what Harry would think of it –

But more than anything, he wondered if Luna Lovegood had been wrong.

It's not too late, you know.

But was it? Albus Dumbledore understood the severity of what he had done. It had taken time, and a great deal of honest, painful self-reflection, but he knew what he had done.

And he knew that, faced with the same circumstances, he would make the same decision all over again.

So Albus Dumbledore, known to many as the greatest wizard of the age, knew something more.

In light of that single fact, the fact that he would do it all over again... understanding what he had done –

Regret meant less than nothing.

Sighing tiredly, Dumbledore pushed the bowl of porridge away, dropping his spoon with a dull *clunk*, and got wearily up from his seat, slowly making his way up to his office. When he spoke the password – no longer "redemption" but now "purgatory" – he stepped onto the spiral staircase and stood silently, waiting to arrive at his office.

Pushing open the door and settling himself behind his desk, he laced his fingers together and stared down at his hands.

He could almost see the blood.

Swallowing convulsively, Dumbledore tore his eyes away from his hands and began to rifle through the piles of paperwork stacked neatly on his desk. Better to occupy his mind with busywork than wallow in the guilt, in the things he couldn't change...

But he could almost see the blood.

Against his will, his gaze drifted back to his hands, and he lifted them shakily, staring blankly at them. If he looked closely enough, he could almost see the blood from the time Petunia Dursley had struck Harry with a belt, from the time the boy had been forced to weed the garden for eight hours with no water under the relentless summer sun pulling the thorniest of the weeds –

It was better, he reminded himself, to occupy his mind with busywork than to wallow in the guilt.

But he couldn't push the guilt from his mind.

He knew he could never make up for what he'd done – knew he could never undo the damage he had wrought upon the boy, but that didn't change two horrible, terrible facts.

He would do it all over again.

And Albus Dumbledore didn't know if he could live with that.

But he had to; there was no other choice.

If he took the easy way out, the suicide of the greatest wizard of the age would accomplish nothing but to hand Voldemort the wizarding world on the proverbial silver platter.

He had ever advocated doing what was right over what was easy.

And there was work to be done.

Raising his wand, and allowing himself one last tired sigh, he summoned Minerva with a single swish and flick. He wasn't surprised to see her mouth set into a thin line when she entered his office a few minutes later. Minerva had always looked angry around him recently, a fact which cut him deeply. It was with a weary heart that he recalled the days of their camaraderie – days as recently as three weeks before.

Self-pity was very much his friend now.

"You called, Albus?" Minerva asked coolly, and pushing aside the pain, Dumbledore stroked carefully at his beard and began to speak.

"I had hoped you would take a trip to Grimmauld Place to check on Harry," he said slowly, forgoing any offer of a lemon drop – Minerva no longer tolerated his small talk. "Although I am quite certain the Potters and Remus are taking excellent care of him, I had hoped to see his chosen class list returned soon. It has not been, and I am not permitted to contact him."

"I will do so immediately," Minerva agreed with a perfunctory nod. "Is that all?"

"No, it is not," Dumbledore replied. "After your visit to Grimmauld Place, I would very much appreciate it if you would be willing to join me for luncheon in my quarters. I am certain you are quite angry with me, but I would like to explain—"

Many would consider Albus Dumbledore a brave man, but nevertheless, his voice trailed off at the sight of the fury that sprang to life in Minerva McGonagall's eyes.

"I am sorry, Albus," Minerva replied, her nostrils flaring, "but I find myself leery of being alone with you any longer than strictly necessary. You might decide that I must disappear and remain imprisoned for the *greater good*."

"Minerva, I—"

"*Save it*, Albus," Minerva hissed angrily, and the headmaster drew back in shock. "You abandoned that child, imprisoned his parents, lied to the *entire world* for a *prophecy*! What's *happened* to you?"

"I did what I had—"

"You're not the man I knew," she said harshly, and turning on her heel, she swept out of the staff room without a backward glance.

Albus reached blindly behind himself, slowly lowering his battered body into a chair. Dazedly, he dropped his head down into his hands and began to weep.

Before his mind shut down to grief, he absently reflected that he'd cried more in the past month than he had in the entire decade before.

After determining that Lily and James had been off getting into Dumbledore-related mischief and had decided to celebrate by getting pissed, Remus quickly filled his friends in on Harry's vision from the night before. It had taken a considerable amount of effort to hold Lily back from going after Snape yet again – somehow, she seemed determined to blame him for anything relating to Harry's scar and visions.

"Quite honestly, Lily," Remus finally said, "I'm surprised at you. You have a son who you *know* has been abused, who you have been told is a target for the same Dark Lord that caused the sundering of your family for *fifteen years*, and yet you and James felt that all was well enough to go out and get drunk, without telling anyone where you were. And now you blame *Severus*, of all people, for the torture that he went through last night!"

"You support that greasy haired bastard?" James barked. "What kind of a friend are you?"

"One who apparently cares more for your son than you two do." Remus stood and began to pace even as they sat back in their chairs as if struck. "I don't believe you two! You've mourned the loss of your son for all these years, you say. You wished you'd been with him for all these years. So, within a week of the reuniting of your family – rejoining a boy you thought *was* dead! – on a night when you he needed you to be with him and to comfort him, what do you do? You go out and get pissed! You decided that it was better to drop everything and have a little drink – *four hours* of a little drink – rather than learning about the son you profess to love! He has a Voldemort nightmare, and his *own parents* aren't around to comfort him! How do you think that makes him feel?"

"What would you know about family?" James snapped. "You're sterile. Does your little chippie know that?"

Remus inhaled sharply, and stomped down on the wolf inside. His voice dripping icicles, he said, “We will continue this at a later time, Mr Potter. Perhaps after you and your wife have had a chance to decide which is more important – celebrating your pranks and freedom, or actually getting to know the child that you profess to love. Good day.”

He stepped from the room and closed the door firmly behind him. Perhaps too firmly, since the doorknob came off in his hand. Several people came barreling toward him, but he calmly turned and replaced the knob. “*Reparo*. I think that it would be a good idea if we all left the Potters alone for a while. They're a little high-strung at the moment.”

“What did they say to make you lose it, Remus?” Tonks asked.

“James chose to make a comment about my sterility. He does stupid things like that when he's particularly angry.”

“You're a werewolf. Of course you're sterile. Comes with the territory. Is that a sore spot for you?” she asked, more than a little puzzled.

“Not particularly. I made my peace with it years ago. It was his phrasing. It was meant to hurt. I made him think about the relationship that they say that they want with Harry. James doesn't like to be forced to think, especially when he knows, deep down, that he's wrong. He lashes out at everyone first and then comes to his senses and apologises later.”

“Do you really need a friend like that?” Tonks asked him.

“It's actually quite seldom that he gets that bad, so I'm not as worried about it as you perhaps think that I should be. But while I can't be a father the old fashioned way, I've always seen Harry, Ron and Hermione as my own, if that makes sense. And I'll protect them like that as well. They,” he said, jerking his thumb at the door, “have to convince me that they'll do right by Harry.”

“Great. You're the best parent figure that we've got for him at the moment. We're going to have to talk to the Trio about this, though. We can *not* let it be known that you're living under the same roof as him.”

“Why not?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Because my bigot of an ultimate boss informed me that Harry would be placed in a home of the Ministry's choosing if it was found that you were living in proximity to Harry. She also threatened my job if I permitted my relationship with you to go too far.”

“You need your job, Tonks!” he said with alarm.

“Will my job keep me warm at night? Will my job hold me when I need to be held? Can my job give me love?” She sighed. “Sirius wasn't exactly stingy, remember. A thousand Galleons? Arthur supported a family of nine on three thousand. I don't have to support anyone else. A thousand Galleons for me will last me a year, easily, assuming I get fired tomorrow and can't find a job.”

“And we'd hire you in a heartbeat as a bodyguard for Harry,” James said softly from the open doorway before turning to Remus. “Once again, I am an arse. Neither of us wanted to think about what you were saying. I, of course, go for the most hurtful statement I can, as usual.” There were tears in the corners of his eyes. “How did we go fifteen years without growing up?”

“Dumbledore saw to it that you didn't have anyone around to help you with the process,” Tonks said. “You couldn't even go shopping – you said the things you needed just showed up, didn't you? So there was no one you could talk to.”

“You're right,” Lily said. “Still, that doesn't excuse us.” She looked at Tonks for a moment, who apparently understood exactly what Lily was asking, because she nodded. Lily stepped forward and hugged her school friend.

As she stepped back, she continued, “We spent fifteen years mourning the death of our only child, and I guess that we were so happy that we had him back that we didn't think ... we'd never seen an attack and ... to be blunt, we blew it.” She sniffed. “Do you think he'll ever forgive us?”

“We're all learning, Mum,” Harry said as he made everyone aware that he'd slipped into the hallway with them. “I'm not used to having living parents to lean on, and you're not used to having a living son. I've still had some times in the mornings when I've been startled to see you in the kitchen.”

“It's just that ...” James began. He looked frustrated for a moment, as if trying to find the words he needed. “You needed us, and we were out getting pissed!”

“James!” Lily exclaimed.

“He's sixteen, love. He's probably already heard all of those words.” She scowled at him, telling him this conversation was not yet over. He ignored her scowl for once and turned back to Harry. “We've finally got something we knew we'd never see again in this life, and we go and get ourselves drunk!”

“Dad, if I was happy, and had the right to drink, I'd probably celebrate as well. As much as I appreciate what he's doing, I think Prof ... *Remus* is overstating things. I would have had the nightmare under any circumstances, but nobody knew it was going to happen.” He paced restlessly. “How am I supposed to act? You're my parents, but I'm an orphan, as far as I'm concerned.” He looked up at the hisses of pain from his parents.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean that to hurt you. It's my mindset right now. I haven't had the time to really get it set in my brain, my heart, whatever, that I actually have living parents now. You're here, you're alive, but my brain hasn't completely accepted that. Right now you're adults who are really concerned about me and my health. It's happening – slowly – that I'm getting used to the fact that *my parents* are alive.”

He grinned widely. “Wishes do come true sometimes. My parents are here and they love me.”

He looked to Remus. “Give 'em a break, Remus. Be honest – if *any* of us had known that attack was going to happen, we'd have prepared for it, even if it required hitting me over the head with a hammer to prevent me from experiencing it. Are they supposed to stand behind me every moment of the day, waiting for a problem? They were celebrating being alive. Are you going to be angry with them if I fall and break my leg and they aren't there?”

Remus scowled at him. “When did you get so good at arguing?”

“I don't want my family arguing. You're mad at them because they weren't here. They went out for one night of celebrating. It turns out, in hindsight, to be a bad night.” He shrugged. “Nobody's dead, and despite what *he's* trying to do, it won't work. I've had it knocked into my skull by a couple people that I can't drive my friends away, so I'll stop trying. What he's trying to do is -”

He stopped talking for a moment, a look of wonder in his eyes as something obviously struck him. Before he could say anything, he suddenly winced heavily. “Damn ... need to work on ... Occlumency ... rrrgghh ...” He let loose with a scream suddenly and collapsed to the floor.

A high reedy voice spoke through his lips once more. “I shall know why you feel such triumph, boy. Your mind is nothing to me, and I shall strip it bare if need be.”

Hermione appeared in the hallway as if summoned, looked at Harry and slipped into her room, exiting a moment later holding the same stone from the previous night. “*Expulsi!*” Hermione screamed as she pressed the stone to his scar, and once again she struck Harry with her spell. He stopped writhing and fell heavily flat onto his back.

“Ow?” he said softly.

Lily landed heavily on her knees and scooped him into her arms as best she could. “I'm here, baby. Just be calm and I'll do everything I can to help you.”

“Just being here is enough,” he said softly, obviously in pain. “Thank you, Mum.” He faded into quiet unconsciousness.

“Do you realise that this is the first chance I've had to get to Diagon Alley since third year?” Harry asked as the group walked through the portal behind the Leaky Cauldron. “Me getting here in fourth year was right out, given the World Cup – thanks again for inviting me, Mr Weasley – and last year, with the Headmaster deciding that I wasn't safe unless I was under the thumb of someone that he personally trusted, I couldn't come either.” He cocked his head slightly. “Mum? Dad? Do I still have access to your vault?”

James laughed. “Of course you do,” he said. “Let's get to Gringott's and we'll deal with a few things. Better to do it now, while you're here with us.”

The group wended its way to the large white marble building and joined the line. A goblin with a look that Harry *hoped* was a grin approached them. “Ah, the Potter family. Follow me, please.” He turned and walked away without verifying that they were, in fact, following.

They were led to an office with a golden door. It opened noiselessly, exposing a desk with a well-appointed goblin seated behind it. He was obviously powerful and placed highly. “Ah, the Potters. Enter, please.”

Once they were seated, the goblin spoke again. “I must first start with the young Mr Potter. I regret to inform you that the vault that was opened for your convenience has been closed and its contents reabsorbed into the accounts of its true owner.”

“Dumbledore,” Harry said simply, his face a mask.

“I am forbidden by bank secrecy statutes to admit whether or not you are correct, Mr Potter,” the goblin responded, although his face told a different story for those who knew how to read it. “I must now move on to the business with Mr and Mrs James Potter. More precisely, further business for Mr Potter the younger, but it requires a decision on your part.”

“I'm listening,” James said simply.

“It involves the will of Sirius Black. While you have fulfilled the legal aspects of the will, we find ourselves in a slight quandary. Due to the situation that you found yourselves in for the last fifteen years, Mr Black was unaware of your existence, and left instructions with us. While the will was required to refer to ‘the current head of House Potter’, the instructions left with us refer to ‘Harry’. We were unable to resolve this, since these instructions are as legally binding to us as the will is. And they are at odds. We cannot give the items to both yourself and to young Mr Potter.”

“Is it anything likely to be considered dangerous?” Lily asked.

“It depends on your definition of dangerous. A non-magical sword can be dangerous, as can a large sum of Galleons, especially if they fall upon you.”

“Is there anything in the bequest that is immediately dangerous, such as cursed items?” she asked carefully.

“Not that we are aware of. There may be Dark or cursed items in the vaults that Mr Black referred to, but nothing obviously so.”

“What is involved?” James asked.

“A vault of items, such as jewellery and the like; family swords, ornamental and functional; as well as other various items, and a vault much like the one he has used these past five years, with considerably more money in it.”

“One wonders if Dumbledore knew about the wording that Sirius used?” Lily asked.

“No, he didn't,” Harry said. “Or else there wouldn't have been the problem with my discovering that you're alive. Had Sirius said, 'Everything to Harry', the goblins wouldn't be in this situation, and we never would have discovered that you're alive.” He scowled. “I wonder if removing the vault is just clean up on his part, or a very mild attempt at a spank of sorts, for getting out from under his thumb? After all, I now have to go through you guys for money.”

“No you don't,” James said. Looking to the goblin, who was wearing what Harry assumed was a satisfied look, James said, “Sirius left instructions that the vaults should go to Harry? I agree. He wanted them to go to him, Harry gets the vaults. Sirius is happy in the beyond, Harry is as happy as he can be at the bequest, and you here at Gringott's get to be happy as well.”

Several sheets of parchment came out onto the desk, and after Harry and James had both signed them, two ornate keys were slid toward Harry. “These are the keys to your new vaults, Mr Potter. Use them in good health.”

“I'd offer you a heartfelt sentiment in return, but with my luck, I'd accidentally start the next war with the goblins,” Harry said wryly.

“What were you thinking?” he was asked.

“Something about swimming in gold or the like, meaning that I was wishing you wealth and such.”

“Such a thought would not be amiss, young Mr Potter. Let us take the wish for the deed.” He held out his hand in the human gesture, and Harry shook it.

“Done,” he said with a smile. “We both wish each other well.”

“Indeed we do, Mr Potter. I look forward to a long career of doing your banking.”

“From your mouth to God's ears, as the Muggles say,” Harry replied. “I've got a nuisance on my back that might cause problems with that.”

“Somehow, I have doubts that he will prove to be a significant menace for long,” the goblin replied.

“Let us hope that you are correct,” Harry answered him fervently. “Well, we should stop taking up so much of your time, sir.”

The goblin's eyebrows rose for only a moment. “Please, Mr Potter, call me Ragnok.”

It was Harry's turn for rising eyebrows. “As long as you call me Harry.”

“Done, Harry.”

“Done, Ragnok.” They held their solemn looks for a moment before both broke into simultaneous smiles.

“I think we've been sombre enough for posterity,” Ragnok said with a smile.

“History will call it a solemn occasion, so we're good,” Harry chuckled lightly. With that, they left the office, returning to the lobby to meet Hermione and the others. All had very worried looks on their faces.

“Is everything okay?” Hermione asked. “You were gone for so long!”

“We had to clear up a problem with Sirius's will. Everything's good now, according to Ragnok.” He had a smirk as he waited for the reaction to that comment. “I don't know whether or not he was serious about it being a solemn occasion or not.”

“Harry, you shook hands with and joked with the head of the goblins,” James said. “Something you did impressed him. I'd say that was worth a solemn moment or two.” James was shaking his head and looked to Remus. “They were joking around like old friends!”

“All I did was wish him good will,” Harry said with a shrug.

“Very few treat goblins with any type of ...” Arthur began. “To be honest, it seems that the average wizard or witch would like to do to the goblins what we do to the gnomes in our gardens. They're seen as little better.”

Harry was scowling at that point. “We treat the people who can bankrupt us in a second like something we clean off our shoes. Idiots.” He shook his head. “Well, I need to get on line to get some money, so that I can actually buy my stuff today.” He turned and almost ran over the goblin waiting for him. “My apologies. I ... never mind. It's bad enough I didn't notice you, I won't dig myself any deeper by saying the wrong thing.”

“I understand, Mr Potter,” the goblin said with amusement. “I am here to take you to a cart. It should be interesting to see if you enjoy it as much as you did the first time I took you down the tunnels.”

Harry looked at him for a long moment. “I can't remember your name. Started with a 'G' I think. 'Grit-' or 'Grip-' something?”

The goblin's eyebrows rose. “I'm impressed. Most wouldn't remember that much. It's Griphook, by the way.”

“Well, you gave me one of the first bits of fun I can recall in the wizarding world, so I remember a lot of that day. I'm sorry I didn't remember all of your name.”

It's of no moment. We met once, five years ago. Now, shall we?"

His money pouch heavier by many Galleons, and wearing some jewellery he found in the second vault, Harry and the rest began to work their way through Diagon Alley. "What's the armband for?" Ron asked.

"Apparently it was designed for poor students. The little card that was in the box it was in described it as a study aid. You wear it all day, and at night, it helps your mind organise the information so that you can better access it."

"That's cheating!" Hermione gasped. "That gives you an unfair advantage!"

"Not really," he answered her. "It's not like it's a textbook that has all the answers in it. It's more like ... hmm ... it's more like your notes you take in class. It doesn't give me perfect recall of the material. If I fall asleep in History of Magic, it's anyone's guess what I could end up 'learning'." At her disbelieving look, he added, "Sirius added a note, warning me about falling asleep in classes or the Common Room. Apparently it happened to him once."

Lily laughed. "So that's why he swore that Ringo Starr was a Goblin astronomer! Needless to say, I never let him live that one down."

Harry grinned. "I'll remember that. This thing won't guarantee that I'll pass all my classes, Hermione. I need to try to pay attention to the professor for it to work, which means that my History of Magic grade will still hover near the low end." At her still disbelieving look, he tried once more.

"Apparently it works the way that your notes do for you. You read them and repeat the information, hoping to make it stay in your brain. Apparently, this bracelet does the repeating for me while I sleep. I'd imagine that it would be an excellent thing to have around if I wanted to learn a new language."

She seemed less than convinced, so Harry shrugged and moved on. "I grabbed a couple rings because they seemed to insist on coming out with me." He held up a largish one that immediately made James laugh.

"You sneaky old dog!" he said to the sky. "I'll bet this was part and parcel of trying to get Harry out from under Albus!"

"What do you mean?" Lily asked.

"That big ring is the Black family ring. The one who wears that heads the Black family. I'm betting that was the reason that Ragnok was involved with that transaction in there. He was probably going to insist that he speak to Harry directly, rather than allow Albus to handle all his banking. That would have unravelled all of this at that point, since the situation would have remained the same, and Harry would know that there was a Potter still alive." He looked to his son. "Sirius wanted you to have that, Harry. Put it on."

"Anything special supposed to happen when I do, like a burst of power, or unlocking some secret talent or something?" Harry asked with a laugh.

"Not unless the Blacks were even more psychotic than I think they were. All that a ring like that will do magically is verify that you have the right to wear it. If you don't, it goes right back into the vault. Well, they all have resizing charms and the like. Wearability charms are a standard."

Harry laughed and slid the ring onto his right ring finger. It was warm for a moment as it resized, and then the weight on his finger lessened slightly. "Looks like I'm the head of the Black family now," he said quietly. "You'll have to train me in what that means, Dad."

The group arrived in Greece quietly. Portkeys were good for that sort of thing. They carefully exited the safe room that had been set up for them, keeping a close eye on those nearby. While it might have been after 2 a.m., people were always up and around at every hour of the day. It had taken the team over two weeks to set up this raid, and they weren't going to let something like an insomniac Muggle ruin it.

They quickly released the owl that carried a letter for the Grangers. The tracking charm on the letter would handily pinpoint them for the strike team, and then they could complete their mission. Soon, they had their target - a villa on a hill. No neighbours within any reasonable distance. It was a perfect site for an ambush.

They were quite stealthy on their way to the villa. Apparation was right out, since not all of them could be quiet. The person who had made the Portkey for them had not known the interior layout of the villa with any certainty, so they had not been able to appear inside, lest they run the risk of becoming one with a wall. While Voldemort might not complain about losing one Death Eater, the resulting explosion would likely take out more than one of the others. A Pyrrhic victory, it was decided, was not in the plan for that night. The Death Eaters on the mission found themselves pleased with that.

The group of ten neared the property, and were suddenly bathed in bright light. "*Reducto!*" the leader screamed, and one of the lights exploded in a shower of glass and steel. There were still others on the property, and the occupants appeared to be moving inside. "Just shoot at anything that moves! The Grangers are supposed to be the only ones in there!"

They blew down the door and began to fire spells inside. The sounds of breaking wood and glass were loud in the air. Shortly, the groaning of support beams could be heard, and the villa collapsed in on itself, obviously dooming those inside.

Feeling smug, the team lead pointed skyward and shouted "*Morsmordre!*" before activating the team Portkey.

Wishful Thinking A Swiftly Changing Landscape

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 9 – A Swiftly Changing Landscape

Severus Snape placed a properly concerned look upon his face as he strode through the halls of Hogwarts toward the Headmaster's office. He was, however, enjoying the news he'd have to give. *This will teach those sanctimonious fools to underestimate me. I can hurt and degrade them as easily as they believe that they can me. It's just a pity that it couldn't have been managed for the brat's birthday, but a month after is good enough. The pain will still be sweet.*

"Purgatory." The old man tortures himself over things best done for the survival of the world. That is why the fight has taken so long. He makes the necessary decisions, but then flagellates himself over those same decisions.

"Come in, Severus," Albus said.

Severus entered the room to find the man without his customary twinkle. He had certainly been without it these past days, since the return of the Potters, and the news Severus had to impart would certainly not bring it back any time soon.

"Albus, I have unfortunate news to report." He stood before the desk, carefully schooling himself into the mien of a man who wished anything but to be doing what he was at that moment. "It appears that the Dark Lord has located the Grangers in Greece, and sent a team to kill them. The villa that they were in was destroyed utterly."

"Is there any chance for survivors?" Albus asked carefully. The hope was raw in his voice.

"From the report that I heard at tonight's meeting, unless they developed magical abilities in their last seconds, they were crushed by the collapsing structure. Even a wizard would find surviving such an experience to be a difficult proposition." His demeanor spoke of sorrow, but in his head, he was dancing with delight. Now to find a way to get the information to Remus in such a way as to blame the Potters – or at least their spawn.

"Very well, Severus," Albus sighed. "I shall make some inquiries and then request to meet with Miss Granger to pass along the sad news."

"I shall return to my dungeons and continue my studies. I have been working on the Wolfsbane Potion in an attempt to alter its effects. The shift is still too painful for a werewolf to be useful to anyone for some time after the change."

"Very well, Severus. It pleases me to see your attempts to fix such a grievous wrong." He rose to his feet and walked around his desk, and the two men left the office together.

Their conversation veered to the banal as they walked together toward the entrance to the school. Before they reached the entrance, Severus said, "I fear I should take my leave of you now, sir. As I said, I have potions brewing."

"Yes, Severus, by all means. I shall see you when I return."

The Potions Master peeled off toward the dungeons and his laboratories. *Oh yes, he thought with a smile. I am attempting to fix the Wolfsbane issue, but not in the manner that Albus thinks. With luck, I should be able to alter the effects enough to not have them noticed until it is far too late. And since Lupin is my only test subject at the moment, I can manage to rid the world of that vile creature.*

He shook his head. *I was so close. James Potter was dead, and the mutt got himself killed. All that was left was the werewolf and the sniveling coward, and the coward will be easy to manipulate to his death. The Dark Lord himself will do the job for me.*

A regal looking owl tapped upon the window of Number 12 Grimmauld Place. Remus looked up in surprise. "Not one I recognise, but it's sent by someone with the secret. It couldn't have found us otherwise." He opened the window and the owl flew in, landing before Hermione.

Miss Granger,

It is rare that I have had to write one of these letters, and I like them less and less each time I have written one. It is with truly heavy heart that I write this.

I have come across the unfortunate information that your parents were killed while in Greece. The Muggle papers state that it was a localised earthquake and subsequent collapse of the villa that they were renting, but it is my understanding that the cause was actually Voldemort's

Death Eaters.

I can only hope that their end was quick and painless. I am truly sorry, Miss Granger.

Albus Dumbledore

The letter fell from numb hands onto the table, and Hermione began to shudder and shake. Harry picked the letter up and scanned it before setting it back down on the table. He knelt by Hermione and put his arms around her. "Let it out, Hermione."

She spun in the chair and nearly threw herself at Harry, putting her arms around his neck and sobbing hysterically. The letter made its way around the people at the table, with a surprising number of scowls appearing on faces as they read.

Harry thought for a moment and then moved once more, this time picking Hermione up out of the chair and heading for 12 Grimmauld's lounge. Her crying could still be clearly heard from the kitchen where most everyone remained.

No one spoke for a long time as all were either lost in thought or unwilling to disturb those lost in thought. "We're dealing with a spy in the Order," Hestia Jones said finally. "I'd like to think that with all the work we've done recently, trying to find the will and then find the Potters, I've learned a little of what makes that girl tick. I have very serious doubts that she chirped her parents whereabouts to everyone who would listen. She's not that type. She mentioned it in the Order, or at the Weasleys – people she trusts, or at least used to trust. The kids aren't about to say anything to Dumbledore or Snape about it, so any of them is right out."

"But I'm not," Arthur said sadly. "Albus was mildly surprised to see Hermione at the Burrow so early, so I explained that her parents were in Athens for a second honeymoon. I can easily see Severus complaining in his inimitable fashion about her 'interfering presence' to him, and Albus explaining why she was around."

"It certainly wasn't common knowledge around the Order, as far as I know," Remus said. "I knew because I'd asked her about them when I first saw her – same reason as Albus, surprise – and she told me. But it was just the two of us, unless someone was using Extendable Ears." He thought for a long moment. "My thought is that the two most likely culprits are Albus and Severus. The question is, why?"

Harry carried Hermione into the lounge and sat down on the love seat, cradling her to his chest. "I know it hurts," he crooned. "Let it out." He rocked back and forth on the seat as she sobbed into his shirt.

The other four of the six who'd gone to the Ministry sat in shock at what they'd just learnt. Ron was blinking back tears, and Neville knelt on the floor next to the love seat, his hand simply touching her to let her know that she wasn't alone.

Finally, her sobs subsided, but she made no effort to pull away from Harry. "Thank you," she sniffed. She looked around the room and saw the others. "Thank you, all of you."

She suddenly realised that Ron had tears in his eyes. "What's wrong, Ron?"

He laughed softly. "You lost your parents to Death Eaters, and you ask *me* what's wrong?" He walked over to her. "I got to thinking what I'd feel like if I got told that Mum and Dad were dead in such a cold and unfeeling manner." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "You'll get through this, 'cause you've got us to help you." He paused. "Well, Neville and Harry. Can't say as I'll be much help. Teaspoon, don't you know." He grinned at her, drawing a small laugh from her.

"Oh Ron," she replied, "you've grown so much since then. You're at least to tablespoon level, or maybe even a demitasse cup!"

"Demi-wha?"

"What he said," Harry and Neville added simultaneously.

She rolled her eyes slightly. "It's a small coffee cup. It literally means that. It's a French word, meaning 'half coffee cup'. It's about 4 ounces, and I realise what you guys are doing, you sneaky people." She smiled at them, a little watery, but they all understood.

"You'll cry over it," Neville said, "But eventually you'll get past it. It'll always hurt a little, I won't lie to you about that. But it will get better." He smiled his own weak smile. "My parents aren't dead, but I think I can call up some understanding."

"Thank you again," she said. "It means a lot to me."

"Well, you mean a lot to me," Harry said plainly. "Us. You mean a lot to *us* ." He blushed slightly at the misspoken phrase.

Her eyes sparkled, and the others in the room grinned to varying degrees. Before anyone could say anything to further embarrass him, Charlie walked by the room on his way to the kitchen. "Charlie?" Harry asked, stopped the dragon tamer.

"Yeah, Harry? What do you need?" The stocky man walked over and looked at the two in the chair.

"Well, the day that we escaped from the Dursley home, you cursed, and I wanted to ask you about it. I think I misheard what you said," Harry was smiling slightly.

Charlie thought for a long moment, and honestly couldn't remember what he'd said at the time. "Sure, go ahead. What was it?"

I'd swear that I heard you yell 'Hellfire and dalmatians!' before we left the place." The smile Harry wore was a bit larger now.

"Yeah, that's the phrase! Dad taught it to me! How'd I do?" He sounded excited at learning something new, discovering whether or not he'd gotten some Muggle phrase correct.

Harry's grin widened, and even Hermione was giggling now. "Hellfire and dalmatians?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "Um, I hate to tell you and your father this, but it's *supposed* to be 'Hellfire and *damnation*'. You definitely get an A for effort, though."

Charlie stepped back slightly, thinking. "Huh. I always thought it was supposed to be a reference to the dogs that ride with the fire patrol people."

"Nice thought," Hermione said, laughing very softly through her sniffles, "but nowhere near correct. Sorry."

"Hey, you learn something new every day," Charlie said. "Now I can get it right if I ever need to use it again. And I can let Dad know too!"

"Let me know what?" Arthur asked conversationally as he stepped into the room. He seemed to be taken slightly aback as the Ministry Six began chuckling, or giggling in the girls' cases.

"The phrase is 'Hellfire and damnation', sir," Harry said. "Dalmatians have nothing to do with it."

"Are you ... yes, of course you're sure. I was so certain that I had it right!" he murmured. "I'd have sworn I learnt it correctly. Thought it had something to do with the dogs that follow fire patrol vehicles."

Ron laughed outright. "We Weasleys all think alike," he said. "Charlie said the same thing, and I know that I'd've come to the same conclusion if I'd heard the phrase."

"I must unfortunately bring this to a more sombre topic," Arthur said. "Is there anyone in the Order that you trust to give your power of attorney to?" he asked Hermione. "We'll need to have someone to handle your parents' estate and ... other matters."

"As long as we're talking Order rebels, yes," she replied. "It would be best to have someone who knows the Muggle world better, though."

"I understand and agree," Arthur said. "Probably your best bet would be either Remus or Tonks, then. Both are pretty well at home in the Muggle world."

"I'll talk to them later and see which one wants it or can handle it best," she said with a sniff. "I miss them so much." She put her head back on Harry's shoulder and cried a little more.

Harry entered the room for his last lesson in Occlumency. His mother had taken over the lessons for all those who needed to learn, including Arthur Weasley. In only three weeks, he'd managed to learn what he needed to in order to be somewhat effective, and Lily had showed him that there could be a gentleness to the art.

"You should be ready to take on the world, baby boy," she said with a smile. "This is less of a lesson than a chance to test your skills. Since you head off to Hogwarts in two days, it will be harder to teach you if you still need it."

He smiled at her and brushed away the gentle tendrils he felt tugging at his mind. He knew he'd never have noticed them at the beginning of the summer. "Nice try, Mum," he said, his face breaking into a huge smile.

"I know, Harry," she said, her own smile growing as well. "I thought I'd never see you until I passed on, and now we're here and *LEGILIMENS!*"

This one was more of the style that Snape used on him, and he felt the strong pressure on his shields. In response, he walked over and tweaked her nose lightly, making her laugh.

"You pass, Harry. Voldemort will still get to you occasionally, because he's got an in, so to speak, but you should be far more able to ignore his visions and his taunts."

"I wonder what will happen this year?" he asked. "What will go wrong for me this school year?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you've been told about my school career so far? The Philosopher's Stone, and facing Voldemort riding the back of someone's head? Stop that, Mum, I can feel you trying to get in." He grinned impudently at her. "Then I had to fight that stupid basilisk while worrying about people hating me for being 'The Heir of Slytherin', which I'm not. Third year was that bit with Sirius, where they treated me like a mushroom for the year. And the information that they kept from me was ridiculous! 'Sirius Black tried to kill you as a baby. Oh, by the way, we're hiding that he was your godfather.' What did they think, that I was going to suddenly give myself over to Voldemort because one of his biggest supporters was my godfather?" He looked at his mother's amused look. "I know he wasn't a Death Eater *now*, but at the time -" He pressed his finger to her nose. "I can still feel you trying, Mum."

"I understand as far as Sirius is concerned," she responded. "I'm quite impressed with your Occlumency, by the way. You've repelled every one of my attempts. The two most obvious ones I could understand, but I've continued attacking, and you've been able to keep me out. I'm not a Master at it, but I like to think I'm pretty good."

"I had good teachers this summer."

"Thank you, and I'll pass that along to Arthur as well."

"Please. And thank him for putting up with Snape. That means a lot to me." After a short pause, he added, "And thank you for *not* correcting me by telling me that it's 'Professor Snape, Harry'." The last three words were delivered in a perfect imitation of Albus Dumbledore.

"Give him all the respect he's due," she replied with an angelic smile. "Then go back to calling him 'Professor' when you're at school."

He laughed. "I love you, Mum," he said as he gave her a quick hug. He was startled, however, by the quick twitch he felt from her, and then the very tight return of his embrace.

"You have no idea how happy hearing that makes me. I spent so many years mourning your death, and now to hold you in my arms ... I will never be able to tell you how good it makes us feel to know that our darling baby boy is alive." He could hear her holding back tears as she reached the end of her comment.

"And now I know that my parents loved ... love me," he replied, his own voice getting a little thick. "Vernon and Petunia seemed to love telling me that you two were worthless and that Dad killed you both drunk driving. I ... please don't get depressed by this, Mum, but I used to wish I could die and be with you both." He pulled her tighter. "Now I've got you right here. Except for the pesky problem of Riddle, everything is actually surprisingly good."

James laughed from the doorway. "You've been listening to me too much, son. Describing a Dark wizard like him as a 'pesky problem'?"

"You guys will keep me safe, won't you?" he asked impudently.

"With our lives, son," James said seriously. "With our lives."

Even though he packed the night before, somehow the attempt to get to the train station still felt rushed. He had to admit that a large part of that was breakfast taking far longer than it should have, what with pictures being taken by his parents, who seemed to be trying to make up for five previous years of none. He didn't make things any easier, since he couldn't stop grinning over the fact that they were finally there to see him off to school for once, as he'd always dreamed.

Eventually they made it to Platform nine and three-quarters, along with the rest of the teeming crowds headed for school that day. Hermione was recovering slowly – she'd spent the day of the letter and almost all of the next day doing nothing but crying – but was no longer sobbing at the drop of a hat. She pretended to be over it already, but Harry knew better.

"Alright there, Hermione?" Ron asked softly as he gently put his hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she replied non-committally.

Ginny's snort told everyone what was coming. "If we've decided that we won't accept that from Harry, why would we accept it from anyone else?" She looked at Hermione with a slight smile on her face, but the look also said that she was going to be rather like a terrier about this.

"Fine," Hermione huffed angrily. "I'm hurting, and I'm grieving. Is that good enough?"

"Better," Neville said. "It really does feel better to admit it, rather than hide it."

"If I were her, I'd hide my face," came the all-too familiar drawl of Draco Malfoy.

"If you were her, you'd *still* manage to be ugly somehow," Harry shot back, much to the surprise of everyone within earshot of the meeting.

Draco Malfoy turned a colour that Harry remembered all too well from his uncle. It never worked well with Vernon, and it certainly didn't work on someone as pale as Malfoy. He finally inhaled deeply and his colour returned to normal. "I forgot for a moment. It's not as if I was being insulted by someone worthwhile, rather than the scar-head and his band of mewling sycophants."

Harry's response was not one that anyone listening expected to hear, given his previous interactions with the blond. "Isn't it interesting that he's managed to describe his own troupe rather well? I mean, think about it – Draco at the head of a group consisting of Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson, Greengrass, and Bulstrode. Their gender balance is the same as ours, I think, but it's hard to tell with three of them what they are. Malfoy speaks and they all hurry to agree with him. They're more sycophants than any of you five are."

"Yeah, we'll tell you where to get off," Ron said, also surprising the group.

"I'd imagine you have to tell him that in regards to the Weaselette," Malfoy said with a smirk.

Harry turned to look at Ginny, who was seething, as was Neville. He winked to the both of them before turning back to Malfoy. "Well, if I were ever in that situation, you can bet I'd be trying to get off." His voice made it quite clear which side of the double entendre he intended, and Ginny blushed furiously by way of applause. "Now, what brings you to this corner of the world, Malfoy, other than boarding the Hogwarts Express? Are you here to admit that your father is a Death Eater who was seen by quite a few Ministry officials in said gear?"

"My father is no such thing, Potter. If he were seen at the site of your godfather's unfortunate demise," he replied, not having lost his smirk, "then he

would have to have been there under the Imperius. Someone is obviously trying to besmirch the good name of the Malfoys.”

Harry’s only response was a loud bark of laughter. “Of course he was under the Imperius! He had to be! After all, having such a horribly weak will like that has to be hereditary, so now I know where you get it from.”

Malfoy purpled again, but Harry bulld on. “Remember, Malfoy, that we had a teacher who taught us about the Unforgivables, and even taught us how to fight off the Imperius. Most of the Gryffindors could do it. How did you Slytherins do?” he asked. “If people who you consider far, far beneath you, such as Ron and Neville, can throw off the Imperius, then it really doesn’t say much for your father, does it? You sneer at the Weasleys, yet they can fight it. Your father, on the other hand ...” Harry intentionally left the statement unsaid.

Malfoy looked ready to explode at Harry, his hand twitching toward his wand, but then his eyes landed on Hermione. “I was so sorry to hear about your parents, Granger,” he said in a voice so silkily insincere that it set Harry’s teeth on edge. “It might make you want to think twice about how close to Potter you want to be.”

“The papers say it was an earthquake,” Harry said.

“The *Muggle* papers,” was the blond’s scoffing response. “Anyone with any intelligence realises that it was a message to anyone who trusts Potter.”

“Yes,” Neville said. “It said, ‘We’re so scared of Harry Potter that we have to try to scare his friends away by killing the easiest targets we can find – people who can’t fight back against wizards.’” He walked up and got nose-to-nose with Malfoy. “It says that you Death Eaters are all cowards.”

Malfoy was beyond angry, and his wand came out, but before he could say anything, Harry asked, in a rather passable and obvious imitation of his drawl, “Tell me, Malfoy, did they give you the real Mark yet, or is it one of those temporary ones that comes off with alcohol – play tattoos for children who want to be just like Daddy, but aren’t old enough to play with the big boys yet?”

“You will not mock me, Potter! I am the last scion of the Malfoy family!” Malfoy bellowed, and the tip of his wand glowed. Before the spell could leave, Harry had shoved Malfoy’s hand toward the ceiling, where the oddly mauve spell splashed harmlessly across the boards.

“Then act like one, you twit,” Harry barked. “You attempted to attack me. Are you aware that I can expel you from the Black family line now, and even bring your mother in as collateral damage, since it is obvious that she never trained you properly?”

“And how can you expel me from the family?” was the sneered response.

Harry raised his right hand, where the Black Family ring sat. “This states that I can, Draco. I’m certain that you recognise it as a valid Family Head’s ring. Don’t push me, or else you’ll find yourself receiving a Howler from your mother about her expulsion. You are a member of the Black family, whether or not you carry its name. Your attitude reflects upon the family.”

He stopped and glared in the blond’s eyes. “You must learn to deal with taunts without violence, young grasshopper,” he said. “You only shame yourself otherwise.”

Malfoy turned and started to stalk away, but he thought better of it and spun on his heel, moving in close to Harry. “This is not over, Potter. We’ll hunt down and kill anyone who means anything to you. And we’ll get away with it, too.”

Harry grabbed his collar and yanked him forward until they were face to face again. “If you’re going to threaten like that, Malfoy,” he said conversationally, “you need to learn to do it better.” Harry slapped him once on each cheek, hard enough to cause redness. “Go back and try again.” He looked over the blond’s shoulder and then pushed just hard enough to send the boy stumbling. Malfoy snarled at Harry and then stomped away.

“Was that high dudgeon or girlish snit?” James asked in a voice clearly heard throughout the platform, judging by the laughter that rippled around.

“Well, it’s getting close to time for the group of you to board the train,” Lily said, her face tight. Harry looked and noted that Molly Weasley wore a similar look, so he was pretty sure that they’d just had the first of many battles as to which one was going to be the better parent to him.

“Before we step on, I need to tender an apology to Neville, to Ginny and her family,” Harry said.

“No you don’t, dear,” Molly said. “While it was startling, I could tell what you were actually saying – that there were two ways to take it, and you chose the more complimentary version. I don’t consider the family insulted.”

“Nor do I,” Arthur said.

“Nonetheless, it was somewhat crude, and as the Head of the Black family, I would like to take this moment to apologise for saying a potentially hurtful thing without prior warning.” He looked to his father, who nodded. “I would also like to state publicly that the Black family is proud to call both the Weasley family and the Longbottom family friend.”

James stepped forward. “The Potters would like to make the same statement. Both the Longbottom and Weasley families are considered friends by the Potter family.”

Arthur grinned. “The Weasleys are honoured and are proud to call the Longbottom, Potter, and Black families friend.” Neville reiterated the statement, claiming the Weasleys as friend as well.

“Now that we’ve got the lovefest out of the way, can we get on the train?” Ron asked. “I’d kinda like to actually catch the thing. We don’t have a car to fly this time!” Amidst laughter, they quickly boarded.

The trip was about two hours old when Susan Bones came by. "Hi!" she said brightly. "How was your summer?"

"Mine was decent," Harry said, "but unfortunately, Death Eaters murdered Hermione's parents a few days ago."

"There was nothing in the papers about it," Susan said softly. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

"I'd say it's okay, but ... well, I know what you mean. You didn't ... oh ..." Hermione faded off into some sniffs of grief, and Ginny held her for a minute while she pulled herself together.

"I'm really sorry, Hermione. I never meant to ..." Hermione just waved a hand at her, a watery smile on her face. "Okay." She turned to Harry, feeling more than a bit embarrassed. "I was startled to see your parents were still alive. After all this time with everyone believing – I want to think that he had good reasons for it, but for Dumbledore to – it's just not right! I think you should talk with Auntie and see if there's something that can be done about what he did."

Harry scowled. "I think I'd rather wait until someone a little more sympathetic to certain family friends is in that office. Right now, I trust your aunt as much as I trust Cornelius Fudge, which is to say – not at all."

Susan was actually physically rocked back by this comment. "Aunt Amelia?" she asked in bewilderment, blushing as she spoke since her voice came out as a squeak. "She's upheld the law for years!"

"Yes, including the child endangerment ones. Luckily, Remus Lupin only visited occasionally, rather than living in the same house as my parents and I did this summer."

Susan was looking more and more confused by the second. "But why would Auntie say anything against Mr Lupin? She was happy when she'd heard that he had been working at Hogwarts without an incident until the end of the year, once she learned about his affliction. She'd like to see better laws written in regards to the way werewolves are treated."

"Based on what Auror Tonks said, the laws she'd likely want to see enacted involve camps and lots of silver. Tonks had her job threatened because she's seeing Remus. She was basically told that if she chose to marry him, her job was forfeit."

Susan was shaking her head. "No. Not Aunt Amelia. She'd never do something like that. Auror Tonks must have misunderstood her."

Harry scowled. "She morphed into using your Aunt's face and used her voice when she told us. I believe the exact quote was 'If you marry that *beast*, your contract will be forfeit.' She spat the words out, I believe." He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Now, care to explain how that might be misunderstood?"

"I ... I can't. I'd like to think that there's some explanation. But maybe my aunt really has been a bigot all this time and tried to fool me," she said sadly. "You'll forgive me if I don't thank you for this revelation," Susan finished.

"I'm sorry, but you did need to know."

She nodded and left the compartment.

"You've changed, Harry," Ron said. "You've never acted like you did around Malfoy before. What happened? It was like you were a whole new person."

"In a way, I am. Sirius left me leadership in the Black family, and with that comes certain responsibilities. I'll likely backslide and hex the hell out of him in the halls just in time to see Snape walk into view and dun me a thousand points, but for now, I'm trying to be more adult. I wasn't joking about that bit with the Blacks allying themselves with the Longbottoms and Weasleys."

"We knew," Neville said. "None of us treated it as a joke." They quieted for a while, letting the scenery go by, both inside and outside. Several of the Sixth and Seventh year Muggleborn girls were wearing clothing appropriate for the very warm weather London had been experiencing in August, and none of the boys were entirely unappreciative.

"I saw Bones heading down the train in tears, Potter. You've got some talent. Is there a girl you've been with that you haven't made cry?" Harry heard as he looked out the window at the rushing trees and grass. He turned to find a somewhat nastily smirking Cho Chang.

"Does that include cries of ecstasy?" Hermione asked in a saccharine voice. "If it does, then the answer would have to be 'No'."

"You have that right," Ginny purred in a voice that made all three males change the way that they were seated. Cho simply stomped off.

"Wait, you haven't heard my tale of passion!" Luna yelled after her.

"Ginny, that's a very dangerous weapon you have there," Neville choked out. "Careful how you use it."

Ginny grinned at him and then turned to Ron. "You compliment me, brother dear," she said with a smirk.

"Yeah, well if I'd been paying more attention who was talking, you'd not have gotten that reaction. I thought it was ..." he paused for a moment before saying, "...someone else."

"Oh really?" Luna asked, doing the same with her voice, which actually drew a slight whimper from Ron.

"Please don't?" he asked softly, his ears and face trying very hard to match his brilliant hair. She merely laughed, musically this time, rather than the usual raucous cacophony, and moved to rest her head on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry about starting that, Harry," Hermione said, "but Chang just ... she blames you for not saving Diggory, for not making last year work, and for not dropping me as a friend when you saw that *her* best friend had screwed up."

"Not much of a friendship if I drop you because my girlfriend says that I should, is it?" he replied. She blinked and then smiled at him.

"We're still only half-way there," Neville said into the quiet of the car. "I wonder if anyone else will come by to harass us?"

Albus Dumbledore spent more and more time in his office these days. Ostensibly it was because he had the beginning-of-year paperwork to finish, but it was more to stay away from his staff, all of whom no longer seemed to trust him.

How do I make them see that it was necessary? That had the prophecy stated that I must be the one to suffer, I would gladly have placed myself in Harry's situation? How do I make them see that we stand a chance of winning against Tom now— one that we would not have had if he had remained with his parents?

He was startled from his reverie by a sharp knock at the door to his office. "Come in!" he said. "Please, come in." The door opened to show Minerva in her usual mien these days – a very sharp line for a mouth and a more than slightly disapproving look to her eyes – and a James Potter who was coldly angry, with Lily silent beside him. "How may I help you both?"

James glared for a short time before saying in clipped tones, "We have come across some information that we wanted you to hear. What happens next is entirely up to you."

"Please," Albus said. "As they say, I am all ears." He settled back into his chair uneasily. James sat without being offered a chair, and Albus scowled although it was obvious to all that he was aiming it more at himself. "My apologies. This situation that I have created has addled my manners. Please, sit if you wish. Minky?" A house elf appeared in a ragged tea towel. "Would you be so kind as to get us tea for three?"

"Would you like the little cucumber sandwiches with your tea?" she asked in her squeaky voice.

"Yes, please." The little elf popped away. "I will swear an oath to you, magical if need be, that the tea and sandwiches are untainted in any way. I am making only an attempt to relax the tension between us. To prove that, I will permit you to choose my cup and pour my tea." He looked to Minerva. "This is to ease your mind. I have not forgotten your comment."

"Good," was her only response, rather sharply delivered. A moment later, Minky returned with a tray bearing a tea pot, cream, sandwiches and sugar. She narrowed her eyes. "As much as you have given me reason not to, I will trust you in this," she said, and poured tea for the three of them.

"Thank you," was Albus's heartfelt reply. "Now, what is this situation you speak of?"

"We have a spy in the Order, Albus, and we know who it is. I'm not referring to Severus passing information as we know he is. I'm referring to someone knowingly passing *extra* information to the other side," James said

Albus sat forward suddenly enough that he spilled some of his tea onto his robes, but he ignored the heat. "How do you know?"

"Two ways," Lily said simply. "One was Draco Malfoy, who taunted Miss Granger with information that was *not* printed in the Daily Prophet . After all, her parents were Muggles, and the crime took place in a foreign country. The Prophet wasn't interested in such a minor story. This means that the Death Eaters were definitely involved, since it is known that Lucius Malfoy has ties to the Death Eaters, especially after this past June."

The thread was picked up by James. "Second was the small number of people who had been told by Miss Granger that her parents were in Athens – Arthur admits that he told you, and we know that she also told Remus. Miss Granger is not the type to tell everyone where her parents were, so that narrows the field down. Arthur is willing to take Veritaserum to prove he is not a Death Eater spy, and Molly has already told us, with a wicked gleam in her eyes, that she can vouch for the fact that Arthur has no Dark Mark anywhere on his body." This was the first that James seemed to smile in the slightest degree. "I know that Remus didn't tell anyone, despite his being a 'Dark creature'." He delivered that with a scowl, recalling the conversation that his friend had told him about. "Even knowing the reaction that it would cause in him, he has offered to take Veritaserum to prove that fact. That leaves you and anyone that you might have told."

Albus sat back heavily enough that his chair moved slightly. "But ... but what reason would I have had for leaking information that led to the deaths of Hermione Granger's parents?"

"Perhaps you were attempting to isolate Harry again?" Minerva answered him. "You-Know-Who would react in very predictable fashion to such information. If you could remove the one person that has always been his rock, then he would possibly be forced to deal with you once more."

For the first time that anyone could remember, Albus Dumbledore was seen with his jaw open in complete shock. It took him nearly a minute to find his voice. "Have ... have things gotten so bad that you truly think that I would stoop to Tom's methods to ... to gain control of Harry? Do you *truly* believe that I would have anyone's parents *assassinated*?"

"That's the problem, Albus," Lily replied. "The Albus we thought we knew would never have contemplated something like that. But the Albus we *thought* we knew would also never have kept Harry from his *living* parents for fifteen years, no matter the reason. The Albus we thought we knew would never have contemplated making us grieve for our son for the past fifteen years for no reason. We don't want to think that you might have had her parents killed, but discovering what you've done these past fifteen years has shaken our belief in your motives *and* your methods." She stopped

speaking for a moment. "I guess the answer to your question is 'yes'. Given what we've learned, we believe it *possible* that you had her parents killed. Whether it's likely is another question. I will state however, based on your reactions right now, I would tend to think that you knew nothing of this until after the fact."

Albus stood and began to pace nervously. "I will swear by any means that you trust that I knew nothing of this until you told me. I honestly believed that the knowledge was out there, and that someone had overheard it and told the Death Eaters." He turned and faced the Potters and Minerva. "If you believe nothing else from me ever again, please believe that I truly had nothing to do with the deaths of her parents, unless it was trusting Severus with the ... Severus. But why would he make them a target, when they are not a ... I would not consider them a target of anyone's choice. What purpose could he have had?"

"Call him here," Minerva said. "Hide us so that we may hear his explanation, and ask him about the Grangers. I shall call Kingsley Shacklebolt in case he is necessary."

Albus's thoughts were whirling in his head. *This has gone so far from my control. I have no trust from the Order any longer, and now it appears that the man that I have trusted and protected these past years may still be working for the enemy. It is time to deal with things.* He looked grimly at his visitors. "Agreed. If you are willing to wait in the side room, I will send for him." A moment later, Minky the elf was off to request Severus Snape's presence in the Headmaster's office, returning seconds later to report that he would be along presently.

Severus was settling in with the latest Potions journal, planning to enjoy his last moments of freedom before the dunderheaded students arrived, when a house elf appeared. "Excuse me, Master Severus, but Headmaster is wanting to seeing you."

"Understood. I shall attend him shortly." Severus sighed and rose to his feet. He moved about his quarters ensuring that things were safely placed away in a manner that any Weasley would immediately have classified as 'bustling'. Of course, to say so in class would earn at least a fifty point dunning to the one foolish enough to state it.

Finally certain that he could put off the meeting no longer, he left his quarters and began the trek to the Headmaster's office. *I wonder what crisis has erupted this time? Likely something to do with those damnable Potters again. I could hope for a crippling injury for one or all of them, but that is a pipe dream, alas.*

Perhaps he wishes to inform me – with all due sadness, of course – that the Granger mudblood will not be returning to these halls. If that is to be the case, then I just might throw myself a small party. And the opportunities to make the brat uncomfortable by reminding him that she is gone will be worth the time as well.

He scowled for a moment. *I'm assuming that it is something good. More likely it is simply some last minute thing to do with the school.*

He found himself at the gargyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office. It was open, with the stairs already moving, so he stepped aboard and rode to the top, curious as to why the entrance below was already open. He swept carefully into the office – there were far too many gadgets and things that could be broken easily. "You asked to meet with me, Headmaster?"

"Yes, Severus. I need to ask you some questions in regards to the deaths of the Grangers."

Severus stopped breathing for only a moment, but recovered before the Headmaster noticed. *I hope.* "Yes sir. What would you like to know?"

"Where did the information come from? Which of Tom's Death Eaters informed him of the location of the Grangers?" Albus looked inscrutable, which was his normal look before this business with the Potters had erupted. *Perhaps he's finally gotten his feet back underneath him after all that the Potters have done to him. I will admit that I wish he had chosen a better time.*

"I am surprised by the question, Albus. Is there a reason that the source is important?" He placed a look of concern on his face.

"Yes, there is. Please answer the question."

He knows, and wishes me to implicate myself for some reason. Let us see why. "I am forced to admit, Albus, that I was the source for the information. The Dark Lord does not trust me completely. He has seen the newspapers from those days just after his first defeat, and knows that you vouched for me. He suspects that I am a spy within the group. He demanded information that would show my loyalties." He shrugged. "There are so many things that I could have told him about the working of the Order, but I instead chose to give him the information that would do the wizarding world the least amount of damage. I told him that Miss Granger's parents were, in fact, in Greece."

"So you gave the information to Tom, knowing that it would lead to the deaths of two innocents?" the Headmaster asked softly.

"Would you rather I gave him information on meeting times? Information about our membership? While our meeting locations are highly protected, the members are not. You know the type of information that I have. Would you rather I gave that information out, instead of the whereabouts of two Muggles?" he asked sharply.

The look on Albus's face told him immediately what the answer was. "Yes. I would rather you told him the entirety of the Order's membership than to have effectively *murdered* two innocents!" Albus was on his feet and yelling by the end of the sentence. "Myself, Hestia, James, Arthur – any of us can defend ourselves against other wizards. A Muggle cannot! It is the equivalent of placing a kitten into a steel barrel and then pouring molten metal over it! You know that it will die, and it will be an exceptionally cruel way to kill the innocent creature." Albus took a deep breath. "You chose your target carefully, did you not?"

How do you mean 'choosing carefully'?" Severus asked warily.

"You chose exactly which information to give Voldemort, based not on security, but upon the pain you could cause, didn't you?" Albus asked his question sadly. "You chose his target based upon your dislike of Harry, didn't you?"

"Headmaster, I..."

"Silence!" thundered the Headmaster. "While I might have been willing to permit far too much in your vendetta against the Potters – a vendetta that was undeserved against a small child who had never known his parents – I will not permit you to cross the line between Light and Dark with impunity. I am certain that you chose your target based on the pain that it would cause Harry." He sneered for the first time that the Potions Master could ever remember. "And I allowed that latitude for too long. No more. My actions have led you to think that you can do anything without paying the price. You now learn otherwise."

Severus had had enough. "You sit there, sanctimoniously berating me for the pain I cause the worthless brat, while you are the author of most of his woes! Do not presume to lecture me about the pain I caused, Headmaster. You are a far better purveyor of the ware than I could ever hope to be. In your own way, you are the equal of the Dark Lord!"

"Yes, I have caused pain. Yes, I placed Harry in a situation where he would be abused. Yes, I have my own cell awaiting me in Hell for my actions. But who profited from your actions? Yourself, by causing pain to two students whom you loathe, and by proxy, to James and Lily, who wish that they could ease their son's pain that he feels for Miss Granger. At least my way to Hell is paved only by my intentions. Yours is paved by your actions."

Kingsley Shacklebolt entered the office from the side room. "Severus Snape, by your own words you admit that you knowingly passed information to You-Know-Who which led directly to the deaths of the parents of a Hogwarts student. For this crime, I am placing you under arrest."

Snape sputtered incoherently for several moments as Shacklebolt confiscated his wand and produced a set of magical bindings.

Before Shacklebolt could leave with Severus, Albus stopped him. "I have my own part in things, Kingsley, as you well know. You have my oath to place myself in your hands when the battle with Voldemort is finally done." Shacklebolt nodded and left with the greasy haired man in shackles.

"Why, Albus?" James asked as he re-entered Dumbledore's office, followed by Minerva and Lily.

"Why wait? Why did I do it? Why change my position? Each has their own reasons. Why wait? Until I know that Harry has a chance of defeating Tom, I dare not make things easier for Tom. Why did I do it in the first place? I truly felt that I was doing the right thing for the wizarding world, and possibly the world as a whole. Why change now? Severus. I see how easy it is to slip from doing good to doing evil. I have done evil in the name of good. I should pay for that evil."

He sat down heavily behind his desk. "And now, if you will excuse me, I still have a school to run ... and a teacher to find a replacement for. Feel free to stay for dinner if you wish – I'm sure you'll want to see that your son arrives safely."

As they left the room, escorted by Minerva, James looked back to see the headmaster resting his face in his hands for a moment. At that moment, he looked every one of his rumoured hundred and sixty years.

Wishful Thinking Girl Talk

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 10 – Girl Talk

James and Lily had gone to visit Filius Flitwick, leaving Albus to sit in his chair and ponder his new staffing needs. *Two teachers gone. I have lost my Potions professor – perhaps I never truly had him – and my Defence teacher waited until today to realise that Harry Potter's presence means that Voldemort might also make an appearance.* He sighed. *Where do I get these idiots from?* He blinked as he realised what he had just been thinking. *I am certainly under far too much pressure when I refer to my teachers as idiots.*

He stood and walked over to his window, gazing absently over the Forbidden Forest. *How do I manage this situation, however? Cornelius remains in office and wishes to control things as tightly as ever. He does not do well when forced into an action, and he has been forced to admit to Tom's return. If word gets out that we have lost two teachers, then Cornelius will use that fact to take more control over Hogwarts. Since Dolores does not seem to be paying for her crimes against the students, having the Ministry in charge of the school is clearly a dangerous position to be in for the students' sake.* He began to walk back and forth in front of the window, trying to puzzle out a solution.

Minerva entered his office as he paced. "Good heavens, Albus! You'll wear a hole in your carpet! What seems to be bothering you *this* time?" She had not completely forgiven him for his crimes against the Potters, but his willingness to pay for his crimes did seem to allow her to once again act as the friend and assistant she had been for years.

"I have no Defence or Potions teachers. What can we do? If I let this situation stand, there will be letters flying to the Ministry tonight, and tomorrow we will likely have teachers worse than Dolores Umbridge thrust upon us by Cornelius." His pacing did not slacken.

For the first time in weeks, a real smile came to her face. "Albus, I believe that I have the solution. Do I have your permission to talk to the candidates I have in mind?"

He stopped and looked at her hopefully. As he registered the smugness of her appearance, it suddenly came to him who she had to be considering, and a smile crossed his face for the first time in weeks. "By all means. Feel free to promise them as much autonomy as the school can manage. I promise I shall not interfere with them beyond the minimum supervision required by the Board of Governors." When she looked at him in disbelief, he added, "An old dog *can* learn new tricks, Minerva ... My apologies. I believe that I have lost the right to refer to you in such a familiar manner, Professor McGonagall." He sighed and wiped at the wetness that had appeared at the corner of his eyes. "I am learning to ... I believe the current phrase is 'back off'. 'Keeping my fingers out of the various pies' is also rather apropos here." He sighed. "Besides, I had best delegate the administration of the school. Once Tom has finally been defeated, I am surrendering myself to the Aurors for my crimes against the Potters. I would do so now, but as arrogant as it sounds, I appear to be the only wizard to frighten Tom."

Minerva's smile was sad, but it conveyed the deep respect for him that she had carried before this summer. "Now there is the Albus Dumbledore that I've known and called friend these many years." She turned away. "I shall return shortly, hopefully with two new professors. And perhaps we can have tea together this afternoon, before the students arrive. And I can ask about the Board required interference that you mentioned."

"You and the others complain about it every year – the useless paperwork, the occasional requests from me that we sit down and talk about how your classes are going and how the students are working out – all the things that slow you down from doing the proper job of teaching."

As she descended the stairs, he added, "I do hope that tea this afternoon works out for you." He sat back in his seat and began to work on the remaining paperwork, feeling lighter than he had for some time.

"He must have gotten his taunting out of the way at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters," Neville said with a laugh as the Express pulled into Hogsmeade Station. "It was a nice change, not having to deal with Malfoy on the train."

"Yeah, but he'll be back to his usual garbage once school starts," Ginny growled. "I just wish we could hex him once without worrying that Snape is going to catch us."

The students all stood and began to shuffle toward the exit. Once they were out in the open, Harry headed off to talk to Parvati and Lavender. Hermione scowled as they spent the time walking to the carriages deep in conversation, the girls giggling once or twice. Once the unlikely trio reached a carriage, Harry nodded and moved away, returning to his friends. "Sorry about that," he said. "It took longer than I thought."

"Well, it *is* Lavender and Parvati," Hermione answered him, her tone sharper than her friends were used to.

"They aren't that bad," Harry said with a curious look at Hermione. Ginny, Luna and Ron got into one of the four person carriages, and Hermione managed to get the final seat, leaving Harry and Neville to climb in with Parvati and Lavender.

"I wish there was something more I could do for Hermione," Harry lamented as the carriage began its trip to the castle. "But thinking seriously about that sort of route is a dangerous slope to be on. Necromancy is the route that started Tom on his road. Or maybe he was just bad to begin with, but . . . well, the only way to help her right now would be to try to raise her parents from the dead, and I won't even contemplate that."

"Yeah," Neville said. "It was easier on the both of us, because we never really knew our parents. She had almost seventeen years with them."

"She'll be okay," Lavender said. "We'll keep an eye on her."

"Good. I think she's been trying to be her old self and not grieve in public, for whatever reason. She'll likely cry herself to sleep some nights. Don't be surprised by Silencing Charms. It's what I did after . . . after Sirius died. I think that's why I didn't hear anything from her at the place she stayed these last few days."

"So you paid close attention to her?" Parvati asked impishly.

Harry gave her an annoyed look. "She's my best friend, and her parents were just murdered. Of course I did."

"Uh-huh," was the thoroughly unconvinced response from Lavender.

"Admit it," Neville said. "You'd like to get her alone in broom closet and snog the daylights out of her, wouldn't you?"

"She's not that kind of a girl!" Harry replied, offended. "I wouldn't dream of doing something like . . . like that!"

Neville looked at Harry for a second before asking carefully, "What precisely do you think 'snogging' means, Harry?"

"There are ladies present," he replied through his teeth, as if trying to be somewhat secretive about it. He was blushing furiously.

"You can't even talk about *kissing* in front of us?" Lavender asked with a smile.

Harry stared at her for a moment and then turned and began to gently smack his head against the wall of the carriage. "What's that about?" Neville asked him.

"It's my lot in life to be an arse in front of females, apparently," he said with a wry laugh. "First I treat Parvati like garbage at the Yule Ball two years ago, because I was drooling over Cho -"

"- and Hermione," Lavender quipped.

"- rather than paying attention to the pretty girl I was there with." Parvati blushed prettily at the compliment. "Let's not get into that whole thing with Cho," he added. "Now I manage to prove just how clueless I am in front of my classmates. The only way it could have been worse is if -"

"- Hermione had heard?" Lavender quipped again.

Harry paused. "Well, I was thinking Malfoy, but yeah, Hermione hearing how dumb I can be at times would be more than a little embarrassing. She already knows it, there's no need to drive the point home any worse."

The three others in the carriage looked at each other for a moment before smiling and saying, "Smitten," in unison.

"What?" Harry asked in confusion. "Just because I admit that I'll never be as smart as her means I'm in love with her?"

"I'd say that not wanting to look dumb in front of her is a sign," Parvati said. "Do you have a problem with doing something that makes you look . . . less than smart in front of Ron, for instance?"

"With the number of times I've done that in front of him already? With how often he's the author of the dumb thing we're doing, that I readily agreed to?" Harry laughed. "Not hardly."

"Then why are you afraid of looking dumb in front of Hermione? She's part of the Trio. Shouldn't she be in on the things you're doing?"

"She's usually trying to talk us out of whatever it is, and she's pretty much always right. Why give her more ammunition?"

"But why is it that her opinion of you matters more than Ron's?" Neville asked sagely. "I know that Ginny's means more to me than Hermione's or Luna's does." He scowled a second later, and added, "That didn't sound right. All their opinions – and yours – mean something to me. But Ginny's means a bit more."

"You want her to be proud of you, right?" Parvati asked suddenly.

"Those rare times I've done something right, it's felt nice when she said so," Harry admitted.

"Does it feel the same as when Ron or Neville or Ginny says that they're proud of you?" Lavender asked, obviously having gotten the thread of what her best friend was thinking. Harry shook his head.

"How about when Mrs. Weasley says she's proud of you? Or your own mother?" Neville asked with a grin.

Harry did something unusual, much as he had on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters; he stopped and thought about the situation, rather than simply reacting. It had led to a much more satisfying taunting of Draco Malfoy in London, but he wasn't sure where it might lead him now.

It does mean something when Mrs . Weasley is proud of me, and I liked it when Mum hugged me and told me she was proud of me when she tested my Occlumency. But is it the same if Hermione tells me that she's proud of me?

He had to think for a moment about when she had been proud of him. The fact that it took so long to come up with something shamed him, and he silently vowed to do better. *There was when she thought I was a prefect last year – no, she was sure that I was, but that's not really the same as being proud of me. She was sure that I could handle what was ahead in our first year, but ...* He thought long and hard about it.

"I guess I'll have to find out on the day I do something that she feels proud of me for," he said, more than a little sadly. "So far, nothing I've done has really gotten that from her. She's been happy when I did something right, but she's never actually said that she's proud of me for something."

That comment led to a scowl on Neville's face.

James grinned as he looked into the mirror. The person that grinned back at him was not someone that he ever expected to see – a Hogwarts professor. "Hey, Potter, stop hogging the mirror!" a female voice called from behind him. He turned to face his wife, kissing her quickly as he stepped out of the way.

"Could you ever imagine me as a teacher, Lily?" he asked, unable to wipe the grin from his face.

"Back when I first knew you, if you'd told me that you'd end up teaching at Hogwarts, I'd have started running. I'd have made Canada by now, easy." She reached over and ruffled his hair, her own grin making an appearance.

"What do we do, though? Profess ... Minerva – Merlin, is *that* going to take some getting used to – said that we have some serious latitude with what we teach. I know Defence pretty well - and I won't be able to thank Remus enough for giving me his notes from when he taught the class - but I've never really taught before."

She chuckled slightly. "The other professors want you to succeed, so feel free to ask them for tips. If you want, you could even ask Harry – I hear that he did a decent job this past year."

"Yeah, possibly. Could be a little weird though," he replied with a small laugh.

"Well, that would work fine then, because you are as well," she fired back with a smirk.

"I'll get you later for that, Lily," he said in mock annoyance. "Right now, we need to get to the Great Hall for a show of solidarity or some such. Plus, we get to listen to the utter silence when we're announced, and the pandemonium when it's announced that Snivellus isn't here anymore."

She opened her mouth to admonish him, but he could see that her heart wasn't in it. "You're right. It probably will be a madhouse the moment that's announced."

"He'll never pay enough for what he's done. He can't be tried for his part in what happened to us, but he'll certainly be tried for complicity in the murders of the Grangers. He'll go to Azkaban this time, and he'll stay there."

"We can only hope," Lily said. "I really don't want to have to kill him." James was startled by the surety in her voice. She obviously saw his reaction and said, "This is Snape. If he gets free, he'll try for revenge. And I'll kill him if he tries. He's done enough to my baby."

"*Our* boy, Lily. Let me have some rights to him. too." This last was delivered with a theatrical whine, which succeeded in his goal: he made her chuckle again.

"I suppose so," she replied, equally as theatrically. They held their expressions for a moment longer, before bursting into laughter. This is how Minerva McGonagall found them.

"I'm pleased to see you two in a good mood, given what happened this morning," she said. "It's time to head to the Great Hall."

They followed her to the Hall, where James took a seat between Pomona and Hagrid, while Lily sat between Minerva and Filius. "This is going to take some getting used to," James said with a small laugh to the rest of them. "Not only am I having to get used to calling you by your first names in private, but I have to be respectable now! The first will be easy in comparison to the second!" He was given his chosen applause – laughter – and they settled down to await the entrance of the students.

The students began to filter in, and several stopped in their tracks when they saw the Potters at the Head table. "It's really true!" was heard frequently – plus variations on that phrase – as well as more than one, "Huh! The Prophet was right! How'd they manage *that* ?"

The Hall filled quickly, and James found himself amazed at the speed managed by the coaches and thestrals. There certainly weren't enough carriages or thestrals to bring all the students to the castle at one time, so the winged equines performed a circular route to deliver them. The first year students, on the other hand, took their slow trip across the lake followed by their first example of the stairs at Hogwarts – the climb from the lake to the Great Hall level, a substantial number of steps.

Harry walked in with his friends, and James was curious why Hermione seemed to be annoyed at his son. They walked in farther apart than he'd seen them all summer, and when they sat, she did not look at Harry at all. He seemed hurt by the unexpected snubbing.

Their old friend Hagrid came into the Great Hall to announce, "The First Years are outside, Professors." He obviously considered this not only a great honour to be permitted to do this, but a duty that he performed with great solemnity.

James didn't really pay attention too much to the Sorting, save to laugh along with the rest of the hall when a "Finnegan, Brianna" was Sorted into Gryffindor. The reason for the laughter was her brother shouting "That's me sis! Way to go, Bree!" as soon as the Hat announced her House. She, of course, blushed furiously and glared toward the Gryffindor table, specifically at her loud older brother.

Finally the Sorting was done, and Professor Dumbledore stood. "Once again, I welcome all students to another year at Hogwarts!" There was a smattering of applause, mostly from the new first year students, which drew a smile from the Headmaster. "As always, the Forbidden Forest is as the name suggests, forbidden. No one should be entering it without a proper staff escort." James noted that his eyes seemed to slide to Harry with some amusement. "Mr. Filch has once again expanded the list of forbidden items in the school, and the list is posted on his door, as always. I believe that any person who has a Weasley Wizard Wheezes catalog likely has the majority of the list within their possession." There was a slight pause while several at the Gryffindor table, most notably Ginny and Ron, cheered.

"Please also note that the staff complement has changed. Severus Snape will no longer be teaching at Hogwarts, I am sorry to say."

James was utterly startled at the loud cheering that erupted from three of the four tables – he knew that he didn't like the man, but for that many students to be cheering that loudly? The cries of "Maybe we can get a *fair* teacher now!" startled several at the Head table.

"I am sorry to discover that you all feel that way about his leaving our employment. In his place, we have hired Mrs. Lily Potter to teach Potions."

"Is she any good?" came a laughing voice from the Gryffindor table. There was absolute silence for a moment as people realised that it was Harry who had called out the question. "I mean, I think she'll do good, but I'm biased!"

James noted that most of the other students seemed utterly shocked at Harry's behaviour, but he decided to play along with his son. "I'd vouch for her talents, but I'm kinda biased as well."

"Yes, well," Dumbledore said, mildly surprised at the way the announcements were going. "I have full faith in her capabilities as a Potions teacher," he finally said.

"Plus, she's a heck of a lot nicer to look at than Snape was," the Finnegan boy said, obviously intending it to be heard only by his table-mates.

"Thank you, Mr. ... Finnegan, I believe it is?" Lily said sweetly. The boy managed to somehow turn both bright red and completely white in the span of about ten seconds as he nodded.

Albus once again took control. "Our other new professor is Professor James Potter, who will be teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts this year. I hope that you will give both professors a warm welcome." He was answered by a round of applause, understandably started at the Gryffindor table by a certain six students. James smiled softly and stood, sketching a bow to the students, as did Lily.

"Finally, as Professor Snape had been the Head of Slytherin House, we find it necessary to place another into that role. Professor Fitby will be taking on those responsibilities and looks forward to making the acquaintance of those Slytherins who do not take his Ancient Runes class." There was perfunctory applause from the Slytherin table, where most of the students were still getting over the shock of Snape's absence.

The feast started shortly thereafter, and the students tucked into their meals. James idly looked around the Great Hall as he ate. Harry, his shoulders hunched, was apparently being berated by by a wildly gesticulating Hermione. She seemed to gesture around the hall several times, more than once including the Head table.

Finally, Harry pushed away from the table, before the dessert course had even begun, and walked to the Head table, stopping stiffly before his mother. "Professor Potter?" he asked in a voice that could be heard throughout the hall. "It has been pointed out to me that I have been terribly rude to you with my comments earlier. I would like to apologise. I honestly believe that you will do a wonderful job in the position and did not mean to impugn your abilities."

"What brought this on?" she asked, clearly startled at his actions.

"I am the head of a Noble House, and I am sixteen. I can no longer afford childish things, such as making fun of a teacher, even if it is good-natured. It will certainly not help me in my fight against a psychotic madman who has wanted me dead for my entire life. It is better that I begin to act the adult that the law and my peers expect me to be." The tone and wording made it obvious that he was trying very hard to sound adult, even if it made his words sound a bit stilted. "Again, I apologise for the slight upon your abilities." He bowed to her and turned to face Minerva, whom he began to speak with her in tones inaudible to James.

James let his eyes slide to Hermione, and she looked happy that Harry had apologised. Her look turned to confusion when, rather than returning to the Gryffindor table, Harry walked to the doors of the Great Hall and left without a further word to anyone. The Longbottom boy said something to her that caused her to appear stunned and hurt. James looked to Lily and knew that a problem was brewing – she was glaring at the young witch with an expression that wouldn't have been out of place had she been looking at Snivellus.

Hermione quickly moved toward Gryffindor Tower once the feast was over. Neville's words had bothered her quite a bit, and that Look that Professor Potter had given her was not terribly encouraging. At least her husband didn't seem to want to kill her on sight.

Would that really be so bad, if I let her? At least then I could be with Mum and Dad again and apologise for all the crap that I put them through in my life. She sighed. No, they'd be unhappy with me. It hurts so much to lose them, and I'm chasing away all my friends because of it. I'm snapping at Harry more than I ever did before in these past fewdays, and after this evening, I've probably lost him as a friend.

'I knowyou're hurting, but are you trying to make him hurt , too?' I didn't think Neville knewwhat he was talking about, but when Harry just ... left ...

I didn't mean to hurt him. I just think that professors deserve some respect.

Who are you kidding, you stupid bint? she answered herself harshly. *You just wanted him to follow your rules. You just decided for him, like you always have, and forced him into it. Just like with the Firebolt – you did it behind his back, because you knew better.* Even her mental voice had a harsh mocking tone as she thought it.

She entered the Gryffindor Common Room to find it as yet unoccupied. *He might have gone upstairs,* she thought hopefully. *But he's probably not in a mood to see me,* she finished. She headed up the stairs to the girls' dormitories and threw herself onto her bed and began to sob into her pillows. *I've lost them all,* she thought. *Mum, Dad, Harry, Ron, Ginny – all of them. Friends and family are completely gone, driven away or killed.* She pulled herself into a foetal position around her pillow and cried as if her soul were dying.

She had no idea how long she'd been sobbing when the outside world intruded on her senses once more. Maybe it was the soft, wordless crooning that someone was doing, or maybe it was the hand rubbing her back soothingly. She sniffled a few times as she listened and realised that Parvati had a beautiful singing voice.

"I'm sorry," she said as she began to uncurl from around her pillow. "I should have Silenced the curtains. I didn't mean to disturb the two of you."

"It's all right," Lavender said. "We were actually kinda expecting it. Harry asked us to keep an eye on you, since you're hurting so much for your parents."

Hermione slowly rolled over to her back, staring at the canopy to avoid the eyes of the two girls sitting on her bed. "After all I've done and said and the way I've acted over the past five years, you still do that," she said sadly. "I've been horrid to you, and you still try to comfort me."

"Well, we've both lost family," Parvati said. "I think that's why Pad and I are in different Houses. Our sister Lalita was killed the summer before we started school. Pad withdrew into her books, and I started trying to fill that hole that she left in my life – I wanted to be as outgoing as she'd been."

"It was my great-gran," Lavender said. "Just before fourth year. I was always happy to visit her, but I never really paid the attention to her that I ought to have done. There are so many family stories I'll never know now because I was just too stupid to realise that she wasn't going to live forever."

Hermione sniffed again. "So many things I should have said to them," she moaned. "I don't even remember whether or not I told them that I love ... loved them!" She started to cry again but this time felt the comforting presence of her two room-mates with her. She slowly faded off to sleep, her strength sapped by crying.

The next morning, Hermione awoke to find herself sandwiched between the two girls. She moved slightly, trying to stretch without waking them and only succeeded in doing just that – waking them. "How are you feeling?" Lavender asked sleepily.

"Much better," Hermione said after a moment of introspection. "Thank you. Having someone to share my grief with was what I needed." She looked at her room-mates and then bit her lower lip. "It was more than I deserved."

"How do you mean?" Lavender asked, propping herself up on an elbow and rubbing her eyes.

"With the 'superior little bitch queen' act I've pulled these past five years, looking down my nose at you? You have to ask?"

"We all have our own ways of acting childish. Mine was to turn into a giggly little bimbo." Lavender looked at Hermione, who was shocked at the girl's self-description, and then added, "Now I'm embracing my inner bimbo and leaving the giggling to the younger girls." Lavender looked utterly serious, save the small sparkle in her eyes.

Hermione stared at her for a moment before she started to laugh softly. She tried to stop it, but that just seemed to make it worse. In short order, all three of them were laughing so hard that they were crying again. It took several minutes to calm themselves down again.

Hermione finally looked down at herself and realised that she'd slept in her clothes. "Blech. I think I need a shower and some clean clothes," she observed.

"We all do," Parvati said, stripping quickly and grabbing a dressing gown and a towel – actions quickly mirrored by the other two.

Once they were in the shower, Parvati spoke over the sound of the water, "Look, you're apologising to us for how you treated us, and we really owe you the same sort of apology. You looked down your nose at us because we were acting like flighty bimbos, and we made snide comments about your teeth and your studious nature."

"That's a polite way of putting it," Hermione said with a very unladylike snort. "'Bookworm' is one of the phrases that can be used in public, I'd imagine."

"Yeah, but I'd like to think that we're finally growing up," Lavender said. "Took us a while, but it's happening."

"'When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.' First Corinthians, chapter 13. Somewhere around verse four or so," Hermione answered them both. She blushed. "Sorry, beaver-toothed bookworm here," she said.

"And I apologise for calling you that," Lavender said sadly.

Hermione waved her hand dismissively. "That was *last* week," she said, pausing and hoping that she'd read the two girls right.

Lavender giggled for a moment. "Nice, Hermione."

"You two are able to laugh at yourselves. I've got to learn to do the same and stop taking everything so seriously," she said. "There's certainly enough material to laugh at," she added softly, thinking the other two couldn't hear her. She stopped speaking while she worked on getting the last of the shampoo out of her hair. After she'd finished that task, she opened her eyes to see Parvati and Lavender scowling at her. "What?" she asked, more than a little puzzled.

"We spent the past five years either disliking or ignoring each other," Lavender said, "but that doesn't mean that we have to keep the fight going."

"Part of growing up means acting that way," Parvati said. "Maybe we'll never be friends. On the other hand, maybe we can, if the three of us can stop acting like we used to toward each other. The first thing we're going to do is talk to you about your self-hatred."

"I drive people away," Hermione said, tears building again. "I badger Harry to no end, and I *humiliated* him in public last night. He left before dessert was served. He *never* does that. I drove him away from the table because I thought he wasn't treating a professor right." She started to run a brush through her hair, but it quickly became caught. "Argh!" she screamed, and the tears began to flow again as she painfully yanked the brush free and threw it across the room. "I should just shave it all off! I couldn't possibly look worse!"

Lavender hugged her. "Shh, it's all right. The first thing we're going to do for you is to teach you some hair charms. We didn't teach them to you before because it was our way of feeling superior to the smart girl." It was only then that Hermione noticed that Parvati had started working with the mass of tangles that was her hair, humming softly as she worked. Hermione couldn't help but relax into the dark skinned girl's ministrations.

It was tangle-free in just a few short minutes, with only three slightly painful tugs. "The first thing we're going to teach you," Parvati said, "is to change your shampoo. You have beautiful, lush hair, and it's the shampoo that's made it unmanageable. A few other charms we can teach you, and I guarantee that you will have Harry picking his jaw up off the floor. And it will all be you, Hermione. No illusions necessary."

"I couldn't be that lucky," Hermione retorted sadly. "Besides, I think tacky is the kindest word that could be used for me starting to date so soon after my parents died." She sniffed as tears threatened yet again. "I've been called a cold, heartless bitch before. No sense in proving it to everyone. Like he'd really date me anyway. We're friends, but he's looking for someone who can match him – a Cho or a Ginny."

Lavender smiled. "Ask Neville. Harry was so dejected last night not because he was chewed out or anything, but because he wants to do something that you're proud of him for. He felt, I'll bet, that he'd made himself look stupid in your eyes. Just as you think you can't do anything right by him, he thinks the same way. He didn't say it in the carriage, but I'll bet that if we were to ask him, he'd say that a girl like you would never deign to lower yourself to someone as dumb as him." Hermione's eyes flared, and Lavender sped on. "I'm not calling him dumb, Hermione! He called himself that. He said that you already knew how dumb he was, he didn't need to rub it in. Ask Neville if you want confirmation."

"What led to that conversation?" she asked, curious how her brilliant but somewhat lazy best friend came to the conclusion that he was unintelligent.

"We had to explain what snogging was to him," Parvati said with a giggle. "He'd thought that it was considerably more than just some serious kissing. He rather forcefully informed us that you were *not* that kind of a girl!"

"I could go for the kissing, but nothing more just yet," she admitted. "I'm not ready for that in so many ways."

"Hermione, you have something unique in your hands, and I think you should be careful with it," Lavender interjected. "You hold the heart of a remarkable man, and I think that he worships the ground you walk on, if he'd admit it to himself."

"I want to, but ... I feel like ... if I talk to him about it, do you think he'd understand if I wanted to grieve more for my parents?"

"I think if you told him he had to wait until you were both finished with Hogwarts, he'd wait. He'd be impatient, mind you, but he'd wait. He won't even really admit it to himself, I think, but he loves you."

Hermione was lost in thought for a while over Lavender's words, not paying attention to the outside world.

She was brought to reality by Parvati saying, "Done! And that's fairly simple to deal with on a regular basis, as long as you get rid of that shampoo. You can use mine until you can pick up some of your own."

Hermione looked in the mirror, and for the first time in her life, thought that the person staring back at her in shock was beautiful. Her hair was no longer an unruly mop but a cascade of gentle waves. "Let me do your hair with you a few times until I'm sure that you've got it down pat, okay?"

"That's really *me*? No illusions?" Hermione was incredulous at the change in appearance that simply changing her hair had brought about.

"That's one hundred percent natural Hermione Granger," Lavender said with a grin.

Parvati started to giggle. "I'll say! Can you imagine Harry if he saw her right now?"

Lavender started to giggle. "Since she's naked? He'd probably ..." She lost the smile. "Honestly, he'd probably turn himself in for expulsion, because he'd feel that he violated you or something." She looked at Hermione. "Girl, if he's gonna keep you on a pedestal, at least convince him it's alright to look up your skirt once in a while, okay?"

"Lavender!" squeaked the suddenly blushing Hermione.

"Like the idea, huh?" Lavender asked in a lascivious tone.

“Wanna make some of the boys uncomfortable at breakfast?” Parvati asked, rescuing Hermione. “We'd need to let Harry know that we were pranking everyone else, though.”

“What do you have in mind?” Hermione asked. When the two girls looked at her in some slight surprise, she added, “Look, I've been a real bitch to you two these past five years. You're being friendly anyway, even though my past with you doesn't deserve this kind treatment. As long as it's not a harmful prank, I just might be willing to play along with it.”

Ginny sat at the breakfast table, looking at Harry. She had heard Neville's comment last night to Hermione, and she was worried. He was looking mildly unhappy – a look she was all too familiar with from him.

She looked to the door as she heard people entering and saw that it was Hermione and her room-mates. Hermione made straight for Harry. “Harry, I want to apologise for last night at the feast,” she said. “I let my turmoil turn something that should have been an amusing comment into a row between us, and I'm sorry for that. I should have stayed silent.”

“You're beautiful!” he blurted as he looked at her. “Um, I mean, uh, it's all right that you said what you did. I was out of line.” He had looked away after his exclamation, too embarrassed to look in her eyes.

“No you weren't, and I'm sorry for hurting you,” she said, then leaned over and hugged him. From Ginny's perspective, she could see her whisper something in Harry's ear.

She was curious as to why Parvati's eyes started sparkling with mirth until she said with a small purr in her voice, “Thank you for last night, Hermione. I think all three of us needed that.”

“That's what friends are for,” was Hermione's response, also with a small purr. “The shower was needed too, I think.” Ginny noticed that Harry reacted, but not the way that she would have expected. He didn't seem to be surprised by what was being said.

Lavender never got a chance to say anything, because Dean was pounding Seamus on the back, finally dislodging a piece of sausage. “Breathing ... sausage ... bad ...” the sandy haired Irish teen coughed.

Harry was utterly clueless as to why Seamus was coughing until Dean said, “I doubt it's what you're thinking, Seamus.”

“And what are you thinking?” Harry asked, suddenly seeming very dangerous. Ginny smiled to herself. They might not be a couple, but he was certainly acting like the jealous boyfriend.

Seamus blinked at his room-mate and suddenly realised for the first time just how dangerous Harry Potter could be. There was something that made him answer, even knowing that it would likely infuriate Harry. “That those three are damned lucky to have seen each other naked! And more, it sounds like.”

“Hermione isn't like that,” Harry growled. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Finnegan.”

He took his life in his hands then. “Can I help it if your girlfriend is hot?” he asked loudly, coughing the whole time.

“Harry, it's all right,” Hermione said. “We said this knowing that the boys would think that way. We did sleep together last night and shower together this morning. And that's exactly what happened. We each talked about loss and cried ourselves to sleep in the same bed, and then we used the communal shower, the same way that you boys do in the mornings.” She smiled. “We knew that at least Seamus had a dirty mind and would think in the direction we wanted.” Harry was scowling, so she leaned in closely. “It's all right to think about it, Harry. And we'll talk about *us* later.” He looked at her in surprise. “Well, you didn't exactly try to complain when Seamus called me your girlfriend,” she continued in a whisper.

He looked pole-axed for a moment, and then panicked. “I'm sorry,” he said quickly. “I know I should have, but I just wanted to -”

“Calm down, Harry,” she said, trying hard not to laugh at his sudden panic. “I can tell you that it's not an unpleasant idea. I just ... well, my parents died less than a week ago. You're all helping me get through it, but I need some time, okay?”

He stared at her. “You'd ... you actually don't have a problem being thought of as my girlfriend?” He asked carefully, sounding beyond astonished. Ginny couldn't help but giggle a little as she heard his utter incredulity.

“I'd like it to be reality,” she said with a soft blush. “But I need -”

“You take all the time you need to grieve, Hermione,” he interrupted. “If you'd rather wait until Voldemort's dead, I can understand. If you want to take until you're twenty, or *forty*, go ahead!”

“It won't *be* that long,” she said. “But right now, I want breakfast.” He started and then stood.

“There's room for all of us here,” Parvati said, stopping Harry from moving out of the way. “Besides, we've got five years of girl talk to catch up on with Hermione!”

Ginny relaxed a little as she saw Harry settle down with a small smile. She finally had a definition for 'bemused' – the look on Harry's face. A little bit bewildered and a little bit happy.

Bastards, Severus Snape thought viciously as he paced his small cell. *It was a pair of worthless Muggles! Why can't they see that it was*

necessary? If it gave me a sense of revenge, all the better. But he actually wanted someone worthwhile put at risk, rather than ... I will never understand that man.

I will not go down alone. I need to try to ensure the least punishment for myself, and the greatest damage to my enemies. If they are going to take me down, others will be going with me.

And if I can manage that damned brat and his parents as collateral damage, then even prison would be sweet.

Wishful Thinking Trouble Brews at Hogwarts

Lily Potter stood at the lectern awaiting her sixth year class. She'd be making the point to the students almost immediately that there was a new set of rules in place.

Her thoughts seemed to be their own Summoning Spell, as the first of the students began to drift into the room. She looked at the attendance sheet and smiled as each person listed checked off as they entered the room. *Sirius had his part, but the movers and shakers on that map were James and Remus.* She chuckled as she also realised that she could easily tell which of the students were likely to develop a crush on her. *Finnegan, definitely. He fashions himself a ladies' man, from what I see.* Malfoy entered the room, but wasn't quick enough to get the sneer off his face before she noticed. She catalogued it for later.

"All right, settle down," she said. "Today starts a new age for the students of Hogwarts. The previous class learned it, and now, so shall you. Today you begin to actually learn the whys and wherefores of Potions brewing and creation, rather than simply following the written recipe like a mindless drone."

"Professor Snape is a Master in the field!" Malfoy exclaimed in an affronted voice.

"That may well be, but he clearly can't teach worth a damn," she replied. Several students reacted that the usage of the word 'damn', which made her laugh. "You'll want to watch it in other classes, but I think you're getting old enough to hear words like that, and in the right circumstances - or wrong as the case may be - actually utter them. Trust me, when you get out in the world, you'll hear *much* stronger words than that used."

She began to walk around in front of the class. "Back to my point about teaching. Mr. Thomas, why should most of the stirring motions in a Calming Potion be widdershins?"

"Widdershins, Professor?" Dean asked, confused.

"Widdershins, Mr. Thomas. Widdershins is anti-clockwise and deosil is clockwise. Widdershins." He thought for a moment before saying, "I'm afraid I don't know, Professor. I just know that they should be."

"Mr. Goyle? Can you answer it?"

"Um, I think it's cuz you're getting rid of something."

"Precisely. You are 'getting rid of' or *banishing* anxiety, so the potion must be stirred in an anti-clockwise direction. One point for Slytherin. Where did you learn that?" she asked.

"Professor Snape taught us that." Malfoy smirked as Goyle answered her.

"In this classroom, or privately to just the Slytherin students?" she asked, which wiped Malfoy's smirk away immediately.

"In the common room," Goyle answered. "He taught us Slytherins separately."

She noticed Malfoy glaring at Goyle. "Is there a problem, Mr. Malfoy?"

"No, ma'am," he answered in a surly voice as he turned to face her, rather than his classmate.

"I see no reason why you should be angry at Mr. Goyle for earning you another point for his honesty." She walked over to Ron Weasley. "Mr. Weasley, what stone would you place in the Sobriety Potion?"

"That's the one you drink *before* drinking something alcoholic, right?" he asked, drawing some laughter from the other purebloods in the room, which made his ears turn red.

"Precisely, Mr. Weasley, and take a point for your honesty in asking, rather than assuming, since there are anti-drunkenness potions that should be consumed *after* imbibing." She turned to the rest of the class. "Never be afraid to ask a question in my class. You can't learn if you don't understand, and if you don't understand a concept, then I need to know so that I can explain it better." She turned back to Ron. "Now, do you know the answer to my question? What stone is a catalyst?"

"An amethyst?" he asked. He sounded like he was fairly sure about it but a bit scared of being wrong.

"Correct. Mr. Finnegan, why an amethyst?"

She could tell that he was trying to decide between the smart-aleck answer and the real one. "Well, me Mum says it's one of the magical properties

of the stone. I never learned that from Professor Snape, though."

"Another point for Gryffindor." She walked back to the lectern. "I'll be talking to the school about getting some books for you on the topics you'll need to reach full competency in the subject of potions. This will be a gruelling year for the upper classes, I warn you. If I'd had more warning, I could perhaps have gotten word to your parents, but Severus Snape was only arrested yesterday morning. I was offered the job on the first of September."

"What'd they say he did?" Malfoy asked, his tone challenging.

She looked at the blonde student for a moment, clearly trying to decide whether or not to answer. "Complicity in a murder and consorting with Dark Lords were the charges I was told about," she finally replied before turning back to the rest of the class.

"And it wasn't even a competent Dark Lord," Harry muttered, although it was loud enough to be heard throughout the classroom. Malfoy's face started to go red at the slight.

"Explain, Mr. Potter," Lily said. "Many consider him to be the most dangerous Dark Lord in a thousand years."

"Then Grindelwald was a piker who played with children's blocks that had no sharp edges, for his own safety. Voldemort -" he paused for the various screams and gasps "- couldn't even kill me as a baby, and the three times he's tried and failed miserably since then as well. He's good at collateral damage, but he's bugger all on completion, in my experience." He blinked. "Pardon the language, Professor."

Lily laughed. "I think I can forgive your language if you're calling You Know Who incompetent."

"Ma'am?" Harry asked with a scowl on his face. "May I say something unconnected to Potions but that I think needs to be said about Voldemort?"

Lily looked at her son for a moment and realised that he was consciously beginning to take on the mantle of leadership that would be needed in these times. Albus's day was coming to an end, and Harry would soon take up that position as the perceived leader of the Light side. "Go ahead, Mr. Potter."

He stood and walked to her lectern. "Sorry, but it's easier to see the entire class from here. I'll return to my seat as soon as I'm done."

She nodded with a smile and moved to sit in Harry's seat scowling at Hermione for just a moment.

Harry began to pace behind the lectern. "We're all running around screaming whenever we hear the name 'Voldemort'," he said. Several people obliged him. Most screams were not done out of a sense of comedy, save the excessively girlish and humorous scream from Seamus Finnegan. "Yes, thank you, Seamus," he said with a grin. "We're all scared of a made up name! The name that you all scream at every time you hear it was made up of the letters of his birth name, Tom Marvolo Riddle." Pulling out his wand, he performed the illusion that the spectre of Riddle had shown him years ago. The students stared in shock. "What he also doesn't want anyone knowing is that his mother named him for his Muggle father. Not Muggleborn, but *Muggle*."

"You lie, Potter!" Draco Malfoy yelled. "He's the true Heir of Slytherin! He's got the purest blood of us all!"

Harry cocked his head. "How do you know that about his lineage, Malfoy? I never said that. Perhaps your old Head of House told you? Or was it your father?"

If Malfoy wasn't considered to be Ravenclaw material, he was at least in possession of some native cunning, however late it might have come upon him. "Yes, Professor Snape told us," he said, stumbling over it slightly.

"I see. And you believe that you should trust the word of a known Death Eater . . . why?" Harry asked with feigned innocence. Malfoy's answer was to sullenly sit back in his chair. "Hmm, no answer. Well, really, that's all I wanted to say about Voldemort. If you can't call him a name he made up because you've been trained to be frightened by it, then call him Riddle, since it's his real last name. Use the letters in a different arrangement and call him Tromedlov or Vmootlerd or Lord Vromet." After a brief pause, he amended, "Maybe not that last one. Then it'd be 'I am Lord Lord Vromet'. Bit repetitive." He shrugged. "Then again, having being on the receiving end of his rants before . . ."

He walked back to his desk. "Sorry about that, Professor. I got carried away."

"That's quite all right, Mr. Potter. If you'll take your seat now, we can continue with the lesson."

"Oh, that man!" Hermione railed as she stomped softly around the nearly empty library alcove she'd grabbed near the Restricted Section. She was scowling mightily in her travels back and forth.

"Which one? Harry, James, Remus, or Albus?" Lily Potter asked as she came into the alcove.

"Last and first, in that order." Hermione paused. "Ma'am, I owe you a major apology, and I am still working on apologising to Harry. I was so far out of line as to be ridiculous at the welcoming feast. I let my short temper at the loss of my parents rule me, and I hounded your son into apologising for something he didn't need to apologise for. If you deem it a requirement, I will apologise to . . . No, I'll do it anyway. I publicly humiliated Harry, I should publicly humiliate myself. In the Great Hall, during dinner, I will stand and apologise to you then to Harry."

Lily didn't react, other than to nod. "Continue. What led to the outburst?"

"I was just thinking about . . ." She stopped her thought at one of the names that Lily had given earlier. "Wait, what has Prof ... Remus done?"

Nothing that I know of. It's just habit from when the Marauders were active. Why 'Albus and Harry' and in that order? Other than all the rest of the things that Albus has done - 'for the greater good', of course," she added sarcastically, "what *specifically* has he done?"

"Harry lived at the Durselys for nothing!" Hermione yelled and then fell into a chair herself. "It was all for nothing!" she repeated softly.

Lily was immediately alert. "What do you mean, it was all for nothing?" Her tone was demanding.

"*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 forged in the fires of adversity, he will be the One to vanquish the Dark Lord*," *The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies*" Hermione quoted. "It's the 'forged in the fires of adversity' line that clinches it."

"Explain!" Lily demanded, sounding more and more the lioness guarding her cub than the detached professor.

Hermione started at the brusque command but then continued. "He's been The Boy Who Lived since the moment he survived that Killing Curse. Whether he'd grown up with you or not, he'd have faced that. That would have been stressful all by itself. But might-have-beens are unimportant. First year, Harry had to deal with the problem of being The Boy Who Lived to the public in the school. Everyone knew he was back. So was Voldemort, unfortunately. We can assume that in one way or another, Voldemort and Quirrell would have found each other. Harry would have faced him, much as he did. You and Mr. Potter, well, I can't see you and him allowing Harry to have a swelled head, so he'd have won against Voldemort the same way that he â€" she trailed off, and a grin broke onto her face.

"What is it, Miss Granger?" Lily asked.

"He's going to win," she breathed. "Harry's going to win!" She hugged herself tightly. "He's going to win!" The last one was shouted.

"We're glad of that," Lily said in a rather dry tone. "But what made you *realise* that?"

"He defeated Voldemort in first year, by burning Quirrell. He was told that it was you sacrificing your life for him that allowed it, but he was told that *after* he was victorious! Riddle may have his blood, but Harry will still win, because he can love, while Riddle can't. *That's* what drove him out of Harry's mind a month or so ago - Harry's love for Sirius and you two. He thought he was going to die, so he thought about seeing Sirius and you two again. Drove Voldemort right out, screaming!"

"I'm not sure I follow you. Finish this thought, then go back to the original one."

"Harry destroyed Voldemort's body because of love. He was told it was because you died for him. As you're sitting here talking to me, you obviously *didn't* die for him, although I'm sure you would if necessary. But apparently his ability to love actually *is* a power to reckon with."

"Can I assume that you'd be interested in examining that particular power rather more closely than you currently have been?" Lily asked rather pointedly.

Hermione realised that she was on tenuous ground. She had the feeling that there was really no proper answer, at least not that would put her in the good graces of Lily Potter. "Back to the original point about adversity," she said, trying valiantly to ignore what she assumed was a veiled threat. "He faced Riddle in first year, he faced his echo in second year, for which the Weasleys are greatly appreciative - especially Ginny - although the entire school hated Harry for a while. Third year was the year that he faced the fear that Sirius was the traitor and faced down Pettigrew, Sirius, and Professor Lupin during an uncontrolled full moon. Fourth year led to him being entered into the Goblet of Fire for the Tri-Wizard Tournament against his will. He was hated even by Ron for a while, the jealous git. But during that year, he faced a dragon, the merfolk while he rescued Ron and a Veela girl, and then the things in the maze, before discovering that the Cup at the centre was a Portkey to Voldemort. He survived that -"

She broke off and blinked as an incongruity came to mind. "How were there echoes of you two in Voldemort's wand?"

"With the amount of emotion running high that night, it was likely an emotional imprint, sort of like a partial ghost," Lily said absently as she followed the bushy-haired girl's logic.

Hermione nodded. "Okay, that makes sense. Back to the topic: He had all that crap, and then had fifth year when the Ministry did everything that they could to discredit him." She took a deep breath. "It's hard to say, but I can see how things might not have been all that different even if you'd been the family for him to return to every summer. He'd have faced Voldemort, he'd have fought the diary version, and he'd probably still have faced Pettigrew, although Pettigrew would have been the one escaping Azkaban. Maybe not. But I'm betting that Voldemort would have found someone to help bring him back, and fourth year and fifth year would have been the same."

"There's a break in your logic, Miss Granger," Lily pointed out somewhat triumphantly. "Wormtail went looking for him. You can't guarantee that someone would have come along and helped him."

"I admit that Pettigrew was a lucky break for Riddle, but Quirrel went looking for him three years earlier. As much as I think it a woolly science, I suspect that the prophecy has some control over things and is attempting to bring things to a head. Harry comes back to the wizarding world, and Riddle just happens to come back the same year? I suspect that there is something out there aiming things toward a final confrontation between Harry and Voldemort, no matter how much admitting that bothers me." She shook her head. "But that's neither here nor there. Harry has been through hell, and might-have-beens are irrelevant. What matters is what he has actually faced. He has fought for his life at least five times since returning to Hogwarts." She looked up at Lily. "Would you classify that as â€"fires of adversity?"

Lily looked carefully at the girl in front of her. "I begin to understand why some have referred to you as the smartest witch of your generation. With proper guidance, you'll likely go far."

Her expression changed to a scowl. "But don't think that apologising to me in public will make things all right between us. You publicly hurt and humiliated my son. If he gets any ridicule this year from it, it will be because of *you*. I want you to think carefully about that. Because of your views on propriety and such, my Harry was held up before the entire school population as an object to be either pitied or ridiculed."

"I know," Hermione said softly. "I'm surprised that he still wants to be my friend after that."

"Don't think I won't have a conversation about that with him, girl," Lily said with a tone of slight menace. "I'm not sure that you're a good influence on him."

"Shouldn't that be his decision?" Hermione shot back, startled at the sudden change in the conversation. "Besides, is it your job as teacher to involve yourself in his personal life?" This was not something that should be happening in a teacher/student conversation, and it reminded her disturbingly of the previous Potions professor, although she couldn't pinpoint why.

"Don't you take that tone with me, child! I am his mother!"

"And you haven't been around him for most of his life! I know him better than *you* do! Don't you *dare* pull that on me!"

"I will see you -" she began.

"See her what, Mum?" Harry asked as he rounded the corner to the alcove. "Madam Pince is apoplectic up front, by the way. If it was students screaming back here, then she'd kick them out, but when it's a teacher . . ." He scowled at both women. "And what the hell were you thinking, talking about what you were in such an insecure place? It's good that it was just you and Pince, but this is the library! Anyone could overhear what you were shouting about!"

"Don't take that tone with me, young man," Lily snapped. "Miss Granger and I were having a conversation concerning her continued association with you."

"Well, considering that she's the best friend I've got in the world, I hope it was over her safety. I think you'd probably have to cripple her to make her abandon me after five years." He smiled at Hermione by way of thanks, ignoring the tone his mother had used.

He missed the speculative look that Lily gave Hermione at that comment. "Plus," he continued, "I think I'm in love with the girl, and if she left, I've no idea how I'd cope."

Hermione blinked several times. "You . . . you love me? You -"

"I said that I'd wait for as long as you wanted to get over the deaths of your parents," he said softly. "I asked you to be my girlfriend when you were ready. I'm not like some of the other guys. I . . . well, Neville, Lavender, and Parvati made me realise that I should just admit my feelings."

"Son, we'll talk about this a bit later, I think," Lily said as she stood to leave. Harry caught the look she gave Hermione this time.

"Yes, Mum, I look forward to the talk," he said, his voice taking on a hard edge.

"I am your mother and you will not speak to me in that manner, young man!" she barked.

He simply looked at her for a long moment before saying, "Looks like we'll be having our first real fight then, *Mum*," he said, using the last word sarcastically. He turned to Hermione, "Shall we leave? I can escort you back to the tower." With that, he helped Hermione to her feet and they left the library, leaving a fuming Lily Potter behind.

They hadn't gotten very far when she burst from the library and caught up with them. "You will not turn your back on me, young man! Since I am a teacher here, I am giving you a detention with me, tonight, where I will explain the punishments you will get if you choose to date this . . . girl."

He raised an eyebrow at her rant, and then said in a voice obviously filled with rage, "I look forward to the conversation, Professor Potter. Shall we say 7 P.M. in your office?"

"You're just making it worse with the tone, Mr. Potter," she replied sharply.

"And you're making things worse by informing me, in a public place, that the teachers in this school have a right to decide the romantic relationships of the students!"

"I'm not doing it as a teacher, I'm doing it as a mother!" she yelled.

"THEN YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO ENFORCE IT IN A SCHOOL SETTING!" he bellowed. "If you insist on following through with this, *Professor*, then I will bring you up on charges!"

SMACK!

The hallway was silent for a long moment after Lily Potter's hand struck her son's face. Rage contorted her normally attractive appearance. "You will not speak to a professor in that manner. Seven P.M." With that, she stalked off.

"Oh, no," Hermione moaned. "Maybe she's right. I've caused a huge fight between the two of you! She struck you, and she never seemed the type this summer!"

"She's an Evans," Harry said simply. His tone showed that he was still angry, but that resignation and sorrow were also components. "Evidence

seems to show that the Evans family has a tendency to lash out at things that they can't control. Aunt Petunia did it all the time. Once she threw a frying pan at my head. It didn't connect, but I was also in trouble for the dent it made in the wall." He shrugged. "So I'll get to go listen to her try to explain why I can't date you, we'll scream at each other for a while, and then she'll give me a direct order, threatening my grades or my standing in Gryffindor or whatever."

"How can you be so blasé about it?" Hermione was nearly apoplectic.

"Simple: Now I understand her a lot better. We've been together for long enough for her to be willing to drop the mask around me. The woman that was Petunia Dursley's sister is coming to the fore, and I'm learning that she was not the bastion of sweetness and wonderfulness that everyone said she was. I'm related to her. That's it. Yeah, it hurts to find out that they're not the perfect people that I thought they were, but now that I know the truth, I can adjust."

"How'd your dad get into this?" she asked, more than a little bit puzzled.

"Oh, sorry. I never told you guys about the memory that Snape left in the Pensieve, did I? Whether or not it was invented, there had to be some truth to it. Dad was a bully growing up, and so was Sirius. Not that I like the little bastard, but I begin to understand why Pettigrew was willing to turn traitor. Dad probably used him as a target for pranks occasionally. I'm sure that Sirius did."

She shook her head. "I am so sorry about all this. Maybe you would be -"

He almost smiled. "Would you guys accept that idea from me if I said it in regards to my trying to be alone to fight Moldies?" She shook her head. "So what makes you think that I'm going to accept letting the girl I really think I'd like to have as my girlfriend get away?" He blinked. "Wait. Let me say that so that even I can understand what I just said." She giggled softly. "Seriously, though. If you won't let me be alone for something that might kill you guys if you follow me, then what makes you think I'm going to let my future girlfriend get away from me without a fight?" He pulled her into a hug.

"Thank you," she said softly. "Nobody other than my parents ever really made me feel as wanted as you just did." She looked up at him and saw that he was remaining silent, but he seemed to be blushing. "Are you thinking of a different meaning for 'wanting me'?" she asked with a grin teasing at the corner of her mouth.

"Were I an American, I would plead the Fifth, whatever that means. Instead, I'll just say that . . . hey, look! A snorkack!" he said, pointing off down the hall.

"That's not going to work," she said, shaking her head in amusement. "You're not an American, and there's no snorkack. But I appreciate what you're too embarrassed to say. Thank you."

"It's rude to say what . . . well, I think it's even rude to *think* it about you, but -"

"Well, you just go on being rude if you want to," she replied. "It's nice to know that someone thinks I'm pretty." They hugged tighter for a moment, and then continued the walk to Gryffindor Tower.

Voldemort looked with interest at the letter that had been handed to him by Narcissa Malfoy. "My Lord, I have no idea of the content," she said, head bowed. "Our son sent it to us, with that sealed letter already inside."

"Yes, it is a conundrum, isn't it?" Voldemort teased. "Open it and find out what the boy wishes to tell me, possibly taking credit for it yourselves, or potentially face my wrath for opening a missive addressed to me, in hopes of disarming any possible traps. Quite the choice, isn't it?"

"Yes, Lord," she said softly, head still bowed.

Convinced he had her properly cowed, he opened the letter carefully - the boy was an idiot, but one does not live long enough to become a Dark Lord by ignoring precautions - and pulled out the sheets within. No Curses or Charms lay upon the missive.

My Lord,

I do not know if you have heard all that has happened at Hogwarts thus far, so I will explain it all. Please forgive me if I am simply repeating that which you already know in your infinite wisdom.

To start with, I must report that Professor Snape has been arrested for being a Death Eater and for having a part in the deaths of the Mudblood Granger's parents. I do not know if he truly had a part in it, but the Headmaster himself seems to have no problem with the situation, so I assume that Professor Snape has done something to anger the Mudblood loving old goat.

Second, the reports that the Skeeter woman made this summer are true. Potter's parents are alive and currently teaching here. I have tried to begin some inquiries into how the Potters were brought back to life, but the questioning has gone nowhere thus far. I apologise that I have not been more capable in procuring this information and hope that you will be gentle with my punishment when the time comes, although I do not deserve such mercy.

I will continue my inquiries, however.

There appears to be some good news, however, regarding Dumbledore. It appears that the 'Golden Boy' is on the outs with him, as are many of the teachers at the school. Including the Potters. They especially seem to have a blinding hatred of either him or of something that he has

done. I suspect that this can be exploited, although I am uncertain how at this time. I eagerly await your orders in this regard.

Also, it appears that Potter is even on the outs with his own parents. I was lucky enough to overhear a screaming match between himself and his mother, over the possibility of Potter dating the Mudblood Granger. As much as it disgusts me, perhaps we should encourage this relationship, if it can cause that kind of dissension amongst the fools. Separating Potter from his parents through their own stupidity would likely work quite well into your hands, My Lord.

As further information becomes available, I will forward it to you. I wish that there were more, but it is only a week into the school year. I am honestly surprised that there was this much information.

Eternally in your service,

Draco Malfoy

"He understands grovelling quite well, I see," Voldemort said softly. "I am aware that it is also not 'all', but he does well to avoid the more useless information."

He thought for several minutes, quietly contemplating the information within. *No one is aware that I know that the Potters were not dead. I can perhaps use that information. Let us see.*

"I shall write him a response, and you will send it to him with your next owl."

"Yes, My Lord," Narcissa replied shakily.

James Potter followed his wife as she headed toward the Potions classroom. She'd been glaring at the Granger girl for most of dinner, even after Hermione had stood and publicly apologised for her part in the Welcoming Feast incident. For some reason,, and Harry seemed to be receiving some of those glares as well. Something had made her angry, and as he knew all too well, when she got it in her head to be angry, it took forever to get her out of that mood. *If there's anyone who knows that, it's me.*

He waited outside the door of the classroom to see who might be coming along. He knew the school well enough to be able to hide and not be seen, so there was no danger of anyone telling Lily that he was skulking outside. He was slightly startled to see Harry approach. "I'm here for my detention, Professor Potter," his son said with little love for the woman inside. *Shite, what did she do now? I love her, but damn me if she's doesn't live up to that stupid hair colour.* He slid one end of an Extendible Ear under the door as it closed.

"You're developing quite the attitude, Harry," Lily said. "Is that related to being back at school or something else?"

"Oh, it's quite clearly something else, Professor," he replied calmly. "Last year, it was the Ministry telling me what I could think. This year, it's you doing the same thing."

"I'm not telling you what you can think, Harry," Lily said. "I'm just telling you that dating that girl is not a good idea. I've asked around about her, and it's not a good picture."

"Let me guess a few names that you interviewed, if I may, Professor? I'm betting that names like Marietta Edgecombe, Cho Chang, Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode, and probably several of the guys from all the Houses too. But you ignored people like Ron and Ginny and Neville. How'd I do?"

"Fairly spot on," was her reply. "Don't you think that it's rather telling that you could list the people I spoke to? She's no good for you, son."

"Let's see. Marietta still has spots from the curse she knowingly set off last year by betraying us to the Ministry. Cho is Marietta's best friend, who *also* saw before we did how we feel about each other, and therefore sees Hermione as not only the woman who hurt her best friend, but who also stole her boyfriend. Bulstrode and Hermione have hated each other since day one, and Parkinson thinks that Hermione is worthless because she's a Muggle-born. Most of the guys hate her because she's smarter than them and wouldn't give them the time of day."

"You're just trying to protect her. I've been told by quite a few about her misguided S.P.E.W. attempts. She made no effort to learn about the house elves and made things quite horrible for Dobby."

"She was fifteen. Didn't you do anything something at fifteen without thinking it through? Besides, since her error was pointed out, she's been trying to improve."

"You're just trying to stick your nose into something that doesn't concern you."

"You're my son," Lily replied with forced calm. "If you're dating someone I think is inappropriate for you, I'll do more than stick my nose into the situation."

James could hear Harry laugh, but it was not a happy sound. "I wish Aunt Petunia was still alive; I'd apologise to her for thinking you were a saint."

SMACK!

"Were all the Evans women this violent and hateful?"

SMACK!

"I can keep this going all night, Professor. I've written lines that were carved into my own hand. I've faced the Cruciatus from Voldemort himself. Slapping me around in hopes that it will somehow convince me - or you - that you're right is not going to work. I've been beaten by your sister and her walrus of a husband, not to mention their whale of a son. You'll have to get a lot more inventive, Professor. Now, unless you have an actual detention for me, I have homework to do. You won't convince me to stop hoping that I can date Hermione someday." He started walking toward the door.

"Don't think that I won't try getting her expelled, Harry," his wife called out to their son.

"Do what you feel is necessary, Professor." James just barely got the Ear out of the way and returned to his hiding place just in time, because Harry yanked the door open and stalked from the room angrily.

He walked in a short time later, after ensuring that Harry was nowhere in sight. "What a piece of work you are, Lily," he said before she could say a word. "Where has this hateful harridan been these past few years? Did someone Imperius you or something?"

"That little bitch has her hooks into my son, and he can't see what a horrible thing it is! I need to break them apart before it gets too far."

"And slapping him around is going to help you in that regard?" he asked her incredulously.

"How do you know what was going on inside this room?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

"I'm a Marauder for Merlin's sake! I've got no end of tricks up my sleeve! The point is that I saw you walking down here with that infamous 'I'm pissed at everything' look of yours - the one that makes you walk so that your breasts bounce in an alternating rhythm?"

"You and my tits," she growled, but her heart wasn't entirely in it.

"I've always been rather fond of your tits," he replied, "but that's not important right now. What is important is that our son never once called you 'Mum'. You were 'Professor' to him, even though he knew it was a family matter. What did you say to him earlier that led to this 'detention'?"

"I'd been talking to the Granger girl, and he came in at the end. Make no mistake, this relationship will end before it starts, James. I will not have him involved with someone who is so very certain that she knows better than everyone else."

James looked at her for a moment before he headed back to the door. "No, I can see that you wouldn't want him marrying a woman so much like his own mother." He shut the door and Sealed it quickly, leaving before she could reverse his charm. He could hear her scream of frustration from within.

Minerva McGonagall was nearly run over by Harry Potter on his way back to Gryffindor Tower. "Mr. Potter!" she barked in her brogue. "Watch where you're going!"

That seemed to shock him out of whatever snit he was in, because he drew up short and turned to face her. "Sorry, Professor. This hasn't been a good day, and it's shaping up to be a crappy year. I wasn't watching where I was going I'm sorry."

The response was not exactly what she had expected, so she decided to draw him out a bit. "Given the tragedy that happened to Miss Granger's parents, I can see where that would put a damper on things, but *your* parents have returned! Doesn't take improve your situation at all?" She motioned for him to follow her, and they headed for her office.

He didn't speak again until they were there and seated comfortably. "You'd think it would, but I just gotten back from being talked at by Professor Potter, who has informed me that she won't *permit* any relationship to happen between Hermione Granger and myself. She'll see Hermione expelled if necessary. That's something I'd expect out of that manipulative old coot upstairs, not my own mother!"

"Lily threatened Miss Granger? Why?" Her hand shot to her chest in shock.

"Apparently, she feels that the humiliation I received at the Opening Feast was the Fourth Unforgivable and plans to see to it that Hermione is expelled for being a threat to myself and other students. Or at least a threat to my heart. Or something."

"What are you going to do?" McGonagall asked slowly.

"Explain to Hermione that I'm going to back off on dating her until we've left Hogwarts. I won't let my romantic feelings get in the way of her education. Besides, now that she knows that one person finds her pretty, she'll act differently around the school. This way, she has a chance to attract the attention of someone better."

"She would have trouble finding someone better than yourself, Harry," McGonagall replied in a manner that was both stern and gentle. "While, at times, I might wish that you were a better student, I've never been able to fault your sense of right and wrong. You're willing to hurt yourself to help the woman you care for. If that doesn't melt her heart, then nothing will."

"I need to tell her, though. I'm not looking forward to that."

"And I will warn the others to watch out for inappropriate behaviour from Lily. I would say that it would be impossible, but your attitude tells me how wrong I am." She sighed. "Unfortunately, the experience with Albus from this summer also shows me that I don't know people as well as I thought I did. Even this late in life, I can still be blind-sided." Her tone was sad.

Harry's eyes twinkled. "What do you mean, 'this late in life'? You're younger than Snape, aren't you? He was Seventh Year while you were an ickle

Firstie, right?"

She laughed softly. "You, Mr. Potter, are a great deal like your father, and all in the good ways. He, too, was quite a charmer."

"What? You think I jest?" Harry replied with mock affrontery. "How could you say such a thing?"

"Away with you, scamp!" she laughed again. "Go to your lady and explain the situation."

He nodded, no longer smiling. "I'm going to start keeping a record, too. If I have to, I'm going to bring her up on charges before the Board of Governors."

"I hope it doesn't get to that," Minerva said softly.

"So do I."

"How'd your detention go?" Ron asked as Harry entered the Tower.

"What detention? It was another excuse for Professor Potter to yell at me and slap me around."

"She hit you again?" Hermione asked.

"Twice. Not a big thing, so don't worry about it."

"Your own mother strikes you and you say 'Don't worry about it'?" Ginny asked, her voice making her incredulity obvious.

"Think about who her sister was, Ginny. Petunia Evans-Dursley never had a problem striking me. Basically, Professor Evans-Potter showed that the temper and anger are an Evans trait. I had that problem last year, I'm sure you can recall. I'll want to see someone about that after I get out of school, before I get involved in a relationship."

"What about me?" Hermione asked, stricken.

"We have to either run around behind everyone's backs - and you know the rumour mill around here - or we wait until we're out of school. Professor Potter has decided that she's going to try to get you expelled if we start a romantic relationship. Your education is more important to me than my heart, Hermione, so I'm willing to wait until after you've aced all your N.E.W.T.s to get romantically involved with you if you're still willing at that point."

"What if I don't want to wait?" she asked.

He sighed. "Merlin knows that I'd love to stand on the table in the Great Hall during breakfast and scream out that I love you, but that's a sure-fire way to ensure that she invents something to get you expelled."

There was a long pause as Harry's friends thought this through. "So she wins," was the only thing that Hermione could say.

"So she wins," Harry agreed bitterly.

Wishful Thinking Winds are changing

By Monday, the entire school knew of the falling out between Harry and his mother. The former seemed a little sad but otherwise fine; the latter seemed to alternate between angry and hurt. The other professors seemed almost universally to be scowling at Lily Potter, and even the Headmaster seemed unhappy about something.

Gryffindor table seemed to be pretty annoyed with their new Potions professor as well. There were few that gave her pleasant looks, and the grumbling from those that had her class was actually audible to those at the Head table.

The situation didn't really improve during classes. While she was a good teacher, the Gryffindors were treating her exactly as a teacher and nothing more. There were no friendly, "Good morning," calls, and the class itself dealt with nothing but the course material.

By Friday, she had had it. "I have had quite enough of this," she said at lunch. "I would appreciate the students staying out of what is a purely family related issue."

"A bit hypocritical of you, wouldn't you say, Professor?" Harry asked without turning to look up at her. "Telling people to stay out of a purely family thing when you're willing to bring the full force of your authority as a *teacher* at this institute of learning to play on the exact same situation?" He stood and turned to face her. "Besides, *Professor*, you've gotten what you wanted. Hermione and I are not dating, nor will we until we are both finished with school. You've won. Are you happy now?"

"I will not permit a student to back-talk a teacher," she snapped back, ignoring the questions, "even if he's my son. Detention tonight at 8 PM."

"Shall bring the Bruise Balm, Professor, or will you be able to keep the Evans temper under control this time?"

There were several hisses of indrawn breath at his comment.

"I'll take the detention, Mr. Potter," his father said. "If she chooses to attend it as well, then she can, but this way both sides are appeased."

Lily looked at her husband as if hurt.

Eight o'clock rolled around and found Harry stepping up to the door of the Defence classroom. As he entered, he saw that his mother had preceeded him. She come to a stop in front of his father. "Why did you take the detention from me?" she demanded.

"Because I was planning on preventing another incident like last week. I somehow think that you getting angry and proving Harry right about the Evans women is a bad thing," James Potter replied calmly.

"Excuse me?" she asked him, softly, her temper quite obvious.

"You're about to lash out and strike me if I continue in this vein, *just like Petunia would have*. Can you deny that you're acting just like her?"

Lily stopped moving, standing stock still for a few moments. "Oh my God. I've become my sister," she finally said in a choked whisper.

"Worse, in a way," Harry said, stepping forward and announcing his presence. "She didn't hide that she wanted to control me. She made it quite very clear that she simply hated me. You use a perverted version of love to justify your attempts to control me."

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said softly, eyes glistening as they regarded him.

He shrugged. "That's neither here nor there. I think it's better to see you as a human being, rather than as a saint. This summer sort of allowed me to revert to childhood and see the both of you as these marvellous people who could do no wrong, but I can't be that child any longer. I have to kill a man one of these days, and I don't like what that's going to do to me. I've a family I have to head, and that requires adult thinking." He turned to his father. "Which is why I agree with the detention. I argued with a teacher in a public setting." Turning to his mother he added, "I apologise for that, by the way. Our disagreements should be kept between us. I'll talk to the Gryffindors as well."

"I appreciate that.

"I suppose that I should leave you two to the detention, then," she said in a subdued tone.

"If you want," James said.

"I probably should." She walked to the door, but before she could leave, she turned around and said, "James? Will you be . . . can I expect -"

"It's been a lonely week for me, too. I'll make things easier on the house elves."

She gave a tiny smile at that comment and left the room.

"Am I too young to understand what that last was about?" Harry asked with some bemusement.

James raised his hand to rub at the back of his neck. The move spoke volumes about his embarrassment. "I've . . . been sleeping on the couch in our quarters."

"She kicked you out of bed?" was the incredulous response.

"No, I was angry enough that I kicked myself out of the bed. That's all worked out now, so let's get on with the detention."

Harry was laughing as he staggered into the Tower. "See you tomorrow, Dad," he called out just as the portraiture closed.

"Things went well?" Ron asked simply from the Trio's usual study table. His eyes were showing amusement at the manner that Harry had entered the Tower.

"We've come to an understanding. She's going to work on her temper."

"And the dating thing?" Ginny asked, leaning on the couch behind her brother.

"One thing at a time," Harry said. "I'd like to avoid the Evans temper before I bring that up again. In that vein," his voice rose as he addressed the Common Room as a whole, "I'd appreciate it if people acted nicer toward her. It means a lot that you've closed ranks behind me, but . . . well, the argument *is* a family one."

The Gryffindors grumbled a bit, but they agreed and slowly went back to their previous activities. Harry gravitated to where Ron and Hermione were sitting, gently ruffling her hair before he jumped over the edge of the couch and landed next to her. "Things will work out eventually."

"It's for the best right now anyway," she said sadly. "I . . . it's just too soon."

"I understand," he said, pulling her close and kissing her forehead. "Besides, I like the idea of just sitting here with you leaning against me. Makes me feel like . . . well, like a family. Like I've got a chance at one."

"What happened?" Ron asked. "I remember you talking about how the two of you were laughing when she was testing your Occlumency skills. Now you won't even call her 'Mum'."

"I don't know. I don't know if she was putting on that face for me in the summer, or if she's fallen prey to something now that we're at the school. It's like she sees Hermione as a threat or something, and that bothers me. If she forces me to choose, then she'll lose, because I've known Hermione a lot longer. I've done without a mother for years, I can get used to still not having one."

"I just hope that she wakes up to that realisation before it's too late to fix things," Ron said somberly. Percy had passed the point of no return as far as the twins were concerned, and Ron was at that point as well. Losing a family member hurt, and he didn't want Harry going through that.

Amelia Bones glared at the letter from her niece. *Howdare Potter talk about me in such a manner? I think I need to go to that school and have a conversation with the young man.* She donned her cloak and headed for the Ministry's Apparation point.

She reappeared directly in front of the gates to Hogwarts and strode purposefully toward the school. She was met by a rather surprised Albus Dumbledore. "Madam Bones! What a surprise! To what do we owe the honour of your visit?"

"Albus, I'm here to have a conversation with one of your students," she replied, more than a little annoyed at his obvious stalling tactics.

"In an official capacity or as a concerned parent, so to speak?"

"At the moment, the inquiry is purely private, but if necessary, I'm certain that it could be taken into the official realm."

He raised an annoying eyebrow at her. "That sounds as if you are threatening one of Hogwarts own."

"When you have a student sowing dissent within families, in order to forward some unknown agenda, possibly damaging the Ministry's image, then perhaps it should sound as if I am threatening him. Now, shall we go inside, where I may speak to Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, I believe that moving this to my office would be an excellent idea."

"I don't believe so, Headmaster. I am here to speak to him, not to speak to the administration of this school. Our conversation will be private."

"Mr. Potter is considered to be an adult, Madam Bones. The conversation will take place in a manner of his choosing." Albus Dumbledore began to exert some of the pressure that he was so famous for.

"If he is an adult, then he can come with me to the Ministry where we can carry on this conversation in peace."

Lily Potter came out the door at a run and then slowed to a walk a short distance before stopping in front of Amelia. "I believe that you are here to

Speak to my son, Madam Bones?"

"Ah, Mrs. Potter. Further stalling tactics to prevent me from speaking to the boy?"

Lily blinked once at the open hostility. "No, I came because I would like to know what you wish to speak with him about. He may be an adult in the eyes of the law, but he is still my son."

"Nonetheless, you do not have a legal right to know of the conversation's content while it is happening." Amelia was beginning to get angry – far angrier than she had been when she had headed to the school. "I find myself wondering what reason you seem to have for preventing me from speaking with Mr. Potter. You are aware that I could probably charge you with obstruction of a Ministry official?"

The door spat out more people – this time Potter, followed by several of his fellow students. "Thank you, Miss Vane. I appreciate your coming to get me when you heard that Madam Bones wished to speak to me."

The sharp-faced girl he was speaking to blushed furiously and melted back into the crowd.

He approached Amelia. "So, Madam Bones, to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"I wish to speak with you alone," she replied with something approaching a snarl.

"By all means," he said. "Shall we head inside and find a place to talk?"

Amelia Bones raised an eyebrow to him. *He's being awfully charming. What's he got up his sleeve?* "That should work quite well, Mr. Potter."

In short order, Harry was seated with Amelia in an unused classroom. She cast multiple privacy spells to ensure that their talk remained just between the two of them. "So, Mr. Potter. What was the idea behind the conversation you had with my niece?"

"I had a sneaking suspicion that was why you were here. Rather hammer the problems out with me before you go and tell her that I was . . . mistaken, perhaps?" His tone was tightly controlled.

"Convincing my niece that I'm a bigot? I'll break you if I have to, Potter."

"Then how do you explain that you are openly biased against werewolves, Director Bones? Isn't that the definition of bigotry? I believe that your words to Auror Tonks were that her contract was forfeit if she married Remus Lupin. That I would be removed from my parents if Remus were to do more than occasionally visit them? These are not the words of a non-prejudiced woman, Director."

Amelia shuddered in the chair for a moment. Before she could speak, Harry continued. "I can see you reacting in disgust at the thought. I *am* sorry that I hurt Susan's feelings. I'm sorry that I was forced to open her eyes to the real Amelia Bones, but I am glad that she now knows just how two-faced and political you are." He sneered at her. "People like you and Umbridge disgust me, Madam Bones. That nasty little toad was at the school last year spouting the same type of crap that you are now."

"How dare you refer to a respected member of the Minister's staff as a toad!" Amelia hissed.

"I call a spade a spade, Madam," he said sharply. "I have said nothing that is illegal, to my knowledge."

Amelia blinked several times in succession at Harry's tone and manner. "Exactly what are your intentions in regards to the Ministry, Mr. Potter?"

"Ah!" he replied with a sharp laugh that held little humour. "Now we get to the meat of the questioning! My intentions in regards to the Ministry are as follows: to leave this accursed island called England as soon as that snake faced bastard Riddle is dead and never return. I will leave because the Ministry is just a legalised version of Riddle's Death Eaters, and I refuse to fight that battle if I don't have to. So you can run on back to your masters, Madam Bones, and tell them that I am not going to be any threat to them. I will simply go away when Riddle is dead, and you and your ilk can continue to betray the public trust."

"You surprise me," she replied after a long moment of silence. "I'd expect you to fight the supposed injustice. You are a Gryffindor, after all," she replied with a small sneer.

"You and yours have proven that it's useless to fight the government. Umbridge tortured students, and nothing will be done to her. I'd imagine she's even been promoted, given the Ministry's way of working things."

She shuddered again. "What do you mean 'tortured students'?" she asked through clenched teeth.

He shoved his right hand under her nose. "You can tell your partner for tea that I will carry these scars for the rest of my life. I have her obnoxious little attempts to force me to the Ministry's official thought processes permanently carved into my hand. After all, 'I must not tell lies' about the return of Voldemort."

"Who else had detentions with her?" she ground out.

"I refuse to tell you, on the grounds that you're going to have to earn your arrest record. I already know that I'm bound for Azkaban without a trial, if Fudge and Umbridge sent you to talk to me. I see no reason to make your job easier."

"Was Susan on that list?" she asked.

"Ask the Headmaster, if you can convince him to give up the information. As for me, I intend to make your job as hard as possible, within the law."

"Tell me if Susan did detentions with Umbridge!" she yelled at Potter.

"Why?" he asked, tilting his head curiously. "You'll just find an excuse to keep her out of prison anyway. Why does finding out whether or not your crony tortured her make any difference?" He sat back, a sly look suddenly appearing on his face. "Unless she swore not to hurt Susan and then hurt her anyway?"

Amelia sat back and stared at Harry for a long few seconds before she began to shake in the seat. Suddenly, she pulled her wand and fired off a Bludgeoning spell. Then everything went black.

Susan sat in the hospital wing looking at her unconscious aunt, her parents beside her, worry etched on their faces. Susan's worry was for a different reason than for her aunt. She was sure that Harry was going to be fined at the very minimum and possibly sent to Azkaban for Stunning her aunt.

"How is she, Madam Pomfrey?" Denise Bones asked.

"She should be awake at any moment. It was a rather powerful Stunner that Mr. Potter sent her way."

"Yes, it was," Susan's aunt said groggily from the bed. "Remind me to commend that young man on his reflexes."

"Aunt Amelia?" Susan asked softly. "Why did he Stun you?"

"Because he had no way of knowing that I was not aiming at him. I was frustrated that Dolores Umbridge had used me! And she'll get away with what she did to me, too," she said in a loathing tone.

"What did she do to you?"

"During the time you were in the St. Mungo's summer study program, she came into my office and threatened you – politely, of course, and with nothing I can take to court, but the threat was obvious to someone who has worked the political arena as long as I have. It's fairly obvious that she cast the Imperius on me at some point. Worry for you probably lowered my resistance enough, and she certainly didn't vocalise it, or else I'd have fought it. Again, I can't prove it. She's rather soundly destroyed any good will I had with people and destroyed my credibility and my career."

"Isn't there anything you can do about it?" Amelia's brother Edwin asked.

"Short of going into the Ministry and challenging her to a duel? Not a damned thing. She's doubtless cast many spells since she hit me with an Unforgivable, so I have no proof. Mind you, challenging her is a damn good idea, but I won't do it in the heat of the moment. I'll plot that duel to make it to my advantage as strongly as possible." She looked around. "What happened to the Potter boy?"

"He has placed himself under house arrest, so to speak," the Headmaster said from the doorway. "After all, he has attacked the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Good heavens!" Amelia cried out. "Tell him he's no worries from me on that quarter."

"You realise that your attitude from this summer is not going to instill him with a great deal of confidence in your trustworthiness," Susan warned her.

"I know. Umbridge has managed to cost me my job, but she forgot that I was in Slytherin as well. She'll not get away with it scot-free."

"Why not?" Minerva McGonagall asked. "After all, she's gotten away with the torture of Hogwarts students by making them carve their own flesh. Why should we trust that she will finally face some form of justice?"

"Because I know about it now," Amelia responded, face settling into determined lines.

"Honestly, Amy," Edwin said, "you know that the very people that you'll need to convince are going to be the hardest to convince now. You've alienated Harry, and he's the one who you most need to convince. Face it, Sis: by letting your guard down and letting Susan be a hostage, you've ruined quite a lot."

"As much as I hate admitting it, I'd have to say that you're right." She scowled deeply.

"I still love you, Auntie," Susan said softly. "Knowing *why* you acted the bigot helps, though. I'll tell Harry what happened. That should help your efforts to convince him."

Harry and Hermione sat out on the cliffs above the lake, their one class of the day over. They'd eaten lunch and absented themselves from everyone else. It was the nineteenth of September, and Hermione was near tears. Harry just held her and let her cry. Her first birthday without her parents was understandably rough on her.

"I miss them," she sniffed. "I wish I could . . . all those summers when I rushed off to be with you and Ron and Ginny, and I'll never . . . I'll never -" She dissolved into tears again.

When she had cried herself out once more, Harry responded. "I really do understand. Until this summer, remember, I had no parents. I wanted so much to explore things with them, and to know that they loved me. Your parents loved you, Hermione. I'm sure of that."

"How can you be sure?"

"How could they not?" he asked her with a smile. "They had a beautiful and intelligent daughter, the top of her class, and they couldn't help but be proud of that. And where there's pride, there's love."

"How do you mean?"

"That's *our* daughter that beat all the school records!" he said, pretending to be her father. "They'd want people to know that the smartest girl Hogwarts has seen in at least a generation was their daughter. They'd want people to know that you were theirs. Contrast that with the Dursleys, who would only accept that I existed if it would bring *them* acclaim. I was a freak and not fit to live, to them. Your parents took you all over Europe. The Dursleys took me to Mrs. Figg."

She nestled into his arms again. "Thank you. It means a lot to me that you'd do this for me."

"You're my girlfriend, no matter what my mother wants. The way I understand things, the boyfriend is supposed to be there during all kinds of situations, not just when things are good." He grinned. "You know the drill: 'For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.' All the time."

"Are you proposing to me, Mr. Potter?" she asked incredulously.

"Not yet. We may have known each other for five years already, but we might discover that we don't work as a romantic couple. We may be best as just friends. On the other hand, if we discover that we *do* work as a couple, that could change. But likely not until we're finished with Hogwarts, to be honest."

"Gives a girl something to look forward to," she replied softly.

"Gives me something to look forward to as well. I like the idea of surviving and getting married some day. Even if it is to a woman that my mother hates for some stupid reason."

"She'll get over it someday, I hope. I'd like to get along with her. I hope it's possible soon."

"Well, I . . . hey, is that Tonks running up the road from the gate?" he asked. "Looks like she's got something important, given the speed she's moving. Want to head to the school and see what it is?"

"We probably should," She agreed reluctantly, disengaging herself from the comfortable hug. She stood, smiling as Harry held his hands out to help her to her feet, especially since he used it as an excuse to pull her into another hug.

They walked at a more sedate pace than Tonks was using, and by the time that they had reached the school's front doors, Tonks had been met by the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress. "You are certain about this?" Albus asked in shock.

"Saw 'em with my own two eyes, sir!" she said, bouncing happily. "They're down in Hogsmeade right now!"

"Min . . . apologies. Professor McGonagall, would you go into Hogsmeade with Auror Tonks and perhaps take Miss Granger with you? She might be able to shed some light on this subject." A flash of silver shot from the Headmaster toward Hagrid's hut, and a moment later, the half-giant was out of his hut and tethering a thestral to a coach.

"What situation, Tonks?" Hermione asked as Hagrid's work began.

"Can we leave it a surprise? I promise you, it's something you'll like."

"Can Harry come too?" she asked. "I'd like him there to share in any good news I'm getting." At a nod from the Headmaster, they headed into town as soon as the coach pulled up to them.

They'd been unable to get Tonks to admit anything, and she proved that she was capable of being trusted with state secrets by not even giving the slightest of hints as to what they'd find when they reached Hogsmeade. "All I will say is that it will cheer you up, Hermione."

They disembarked in front of the pub, and Tonks was the first at the door. She blocked Hermione from entering for a moment. "One more thing, kiddo. Happy birthday." Tonks opened the door.

Hermione's eyes went wide as she entered the Three Broomsticks, and she launched herself across the room. "Daddy! Mummy!" she yelled, sobbing as she ran, colliding with them and hugging them as hard as was possible.

Tonks placed her hand upon Harry's rising wand. "I've checked 'em, Harry, and I'm convinced they actually are her parents."

He released a breath and nodded, putting his wand away again.

"I'll let them tell the story," Tonks went on softly, "but it basically comes down to purebloods thinking that Muggles are stupid."

"Why am I here?" Harry asked her. "I know that she asked for me to be here, but this is really family time. I'm certainly not family."

Before either Professor McGonagall or Tonks could say anything, Hermione motioned over to Harry to come closer. She had tears in her eyes. "Mummy, Daddy, this is my boyfriend, Harry Potter."

"Thank you for looking after her for us Mr. Potter," her father said, extending his hand. "She needed friends while we were making our way back, and she tells us that you were there for her."

"It's only right," Harry replied. "With all the times that she's been there for me when I needed a friend, it would have been – what's a good word? – *churlish* of me to not be there for her when she needed someone."

"Not everyone thinks that way," her mother said.

"A proper adult does," was all Harry said.

"How did you survive?" Hermione asked. "We were told that the house fell on you!"

The elder Grangers motioned for everyone to sit down with them and began their tale. "Well, the answer to your question is yes and no," her mother said. "We heard the shouts and made for the first place we could think of to save ourselves – the villa's wine cellar."

Understanding lit Hermione's face. "So the Death Eaters just assumed that the house falling crushed you to death, while you were actually just waiting it out in the cellar."

Her father picked up the thread. "Since that area is prone to earthquakes, the cellars are built to withstand a lot, so a house falling on it was nothing."

Her mother giggled. "We were pretty pissed by the time that the rescue squad got us free. Scared the hell out of one of them when -" The giggling overtook her, and she stopped speaking.

Her father was chuckling but also blushing slightly. "When I saw light break through from the upstairs as the cleared the rubble, the first thing that came to mind was to shout 'MacIntyre!'. Almost scared the poor guy to death!"

Hermione thought for a moment before she started to giggle as well. Harry looked confused, especially when McGonagall and Tonks began to smile and chuckle themselves. Tonks surprised him by breaking into song. "Oh, there was Brown, up side down, mopping up the whiskey on the floor. 'Booze, booze,' the firemen cried as they come knockin' at the door. 'Well don't let 'em in 'til it's all drunk up.' Somebody shouted, 'MacIntyre,' and we all got blue blind paralytic drunk, when the Old Dun Cow caught fire."

Harry looked at her for a moment and then visualised it from the point of view of the rescuer. A moment later he was laughing the hardest of all of them. "I'm sorry," he finally gasped, "but what got me was the image of the rescue guy up top, expecting the worst and hearing someone quite happily shouting out a drinking song!"

"Precisely," Mrs. Granger said with her own laugh. "They helped us out, and eventually we made our way back to England, but it wasn't exactly easy. After all, our passports and everything else were in the house and just part of the debris. We went to the British Consulate and got what help we could from them, but due to a number of things, we had to stay there for a while. Since it was obviously an assassination attempt on us, we couldn't even try to send word ahead." She hugged her daughter tighter in silent apology.

"We ended up getting the most important of our things back," her father continued, "such as our passports and other papers. All our money was in traveler's cheques, which made things a great deal easier as well. But we still had a hell of a delay getting out of Greece. It probably would have been quite the problem getting in touch with you if Auror Tonks hadn't come to our house to begin clearing things up when our taxi pulled up outside. She waited for us to get closer and then verified that we were your parents. The next thing we knew, we were here in this pub waiting to see you."

"Can you forgive me for not saying I love you enough?" Hermione asked quietly of her parents. "I kept crying myself to sleep because I kept thinking of some of our arguments. I'd just taken you for granted, and -" She sniffled and was pulled back into a hug by her mother.

"We know, darling," her mother said. "We kept worrying how this would affect you."

While they talked, Harry carefully stepped outside the tavern, followed by Tonks. "Let Professor McGonagall know that I'm heading back up to the school. This is a time for family, not for boyfriends."

"Are you sure?" the pink-haired Auror asked, obviously a little worried.

"I'm not depressed or anything," he assured her, "I just don't belong here. That's all. I am incredibly happy for her that she can tell her folks what she feels for them. That's been one of the biggest points that would make her cry these past days." He was actually smiling. "Please let her know that I'm not angry or hurt or anything – I'm just doing what I can to not intrude on family."

He left Tonks behind and walked back up the road toward the school, smiling as he walked. *I'm glad for her. She was so heartbroken by their deaths.*

"It is true, Mr. Potter?" Albus Dumbledore asked him when he later approached the front of the school. "The Grangers are truly alive?"

"I saw them with my own eyes, sir. I left Hermione down there since she had Professor McGonagall and Auror Tonks to keep her safe. It's a family moment. Guys who will someday be boyfriends don't qualify as family."

"She kicked you out?" Lily Potter asked as she approached. Harry merely rolled his eyes and walked past her without an answer. "Harry, I asked you a question," she said a little more forcefully.

"Yes, you did," he replied, turning back to face her. "Congratulations for recognising it as such," he added sarcastically. "However, I am under no

constraints – either educational or familial – to reply to your fishing expedition, *Professor* . Perhaps you can run down to Hogsmeade and find out for yourself. I, on the other hand, will not fuel your Snape-like attempt to destroy a specific student here. If I say that she did, you will crow that you knew she would do something like that, and if I say that she didn't, then you'll convince yourself that she's fooled me into thinking that she didn't kick me out. You want her gone? Fake your own evidence, but don't come to me asking for help on the project." He stormed down the hallway away from her and the Headmaster, muttering darkly as he moved. He stopped a short distance away and turned to face them again. "I am coming to the realisation that as far as my past is concerned: I still have no mother. All I have is Aunt Petunia, Mark II."

His father, who had just arrived after letting out his class, simply winced at the comment.