

Fidelius

The Road Not Taken

Author's Note: This story is written for NaNoWriMo, National Novel Writer's Month (for more details on this form of annual insanity, go to www.nanowrimo.org). As such, it should be noted that I am striving for speed of writing and word count, not necessarily quality. You have been warned. Scary thought of the day: This is how I write with NO BETA!

Another Author's Note: I have long been dissatisfied with the "standard" timeline for the Harry Potter books. This timeline holds that James and Lily married right out of school, and that Harry was born the year after that. Fifteen months later, they were killed by Voldemort. By this time, they had already "thrice defied" the Dark Lord, becoming worthy enough opponents to require his personal attention, and Severus Snape was already a Master in his chosen field, and had advanced within the Death Eater hierarchy enough to provide information about Voldemort's inner circle to the Ministry. Also according to this timeline, Charlie Weasley left school just the year before Harry entered Hogwarts. I don't think this timeline is realistic; there just isn't enough time for things to happen, especially since Lily was pregnant or the mother of an infant through most of it. Therefore, in this story at least, I postulate that James and Lily did marry shortly after leaving school, but that they both worked for several years in their chosen fields before Harry was born – James in the Ministry and Lily attempting to instill a modicum of journalistic integrity at the Daily Prophet. This gives Sirius time to complete the three years of Auror training and get a little field experience, Remus to discover the difficulties of finding a job in the Wizarding world, and Snape to take his Mastery in Potions, which surely is a multi-year process. Thus, the Marauders and Snape are all in their mid-twenties at the time Voldemort strikes, and Lucius Malfoy is already past thirty. Also, there is a gap of at least five years between Charlie and Percy Weasley, allowing time for the Quidditch hysteria to build up (the cries of "we haven't won the cup since Charlie Weasley left!" in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone would mean more if he left school several years ago, instead of just last year). This means that both Bill and Charlie are in school already at the time this story starts, and will have had time to establish themselves in their chosen fields by the time Harry first becomes acquainted with them.

Disclaimer (As if I really needed one): I don't own Harry Potter or any characters or events you recognize. See the pretty blond lady over there in Scotland? She owns them. See the piles of money from Harry Potter books, movies and licensing? She owns them, too. *sigh*

FIDELIUS

Chapter One

The Road Not Taken

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I

Took the one less traveled by.

And that has made all the difference."

- Robert Frost

October 11, 1981 – The Dower Estate, Godric's Hollow

"Mr. Prongs hereby calls this meeting of the Marauders to order!" James Potter raised a hammer above his head with the obvious intent of bringing it down – hard – upon the kitchen table.

"James, no!" Lily Potter gasped as she grabbed his arm to interrupt the swing before he did real damage to the furniture. "This is a brand new table!"

"So? It looks too new. A proper kitchen table should have all sorts of dings and dents."

"But they're supposed to be acquired naturally, from use. You're not supposed to add them on purpose." She wrested the hammer from her husband's grip.

"Well then, what am I supposed to use to open the meeting?" he asked, pouting.

"If you must bang on the table, use this." The red-headed woman leaned down and picked something up off the floor; a short cry of protest came from under the table. "Don't worry, Mummy will give it right back. Here," she said, straightening up and presenting James with the bright orange squeaky hammer they'd bought so that their toddler son could bang on things to his heart's content, just like his papa.

"This is downright undignified," said James, accepting the hammer nonetheless.

"Mr. Padfoot advises Mr. Prongs that this is a Marauders meeting, and therefore dignity doesn't enter into it," Sirius Black drawled. He leaned back in his chair and shook his shaggy black fringe out of his eyes. The rest of his hair was drawn back in the pony tail he'd affected since his father had died; the style was the mark of the Head of the Family in the older pureblood lines, and although James had eschewed it, Sirius had decided to wear it as a deliberate insult to his family – or at least to what remained of it. As a final insult, he held it back with a Muggle elastic band instead of the traditional black velvet ribbon required for casual occasions.

"Too true," his friend agreed. "Okay, *now* Mr. Prongs calls this meeting of the Marauders to order!" He brought the hammer down upon the tabletop with a resounding squeak. "Hey, what's that all about?" he asked in surprise, looking down at the floor. His fourteen month old son was determinedly pounding on his father's foot with a blue plush teddy bear. The bear made a little cry of distress with each blow.

"He wants his hammer back, I think," said Peter Pettigrew, looking under the table to observe the toddler's assault on the paternal anatomy. "Or maybe he wants to usurp your position and call the meeting to order himself. He's got a good swing."

James addressed the little boy firmly. "We can't have that! No usurping until you're at least as tall as the table, young man!" He picked the wriggling child up and held him in his lap.

The black-haired toddler promptly dropped the bear to the floor, where it emitted a final, doleful, "Ow!" and reclaimed his hammer, banging it enthusiastically on the table. "Bang!" he cried gleefully.

"Bang it is, then," said Sirius, raising his wine glass in salute to the boy.

Remus Lupin looked up from the remains of his dessert. It was only a few days until the full moon, and he was already feeling the effects. "Mr. Moony would like to request that Mr. Prongs get on with the meeting some time before Mr. Prongs Junior gets his Hogwarts letter," he growled.

"First item of business?" asked James.

"Mr. Padfoot would like to take this opportunity to thank Mrs. Lily Flower for providing us with such a wondrous repast," said Sirius, raising his wine glass to Lily. "And to thank Mr. Prongs for his wisdom in choosing for his life mate not only a vision of loveliness, but one who can cook."

Lily laughed. "As if my mother would let any daughter of hers get married without that qualification. She was a worse taskmaster than Slughorn."

"Oh, so that's how you did it!" said Peter, who had tried to keep up with Lily, and failed, all through their school years. "Cooking and Potions are pretty much the same thing, aren't they? Except a steak and kidney pie is less likely to explode."

Sirius' resolution was duly seconded, voted on, and approved.

"And the second order of business?" asked James as his son continued to apply himself diligently to pounding on the table.

Peter cleared his throat and followed Sirius' example by also raising his glass to his friend's wife. "Mr. Wormtail would like to thank Mrs. Lily Flower for keeping us all on track during the past two weeks. I have no doubt we'd all still be lost in the hardware store if it wasn't for her." He shuddered, remembering that first foray into that bastion of Muggle technology – the only thing that had scared him worse than James with a hammer was Sirius with a screwdriver.

"Hear, hear!" said James, and Sirius joined in. The second item was also seconded and approved.

"For the third order of business, Mr. Moony would like to thank Mrs. Lily Flower for preventing him from killing Mr. Padfoot and Mr. Prongs the *second* time they turned on the power while he was still installing light switches," said Remus, entering into the game. There was no doubt the first time was an accident, but the werewolf had doubts about the second time. He wouldn't put it

past Sirius to have wanted to see if Remus' hair would stand on end again. His response had guaranteed that there was no third occurrence of the "accident".

The third item was seconded and approved after a spirited discussion of whether it had been fair of Remus to electrocute Sirius in turn, given that Sirius did not have the werewolf's ability to absorb damage.

"And for the fourth order of business, Mr. Prongs would like to know if his lovely wife has been sufficiently buttered up that she will take her offspring off Mr. Prongs' hands ... er, lap, and change his nappy, which is quite odoriferous, even though it is clearly Mr. Prongs' turn. Whew!" he said, holding the smelly baby out toward his mother and averting his face.

Lily graciously assented to take the protesting child upstairs to attend to matters of baby hygiene, while the men finally got down to some serious talk.

"Do you really think this will work, James?" asked Peter.

"It has to," the dark-haired man said wearily. "Lily and I have spent almost a year now moving constantly, living out of safe houses. That's no way to live, and no way to bring up Harry. He deserves to have a place where he can grow up in safety. If the *Fidelius* Charm can do that, I'm prepared to do whatever I have to."

"Why not the Hollow, then? Why spend weeks renovating this place?" Sirius waved his hand to indicate not only the surrounding room, but the entire house. The Dower House lay on a small, separate Estate from the main Potter holding of Godric's Hollow. It had once been used as a residence for the widows of Potter lords of the manor so that they would not be forced to share the Hollow – and control of the household – with their daughters in law when the heir took his place. It had long fallen into disuse, however, and by the time James found it and took it over as his secret playhouse when he was a boy, everyone had long forgotten it was there. Over the past year, James and Lily had arranged for improvements to be made, such as bringing in electrical service and hooking a new pump up to the old well. That could only be done by Muggle contractors, who were properly paid for their services and carefully then Memory Charmed so they wouldn't remember any details about the nice young couple trying to renovate the tumble-down house out in the woods. Then the four Marauders had descended on the old house with hammer and saw and paintbrush to make at least a few rooms of it habitable. They wouldn't have been able to do it without the house elves, who came down from the Hollow and swarmed over the Dower House to replace the roof, plaster the walls, refinish the woodwork, and renovate the gardens. All this had required careful human supervision, of course, lest the elves get completely carried away, and somebody had to go out to get the equipment and materials from Muggle suppliers, but at least it had kept the hammers out of James' hands, for the most part. Peter and Remus both had experience with Muggle things, so were far less dangerous when wielding the equipment.

"It's too obvious. Too many people know it as the Potter seat. Even with the *Fidelius* Charm, it might be found. But almost nobody knows about the Dower Estate, even if it is part of the family land and does adjoin the main property. Nobody's used it for a couple hundred years or so.

Hopefully the fact that we renovated it the Muggle way will have kept it off the scrying mirror at

the Ministry, and when we do the *Fidelius* we should be able to disappear completely."

"I just wish I knew how long this was going to have to last," Remus said fretfully. "It's one thing for you to hide out for a short while, but if Harry is the one who will 'vanquish the Dark Lord', it could be years. Maybe until he's an adult. And we're not even sure it's about him. I wish we knew more about that Prophecy. It sounds incomplete somehow. We don't even know where it came from, or how You Know Who got it. Dumbledore says we can trust it, but I'm just not sure. Prophecies are awfully dicey things to be messing around with."

"I've never held much faith in divination either, but I trust Albus, and he says it's reliable. If it takes years, then it takes years," said James. "Lily handed in her resignation at the Prophet before Harry was born, and I've put in for an indefinite leave from the Ministry. Minister Bagnold said she was sorry to see me go, but understood why I had to. I can't say that Crouch was all that unhappy to see the back of me, though. We'll last it out. Who knows, once we find out exactly how the spell is working, I may be able to leave the property and come visit you from time to time. Albus said there would be work for me to do, and I'm sure we'll be able to be in contact."

"It won't be the same, though."

"No, it won't. But hopefully we'll all live through it and throw a massive party when it's all over."

"I assume you've picked your Secret Keeper, then?"

"Yes, but I-"

"Don't tell me, I don't want to know," Remus interrupted. "We all know there are certain elements who don't trust me, even in the Order. I'm a Dark creature, and everybody knows we can't be trusted," he finished bitterly.

James nodded somberly. "It's unfortunate that people think that way. I mean, *we* trust you, but you're right. You miss a lot of meetings, too ... not just the ones that happen around the full moon. You've begged off some missions. You've never even let anyone see where you live. People are wondering why."

"I don't have any choice in that," said Remus, wearily. "And I don't want to talk about it right now. It's best if I don't know who your Secret-Keeper is. But I'd like to say I don't think it should be Sirius."

"So you don't trust me?" said Sirius, standing abruptly. "You think Peter would be more dependable?"

"No, that's not it at all. I don't think it should be Peter, either. Look, we know the Death Eaters are looking for you. Whoever the Secret-Keeper is will be in danger, and if they were caught, they might be tortured to get the information. How long do you think you could hold out, Sirius, if the Death Eaters were really going at you? How long could Peter hold out once they start using the Cruciatus on him?"

"Me?" squeaked Peter. "Probably about two seconds. I know my limitations. This may sound bad, but I kind of wish it could be you. You have the highest pain tolerance of all of us."

"But I have other weaknesses, and if rumour is correct that Snivellus joined the Dark Lord's side, then the Death Eaters know all about me. I have no illusions about how long I'd last if they pulled out silver shackles." The scarred young man shivered at the thought. "So that leaves you, Sirius. We were talking about things being too obvious before. You're too obvious a choice. Anybody that knows us would easily guess which one of us James would choose. The two of you have been like brothers for years. Which is why it should be someone else. Someone they don't expect. Someone in the Order, someone from the Ministry, someone in Lily's family, even."

"That's right out," growled James. "Have you *met* her family?"

"I had the misfortune of dancing with her sister at your wedding," Remus reminded him. "She didn't seem to like you all that much. But surely, for her sister ..."

"Not a chance," said Lily, re-entering the room with a drowsy, sleeper-clad little boy in her arms. "If it were just Petunia, maybe, but if Vernon told her to, she'd sell us out so fast it would make your head swim."

"Someone from the Order, then. Dumbledore. Moody. Someone."

"I'm not sure I trust anyone in the Order," said James, his fingers drumming on the tabletop. "Not even Albus. If we had him as the Secret Keeper, there's no telling who else he'd tell. I love the man, but you know he trusts too easily. There's already information leaking, and we don't know where it's leaking from, and he's getting secret information of his own and won't tell us where he's getting it from. Until the leaks are plugged, I don't think we dare confide in anybody from the Order."

"And that goes double for the Ministry," put in Sirius. "That place leaks like a sieve. You'd think Aurors would know how to keep a secret, but the gossip in the squad room is incredible. From what Arthur tells me, the robes downstairs are just as bad. So who does that leave us? The greengrocer? It pretty much *has* to be one of us."

Remus sighed heavily, pushed his chair back and stood up. "I'd actually prefer using the greengrocer. Look, I have to go. You'll do whatever you decide to do. But I'm on record as being against this." He gathered James into one arm and Lily into the other for a hug. "Be safe, all right?" he whispered. "I don't think I could stand it if something happened to any of you. Especially to this little guy," he said, ruffling Harry's hair.

"I'll see you out," said James.

"You don't have to ... no, wait, maybe you should. Tell you what, can you come with me for a few minutes? I have something to show you. Sirius and Peter can stay here with Lily, all right?"

Remus thought his heart would break when James hesitated. Perhaps, for all his protestations,

James really *didn't* trust him.

For his part, James saw the pain that flickered through his friend's eyes momentarily, guessed at its cause, and decided to take the chance. "Sure. Let's go."

The two donned their jackets and went out into the crisp fall evening. The walk to the designated Apparition point for the Dower Estate was short, and neither spoke. When they got there, Remus took James' arm and Apparated them both away from Godric's Hollow.

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They appeared in the middle of a small Muggle flat. "Welcome, James, to *Chez Lupin*," Remus said, pronouncing it in the French fashion. "This is my palatial abode. We are currently standing in the lounge, graciously furnished in the modern style."

'Gracious' wasn't exactly the word James would have chosen. The place was tiny. The walls were covered with grey wallpaper curling up at the corners, and the single window opened onto a brick wall a bare three feet away. The furnishings of the room consisted of an old fashioned, stained and threadbare couch with a crocheted afghan thrown across the back; a single end table and lamp; a scarred wooden coffee table; a rickety bookshelf that was alarmingly overloaded by a mixture of Muggle and Wizarding books, mostly Remus' collection of Defense books, and a desk with a telephone almost buried under a pile of papers. Instead of art, the one wall with a fair amount of unbroken space had a battered blue bicycle hanging from hooks on it.

"That," Remus said, pointing at the bike, "is my main mode of transportation to and from work, and also to the grocer's. It also doubles as a trendy wall decoration. All the best Muggle homes have them. Through here," he said, leading James into a room so small it could barely accommodate the single bed and a dresser, "is my cozy bedroom. 'Cozy' sounds so much better than 'not enough room to swing a cat,' don't you think? And this," he said, drawing James out of the bedroom and through the lounge again, "is my oh-so-roomy kitchen, complete with top of the line appliances." The room was tiny, possessing only one cabinet, an ancient refrigerator and gas stove, a narrow sink, and about twelve inches of counter space. The linoleum had worn through to reveal the floor boards beneath in the center of the kitchen. "Do you see why I don't have people over?"

"I'm beginning to. But I wonder why you ... Remus, you don't have to live like this."

"Don't I?" Remus flung himself down on the sofa, which sagged alarmingly under his weight. "James, your father left you more money than you know what to do with. Sirius has what his uncle left him. 'A small inheritance' he calls it. I call it a bloody fortune. And since Peter's father died, he's not exactly badly off, either, even if he has to support his mother and sister. None of you will ever want for a thing. You don't even have to work if you don't want to. A career is just something to keep you from getting bored. But me? My father didn't have much to start with, and after I was, well, bitten and my mother left us, he wasted most of what he had left on one quack treatment after another, trying to find a cure for me. You know how well that worked. And then he died during our last year in school. I still have his cottage, but it's not livable, and I don't have

an army of house elves to do what we just did to the Dower House. There's an old stone barn on the property, which is where I spend the full moons. I can lock myself in well enough that the wolf can't get out. But I had to sell the few things of value left in the house to pay the inheritance taxes on the place. I can't hold a job in the Wizarding world longer than a few months. They always find out, and fire me as a precaution for the safety of other workers. I don't have the skills or documentation for any really good job in the Muggle world. I work at anything I can get off the books. I wait tables. I do day labour at construction sites. I've written a few articles for the local paper. I even babysit. Anything that comes my way, really. It's uncertain as all hell, and sometimes I have to choose between a mission for the Order and something that will put food on my table. I regret to say there have been times when I chose the food."

"Then come live with one of us, you know we won't mind. You wouldn't be a burden on any of us."

"I can't do that, James. You know I can't. Maybe it's stupid, but my independence is the only thing I have that I'm not willing to give up. I won't accept charity. I won't become someone else's dependent."

"A caged wolf is just a dog," murmured James.

"Got it in one," replied Remus. "Maybe things will be different one day. Maybe I can find something I can work at from home, where I won't be answerable to someone else. But for now, this is the way things have to be." He shook James' hand firmly. "Get back home now and take care of your wife and son. Pick someone and do the spell. Send me an owl if you can and let me know how things go."

"I will." With a sharp *Crack!* James Apparated back home, sobered by his look at a life he could barely imagine.

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Back at the Dower House, James found Sirius, Peter and Lily deep in discussion. Harry was sound asleep on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. As James entered the lounge and hung his jacket on a peg by the door, he wondered briefly why his son wasn't in his crib, before being drawn into the conversation.

"You don't know what you're asking me to do!" Peter complained

"We've agreed Remus was right," said Sirius. "I am too obvious, and they'll come after me first thing, assuming they come after any of us at all. That means the best thing I can do is *not* know the secret. They can't make me tell what I don't know. But I can hold out as long as possible, maybe even give them a false address and make them waste more time."

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" asked Peter.

"You do what you do best. You run. You cover your trail and hide. Don't think we don't

remember which one of us kept us from getting caught all those years in Hogwarts. It certainly wasn't my foresight and discretion."

Peter snorted in agreement. 'Foresight' and 'discretion' had never been words associated with Sirius Black. Sirius had great ideas, but his lack of impulse control was legendary. Any time he tried to carry out a prank on his own, it ended in disaster. The incident with Snivellus and the Shrieking Shack was only the worst of a good many scrapes Sirius had got into because he just didn't think things through.

"You know the Muggle world almost as well as you know ours. Your mother and your sister have already retired there. You could too, and not one of the Death Eaters could find you. They have no clue about Muggle things."

Peter chewed on his lip while he thought, nervously twisting his signet ring around on his finger. It was a habit he'd developed since he'd inherited the ring and the Pettigrew properties the year before. Lily leaned over and placed her hand on his. "Peter, please. We need you to do this for us. You're the only one who can right now."

"Unless you want me to go down to the village and knock up the greengrocer?" put in James.

"All right, I'll do it. You're right, I can hide better than any of you except maybe Lily. If necessary, I can ... I can go to Australia or somewhere like that."

"Don't go too far. We'll need to be able to get in touch," said Sirius.

"Don't worry. I can set up a drop box so you can send mail to me. I'll have someone else pick it up and bring it to me." *Or bring it to someone else who can send it to a post office box where I can pick it up*, thought Peter, his mind already busy devising a system of drops and deliveries which would make it difficult for anyone to follow the messages. "Sirius, I'll send you an address as soon as I can."

"Good man!" said James, slapping Peter on the back. "I knew we could count on you." Sirius reached for his jacket, but James stopped him for a moment. "One more thing before you leave. We have a new Marauders project. We have to do something about Remus."

"He was our last Marauders project!" said Peter.

"This is serious – and don't even think of doing that joke again, Black! Remus took me to see his place tonight, and explained why he's been missing meetings and things. He's living hand to mouth out there in the Muggle world by picking up odd jobs. And all he has is a cheap little flat and a bicycle to show for it. This is the smartest guy we know. There's got to be some way for him to make a decent living, either in our world or the Muggle world. He's too worn out trying to make ends meet, so it's up to us to figure out a way for him. No charity, no working for us, you know how proud he is. Work your connections; we've got to know somebody who won't be put off by the fact that he's a werewolf. Or try to think of something independent."

"If we figured out how to become Animagi without him or anyone else finding out, this should be easy," said Sirius.

"Yeah, but this can't take as long as becoming Animagi did. I don't know how long he can live like that.

"I'll start work on it tomorrow," Sirius promised.

"Good. Now let's get this spell done. I'm tired, and Harry needs to go to sleep in his own bed. Lily, why is Harry even down here?"

"We need to take a drop of his blood for the spell," said Lily. "That can't be done in advance. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can take him up to his room."

"I'll be leaving, then," said Sirius. He shook hands with the short, pudgy Marauder. "Peter, I'll be expecting your owl." Lily got a warm hug. "Take care of James and Harry, Lily Flower. They'll need you to keep them out of trouble." Finally, he shook James' hand, then gave in and hugged him, too. "I'm going to miss you," he choked out, then left the house before anybody could see the tears in his eyes. After a moment, the roar of his motorcycle's engine filled the night. Its wheels crunched briefly on the gravel of the drive, then the sound faded away into the night.

Lily and Peter left the lounge and returned to the kitchen, while James gathered the sleeping child into his arms and followed them. Lily, or perhaps the house elves, had been busy here; the dinner things had been cleared away and the kitchen was immaculate. The table was clear except for the items needed for the *Fidelius* Charm.

The *Fidelius* was an old charm, and therefore required much more than the incantation and wand wave of a modern spell. For this spell, they had to charm marker stones and bury them at the corners of the property, at each doorway into the house, and alongside the gateposts. Fortunately, this could be done ahead of time, during the day, and they had taken care of it at the same time the gardens had been replanted and the fences repaired. Then, as the caster of the spell, Lily had walked the complete circumference of the property, marking it with the tip of her wand.

While Peter read through the spell to familiarize himself with it, Lily spread a white cloth on the table, its measurements proportional to the property. She set candles in silver holders out in places corresponding to the buried marker stones. "This is just another reason why Remus couldn't be the Secret Keeper," she murmured. "Everything has to be silver, even the knife used to draw our blood." She placed a large white quartz stone, rounded and frosted from years of erosion in a nearby river, in position to represent the house. The knife she placed on the tabletop next to the cloth, next to a scroll that contained the words of the secret. The spell itself was written, incongruously, in a spiral-bound Muggle notebook which Lily consulted frequently as she set things up. "Are we all ready to begin?"

The men nodded solemnly.

Lily lit the candles and a cone of incense, then turned down the electric lights so that the candles

were the only source of light in the room. She consulted the notebook one last time, then began to speak the words of the spell in crisply enunciated Latin. *"I bind us all here gathered, and all who belong to our family, under the Rite of Fidelius. This is the secret which must be kept."* She shifted into English, reading from the scroll. *"The Potter family lives on the Dower Estate at Godric's Hollow. Ego sum Lilia, mater familias. Fidelite."* She made a small cut on her finger with the silver knife, placing a drop of her blood on the scroll and on the white stone. She passed the knife to James, taking Harry from him.

"Ego sum Jacobus, pater familias. Fidelite," said James, repeating the cut and anointing of parchment and stone. Then he took Harry's hand. *"Harrius est, filius familias. Fidelite."* He tried to be as gentle as he could when he drew the blood, but Harry woke at the sting and wailed pitifully as his bloody finger was touched to the parchment and the stone. He subsided, sniffing, when Lily performed the ancient mother's healing charm of kissing the small wound to make it better.

Peter took the knife from James. *"Ego sum Petrus, custos arcanum. Fidelio."* He placed his blood, too, on the scroll and the stone, and placed the knife back on the table.

Silently, they left the kitchen, leaving the candles burning, and went out the front door. The walk to the gate was short, and they shivered as they passed through it. The magic was working already. Standing on the thin strip of grass between the fence and the road, they turned to face the house. *"Fidelio!"* cried Peter, stabbing the earth between the gate posts. The house, the land, even the fence seemed to shimmer in the moonlight, and then the trees on either side rushed in, filling the space and becoming an impenetrable forest.

"Impressive. Now I just hope we can get back in," muttered James.

"Tell us the secret, Peter," said Lily. She jostled Harry to make sure he was awake and could hear the secret clearly; even if he didn't quite understand all the words, the meaning would imprint itself in his mind.

"The Potter family lives on the Dower Estate at Godric's Hollow," Peter read from the scroll. The scroll itself burst into silver flames. Peter dropped it reflexively, but it vanished into ash and a puff of smoke before it hit the ground. The trees rustled and the forest swept away, revealing the Dower Estate and the House once again. Harry clapped his hands in approval, then stuck his thumb in his mouth and laid his head on Lily's shoulder.

"That's done, then. I think it's about time we took this young man in and put him to bed." The three went back into the house, where Lily went upstairs with Harry and James and Peter cleaned up the ritual equipment. The pure white stone now bore four red streaks in it, where the blood had sunk into the surface of the quartz and become part of it. James took it outside and hid it in the shrubbery in the front garden while Peter put his coat on. Lily came down again before he was quite ready to go.

"One question," he said. *"Harrius?"*

"There's no direct equivalent for 'Harry'" she explained. "That's why I inserted the part about 'all who belong'. To make sure he was covered."

"I wondered. It seems to have worked, although that phrasing was broad enough that it could include the house elves. I'll be off, then. There's a lot for me to do tomorrow."

"I'm just looking forward to sleeping in my own bed again," said James. "Those safe house beds are either too hard or too soft or too damn short."

"Good night, James. Lily." Peter went out the front door, and shortly the CRACK! of his Apparition broke the stillness of the night.

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In Scotland, an elderly man looked up from his work, aware that something had changed. He tried to remember where his young friends had moved to, which was information he had definitely had earlier that evening, but found himself unable to.

"Good job, Lily," he whispered, then returned to the report he had been reading.

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In the air half way to London, Sirius Black realized he couldn't remember where he had just been, or where he had spent the last two weeks. He remembered in a general way that he had been with James and Lily at their house, but not a specific address. He could remember driving to pick up roofing supplies, but not any of the street signs or directions. Any details which might have identified the house or even the town were hidden.

"By Merlin, it worked!" he said to himself. "I just hope we did the right thing."

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In the Dower House at Godric's Hollow, James and Lily Potter made sure all the lights were out, and went up the stairs holding hands.

Fidelius

Birth of a Traitor

Author's Note: Okay, now we see why writing without a beta is a Bad Thing. In the description of Remus' living room in Chapter One, I mention an end table and lamp, coffee table, book shelf and desk (presumably with chair) as the furnishings. Nowhere did I mention a sofa, even though the existence of the end and coffee tables usually implies such. Yet a paragraph or two later, a sofa has miraculously appeared for Remus to fling himself onto. And I just barely caught a major timeline goof in this chapter which required a fair amount of rewrite. *sigh*

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything connected with him. I'm just playing.

FIDELIUS

Chapter Two

Birth of A Traitor

Peter Pettigrew was used to being underestimated. It was a trait that had served him well all the way through school, and even more so as an adult.

He was the shortest of the Marauders, the least impressive physically. He wasn't athletic or terribly charismatic. He didn't play Quidditch, a disadvantage in a school where ninety per cent of the students were Quidditch-mad. He had never quite outgrown his childhood pudginess, he had a bit of an overbite, and had undistinctive brown hair and eyes. More than once, people had looked right past him as if he was invisible, and he could say things and later people wouldn't be able to say who told them, just that they "heard it somewhere."

Academically, he was an underachiever. James was superb in Transfiguration, Sirius in Charms, and Remus in Defense Against the Dark Arts. But where they got O's in some classes, A's in most of the rest and D's in those that absolutely did not hold their interest, Peter racked up a steady string of E's across the board – even in History of Magic. He could have done better. If he'd wanted to, and been willing to invest the study time, he could have rivaled some of the Ravenclaws. As it was, the teachers had no reason to praise him, but they had no reason to complain about him, either, and he had plenty of free time to get into mischief with his friends. If Peter had an academic specialty, it was Potions, although he never displayed the classroom brilliance that Severus Snape or Lily Evans did. They sat in the front row of the dungeon classroom, sniping at and attempting to outdo each other. Instead he worked quietly in the back

row, producing serviceable potions and writing homework essays that were consistently good, but not great. Only in his work for the Marauders did he display his true skill, producing NEWT level potions when he had not yet taken his OWLs.

When teachers and students saw him with the other Marauders, they assumed he was just a tag along, that they felt sorry for him and let him be part of their group because he shared a dorm room with them. He knew their Head of House, Minerva McGonagall, thought so – he'd heard her say so when she didn't notice him loitering in the hallway. But there was no dead weight with the Marauders. If you couldn't keep up, they'd leave you by the side of the road. Each of the Marauders had a specialty. Sirius usually came up with the most interesting prank ideas. James turned them into workable plans. Remus, with his werewolf's strength and agility, quite often wound up setting up pranks in places no normal human could reach, or used his acute hearing and sense of smell to keep guard in case some prefect or teacher came across them while they were making preparations.

Peter's specialty was making sure they didn't get caught. He laid plans within plans, contingencies for every possibility. There were escape routes, information drops so they wouldn't be seen talking to each other, ways of laying the blame on others, all products of Peter's fertile mind. Even when he'd only been a schoolboy, Peter could move silently, almost unseen, and when he learned to be a rat Animagus, all the secrets of Hogwarts were laid open to him. There wasn't a Common Room he hadn't visited, a girls' dormitory he hadn't sneaked into (usually when said girls were nowhere near the dormitory, alas, but at least he could say he'd been in there). He hid under beds and sofas, listened to gossip, planted evidence pointing to others, and removed evidence pointing to them.

He was training himself to be the consummate spy.

He did have his standards. He never stole anything aside from nicking food from the kitchen, although he could have. He never betrayed the secrets he overheard, except once when he heard some older boys planning to assault a younger one – in that instance, the assault was foiled when the Marauders came upon the perpetrators at exactly the right moment and turned the tables on them. He never peeked at the girls in the shower or when they were getting ready for bed.

After school, he had taken a regular job as line supervisor for a manufacturer of medical potions, more because it was expected than because he really wanted to, and signed on with the Order of the Phoenix along with the other Marauders. His skills served him well, and it made him happy that he was using them for a good cause. It never occurred to him that there might be another party interested in him for those same skills. Until his father died.

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May 17, 1980 – Pettigrew House

Peter had a headache. He'd had it since shortly after breakfast, when his mother started making lists of eligible pureblooded girls he might be interested in courting. "After all, Peter, you're Head of the Family now. It's time for you to get married and have an Heir of your own. Especially with

all this ... political instability." That was as close as she could come to discussing the efforts of He Who Must Not Be Named to impose his will on the Wizarding world.

"Mother, Father's only been gone for two days. It's a little early to think about Heirs, don't you think? Besides, Martha's son will be born next month. He can be my Heir for a while."

"That won't do at all, Peter! I have nothing against Thomas Finnigan – he's a wonderful young man and he makes your sister very happy, although I do wish she'd just tell him she's a witch and get it over with – but it can't be denied that he's a Muggle. Not even Muggle-born, a full Muggle! We have no assurance whatsoever that her children will even be magical. And you know the taxes if the Estate passes to a half-blood will be ruinous; if you marry a nice pureblooded girl we won't have that problem. There are plenty of young ladies who'd be more than happy to join the family. And it's not as if you have any entanglements at the moment. It will be just as easy for you to fall in love with a pureblooded girl as anyone else. Perhaps more so, since you'd have so much in common already ..."

Peter tuned his mother out. The next best thing to a Squib herself, she had been lucky, and knew it, to attract a pure-blooded husband from a good family, especially a tolerant one. She had always been concerned that her children might share her affliction, so she had made sure they had proper Muggle documentation, attended Muggle primary schools (but very high-class ones) and knew how to function as well in the Muggle world as they did in the Wizarding community. Just in case. When first Martha and then Peter had received their Hogwarts letters, she had practically fainted with relief. By that time, though, her children had friends and connections in the Muggle world and it would have been cruel to force them to break them, so they continued living in both worlds. She was still nervous, particularly after Martha met Finnigan and moved to Ireland to be with him, and that meant she was nagging Peter.

The nagging kept on until Peter went up to change into his formal robes; then guests started arriving for the funeral, so she at least had to settle for quiet mutters of "Oh look, there's so and so, isn't she pretty?" or "You remember Mrs. Thisandthat, she has a daughter about your age."

Then there was the final ritual returning his father's body to the Elements, since the Pettigrews had always been traditionalists in that regard, and the luncheon afterwards. Fortunately his mother was seated at the other end of the table for that, and Sirius, noting Peter's distress, had made it his goal for the day to keep her entertained and away from Peter. She was flattered enough by the attention of the Black Heir that she had gone along with it for a time, but after Sirius left, she was back at it, saying that Sirius was such a nice young man and wasn't it a shame all the Black girls were married already, that Narcissa was a pretty enough girl ... Peter had met two out of the three Black sisters. Bellatrix was already leaving school just as he was coming in, and he'd heard nothing good of her since then. Andromeda was several years ahead of him, and he knew she'd married a Muggle-born wizard right out of school; it had been quite the scandal at the time. He had nothing against her. Narcissa was only a year ahead of him, and the notion of his mother matching him up with her, assuming Lucius Malfoy hadn't been successful in snatching her up, was horrifying. She was pretty, but selfish and empty-headed – the most important thing to her was what the other girls were wearing and how she could outdo them.

By the time the last of the guests had taken Peter's hand and murmured their final condolences and left, the headache had become a pounding migraine. He needed a drink. A large one. Now.

He was completely unprepared to find Lord Voldemort in his study.

So he did the only thing possible. He fainted.

Peter returned to consciousness to find himself stretched out on the sofa in the study. A face came into focus as he blinked. He knew who it was immediately, of course. He'd seen pictures of the Dark Lord from early in his campaign, before he'd managed to completely cow the Daily Prophet and the other papers into not printing pictures or his full name, thereby increasing the air of mystery and fear around him. The papers had accurately shown the man to be good looking, with aristocratic features. He had wavy black hair with just a touch of white at the temples, though there was a bit more of it now than there had been in the pictures, and dark eyes that at the moment were full of concern. What the photographs had not been able to convey was the sense of power that practically rolled off the man. It tickled along Peter's skin and took his breath away.

"Are you all right now, Mr. Pettigrew? I apologise for surprising you, but you'll understand I just couldn't associate with your other guests. Things being the way they are, you know."

"I ... yes, I'll be all right now, but ... why ... what are you ...?" He was unable to organize his thoughts into any sort of coherent question or statement.

"All will be explained, Mr. Pettigrew, as soon as I'm sure you are capable of comprehending it. Perhaps you might want to try sitting up, slowly now, you don't want to be fainting again. And perhaps a drink?"

Shortly Peter found himself back in possession of his faculties, sitting up with a drink of his father's favorite firewhiskey in his hand and gaping at his unexpected visitor, who had helped himself to a drink as well.

"Why ... why are you here? What do you want?"

"Why am I here? To express my condolences on your recent loss, of course. Your father was a good man, and for him to pass while he was still so young ... tragic." Voldemort sipped delicately at his drink, and Peter began to have nasty suspicions of the true cause of his father's death. It had *looked* like a stroke, but ... "It's always a shame when the Head of a Family passes, but it's good to see that the Family's future remains in good hands."

"Uh ... thank you. I appreciate your confidence in me." Bizarrely, Peter remembered his manners, even at a time like this.

"As to what I want, that should be obvious. I want you."

"Me?!" Peter practically squeaked. "But I'm not ... I won't ... You want *me* to take the Dark Mark?"

"Well, eventually. You'd have to earn it, of course. I don't let just anybody take service with me. But I'm looking forward to working with you. To see what kind of stuff you're made of."

"But we're on opposite sides! I've been working against you and everything you stand for!"

"I'm willing to overlook that little detail. I don't believe we're all that far apart ideologically. We're both concerned over the survival of our way of life. You're Head of your Family now, and I believe you'll come to understand things differently in the near future. I think we can find common ground."

"But ... but ... what about the Death Eaters? The rapes and murders of Muggles and Muggle-borns? I refuse to have any part of that."

"And you won't, I assure you. I won't deny that there have been a number of unfortunate incidents, but it's been all blown all out of proportion by the Ministry, I assure you. Just last week they reported an outbreak of food poisoning as a Death Eater attack. It was a tragic thing to have happen, especially at a large family gathering like that, but it was nothing of mine. It's to their benefit to create a climate of fear, you understand. If there is a cause they can use to justify it, they can release only the information they choose. If they control information, they control the press. If they control the press, they can control what people think, what they do ... and make it possible for them to suck the life's blood out of the economy. The Ministry is corrupt to the core, my dear boy. You must admit that."

"That's true enough," Peter said, reluctantly agreeing with Voldemort.

"It will take a strong hand to take control and clean house. I'll admit I have a few bad apples in my organization, but my options were limited when I started, and that was what I had to work with at the time. That's why I'm recruiting bright young men like yourself. I'll need good men, reliable men, to bring order again. Once I have them, the more unreliable elements can be weeded out. Your skills can be of great service to me. I'll need people for my Intelligence and Security department, and I think you'll do quite nicely."

"What if I don't want to join you?"

"I don't think you quite understand, Peter ... may I call you Peter? Since we'll be working together so closely? I think I shall ... Peter, you don't have an option. Or rather, you do, but it's not the one you think." He took another sip from his glass, and gestured to Peter to take another drink as well, which he did almost automatically.

"Here's the way it's going to be. I want information. Particularly information on the Order of the Phoenix. You will provide me with it."

"I'd rather die than betray the Order!" Peter said hotly.

"But would you rather have your mother die than betray it? Your sister? So young, so pretty ... it's a pity about her husband and baby, too, but the Muggle element ... really, you'd think she

would have better taste. But that can be passed over. They live in Ireland anyway, and they're not politically active. As long as you assist me, they'll remain safe. Protected, even. No one will dare touch them if I say they're not to be molested, not even the husband. All you'd have to do would be to write me a report about what's discussed in your Order meetings. It's not like your organization doesn't leak like a sieve anyway, I just want some independent confirmation of the information I'm already getting."

Peter became aware that there was a hint of something red in Voldemort's eyes as the older wizard caught and held his gaze. He couldn't tear his own eyes away.

"That's it, primarily, although there are a few other things that would increase your stature in my organization. You can have power, authority, wealth. Anything you want, really."

"Those are Slytherin goals. I'm a Gryffindor."

"Once you're out of school, do Houses really matter? You know you were only a Gryffindor because your family were traditionally of the House of the Lion. What you did in school says you should have been a Slytherin."

Peter didn't answer, only licked lips that were suddenly dry. How did Vol – how did He Who Must Not Be Named know of the conversation between him and the Sorting Hat so many years ago? The Hat had offered him Slytherin, but Black and Lupin, who had befriended him on the Express, had already been sorted into Gryffindor and Potter was likely to be, too. He didn't know anybody at the Slytherin table, and some of them had looked mean. At eleven, things like that had been important. So he had asked to be Sorted into Gryffindor, and the Hat had agreed. But he'd wondered, since then ... had it been right to do so?

"Albus Dumbledore has somehow inserted an agent into my Inner Circle. Find out who it is, and you shall be richly rewarded. If you can give me a name, I can isolate the agent and use him for my own purposes. I need recruits. Your little band of Marauders will do quite nicely. You're all intelligent, talented, quite gifted and quite dangerous, actually. I'd much rather have all four of you working for me than against me. Black should have been with me all along, of course, and I'd like to rectify the current unfortunate situation. I realize that Lupin is a half-blood, but his other abilities make him potentially quite valuable to me. Potter is the stubborn one, and potentially of the greatest worth to me. His family is very influential, but he doesn't know how to use it properly. Bring them to me, preferably voluntarily, and you will be rewarded. Bring me Lupin, and I will give you a position of rank in the Ministry. Bring me Black, and I will give you enough wealth to reinstate the Pettigrews among the Great Families. Bring me Potter, and I will arrange a marriage for you with the most desirable daughter of my followers ... Wait ... What's this? You've already given your heart ... to a Mudblood? To another man's wife?"

Peter finally managed to tear his gaze away from Voldemort's. He could feel his cheeks burning and he looked down at the glass, which was somehow empty now, clasped in his white-knuckled hands.

The Dark Lord laughed disdainfully. "This is your most shameful secret, isn't it, Peter? You're in

love with your best friend's wife. Even though she's pregnant with his child. I'll make you this bargain, then. Bring me the Potter baby, and you shall have the mother."

"What ... what about James? And the baby?"

"If I have his Heir, he will have to come to me, won't he? Don't worry, he will come to see the practicalities of the situation. A new bride from a more suitable family will see to that. And you will have the woman you want, as wife if you insist, although keeping her as a mistress would be more suitable. A pureblood wife to provide you with an Heir, a Mudblood mistress to provide you with your fun; many's the man that would envy you. I won't hurt the baby, of course – I don't wage war on infants. If it grows up powerful enough, I might even find a niche in my organization for it – one suitable for a half-blood."

Voldemort suddenly stood, looming over Peter. "All this is yours for the price of your cooperation. If you deny me, or attempt to tell anyone what has passed between us here this afternoon, you will find yourself standing over the corpses of your loved ones, wishing for death. And if I am feeling merciful, I shall grant it."

The Dark Lord reached down and seized Peter's hand, where he was wearing the signet ring he had put on for the first time that morning. He hissed something in a language Peter did not understand, and suddenly his hand was aflame with agony. He was on his knees before the powerful wizard, asking, begging for relief before his hand was released and the pain stopped. Voldemort spoke briskly, all business now, as if the preceding unpleasantness hadn't happened at all. "We will correspond by confidential owl. You will find a new owl in your owlery which is to be used only to send routine reports to me, after every Order meeting. If you find out other information you believe would be of interest to me, send a message by the owl requesting a meeting. I shall respond at my convenience. Your signet ring is now a signal device. You will find it impossible to remove. When it becomes warm, it is a sign that I wish you to come to me, and you had best do it without delay. The stone is now a portkey. You have but to touch it and incant, '*dominus*' and you will be brought to a private meeting place."

"P... private?"

"Of course. You are no use to me if everyone knows about you. In fact, it would be quite detrimental to your health. If you attend regular meetings of my followers or have any contact with them, Dumbledore's spy would see you and then you would be quietly eliminated ... like poor Fenwick."

"Benjy Fenwick? He was one of ours! Your Death Eaters killed him!"

"Is that what they told you? No, Fenwick was one of mine. I'd never have wasted such a valuable resource. Regretfully, I was unaware of the agent in my ranks at that time, and Fenwick paid the price. I am unwilling to risk that happening again. You will remain a secret known only to me, and report only to me. Now go about your life, Peter, and know that you and those you love are protected. Do what I ask, and no harm shall come to anyone you care for."

Peter could only nod, tears of shame coursing down his cheeks.

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October 11, 1981 – Pettigrew House

It was close to midnight when Peter arrived home. He'd stopped at a local pub for a brew and a bit of a think, made notes on scrap paper he had in his pockets, and was mildly inebriated when he staggered home. He made a slight detour from the path to a stone building that looked like a typical folly – a landscape building deliberately designed to look like a picturesque ruin. Given the relatively modest house and grounds, having a folly was a bit pretentious, and if anybody in town mentioned this to Peter, he said he thoroughly agreed with them – it was an atrocious thing, and he didn't know *what* his great great grandfather was thinking, but he didn't particularly care to take the money to tear the thing down and re-do the landscaping. In reality, of course, he found the folly incredibly useful. What it really was was the family owlery.

A nondescript brown owl flew down from its perch to greet him and held its leg out for him. He found an unused scrap of paper and wrote, "I have information." He carefully tied the note to the bird's leg with a bit of string, and it winged its way silently into the night. Peter watched it go, cursing softly to himself, then walked across the dark garden to the house.

Over the past year, he'd found it remarkably easy to forget about the bargain he'd made with the Dark Lord. Most of the time, he didn't remember it at all. It was like it was in a little box in the back of his mind somewhere, and he went on with his life as if it had never happened. Only when he had just come back from an Order meeting, or had other information, did it become something important. Then it nagged him, vexing him until he did something about it. After that, he could put it back into the box until the next time. There were times when he wondered if this was something Voldemort had done to him, some spell to make it easier for him to face what he was doing. Other times, he thought he was going mad, like one of those poor Muggles who had multiple people living in their heads. But most the time, he didn't think about it at all. The simple fact that nothing bad had ever happened that he could directly trace to information he'd provided made it all much easier. He'd even had the nerve, during one of his rare face to face meetings with the Dark Lord, reporting that James and Lily had gone into hiding because of the Prophecy, and had been surprised when the man laughed in his face.

"Prophecy? What care I for a prophecy? Because some unstable diviner has a verbal fit, I'm supposed to change all my plans, back off and hide in terror? No, any time there's a strong leader, opposition will form against him, and attempt to justify itself by claiming it was 'ordained'. If anything, this supposed prophecy just confirms that you're on the winning side, my boy. If your Dumbledore had any confidence in his own ability to succeed, he wouldn't be putting such credence in soothsayer's babble." Then Voldemort had dismissed the matter and turned his attention to other business.

Between physical exhaustion, the alcohol, and denial, when Peter woke up the morning after the casting of the *Fidelius*, he didn't even remember sending the owl.

October 12-30, Various Places

The next few weeks were busy ones for everyone.

First Peter quit his job, claiming that he needed to devote his time to Family business. His employer wasn't surprised, having expected this since Peter had come into his inheritance; he was grateful that the young man had stuck with the job for so long.

Then he had flung himself into the dual matters of finding help for Remus and arranging for his own disappearance; it was in the process of working on the latter that he discovered the key to the former. Peter had a Muggle birth certificate and school records, of course, and even had a driving license. He had never obtained a passport, however, and now felt it would be prudent to get one. He applied for a regular Muggle one, but that process took time that he feared he might not have, so he also put out enquiries in low places and eventually contacted a Knockturn Alley forger who specialized in Muggle paperwork, since the Ministry had very little interest in such things. While they kept their own records, they assumed that if you wanted Muggle documentation, you'd take care of it on your own. Hence the rather extensive clientele of people like Peter's forger, who provided the necessary document, which was completely indistinguishable from a Muggle one, in less than a week.

From the forger, Peter learned that he could, for a price, arrange for the creation of a birth certificate for one Remus Lupin and have it quietly inserted into the birth records of a small village conveniently near where Remus had actually been born. With the birth certificate in place, the other necessary identification papers could be obtained, all perfectly legally.

The forger suggested getting Remus' school records transferred into the Muggle system. It had never occurred to Peter that Remus might not have known that Hogwarts was perfectly capable of providing a transcript of Remus' school records which was mocked up to resemble those of a Muggle school, transforming Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology into Zoology and Botany, for example. Even OWLs and NEWTs could be transferred to equivalent grades on Muggle standardized tests. He asked Minerva McGonagall, the Deputy Headmistress of the School, to expedite the paperwork, and she agreed at once. She had not known that Remus was in difficulty or living in the Muggle world, or she would have suggested it herself. Peter swore briefly at Remus' pride, which had not allowed him to ask the questions that would have led him to solutions to his problems, and asked Minerva not to tell Remus about it just yet, since they wanted it to be a surprise. Minerva smiled and agreed and provided the documents almost immediately; Remus had always been one of her favorite students.

With the birth certificate and basic identification, Remus could apply for a driving license if he wished. With the school transcript, he could apply for a regular job, or even go to university later on. Peter sent them to Sirius, along with the address for the mail drop, and considered his part of the job well done.

While he had been arranging for all of this, Peter had also acquired a flat in an unremarkable

residential complex in an unremarkable suburb, using a reference provided by his former employer, and claimed that he was looking for a suitable position in the pharmaceuticals industry. The complex's main advantages were that it had concierge service for its residents, and was quite near a commuter train station. He paid for the flat for a year in advance and Confused the landlord so he wouldn't ask awkward questions.

Then he started arranging for mail drops so that messages could be sent to him in secrecy. The first step, of course, was to make sure that postal owls couldn't reach him directly. This was something Sirius was able to help him with, since Aurors had to be able to prevent owls from reaching them when they were on stakeout or under cover. One owl at the wrong time could completely blow an operation. The spell was classified as "to be used only by authorized Ministry personnel", but there wasn't anything actually preventing Sirius from teaching it to Peter, since they both had a fine disregard for the rules.

Peter arranged for a drop box at the Owl Post Centre in Hogsmeade; again, this was common enough since many people preferred not to maintain their own owls. Several days a week, a contact of Peter's forger acquaintance would visit the drop box, and any mail would be forwarded under a false name to another individual who would put it in a Muggle envelope addressed to a small fictitious business and send it to a Post Office Box, where it would be picked up by a Muggle messenger service and hand delivered to Peter's apartment building, and the concierge would deliver it to Peter. If Peter wasn't available, the concierge would go up to Peter's apartment, open the door, and put the envelope inside. Technically, of course, the concierge wasn't supposed to do that, but a judicious use of minor Compulsion and Memory Charms, combined with a large gratuity, ensured that he would do it and not remember it. As far as he was concerned, Mr. Pettigrew would be picking up all his mail properly at the front desk.

If there was anything in the mail for James and Lily, Peter would take it to them and have a nice visit, and post any replies for them. But there were rarely any letters, since Sirius and Remus were trying very hard not to compromise Peter's security by sending "frivolous" mail.

A week after moving in, Peter had developed his pattern. He would rise, dress in his Muggle business suit, pick up his briefcase, and leave, at the same time as all the other young businessmen in the area. He would purchase tea with cream, no sugar, and a blueberry scone from the bakery on the corner, and consume them while waiting on the platform for his train. He would pick up the newspaper from a stand at the station and read it on the train. All this was totally unremarkable. Then he would disappear into the City, going into Diagon or Knockturn Alley, visiting the Ministry once, closing up Pettigrew House, and generally going about normal business. Some days he spent in a string of coffee shops, going over and over the same set of Help Wanted ads multiple times, or doing the crossword puzzle. He would return to his flat at the same time as the other office drones, pick up some takeout, read the mail, and watch the telly until bedtime.

By the end of the month, he was already heartily bored.

Sirius, in his leisure time when he wasn't on either Auror or Order business (which admittedly was not much), decided to approach the problem of Remus as if he were Remus himself, and do some research. He had only paid cursory attention in Muggle Studies classes, somewhat more in the Auror classes that taught how to move undetected among them, and realized that he actually had very little idea of what Muggles *did* for a living. For all he moved among them on a daily basis, he really never looked at them; they were just a boring backdrop to the more colorful Wizarding world. He understood some of them, of course – the sort of job where people sold food and books and newspapers were pretty much the same in both worlds – but Remus wouldn't be looking for that kind of job. Muggle city streets were lined with tall buildings and everyday thousands of Muggles went in and out of those buildings. Sirius had no idea what went on inside them. Muggle newspapers had advertisements for hundreds of jobs. Sirius had no clue what most of them were. What, for example, was an "actuary"? What was "insurance", and why would it need "adjusting"? Peter's package with the documents for Remus came, and Sirius decided to hold it for a while until he'd gotten a grasp on the whole job thing, and then he could present it all at once as a *fait accompli* .

This was going to take a lot of work.

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James and Lily were having a wonderful time. After a year of hiding, sleeping in hotels, motels, stranger's houses, guest rooms, attics, and even, for one unforgettable night, a cave, it was bliss to have their own furniture in their own room again. Harry had his own room now, a nursery next to their bedroom, and there were house elves ready and more than willing to attend to him if he woke in the middle of the night. With those same house elves taking care of the details of housekeeping, James and Lily spent most of their time introducing Harry to the wonders of their own garden, jumping in leaf piles and throwing stones into the small pond. Turning over stones and finding bugs underneath was also a favorite activity. While he toddled about shrieking in glee at each new discovery, they walked the grounds of their estate hand in hand and got caught up with each other's lives.

Gradually, they found themselves falling in love all over again.

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Remus worked. It was what he did. He unloaded trucks. He swept sidewalks. He spent a full two weeks doing demolitions for a homeowner who was renovating an old house, which had been broken up into flats, back into a single residence. The money was good, and the work was tiring. He didn't hear from Sirius, or James and Lily, or Peter. He was afraid that he had pushed it too far, that last night, that James was angry at him and that's why no one was contacting him. Perhaps none of them really did trust him. He had already determined that he was not even going to try to contact James and Lily, just to prove that he was reliable, but he hadn't expected to lose Sirius and Peter, too. But if that was the way it was, he would cope.

As the moon waned, the lone wolf mourned his pack.

Fidelius

The Fall of the House of Potter

Author's Note: Further to the issue of timelines, it is widely accepted that Voldemort killed the Potters on October 31, 1981, and that Harry went to Hogwarts for the first time on September 1, 1991. It is not possible, given textual evidence, for both of these to be true.

In the fourth paragraph of Chapter 1 of *Philosopher's Stone*, it quite clearly states that the day after the Potter's death was a Tuesday. "When Mr. and Mrs. Dursley woke up on the dull, gray Tuesday our story starts, there was nothing about the cloudy sky outside to suggest that strange and mysterious things would soon be happening all over the country." (I will not get into the Bulwer-Lytton-esque phrasing of that sentence, especially the "our story starts" except to wonder where her editor kept his head.) This means that Halloween in the year the Potters died was on a Monday. In 1981, Halloween was on Saturday. It wasn't on Monday until 1983. So if we go by this, then Harry would have started school in 1993. Later in the text, she mentions that Harry's eleventh birthday, July 31, is on a Tuesday. This is not true of 1991, when it is on a Wednesday, or of 1993, when it is on Saturday. It would be true of 1990. Between these items, it is clear that it is impossible for *Philosopher's Stone* to have happened in any year. Then there's the erratic number of days between full moons in *Prisoner of Azkaban*. In *Goblet of Fire*, both September 1 and 2 are Mondays, and then September 1 is a Monday again in *Order of the Phoenix*.

The question is, did JKR screw up the dates deliberately, so as to place the stories in a timeless "always now", or was she just too lazy to get a calendar for the years in question and keep it with her manuscript and notes? The "official" timeline pins down Harry's birth in 1980, so any attempt to keep it timeless has failed.

For *Fidelius*, I've started with the 1981 date, so Halloween is on a Saturday. Harry isn't going to the Dursleys anyway, so it doesn't matter if Uncle Vernon is going to the office on a Sunday. For future use, I'm going to at least attempt to adhere to the real world calendar, even if it means shifting the dates. It is AU, after all. (That's my story, and I'm sticking to it!)

Spell note: It's not clear from canon what the effect of *Avada Kedavra* is on the victim (aside from making them die, of course). In the beginning of *Goblet of Fire*, the Riddle family are all found dead in their chairs, with open eyes and expressions of terror on their faces. At the end of *Goblet*, Cedric just looks surprised, and his eyes are open. Dumbledore's eyes are closed and "he might have been sleeping." (You know, I'm now finding it suspicious that the HP Lexicon *doesn't* mention Snape killing Dumbledore with the Curse in its listing of times it was used in Canon. If they mention Bellatrix using it on a passing fox, you'd think they'd mention Snape using it on the

greatest wizard of the age. Hmm.) Anyway, I'm going to go with *all* victims of the Curse having a look of terror on their faces. The fact that it causes terror so great its victims hearts stop is what makes it an Unforgiveable (as opposed to a simple Slashing Curse or something, which can be just as efficient in killing but is not Unforgiveable).

Disclaimer: Not mine! Not mine! *Runs away from lawyers*

FIDELIUS

Chapter Three

The Fall of the House of Potter

October 31, 1981 – Pettigrew House

Halloween dawned crisp and clear. Peter was looking forward to it; Saturday's break in routine was always welcome, and this Saturday more so than usual. Martha had invited him over to have the Halloween feast with her and her husband and son, Seamus. She had finally got round to telling Thomas the secret that she *should* (in Peter's opinion) have told him before they were married. According to the letter inviting him, they had had a truly glorious fight, with much crockery flinging on both sides, after which they had kissed and made up and Martha had demonstrated what a useful thing magic was by repairing all the broken dishware. Now Thomas wanted to know all about the Wizarding World and its traditions, so Martha was putting together a traditional family feast, complete with pumpkin juice.

Peter volunteered to Portkey over early and take care of his nephew while Martha concentrated on the feast. Little Seamus was such a troublemaker that he was going to need both men to ride herd on him, especially since he had just started displaying wild magic. It was that, in fact, which had led to Martha having to explain things to Thomas, after a hungry Seamus had turned every liquid in any bottle in the house into milk. Keeping the lad happy and unfrustrated was the best way to prevent random things from happening. That Peter enjoyed spending time with the boy was a bonus.

Unfortunately, just as they sat down to eat, the signet ring Peter wore began to become warm. He did his best to ignore it, but after a short time it started to get warmer, until shortly it felt like his hand was being consumed in a blazing fire. He looked down at it in his lap, expecting to see it blackened and shrivelled, but it still looked whole and healthy – maybe a little pink around the band of the ring, but that could also have been his imagination.

"Are you feeling all right, Peter?" Martha asked in concern.

"I'm fine, fine ... well, I have a bit of a headache," he admitted, as the pain surged to a new level that made sweat pop out on his brow. "I think ... if you don't mind, Martha, I'd like to have a bit of a lie-down."

"Of course, you look terrible. Do you want me to call a healer? That's our kind of doctor,

Thomas, they deal with magical and regular physical things," she said in an aside to her husband, who was looking quizzically at her.

"No, I'm sure I'll be all right shortly."

"Here, let me see you up to the guest room then," she said, rising and helping him from his seat. He would have protested that he didn't need the help, but her big-sisterly nature was in full command, and she firmly took his arm and led him up the stairs, ensconcing him in a guest bedroom and fussing over him until he snapped at her and told her he wasn't going to be getting any rest if she kept it up, and would she please leave him alone for an hour or two? He'd come down later when his head wasn't hurting quite so badly. Somewhat miffed, she flounced back down the stairs to rejoin her family. Peter waited a few moments, then sat up, pulled his shoes back on again, and touched the stone on the ring. "*Dominus*" he said, almost whimpering.

The portkey grabbed him and whisked him out of the room.

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When the world reformed itself around Peter, he found himself in a small stone room, with no windows, and a solid oak door. There were two chairs, one plain wooden one and one luxuriantly upholstered one. A modest table stood near the wooden chair, and an ornately carved mahogany one with clawed feet and a marble top was just to the right of the upholstered chair. Light was provided by oil-filled lamps mounted on the walls and a branch of candles on each table.

Peter knew this room; he'd been here before. He had no idea where it was, of course. Whenever the Dark Lord summoned him, this was the room to which the Portkey brought him, and he had never seen anything outside of it. He wasn't even sure if it was in England at all.

His hand still aflame with agony, he sank into the wooden chair with a sigh. Not for the likes of him was the upholstered arm chair; that was for Voldemort. Ordinarily, the warmth of the signal stopped as soon as he activated the Portkey, but this time he was being punished for his delay. Even the furnishings of the room this time showed that. It was far more austere than usual. On previous occasions there had been food or drink waiting, and the Dark Lord might favour him with a casual chat before they got down to business. Not this time. He cradled the affected hand against his chest and gritted his teeth to suppress a moan.

After a time, the pain stopped abruptly, leaving a burning feeling that ran from his fingertips almost to his elbow. A few moments later, with a soft *pop*, a small potions vial containing a pale blue liquid and a goblet of water. Fumbling with the stopper to the vial, he sniffed at it suspiciously.

Suddenly, the door swung open. Voldemort stood in the opening, silhouetted against a background of torchlight. "Do not fear to take the potion. It's only a restorative to relieve your discomfort. I wished to express my displeasure, not give you nerve damage."

Peter hesitated another moment, then took the potion in a gulp. The taste was vile, and the water

greatly appreciated as it helped get the flavor out of his mouth.

Voldemort strode into the room and settled himself in his chair. "Now then, what was so important that you delayed answering my summons?"

"My Lord, I was ... I was with others. I had to wait until I could leave without suspicion."

"I don't care what your sister and her Muggle husband suspect," snapped Voldemort, confirming for Peter the suspicion that he was watched, at least part of the time. "If you had been with your Marauder friends, or an Order meeting, it would have been different. If you would advance in my service, you must be prepared to put aside family matters, and attend when you are called."

Like a cocker spaniel, to run to my Master when he whistles? Peter thought with some bitterness. Advancing in Voldemort's service had never been anything he aspired to.

"I trust the lesson has been learned," Voldemort continued, "and will not have to be repeated?"

"It will not, Master," Peter whispered. He had been quick to learn Voldemort's "lessons", given during their first meeting here. When to stand, when to sit, how to address the Master. He didn't mean any of it, of course, but there was no point in courting pain by disobeying. At least that was the logic at first. Over the past months, however, Peter had found himself taking pleasure when Voldemort showed him some kindness, or seemed interested in his news. It was more than avoiding punishment. It was actively striving for approval, and Peter knew that he was being trained, but somehow he was helpless to stop it.

Voldemort flicked his wand, and a folded piece of paper appeared on the table next to Peter. He picked it up with fingers that still shook slightly. It was half of an advertisement, folded over on itself, for a band that performed at the pub near Pettigrew House from time to time. Unfolding it, he saw his own handwriting, slightly shaky, spelling out the words, "I have information."

"A little more information in your note would have been helpful," said the Dark wizard. "As it is, the owl took a day or two to catch up with me, as I was travelling at that time. By the time I was able to deal with it, you had put that ward up against postal owls. Very nice work, by the way. I've been using it myself for some time."

"Why would you need to ..." Peter started to ask, then stopped himself. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's quite all right. There are very few, indeed, who would wish to bother the greatest Dark wizard Britain has ever known with Howlers and unwanted solicitations. But there are a few who would dare, either from insanity or a surfeit of idiotic bravery, and I found that getting disjointed Howlers addressed to 'You Know Who' was quite annoying. So I put an end to it." He held out his hand, and the note floated from Peter's fingers into the Dark Lord's grasp. "This is the first chance I've had to call you to discuss this matter. What information did you have that was so important you needed to tell me without waiting for me to summon you, but which you were so reluctant to provide that it drove you to being so terse?"

"It was ... about the Potters."

"You know where they're hiding? Or you knew at that time. Have I missed an opportunity? Have they gone to another of Dumbledore's cursed 'safe houses'?"

"They're ... not in a safe house. They needed to settle down, you see, for the sake of the baby. But wards wouldn't be enough to keep them safe. They knew that any ward they could make, you could break through."

"True enough," said Voldemort. "Though a ward of Dumbledore's might give me pause. Where are they then?"

"At a house that belongs to James' family." Peter was finding it abnormally hard to keep from answering the Dark Lord's questions, but at least he could try to avoid answering them fully.

"I've kept all the known properties under surveillance; they're not at any of those," said Voldemort waspishly. "If wards wouldn't keep them safe, what did they do instead?"

"They put themselves under a spell called the *Fidelius Charm*."

"I don't think I've ever heard of it," admitted Voldemort with great reluctance.

"It's very old," said Peter, "and quite complex. Dumbledore found it somewhere."

"He would. What does it do?" Voldemort asked.

"It places the secret of a person or thing's location in the mind of another person, a Secret Keeper. This makes anyone else unable to remember the location, or even see the place, unless they're told by the Secret Keeper where it is. And even then, they can't pass it on to anyone else. Only the Secret Keeper can reveal the information."

Voldemort leaned back in his chair and toyed with a large silver ring on his left hand while he contemplated the information. "Hmm. A tricky spell indeed. It far surpasses mere Unplottability, or even illusions or Muggle Repelling Charms. What happens if the Secret Keeper dies?"

Peter's throat suddenly became very dry. "I ... I don't know. Possibly the place is lost forever. Maybe that's why the Charm fell out of use."

"We wouldn't want to risk that," said Voldemort. "I want to find them, not lose them for all time. I would imagine that the Secret Keeper is someone they trust implicitly, and who is powerful enough to keep it. Dumbledore, perhaps. Or, no, possibly Black. Well, he should be easy enough to break. Tell me, Peter, do you know who this Secret Keeper is?"

"Yes ... Master. I know."

"Well, who is it?"

"It's ... Master, I am their Secret Keeper." The words came unwillingly from his reluctant lips, but they came all the same.

"You? They trusted *you* with their secret? Oh, this is just marvelous! What delicious irony!" As the Dark Lord spoke, his voice began to rise in pitch, from his normal careful modulation to a sinister cackle. Peter shivered; the sophisticated, urbane man he'd known, however dangerous, was changing into something else, something evil and terrifying.

"You have served me well, Peter," said Voldemort, rising from his chair and standing in front of the frightened young man. "Perhaps not willingly, not at first. But better, in the end, than most of my followers. Accordingly, you shall be rewarded." With the speed of a striking snake, his hand lashed out and grabbed Peter's left wrist. Peter tried to pull back, but he was weakened by his previous ordeal, and the Dark Lord's grip was like iron. Roughly, Voldemort shoved the sleeve of Peter's robe back. Peter was wearing a Muggle-style shirt beneath, and Voldemort tugged sharply at the cuff, making the button fly off into some unknown corner of the room. The Dark Lord pushed Peter's shirtsleeve up as well, exposing his forearm.

Peter was still struggling futilely. He knew what was coming now. "Master, don't, please! Didn't you say you didn't want to Mark me? That you didn't want anyone to know?"

"Ah, but shortly those reasons will no longer concern me, Peter. This is a very special night. I have preparations to make, and then we will go and see the Potters. When we return, and we stand before my followers to declare my victory, I shall present you as my trusted lieutenant, and you shall claim your prize!"

Then Voldemort pressed his silver ring against the soft flesh of Peter's forearm, just below the crease of his elbow. "With this sign I Mark you!" he exclaimed. "As long as you live, you are mine!" Pain shot up Peter's arm and ran through his whole body, pain such as to make what he had experienced before seem like a mere ache. The Dark Lord held the ring there while chanting spell after unknown spell. Peter swore he could smell the skin burning, and tasted the copper tang of blood where he bit his own lip trying – futilely, in the end – to stop himself from screaming. He heard strange, high-pitched laughter as the darkness rose and he pitched forward into its blessed relief.

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He woke to find himself in a comfortable bed in the same room. His outer robe and his shoes had been removed, but he was otherwise still dressed in the Muggle clothes he'd worn to his sister's house. Pain coursed through him as he tried to move, but it was not as intense as before. Reluctantly, but with a sort of morbid curiosity, he pushed the mangled sleeve of his shirt back to expose the Mark. He expected it be a mass of blisters or an open sore, but there was no trace of violence to the skin; just a small black symbol, about an inch long, looking like a well healed tattoo, in the same design as the ring that had placed it there: a skull with a snake protruding from its open mouth. Peter shivered. He wore the Dark Mark. It didn't matter, now, whether he had taken it willingly or not; it was an automatic ticket to Azkaban if anyone saw it. Even his friends would turn against him now. Only if his ... his *Master*, he thought, hating the way the word

sounded – only if Voldemort won would Peter and his family be safe.

The door swung open again, and once again Voldemort stepped into the room, as if summoned by Peter's mere thinking of his name. "I see you are awake at last. Come, the hour grows late, and we have much to do. First we must see you properly outfitted; those Muggle things you're wearing are far from appropriate." He turned and strode out into the hall, confident that Peter would follow behind him like a properly trained pet – which Peter, after two failed attempts to lurch to his feet, and much to his own disgust, did. This was the first time that Peter had been allowed out of his room, and he looked about with curiosity. At first he thought they were in a castle of some kind. The stone-walled corridor had that feel of age that Hogwarts had. Shortly, however, they emerged into a much more opulent area, where the walls were covered with fine oak panelling and the floors, while still stone, were softened with thick carpets. They passed through a residential area where Peter peered into lavishly furnished bedrooms and sitting rooms as they passed.

Finally they came to a large room which was fitted out almost like the fitting room of a fine robe shop. Here he was given into the hands of a house elf, who rapidly measured him and then produced a set of black, hooded robes while Voldemort waited impatiently. When he put them on, they fit perfectly. His Muggle clothes Vanished with a snap of the house elf's fingers.

Then Voldemort picked up something white and smooth. It was a mask, featureless except for eye holes. Ignoring Peter's look of horror, he pressed it to the younger man's face and spoke a temporary Sticking Charm made it cling.

Peter looked at himself in the fitting room mirror and recoiled at seeing the Death Eater reflected there.

"Now you look like one of my proper followers," said Voldemort, and Peter thought there was actually a touch of pride in his voice.

Another soul corrupted and damned, isn't it wonderful?

"Follow me to the Apparation Chamber," said the Dark Lord, and once again, Peter followed him like a damned puppy, raging at himself while walking docilely at heel. He couldn't stop himself, and wondered, vaguely, if this was what being under the Imperius felt like. But no, he suspected he'd know if that had been cast on him. He didn't have that excuse. The fates wouldn't be that kind, to provide him with one.

The Apparation Chamber proved to be a large round room with heavy shielding spells built into the walls and a one-way pass on the door. Anybody could walk (or Apparate) into the thing, but you had to know the password to get out, either way. If you weren't supposed to be there, tough. You wound up waiting until somebody (probably an unfriendly somebody) came to find out just how the hell you'd got in.

Voldemort pushed Peter into the middle of the room and took his place by his side, holding his arm tightly. "You know where to go, Peter. And I warn you, if anything goes wrong, the

remainder of your life will be short and your death long."

Peter wondered for just a brief moment if he had the nerve to make them have a fatal splinching. It would solve a lot of problems. But knowing his luck, it wouldn't be fatal after all, and would leave his parts commingled with Voldemort's forever. Not a good idea. He pushed himself into the Apparation, and both he and the Dark Lord vanished from the Chamber.

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Side-Along Apparation had the advantage of producing only one "CRACK!" when both parties arrived. The residents of the Dower Estate, if they heard and paid attention to the sound, would believe only one person had come to the Apparation Point, and there was only one person it could be.

The Dark Lord released Peter's arm and looked around, seeing nothing but a dark country road with even darker trees leaning in from either side. With the sliver of a new moon already set, the only light was starlight, but that was enough for him to pick out the white oval of Peter's mask.

"Are you sure this is the right place? I must say it doesn't look like much," the Dark Lord sniffed in disdain.

For his part, Peter could clearly see the white fence along the side of the road, and the gleam of light from the downstairs windows of the Dower House. It was probably James; he had always been a night owl.

"It's the right place. The house is right over there, but you won't even be able to see it unless I tell you the Secret."

"Then do so, and be quick about it!" the Dark Lord snapped.

"Listen well, Master," Peter said, his voice shaking. "'The Potter family lives on the Dower Estate at Godric's Hollow. Think of that now."

He could tell from the Dark Lord's hiss of surprise that the trees had again rushed to the side to reveal the house and gardens. "A useful spell indeed," Voldemort murmured. "You must teach me this. My followers will find it very useful to hide things from the Ministry."

"I don't know the details. Dumbledore taught Lily, and she set the spell up."

"I shall just have to convince Mrs. Potter to cooperate, then. It should be easily enough done; she's only a Mudblood, with a Mudblood's sensibilities, after all. They have no ability to tolerate ... unpleasantness."

Peter had a sneaky feeling that Voldemort was being overly casual in his dismissal of Lily's abilities, but since it hadn't been a direct question or statement demanding a response from him, he was able to keep his mouth shut.

There was a gate in the white fence marking the edge of the property, and both Peter and Voldemort could tell it was keyed into the wards, so Voldemort sent Peter through first, with the Dark Lord following close behind. If James or Lily were paying attention, they would have heard one Apparation and now sense Peter entering the grounds ...

As they approached the house, the front door opened, and Peter could clearly see James standing in the foyer. *Stupid, stupid!* he thought. *Have you forgotten basic security so soon, James? You're backlit, we're in the dark ...* James looked slightly ruffled, and Peter assumed that the couple had been interrupted in the middle of a snog session when the wards alerted them.

"Peter? Is that you? What's wrong? Has there been an attack? What ...?" James suddenly broke off as Peter and Voldemort's figures came into view, and his wand slid from his forearm holster into his hand.

"James, you don't understand! We just want to talk to you!" cried Peter, momentarily forgetting the way he was garbed and masked.

"Peter, you ... how could you?" James asked, then shouted, so he could be heard more clearly within the house, "Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off – *Reducto!* " He launched the Blasting Curse at the two approaching figures.

Peter dodged one way, Voldemort the other, and the Curse shot between them out into the dark garden, blasting out a section of the fence. Voldemort rolled and came to his feet in a fluid move that showed he had trained with a Duelling Master in his youth and probably was one himself. "*Expelliarmus!* " James was staggered and knocked back into the foyer, while his wand sailed out into the darkened garden.

Peter hissed, "*Accio wand!* " to summon James's wand into his own hand, but by the time he had recovered it, it was too late to even think about getting it back to James.

"*Nobody* tries to Curse me and lives!" yelled Voldemort, completely losing control of his voice and letting it slide into a higher register. He stormed into the foyer, where James, weaponless without his wand, had grabbed up an umbrella stand and tried to smash the Dark Lord with it. "*Avada Kedavra!* " The spell's burst of sickly green light filled the foyer and spilled out into the garden for a brief, horrifying second, and there was a rushing sound as James screamed in horror. The scream was abruptly cut off and followed by a thud.

"No!" Peter cried, rushing in after Voldemort, but it was already too late; James's body was lying at Voldemort's feet, his face twisted into the rictus of terror that was the Killing Curse's hallmark. "Master, you said you wouldn't hurt them!"

"Stupid boy!" Voldemort snapped. "Stay here, while I go take care of the woman and child. Where will they be?"

It was a direct question again, and Peter's response was dragged from him. "Up ... upstairs. Harry's room is the second door along."

"Good. I'll try to save her for you ... after I have what I want from her first, of course. But if she resists ..." The Dark Lord shrugged, conveying eloquently that he was making no promises, and headed menacingly for the stairs.

Peter tried to follow, but whatever spell it was that Voldemort had on him, he found himself unable to put his foot on the lowest step. "Stay here," his Master had said, and here he would stay.

Hopelessly, Peter knelt by James's side. The black haired man's glasses were askew, his hazel eyes open and fixed on whatever lay beyond the physical world. His mouth was still open with his last cry. His skin was pale, and perhaps it was Peter's imagination, but he thought there was a sickly green trace of the Killing Curse on his skin. Peter put James's wand back into his hand – although it was too late to do any good, he couldn't picture his friend without it. He closed the staring eyes and was doing his best to smooth the marks of terror from James's face, when he heard voices raised upstairs – Voldemort's and Lily's.

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!" Lily cried, her voice full of anguish.

"Stand aside, you silly girl ... stand aside, now," said the Dark Lord impatiently.

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead -- "

Down in the foyer, Peter groaned. "Lily, *please*, step aside ... you can live ..." It was beyond hope, now, that she would ever love Peter, but perhaps by some miracle the Dark Lord would in fact let her live if she cooperated.

"Not Harry! Please ... have mercy ... have mercy"

There was the sound of a scuffle from upstairs, and Peter wondered for a wild moment if the Dark Lord was attempting to subdue Lily physically. He couldn't see that happening, somehow. Then the sound of voices again, Lily's saying something unclear and Voldemort's raised over it. "*Avada Kedavra!*" Another flash of light and rush of sound, another cut off scream, the thud of another body falling and a wand clattering to the floor.

Still crouched over James's body, Peter let loose with a scream of his own, a cry of love and pain, guilt for what he'd done to his friends, and a wordless wish that somehow it would work out, that the baby – who had been roused by all the screaming and was now crying for his Mummy – would somehow live. But there was no hope. Not for Harry. Not for him. His tears poured down across his smooth white mask and dripped onto James's shirt.

Above there were footsteps, as Voldemort stepped over the fallen body of his latest victim. His cackling laughter rang through the hallway and down the stairs, causing Peter to flinch in anticipation. He could still hear little Harry wailing, afraid of the strange man in his bedroom and wanting his Mum, and then the dreaded words. "*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

But this time the light was a stronger green – more emerald – mixed with silver, and it did not pass in a flash. It filled the baby's room and poured out through the hallway like water and down

the stairs and washed over Peter and James's body as well. There were loud cracking and crashing noises, as if half the roof were falling in, and the Dark Lord's voice rang out in a high pitched shriek that seemed to last forever, but finally died away. Something foul, vaporous and dark seemed to pass down the stairs and through the open door into the night as if fleeing from the brilliance of the green light that still flooded the house. As it passed, Peter's Dark Mark began to burn, as badly as when it was first applied. Screaming, Peter collapsed across the body of his fallen friend.

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Peter had no idea what time it was when he returned to consciousness, nor did he particularly care. It had been a while, that much was obvious, although it was still dark outside. The front door of the house was still open to the garden, and the air in the foyer was now quite chilly and damp. Peter realized where he was, and pushed himself up off James's body, which was now cold and beginning to stiffen. For some reason, though, his friend's face looked different than it had before, more at peace. Maybe Peter's efforts had done some good, after all.

Peter's body was wracked by chills and painful muscle cramps; how much of it was from the magical effect he'd just experienced and how much from lying on the floor for an unknown number of hours, he didn't know. The mask fell from Peter's face, landing with a clatter on the floor next to James. If Voldemort's Charm was broken ... Numbly, Peter pushed back the sleeve of his robe to look at his left forearm. The Mark was still there, a pale grey ghostly image of itself, but still there. And his ring, the cursed signet ring, still stayed on his little finger as stubbornly as ever. But maybe other spells had broken.

Hesitantly, Peter staggered toward the stairs, but this time, instead of being unable to even lift his foot, he was able to make his way up step by painful step, clinging to the bannister for support.

The hall on the upper floor was filled with dust, which had only partially settled, and the lights had gone out. Peter flicked the switch experimentally, but they were still out. *All that work for nothing*, he thought. He drew his wand and whispered, "*Lumos*," unsure if even this simple spell would work, and reassured when a steady beam of light shone forth. Peter coughed, and held his sleeve across his face to keep from inhaling too much of the dust. Lily's body lay where she had fallen, lying on her back across the threshold to Harry's room so that anyone passing had to step directly over her. Peter stooped and wiped some of the dust from her face in a last gesture. Her eyes, too, were fixed and staring, but there was no terror there, and he wondered at it. "I'm sorry, Lily," he said brokenly. "I never meant for any of this to happen." Gently, he closed her eyes and straightened out her body. Her wand was on the floor across the hall; he retrieved it and placed it in her hand as he had James's.

Then, grimly and expecting the worst, he stood and went into Harry's room.

The nursery, which he had helped paint (pale blue, with clouds across the ceiling and birds and butterflies and balloons on the walls) was now a wreck. The ceiling had indeed fallen, and the floor near the door was scorched as if by a great heat. A beam had crashed down and brought the plaster with it; the crib lay smashed beneath it, and all was deathly silent.

Trembling, Peter stepped around the scorch mark and approached the crib. It was full of wood and plaster, and the beam was angled sharply across it, with one end on the floor and the other resting against the wall. The forward railing of the crib had been splintered by the blow. Peter hesitantly pushed aside some of the fallen chunks of plaster. The top of a child's head was revealed, the wild hair, normally black, now greyed with plaster dust, the skin of the forehead also coated with the dust. And across that forehead was a lurid red mark, probably caused by the falling debris. A cut, quite deep, in the shape of a jagged lightning bolt.

If there was anything Peter knew about scalp wounds, it was that they bled like crazy. He remembered once when he was a child and fell, cutting his own head just above the ear. Healing spells were beyond his mother's power, and he had been soaked with blood before she had Flooed with him to St. Mungo's, where the Healers had taken care of his injury in about five seconds flat. The cut on Harry's head was easily an inch and a half long, and if he wasn't bleeding ... the only reason for that would be if he was dead.

Peter brushed the rest of the plaster away from Harry's face. Again there was that odd calmness to the features. Something fell from the bed and landed on Peter's foot, exclaiming "Ow!" in a high squeaky voice, and he almost jumped out of his skin. Looking down, he saw Harry's little blue bear, now missing a paw. He picked it up and tucked it in next to Harry. Suddenly pain, purely emotional but unbearable pain, filled him and his eyes again filled with tears.

He turned and fled the room. He couldn't stay here any more, here in this house of death, here where he'd brought ruin. But there was something he had to do. Slightly maddened with guilt and grief, he ran downstairs, into the kitchen and into Lily's Potions still room that opened from it. He rummaged through her kit until he found what he was looking for; the silver knife, its blade kept sharp by enchantment, which she had used in the casting of the *Fidelius* Charm. He placed his right hand firmly on the cutting board which was normally used for roots and herbs, took a deep breath and pressed down with the knife.

He was getting used to pain by now, he realized. Every pain had its own feel and flavor; this, though intense, was at least bearable, possibly because it was self inflicted, possibly because it relieved some of the other pains he was experiencing. Lily had a full supply of medical supplies here – she'd need them, with an active baby running around. He wrapped his hand in bandages which were spelled to seal the wound and stop the bleeding, and dosed himself with a healing potion, but nothing for pain. He didn't want that. Didn't deserve it. His severed finger, still bearing the ring, he left on the cutting board. *Should have done that at the beginning*, he thought angrily. *Should have killed myself right away. Then maybe none of this would have happened.* But he knew it would have happened, one way or another. If he had died by his own hand or at Voldemort's wand months before, James and Lily would still have gone under the *Fidelius*, with Sirius as Secret Keeper. And Sirius had barely managed to pass the Disguise and Concealment portion of his Auror training. He would never have been able to stay under cover, he'd have been caught and tortured to provide the information and the same thing would have happened. At least this way, Sirius and Remus were still alive, to carry on the fight.

For him, though, it was over. Soon the Aurors would be here. They would come, and they wouldn't listen to his excuses, they'd find him in a Death Eater's robe, with a Dark Mark on his

arm, in a house with three dead people, and they wouldn't believe that it hadn't been him who had done it. He'd be in Azkaban and soulless before another day had passed.

He couldn't take refuge with the Death Eaters; none of them knew who he was, and he didn't know who they were, though he had some guesses, and most of them were people he wouldn't want to associate with.

Taking his wand up clumsily in his left hand, he staggered out of the house, pausing only mutter a final apology to James, and to the Apparation point.

A minute later, he was in his Muggle apartment, stuffing a suitcase bag full of clothes and his wallet full of traveller's cheques, thanking himself for his foresight.

By dawn, he was at Heathrow, claiming a family emergency to get on the first flight to New York.

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In the Dower House, there was movement. The house elves had hidden, terrified, in their separate quarters all night, as lights flashed and magic poured out of the Master's house. The elf called Nanny, both her name and her title, screamed in terror for her poor little Master Harry, and wanted to go to him, but Ferny, the Head Elf from the Big House, and Brandy, the Mistress's Kitchen Elf, held her back.

"Nanny must not go!" said Ferny, choking on his own fear and grief as he felt his bond with Master James fail.

"House elves are no use in a Wizard's fight," whispered Brandy. "It is forbidden. It is forbidden." She shook with anguish as her Mistress Lily – kind, gentle Mistress Lily, who was teaching her all the most wonderful Muggle recipes – died and the bond broke.

All of them waited in terror for Nanny's bond with young Master Harry to break, for he was the last of the Potters and when there was no more family, there was no more need for house elves. But although Nanny wailed in fear and pain, her bond did not break. Master Harry lived.

At dawn, the elves finally dared to creep into the Dower House. They mourned over Master James and Mistress Lily, lying still and stiff on the cold floor, and moaned at the destruction of the upstairs. To house elves, bound as they were to keep up the house and grounds, the damage to the building was almost as painful as the loss of their masters. Nanny and the others entered Master Harry's room. Nanny didn't know about head wounds or curse scars, which had begun to scab over already. She did know that a great beam lying across her little Master's bed was Not a Good Thing, and she organized the male elves to shift it while she removed the chunks of plaster that covered Master Harry's body.

While they were doing so, the boy stirred, sneezed, and tried to wipe the dust and dirt from his face. "Mummy?" he asked with a whimper.

Nanny didn't know what to say, really, but held the boy as he wakened and whined and finally cried for his mother. She found a clean nappy and some clothes that hadn't been destroyed, and got him cleaned off and clothed. By this time the other elves had moved the bodies of Master James and Mistress Lily into the parlour and closed the door so that Master Harry wouldn't be upset on seeing them, and she was able to take the little boy downstairs and Brandy started to prepare breakfast. It was only because Master Harry was pressing his hands to his head where the lightning-bolt mark was that she thought to go into Mistress Lily's still room, and received a terrible shock. There was blood all over Mistress Lily's work table, and the first-aid cabinet had been opened and things were spilled all over, and there was a *severed finger*, still wearing a ring of some kind, on the table! Nanny screamed, and all the other house elves ran in and saw, and they screamed too, and then little Master Harry started screaming and all the elves stopped because their Master needed them. Nanny got him a headache potion that she thought was all right for human babies, and she gave him half of it, and then waited to see if anything bad happened before she gave him the other half.

Fed and dosed with an adult dose of headache potion, Harry stuck his thumb in his mouth and started to doze off in his high chair. His own bed upstairs was still unusable, so Nanny discussed the matter with the other elves and then took the little boy into the house elf quarters. It didn't matter if the Masters had promised never to come into the house elves' own place, Master Harry was too little to stay in either the Dower House or the Big House. He would fit just fine in a house elf's bed, and it would be easier to take care of him there until some wizards came to tell the house elves what to do. So she took him and put him in his own bed, and some elf found his blue bear and she sewed up the place where the paw had ripped off and tucked into bed with him.

House elves took care of their Masters. It was what they did. They held a meeting, with all the elves from the Big House and the Dower House, and they decided to do their best: they would clean up the mess in the Dower House and fix it just like it was and take care of little Master Harry until some witch or wizard came to tell them what else to do.

They would be waiting a long time.

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Peter's hand throbbed with pain despite the potion he'd finally broken down and taken to numb it. Fleeing the morning, unaware of the survival of Harry Potter or the Secret he still Kept, he peered out the tiny window of the aircraft cabin and wondered if he could lose himself in the New World. From the Death Eaters. From the Order. From himself.

The *Fidelius* stretched, but it did not break.

Fidelius

Morning Has Broken

Author's Note: Okay, we're still focusing on folks other than Harry here, because face it, a toddler's life isn't all that interesting. However, the repercussions of Chapter Three will start multiplying from here on out as people's lives change from canon.

Warning: There is an off-screen rape and some mildly bad language in this chapter.

FIDELIUS

Chapter Four

Morning Has Broken

Sunday, November 1, Before Dawn - Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

Albus Dumbledore tumbled out of bed as the alarm on his Floo started shrieking that there was someone on the way. Fortunately, at his advanced age, he did not sleep very long or very deeply, several short naps during the day being sufficient to make up for the lack of sleep at night. He reached for his glasses on the night table, and they obligingly jumped into his fingers.

By the time his unexpected visitor tumbled through the fireplace into his office, Dumbledore was already standing at the top of the balcony that connected his living quarters to the office space, looking for all the world as though he had planned all along for Severus Snape to visit at four in the morning. "Severus, my dear boy, what brings you here at this time of night?"

The young Potions Master looked rather the worse for wear. He was wearing a plain black robe, not his usual fashionably tailored (though equally black) professional robes, or a night robe, as might be expected at this hour. His complexion, normally sallow, was downright greyish, and he clutched at the back of a nearby chair for support while the Headmaster descended the stairs with all the dignity that could be expected of a man wearing a fuschia bathrobe and night cap over a lime-green nightshirt and yellow bunny slippers.

"Albus, something's happened. I'm not at all sure what. But ... something." His voice, normally smooth, was rough, as if he were suffering from a sore throat.

"Sit down before you fall down, Severus," said Dumbledore. "You look like you need something to restore your nerves. Brandy? Tea? Lemon drop? How did your meeting go?" The young

Potions Master had been "called" earlier that evening to attend a meeting of the Death Eaters; while the Dark Lord thought that Snape was spying on Dumbledore for him, actually he was spying on Voldemort for Dumbledore, and had been for almost two years now. The young man was playing a very deep, and very dangerous, game.

"I'll take the lemon drop," said the Potions Master wearily, and Dumbledore's shaggy eyebrows rose in surprise. The standoffish young man had never taken one before; he must be in truly dreadful shape. The chair that he had been holding the back of turned around so he could sit in it properly, and then turned back so he was facing the Headmaster at his desk. Ordinarily Snape didn't particularly care for Dumbledore's moving furniture, but this night he was fatigued enough to be grateful for it. The dish containing the lemon drops rose up from the desk on three little feet, and skittered across to the edge nearest Snape, tilting itself to make it easier for him to retrieve the sweet. When Snape took three lemon drops instead of one, it did a little dance of delight and ran back to Dumbledore, who was seriously concerned now.

The young man popped all three of the lemon drops in his mouth and sucked on them for a short time in silence as he put his thoughts in order. After a few moments he was able to speak with something resembling his normal voice. "The message I received tonight was not through my regular contact, but it was definitely from the Dark Lord. He called me to meet with him, at the usual place, at midnight tonight. Er, that's midnight just past," he said, looking at the clock as if he wasn't quite sure what time it was. Given the number of hands on Dumbledore's clock, it was entirely possible that he still didn't know what time it was after consulting it. "The message said he would have an important announcement, but there was no clue what that announcement would be. I left the school at eleven o'clock, after getting my Slytherins settled for the night. Headmaster," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose, "while the celebration of All Hallows with a feast is a time honoured tradition, may I ask if it was really necessary to introduce the American custom of providing large amounts of sweets to the students? All that sugar had them bouncing off the walls of the dungeon, and I had to give Calming Potions to some of the younger ones."

"A little indulgence once a year doesn't do them any harm," said the Headmaster mildly. "I'm thinking of introducing a masquerade next year."

"Please don't," begged Snape. "Even the thought of five hundred children in disguise running amok through the school is enough to give me a migraine." He resolved to let the other Heads of House know about this insane idea of the Headmaster's so they could head him off. He always listened to McGonagall.

"The Americans seem to handle it well enough. Ah well, perhaps I should give the idea further consideration before I act on it. You were saying?"

"I changed into the appropriate garb, went to the usual Apparation point, and Apparated to the Dark Lord's Stronghold. Here I discovered that I was not the only one summoned; in fact, a great many people had been called."

"How many?"

"It's hard to tell, since he makes us all wear these ridiculous robes and masks at all times except private meetings. I'd have to say there were sixty to seventy people there, easily. Maybe more. Judging from the way people were gathering, I'd say he's got at least six independently operating groups, each under a member of his Inner Circle. There's one political group, two information groups, and three attack groups – which is one more than I'd thought," he said grimly. "I am my own group, of course, since I don't have anyone under me and answer only to Him. He may have other independent agents like myself, I don't know. And I suspect that a number of low level minions were not called."

Snape paused to crunch the remains of the lemon drops between his teeth. "I've been thinking it's a very good idea that you did not inform the Order that I was working for you, Albus," he said slowly. "Someone in one of the information groups let slip that he thinks the Dark Lord has an agent in place inside the Order. If that person knew about me, I don't doubt I'd have quietly vanished one night and you would be looking for a new Potions Instructor."

"That's a Curse you already dodged once," agreed Dumbledore. "I'd rather not try to have to do it again. We don't have another Prophecy to buy your life with."

"In any event, most of us had arrived early, since it is never wise to be late when reporting to the Dark Lord. It was perhaps fifteen minutes before midnight when it happened." The normally saturnine young man paused, looking down at his hands, which were clenched together so tightly the knuckles were white.

"When *what* happened?" Dumbledore nudged gently.

"Suddenly, without warning, I was struck with pain burning through my Dark Mark. It was similar to what I experienced when I was given the Mark in the first place. It wasn't as bad as the Cruciatus, but bad enough. Everyone else was struck with the same pain at the same time."

"So your throat...?"

"Screaming. That's one thing you learn in the Court of the Dark Lord, not to feel ashamed of screaming. It only gets worse if you don't. I think he likes it." Snape tried, and failed, to hold back a shudder. "Your lemon drops will serve to soothe it until I can take a potion for it." The candy dish gave a hopeful little hop and dashed over to offer Snape another lemon drop, which he took.

"Most, if not all, of us went down under the pain. I know I passed out, for several hours, I think. I believe I was one of the first to recover, and at that time it looked like everyone, or almost everyone, who had been there was still there, in varying degrees of unconsciousness. When I sat up, I was surprised when my mask fell off."

"Why was this surprising?"

"The Sticking Charm on those masks was cast by the Dark Lord himself; it's part of a little ceremony he likes to do when you're robed and masked the first time. After that, of course, the

wearer can remove it and put it back on again pretty much at will, but it's still his original Charm. If the mask fell off, something had to have happened to break the Charm. Everyone else was surprised, too. Some people didn't seem to care, or to realize what had happened. Some people started grabbing their masks and sticking them back on themselves before anyone saw them."

"What did you do?"

"I tried to memorize as many faces as I could. Some were already known to me, of course, but there were many that confirmed my suspicions, and some were surprises to me. Some I don't know, and I will have to record them in my Pensieve for you so we can try to find out who they are. But the most shocking thing we discovered was when some of us pushed up our robe sleeves. There was still some discomfort coming from the Dark Marks at that point, so it was natural to check. And we found ..."

Snape rose reluctantly from his chair and came around the end of Dumbledore's desk, pushing up his sleeve as he did so. There was a pale grey smudge on his arm where before there had been a crisp black Mark. "The Mark hasn't gone away completely, not on any of us. But it's faded, and I can already tell that some of the compulsions laid on me when I took the Mark have begun to weaken in strength. I believe, for example, that now I may be able to say His name."

"Give it a try," said Dumbledore, encouragingly.

"V ... Vol ... Voldemort," Snape said after several false starts.

"Very good!" Dumbledore seemed unreasonably cheered by this development. "What else have you observed?"

"The Anti-Apparation wards at the Dark Lord's Stronghold, wherever it is, have fallen. Several people attempted to Apparate out, and were at least partially successful. Since three individuals were Splinched, however, one very badly, and I was somewhat disoriented myself, I deemed it wiser to go to the Floo Chamber and get home that way. I believe I was just ahead of the crowd. I Flooed to my private home, in case someone was paying attention to where I was going, and then immediately here."

"Do you believe you are well enough to place your memories in a Pensieve? That should be done sooner, rather than later. You may borrow mine, if you wish. It's empty at the moment." He rose and crossed to a cabinet, removing a carved stone bowl from it and placing it on the desk before Snape.

"Thank you. I'd rather not take the trip down to my quarters and back at this point. Could I also bother you for a Pepper-Up Potion and a restorative? I find myself rather in need of something at this point if we are going to stay up the rest of the night trying to analyse these events."

"Of course, of course," said Dumbledore, "I'll be right back with them. Do you want me to awaken Poppy so she can see to you?"

"Thank you, but I don't believe that will be necessary." Snape busied himself removing the memories and placing them in Dumbledore's Pensieve while the Headmaster himself bustled into his private still room to retrieve the necessary potions. While there, he also donned a spare robe that he kept there in case some of the potions ingredients got ugly. As a practicing alchemist of many years' standing, he knew that when potions ingredients got ugly, it was usually hard on the wardrobe. Clothed properly in a turquoise day robe with silver shooting stars on it, but still wearing the bunny slippers and his night cap, he returned to his office to find that Snape had finished placing memories in the Pensieve. He passed the potions to the younger man, who took them promptly, and looked much better once the smoke had ceased pouring from his ears.

"Now then, let's get to work. I believe our first task should be to go through the memories you have placed in the Pensieve, and we shall see who we recognize. I may be able to recognize old students from Hogwarts before you came here, and some of those privately tutored or who attended another school, since my social network is larger than yours. It may take several passes to find everyone we can. Then we must discuss the greater ramifications of tonight's events."

"But we shouldn't spend too long doing it," interjected the Potions Master. "I feel that something vital has happened, and if we don't take advantage of it soon, we will lose that opportunity completely."

"Do you believe the Dark Lord to be dead?" asked Dumbledore.

"No. But I believe that whatever he had planned to announce tonight has gone very far wrong, and his power has been broken, perhaps temporarily, perhaps permanently. In any event, there will be those among his followers scrambling for advantage, perhaps trying to take his place, and others who may disappear if we give them the chance."

"Very well. We shall review your memories, and then I shall call a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. I believe it is time to break your cover."

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Sunday, November 1, Mid Morning - Hogwarts, Snape's Quarters

Severus Snape had retreated from the brightness of Dumbledore's office to the comfortable gloom of his own chambers. Despite the potions he had taken, by the end of their session the bright morning sun, shining through the diamond-paned leaded windows and sparkling off the myriad silver and crystal devices with which the old wizard covered all available surfaces, had brought back his headache in spades. He stripped off the hated Death Eater robes, donned a plain black wrap around house robe, and was debating whether to take a nap to ease the weariness or a bath to remove the stink of pain and fear, or both to try to drown himself quietly, when his Floo roared to life. The head of Lucius Malfoy floated in the flames.

"Severus, are you there? I need to ... ah, there you are. Just getting up?"

"What do you want, Lucius?" Snape growled irritably.

"I need to talk to you, immediately if not sooner. I believe it will be in both of our best interests."

"Very well," Snape sighed. "Just this once, mind you."

Malfoy withdrew his head from the flames and spun out onto the hearth a moment later. Unlike Snape, he had obviously had the luxury of time to bathe, dress properly, and possibly even get some sleep. He looked obscenely fresh and well-groomed, Snape thought. "I really do appreciate this," Malfoy said. "It's obvious now that you're only just getting in, after all."

"There were things I needed to do. If you'll pardon me a moment, I need to make some coffee if you expect me to be anything resembling coherent." Snape padded barefoot into his quarters' tiny kitchen and set a pot up to percolate, loading the little drip basket with strong, freshly ground Arabian coffee. He liked it strong enough that it counted as a potion.

Malfoy leaned casually against the doorway watching Snape; the kitchen wasn't large enough for both of them to stand comfortably in it. "A large number of individuals seemed to feel the same way. I caught Bellatrix in Our Lord's chambers, going through his papers."

"Was she? You'd think she would have already done so, as familiar with him and his rooms as she claims to be. Do you believe she really is ...?"

"His lover? I doubt it. I think he enjoyed watching her games and implications, but he knew better than to sleep with anyone crazier than he was."

"Was? You think he's dead?"

Malfoy touched his left forearm gently, almost as if seeking for some kind of signal from it, before answering. "No. I don't think he's dead. I think he made a very large mistake, and something blew up in his face. I think he may recover eventually, although it may not be for some time. The question is, what can we turn to our own advantage in the meantime?"

It was the same question Snape had asked Dumbledore earlier, and he knew that someone who asked that question already had some ideas as to what to do. "You don't want to wait for his return like a loyal little follower?"

Malfoy snorted inelegantly. "Hardly. I'm his fourth 'political officer', as he terms it, this year. They have short life expectancy, but you can't exactly turn down the 'honour' when he gives it to you. I have a wife and a child that I'd like to go home to at the end of the day, and ambitions that don't involve being a madman's lap dog."

"Why did you join him, then?" asked Snape, knowing the answer already.

"Why did any of us? He offered me something I couldn't get – a dream to follow and a chance to make my mark on the Wizarding World *now* – without having to wait a hundred years or so for my father and grandfather to shuffle off the mortal coil so I could inherit. And once it was too late, and I was in too far to pull out, I discovered what he really wanted. Power and immortality

for himself, and a gang of boot licking sycophants to tell him how great he is. Both of my immediate forebears are now dead – my father was barely seventy, Severus, that's hardly past middle age! There was no *reason* for him to die! – and he expects me to hand him the Ministry on a platter, as if it's blood alone and not the connections my grandfather had that gave our family its influence there." He cocked his head inquiringly. "You?"

"Much the same. He offered me something I wanted, then twisted it until I was just a weapon he could turn to his own purposes." *Bitterness, and hatred, and the desire for revenge – and all that turned against the wrong people, away from the ones who deserved it*, Snape thought.

"But you found a way out."

"A way out? Hardly that. I was there the same as everyone else last night, wasn't I?"

"But you weren't there to do his bidding, were you? You were there for another reason. You've got an in with the Powers That Be, and you're working for them – presumably with promise of a pardon when all this is done. So is it Dumbledore or the Ministry?"

"Dumbledore," Snape sighed. "I don't have a promise of a pardon, just that he'll put in a good word for me, but that's good enough for me at this point. I have a job and I have his protection, and for that I've been putting my life on the line for almost two years. Well, that and the knowledge that I'm doing The Right Thing."

"Is that enough for you?"

"It has to be." The coffee had percolated to the desired degree by now, and Snape carefully moved it off the fire, pouring himself a cup to let it cool. He offered a cup to Malfoy, but the aristocratic blond shuddered and waved it away.

"I assume you're looking for a 'way out' yourself?"

"Absolutely. I have information, and I'm willing to provide it to interested parties, in exchange for certain guarantees. I think you have connections with those parties."

"There are no guarantees," said Snape as he took his coffee out into the sitting room. "But with Dumbledore backing you, and your own Ministry connections – don't downplay those, Lucius, you've probably inherited more good will than you know – you'll more than likely walk away from this. But you must be honest – Dumbledore will see right through you if you're not."

"I'll be honest. I'm playing for more lives than my own," the blond assured him seriously. "And while the threat of prosecution by the Ministry concerns me, it concerns me less than the threat from another quarter. The Dark Lord? He may or may not come back any time soon. Bellatrix is another matter. She's active now, she's insane, she has people who will do what she tells them to do, and she has a list with my name on it. I'm afraid of what she's planning to do."

Snape took a sip of his coffee. He had a feeling he was going to need more of it before this day

was over. "Tell me everything."

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Sunday, November 1, Late Afternoon – Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix

At about four in the afternoon, a group of strangely dressed people began arriving at a small shepherd's croft on a heath far from any town. From the outside, it looked as if it had been long abandoned; its chimney had fallen and taken some of the roof with it, moss grew on its rough grey stones, and the wind whistled through windows that lacked glass. No road ran nearby, and no path led up to its door.

The first to arrive was a huge man who popped into existence near the front door. His hair and beard were black and bushy, and he carried a pink umbrella. He tapped a sequence of stones on the wall next to the doorway, then pushed open the door and went in, stooping to pass under the lintel. Shortly after he entered, the smoke from a fire started rising from the broken chimney.

As if that was a signal, men and women began appearing out of thin air in ones and twos, some of them in wizarding robes and some of them in some approximation of Muggle clothing. A few flew in on broomsticks, which they left parked next to the door in a neat row. Each of them tapped the stones in a personalized sequence before going in. Soon far more people had gone in than could have possibly fit comfortably in the tiny hut.

Sirius Black Apparated in and tapped his identification code on the bricks; only then would the door open for him. A roar of noise, the sound of too many people talking too loudly in too small a space, rushed out to meet him, and for one moment he considered turning away and going somewhere else, anywhere else. He didn't think he could cope with this. Not now, not today. But of course he did go in. Otherwise, he would be alone, and he didn't think he could cope with that either.

The inside of the hut was much different from the outside. For one thing, it was much larger. A fireplace large enough for six men to stand upright in it at once took up one wall, and the giant of a man who had first arrived had lit a fire and was now heating cauldrons of water for tea. Another wall was covered with maps of all sorts, dominated by a huge Muggle map of England with pins of various colours stuck in it. An oaken table ran the length of the room, with chairs for twenty people around it, and more chairs were set against the walls. Even so, all of the people who had arrived fit comfortably inside, with room for more. Members of the crowd had gathered in small groups and tried to talk loudly enough to be heard over the group next to them.

Sirius made his way through the crowd to where Rubeus Hagrid, the Hogwarts Groundskeeper, was making up the tea, and gratefully accepted a cup, sinking into a chair with a sigh.

"Long day, eh?" said the jovial giant, noticing Sirius's rumpled Auror tunic and trousers.

"One of the worst and one of the longest, Hagrid," said Sirius. "If you see Remus or Peter come in, wave them over here, will you? I've got bad news."

Hagrid frowned. Many people underestimated him because of his size and speech, but he was far from a stupid man. If Sirius was asking for Remus and Peter, but not James and Lily, who could also be expected at a meeting like this, then Sirius had a reason for it. The young Auror looked exhausted, and his eyes were red rimmed. Hagrid kept people from bothering the young man until he finally saw Remus, wearing Muggle clothes, slip in through the door, and signalled for him to come over. Remus looked tired, too, but at least it was ordinary tiredness and not the exhaustion that overtook him on the days following the full moon.

"Hey, Sirius, sorry I'm so late. Had to find someone to take my shift. Is Peter here yet?"

"I sent him a Patronus. I think so did Dumbledore. Haven't seen him yet, though." Sirius' voice was rough.

"James and Lily, then?" asked Remus.

Sirius couldn't say anything in reply. He just stared up at Remus, shaking his head.

"Something happened?" whispered Remus, his heart suddenly filled with terror. "Were they attacked? What happened?"

"They're ... They're gone. I don't know how."

"Harry?"

"I don't know."

Remus did not so much sit as fall down into the chair next to Sirius. "How could anything happen? That was the whole reason you did the *Fidelius* !"

"No ... not me. Not me. I wish it had been me!"

"Peter?"

Sirius nodded. "We wound up agreeing with you after all. I'd have been too obvious. So he did it, and he said he was going into hiding in the Muggle world. We've been corresponding by owl through a drop box ... but there was no hint, none, that anything was wrong!"

"How did you find out then?"

"They just ... just ... somebody delivered their bodies to the Gates of Avalon."

"That's the chapel they used when James's father died?"

"That's it. The manager said he stepped out for lunch and when he came back, they were just ... there. In the chapel. They were wearing their formal robes – the ones they wore for their wedding, you remember? - and all wrapped up in white shrouds. There were flowers and herbs wrapped up with them. There was ... there was also a single finger bundled up in a linen napkin,

also with flowers. The manager called the Aurors, of course, and he told them who James was, and one of the investigating team called me to identify them ... then after I did, they sent me off shift. But it was a good thing I got there when I did, because that poncy idiot Lockhart was about to arrest the chapel manager for murdering them."

"Was there any sign of Harry?"

"No, thank God. I don't think I'd have been able to stand it if there was."

"And ... a finger? Do you think it was Peter's?"

"Maybe. I only got a glimpse. The forensics people may be able to tell, but that's not my department. I'll have to see if I can get a copy of their report."

"If James and Lily are ... and Peter too, maybe ... who's taking care of Harry?" asked Remus.

"I don't know, I tell you! I don't know."

"Maybe Dumbledore knows how to break the *Fidelius* . Maybe Peter will come, and he'll have Harry, and explain everything."

"Maybe," replied Sirius, "but I don't hold out much hope for any of those things." They sat in silence after that, each lost in his own gloomy thoughts.

The door to the hut opened again, and the various conversations died down as Dumbledore strode through, with two men following close behind him.

"Who's that, then?" Sirius muttered to himself as he tried to get a good look through the crowd, then rocketed to his feet. "What the *fuck* ?! What are you doing here, Snivellus?"

"Charming as always, aren't you, Black?" Snape drawled. "As it happens, I was invited."

The room erupted into chaos as various members of the Order objected loudly to the presence of Snape, Malfoy, or both, and it took Dumbledore some time to restore order. At length, however, he got everyone calmed down and they all took places around the table or on the chairs along the walls. Snape and Malfoy sat to the right and left of Dumbledore's seat at the head of the table, causing some disturbance as they replaced Alastor Moody and Minerva McGonagall, who usually occupied those places. There were several chairs left over, which caused the elderly wizard no little concern.

"I have an announcement to make," said Dumbledore, standing so everyone could see him clearly. "Lord Voldemort is gone, his power broken."

"Gone?!"

"You mean he's dead?!"

"What happened?"

The babble of voices burst out again and Dumbledore once more had to take the time to get everyone to shut up. Sirius and Remus didn't waste time asking questions, but glanced at each other. They knew there was a connection between James and Lily's deaths and whatever it was that had happened to He Who Must Not Be Named.

Dumbledore finally had everyone's attention again. "I would like to request that people not break into questions every time I make a statement, or we shall all be here until Merlin wakes!" he said a little sharply. "Last night, shortly before midnight, something – we don't know what exactly – befell Lord Voldemort, and also temporarily felled most of his Death Eaters. We know this because I had an agent inside Voldemort's organization."

"Snivellus," said Sirius derisively. It wasn't a question.

"Sirius, I know there is a long history of enmity between you and Severus Snape, but I beg you to put it aside. There is much to be done. Severus was initiated into the Order of the Phoenix by me personally and has been the Order's agent within the ranks of the Death Eaters for well over a year and a half, reporting only to me. I trust him and the information he has provided implicitly, and indeed, he has indirectly saved the lives of several persons here. In addition, he has identified many of the Death Eaters and done much to work out their hierarchy. He came to me in the small hours of the night to tell me that Lord Voldemort had fallen and his organization has been cast into disarray."

"My other guest, Lucius Malfoy, has come to me just today. He –"

"You're not going to tell us *he's* an Order member?" asked Arthur Weasley in disbelief. The enmity between the impoverished Weasley clan and the aristocratic Malfoys went back several generations, and was, if anything, more intense than the rivalry between Black and Snape. Arthur could not imagine them being on the same side of any conflict.

"No," replied Dumbledore. "Mr. Malfoy is not a member of the Order, nor is he likely to be. He has, however, brought information which he is willing to put at our disposal, and has offered to work alongside us to disrupt the Death Eaters even more while we have the opportunity. As proof of his bona fides, he has offered information crucial to several of our members, and I, for one, am satisfied as to its veracity. So, as our first order of business, are James and Lily Potter and Frank and Alice Longbottom here today?"

Sirius found himself on his feet without consciously willing himself to stand. "James and Lily are ... dead."

Shock and consternation drew comments and sobs from the crowd; the Potters had been popular, even with the older set.

"When?" Dumbledore snapped.

"At a guess ... the middle of the night last night. When they were found at the Gates of Avalon chapel earlier this afternoon, their bodies were dressed for burial, but rigor mortis had already set in, and there was post mortem lividity present. They were wrapped in linen shrouds, with flowers and herbs wrapped with them. Neither of them had their wands, and James was not wearing his family signet ring, although he was wearing his glasses. Additionally, the severed finger of some other individual was found, wrapped in a linen napkin along with flowers and herbs in the same manner as the bodies." Sirius was able to get through his brief description of the discovery of the bodies and the finger by retreating into his professional persona, reporting as an Auror on the deaths of two people he did not know.

Dumbledore looked down at Lucius, who shook his head. "Midnight last night - that's too early. In the middle of the night, we were all unconscious for a few hours, and then we took another hour or so to recover. I know for a fact Bellatrix was still at the Stronghold at three, because that's when I found her rifling through the Dark Lord's papers."

"Disappointed she got there first?" asked Weasley scornfully.

"Of course. Knowledge is power, after all," Malfoy replied smoothly. "The timing of their deaths is suspicious, though. Perhaps they had something to do with the Dark Lord's fall."

"Perhaps indirectly," said Dumbledore. "There is the Prophecy to consider. The Longbottoms then?"

"If she was able to assemble a combat team quickly ... yes. Her husband and brother in law would follow her lead, and there are others as well. It may already be too late."

"My renegade cousin may be going after Frank and Alice?" asked Sirius, for confirmation.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. That is the first bit of information Mr. Malfoy brought us. Bellatrix LeStrange has a list of names which she found among Voldemort's papers early this morning. The names Potter and Longbottom were on it, and Mr. Malfoy believes, with good reason, that she may be intending to kill everyone whose names are on that list, in the belief that her Lord would have wished her to do so."

"Frank and Alice aren't here," observed Sirius. "They may already be under attack. With your permission, Albus, I'd like to assemble a combat team to go to Frank and Alice's place and get them quickly. They have their Floo security locked, but I can use the Auror overrides to get into it."

"Permission granted," said Dumbledore. "Choose whatever fighters you want, my boy." He looked down to where Lucius sat. "Mr. Malfoy, if you would be so good as to provide the rest of the list to the group here, perhaps while we are gone you may identify more of the people on it."

"I'll do that," he said, relieved that he wouldn't be asked to go into the fight with the combat team. He was good in a fight, one on one where he could cheat, but a firefight between Death Eaters, Aurors and Order members was an entirely different matter.

"Thank you, sir." Sirius was now in full Auror mode, all business. Grief for Lily and James, worry for Peter and Harry, and personal concern for Frank and Alice were put aside. He had a job to do. "Although Auror Commander Moody ranks me. He should be in charge."

"This is an Order matter first, and Albus put you in charge. I'll follow your lead and back you with the Ministry," said the grizzled veteran.

"Thank you, Sir," said Sirius. "In that case, I'll select one team and go ahead. You call Auror Command and call backup, and follow with your own team."

Snape was startled by the change in his old adversary, and even more startled when he started selecting his team.

"Remus, you're with me," said Sirius. "Albus, Aberforth ... Snape."

"You want me to be on your team?" Snape asked in surprise.

"We have our differences, but I know from experience that you're one of the best duellists out there," said Sirius, thinking grimly of the many illicit skirmishes the Marauders had had with the Slytherin during their school years. Even with the advantage of numbers, the Marauders had not always come off the winners. "And I'd rather have you where I can see you," he finished, growling.

"Will we be enough?" asked Remus, heading off what looked to be a distracting argument.

"We're five of the best. Moody will bring another five, and we'll have a squad of Aurors coming in for backup. We'll be enough. We have to be."

Albus and Aberforth Dumbledore both stood and Transfigured their robes into close fitting tunics and trousers like Sirius's, which were more effective for fighting. Aberforth's were a plain, dark purple, while Albus's retained the turquoise and shooting star pattern and clashed badly with his bright yellow boots. Their long beards and hair braided themselves so as to cause less distraction in combat. Snape simply stripped his outer robe off, revealing that he was wearing a Muggle style black knit turtleneck and black trousers underneath it. The group formed up near the fireplace, where Hagrid hurriedly scooped his tea-making equipment out of the way. There was a small jar of Floo powder on the mantel, and Sirius scooped out a generous amount. "Longbottom Manor, Auror Override Black Dragon!" The flames roared up and turned green, and the rescue team drew their wands and leaped through.

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Sunday, November 1 – Longbottom Manor

Auror Overrides of the Floo system were not often done, because, in an effort to route the Aurors by the most direct route to their destination, the network had a tendency to spit people out at random fireplaces, and the people then had a tendency to complain, unreasonably assuming that

their trip to get to Aunt Matilda's birthday party was more important than the Aurors' need to catch escaping felons. Thankfully, there were few Floo intersections and fewer travelers between Order Headquarters and Longbottom Manor. Instead of spinning individually through the network, the five members of the team shot forward as a group, skidding out onto the main Floo hearth of the Longbottoms' home after a nerve wracking trip.

The Death Eaters had left one member on guard in the front hall, where the Floo exited. He was alerted by the roar of the green flame that someone was coming through, but was not prepared for the speed with which the fireplace spit them out. Sirius was in the lead, and he already had his wand out and the first syllable of the Stunning Spell on his lips before he came to a halt. The Death Eater never had a chance.

The team members paused just a moment to get their bearings. Sounds of revelry and destruction of personal property came from one of the drawing rooms that opened onto the hall, and screams of pain and anguish came from upstairs. Sirius hated to split up his team, but he hated to leave functional enemies at his back even more. "Dumbledore's," he said, pointing at the drawing room, "you deal with the riff raff. Remus, Snape, with me!" He cast a quick silencing spell on the stairs and charged up the stairs without making any noise to alert their prey – not that anything could have been heard over the eerie, almost inhuman sounds of agony. The other two men followed close behind him.

It only took a moment to identify the room from which the screams were coming: a large sitting room which appeared to be part of the master suite. Sirius gestured at the sides of the closed door, and Remus took a position to one side of it. Snape, taking his cue from Lupin, took the other side. "*Reducto!*" cried Sirius, and the door obligingly blew inwards, the solid panel splitting right down the middle. Remus leaped through and to the side again so as not to block the door. Snape followed, although not with the inhuman grace or speed of the werewolf, and Sirius was right behind him.

In the center of the room, a slim blonde woman writhed on the floor. She was naked, beaten, bruised and bloody, and her throat was emitting the screeches of agony they heard. Another woman wearing a Death Eater's robe stood over her; one hand held a wand directing a reddish glow as it danced over the naked woman's body, tormenting the various nerve centers, and the other hand clumsily clutched a squirming baby, whose cries were adding to the cacophony in the room. Two dark-haired men, obviously related, lounged in comfortable chairs, their robes open in the front, clearly displaying that they had recently been "enjoying" their victim's body. The last person in the room was a stocky man, Petrified and propped up against the wall where he could not help but see what was being done to the woman, wanting to help her, being completely unable to, and knowing what torment waited for him.

Remus, in the lead, swarmed over the first of the dark men, taking the combat to him physically, which seemed to catch the wizard totally by surprise. Snape and Sirius both tried to get a clear shot at the woman, while trying not to hit the baby.

Bellatrix Lestrange snapped her wand's tip away from her victim as she looked up at the three men interrupting her fun. The family resemblance between her and Sirius was unmistakable, both of

them possessing the black hair, grey eyes and aristocratic features that were the mark of the Blacks. "Sirius! I really can't say it's a pleasure to see you again," she snapped. "Drop your wand or the baby dies!" Hostage taking was a fine old tradition, and Aurors usually backed down when faced with it.

Sirius, however, was having none of it. "*Accio baby!*" he responded. The child flew out of Bellatrix's grasp and Sirius caught him as neatly as he had caught the Quaffle on the Quidditch field at Hogwarts, but it meant his wand was out of position to respond to his cousin's Slashing Curse. Snape darted forward and knocked him out of the way, both of them and the baby going down in a tangle of limbs while the purple beam of the spell shot over them with an evil buzz, impacting on the wall behind them.

Snape rolled free, barely in time to put a Shielding Charm up as Bellatrix, enraged, struck again and again with the Slashing Curse. She soon realized that she wasn't going to get through his shield with normal spells, and screeched out, "*Crucio!*" Snape went down screaming as the Unforgivable curse penetrated his shield.

Sirius, however, had left the shrieking child on the floor, was just behind Snape, and now had a clear shot and his own wand ready to deal with his murderous cousin. "*Expelliarmus! Stupefy! Incarcerous!*" he rattled off in rapid order, and in mere moments, Bellatrix was unconscious and bound on the floor next to her former victim. Sirius then turned to where Remus was dealing with both Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrage, his werewolf's strength and agility enabling him to fight both opponents at once, but unable to attain a decisive enough advantage over either of them to take them out of the fight. A well placed "*Stupefy!*" from Sirius took one of the Lestranges out of the fight, and a blow to the jaw downed the other. Remus stood panting and rubbing his knuckles, with the Lestranges at his feet.

"See to Frank and Alice!" said Sirius, and he turned his own attention to Snape, who was somewhat the worse for wear, although the spell had ceased when Bellatrix had lost her wand.

"You had to ... wait ... until *after* she threw the *crucio*, didn't you?" gasped the spy.

"You were doing fine up until then, and I couldn't cast through your shield" said Sirius. "Besides, you knocked me arse over teakettle first!"

Snape just gestured mutely at the wall, where the Slashing Curse had cut through the wall entirely and spewed chunks of plaster out into the hall.

"Well, there is that," Sirius murmured. "If you'd care to call a truce, I think I have a potion that will help with the *crucio* aftereffects here," he said, fumbling at the belt of his uniform tunic for one of the tiny bottles he kept in pouches there. It was probably as close as he could come to thanking his erstwhile enemy.

"Mine's better than that Ministry swill," said Snape, reaching for the flap of a small pouch attached to his own belt. "Here. I'll take yours. You give that to her, she needs it more." They exchanged potions vials, and Sirius helped Remus get the potion down the female victim's throat.

It was a difficult task, since she was still spasming in the aftermath of prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus Curse. Finally, though, they got it into her with minimal spillage. By that time, Snape had released her husband from his Petrification, and he was able to help with her, although not without taking the time to kick Rabastan LeStrange, who was beginning to stir, soundly in the head and knock him out again.

The sounds of mayhem were still coming from from the floor below, but they continued only a little bit longer, rising in a crescendo and then ceasing suddenly.

"Sounds like Albus and Aberforth have everything under control down there," Remus commented dryly.

Albus and Aberforth Dumbledore had been fighting, alone and as a team, for a combined total of over two hundred fifty years. The eight Death Eaters who had been drinking the contents of the Longbottoms' liquor cabinet and looting the family silver didn't come anywhere close to that; most of them were still in their twenties. Back to back, the Dumbledores spun as a unit with a nimbleness that belied their years, their robes blending into a confusing mixture of dark purple and turquoise with silver shooting stars. Some of the stars proceeded to shoot off Albus's robe entirely, distracting and blinding his opponents, which was the entire reason he wore such ornaments in the first place. It looked almost like some strange dance the two elderly men did, their braided beards and hair flying and spells shooting out madly as they spun. It didn't matter that one was the man who had destroyed Grindelwald and the other raised goats and brewed butterbeer for a living, together they were untouchable, as the Death Eaters found out to their cost.

By the time Moody's squad charged out of the Floo, only one Death Eater remained, and he ran almost directly into Moody's chest as he fled in panic from the aged dervishes. Moody stunned him neatly. "You two done striking terror in the hearts of younger men everywhere?" Moody asked the brothers.

Albus responded with a happy grin and a twinkle of his eyes. "Indeed. I had forgotten how invigorating a good skirmish can be. I don't know when I have been this entertained." He was barely breathing hard.

"The boys are upstairs?"

"I believe so, yes."

"Albus!" A shout rang from upstairs.

The three older men and the rest of the Order squad looked up, to see Sirius leaning over the bannister so he could see down the stairwell.

"You'd better get a trauma team over here from the Ministry, or better yet, St. Mungo's. Alice is going to need it," he said grimly.

"Is Frank all right?" Moody called up.

"They didn't touch him. But they made him watch, and that may have been worse. I think Bellatrix even did something to the baby, I'm not sure. Just get the Healers here, will you?"

Soon the Manor was swarming with Aurors and Healers. The latter insisted on treating Snape and Remus for their combat related injuries, despite both men's insistence that it was completely unnecessary.

Each victim was taken into a separate room upstairs to be treated. Sirius looked in on the team dealing with Frank, who had now begun to shake in the onset of a breakdown and was in desperate need of a Calming Potion, and glanced into an adjoining room where a young Auror, not even a Healer trainee, was supposedly keeping an eye on young Neville until a qualified pediatric Healer could be brought in to see to him. The baby was sitting in the middle of the bed, and Lockhart had his wand raised in mid-spell.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Sirius snapped, knocking Auror First Class Gilderoy Lockhart, he of the tailored uniform and the perfect arrest record, away from Neville and sending his wand flying. "What in Merlin's name do you think you're doing, raising your wand to a baby?"

"I, I was just going to protect the young man by removing the memories of his pain. He doesn't need to remember what he's seen here today."

"He's fifteen months old! He isn't going to remember anyway! *Do you have any idea what can happen if you Obliviate a baby?!*"

"Er ... no."

"*No, what?*"

"No, sir?"

"*THEN WHAT THE FUCK WERE YOU DOING IT FOR?!*" roared Sirius. Lockhart cringed away from him. "That's *twice* today you've screwed up an investigation, Lockhart! I'm putting you on report, and as soon as we get back to the Ministry, I'm requesting an investigation into your 'perfect arrest record', Auror!" He scooped up Lockhart's wand with one hand and the baby with the other. With the disgraced Auror preceding him, he left the room in search of someone qualified to look after young Neville. He delivered the child into the hands of a startled Healer, marched Lockhart down the stairs, and explained to the other Auror's squad leader exactly what he had seen. He left Lockhart receiving the dressing-down of a lifetime from his Commander.

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Sunday, November 1, Evening – Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix

After making preliminary reports to the on-duty Aurors who were nominally in charge at Longbottom Manor, since both Sirius and Moody had been off duty at the time of the rescue, and

promising to make much more in depth statements later, the various members of the rescue teams returned to the shepherd's croft. Here there was much more telling and retelling of the evening's events. Eventually the group that had remained at the croft got around to telling the rescue team what they had found.

"This is the list of names that Bellatrix Lestrange found at the Stronghold," Minerva said, pointing to a list posted up on the map board. "We placed Mr. Malfoy under a Memory Enhancement charm briefly so that he could remember it clearly, despite the fact that he'd only had a fast look at it when it was in her hand." The list showed a series of surnames: POTTER, LONGBOTTOM, PATIL, PATIL, GOODENOUGH, ENTWHISTLE, MALFOY.

"Bellatrix Lestrange told Mr. Malfoy that this list was a list of people You Know Who wanted killed, and that she was going to work her way down it. She apparently did not know that Malfoy saw his own name on the list and was thereby warned. He recognized the Potter and Longbottom names as being of interest to us, and therefore brought the information to Severus in order to prove his bona fides – and not incidentally, to get us to catch Bellatrix and remove the threat to him before she got very far down the list."

"Where did the list come from?" Sturgis Podmore asked. "Some of those names I know, but ... two Patils? Entwhistle?"

"There is only one place this list could have come from," said McGonnagal. "It's a source I know well." She waved her wand in a complicated pattern, and a translucent image, of a large book, appeared on the table before her. She flicked her wand and the book opened, its pages turning. "This is an image of the book in which the names of prospective students are written down automatically when they are born. I consult it every year when I send out the Hogwarts school letters, and sometimes I like to look ahead to see who will be attending in the future." She projected an enlarged view of a page of the book so that all could see it. "This is a list of children born the summer before last, from July 31 and listed in reverse order through June. Harry Potter was born on July 31, Neville Longbottom a day earlier on July 30. Twin girls were born to the Patil family on July 14. Gary Goodenough was born on June 29 – he probably won't come to Hogwarts although he's qualified, as his family has educated its children at Durmstrang since the family name was originally spelled 'Godunov'. Kevin Entwhistle is a Muggleborn, born on June 9, and Draco Malfoy was born on June 5. This is a list, not of adults, but of children. We have to assume He Who Must Not Be Named intended to kill them all, to be sure he got every one born even passably close to 'as the seventh month dies'. And we likewise have to assume that someone inside Hogwarts provided him with these names. Even the Ministry doesn't have access to this particular list."

"So, we have an agent in the school to worry about. James and Lily are dead, probably killed by Voldemort last night," said Dumbledore with a heavy sigh. "Frank and Alice Longbottom are in St. Mungo's, where they will be undergoing treatment for some time. And Harry Potter and Peter Pettigrew are both missing."

"Peter was the Secret Keeper for James and Lily," said Remus. "Is it possible that he took Harry somewhere to keep him safe?"

"It's possible. It's also possible that he betrayed the secret, since I can think of no other way Voldemort could have found the Potters. Possibly he was tortured into it. That would account for the severed finger Sirius reported. If so, and if he was freed after Voldemort fell, he might have taken Harry with him wherever he went, or if his betrayal was true, he might simply have abandoned Harry wherever the battle took place."

Sirius choked out a sob at the thought of Harry, lost and alone in an unknown place. He would be hungry and thirsty by now, calling for his parents, who would never come.

Remus spoke thoughtfully. "I think not, Headmaster. I believe Harry is being well cared for, and not by Peter."

"Would you care to explain your reasoning?" asked the aged Headmaster, smiling because he was well familiar with the younger wizard's deductive processes. It was really too bad that the young man was prohibited by his condition from joining the Aurors. He would have made a fine investigator.

"It's because of the bodies of James and Lily. They were prepared for burial with great care, but not by Wizard, or by Muggles. I doubt they were wearing their formal robes when they were killed, so they were laid out and dressed afterward. The shrouding is different from the way we prepare our dead, and Muggles would have delivered the bodies to the Muggle police for investigation. Someone obviously cared deeply for James and Lily, and I can't believe that anyone that took that care for their bodies would leave their living son in distress. The finger was treated with the same care as the bodies. If it is Peter's finger, which should be determined by the Aurors in a day or two, it's doubtful he would have prepared it like the bodies and sent it along to the Aurors to use as evidence. So whoever prepared the bodies came along *after* Peter had left the scene, and his finger, behind. It's possible Peter took Harry away from the scene, but then wouldn't the *Fidelius* have collapsed? I think that he left Harry there, possibly even being unaware Harry was still alive, and fled, for whatever reason. And that whoever took care of the bodies is also taking care of Harry. And since they're still under the *Fidelius* –"

"We're not going to be finding them unless they want to be found," finished Sirius, reassured by Remus's logic. "All of which begs the question, who's taking care of Harry?"

"I think the answer to that will be apparent when the investigators finish looking at the burial shrouds and the herbs. Find out whose customs those match, and you'll know something about who did the preparation. For that we'll have to wait until either you or Moody can get the report from the Investigative Division."

"Which might take forever, knowing those morons."

"Very well," said Dumbledore. "It is clear that we must dedicate our efforts now to several efforts – on the one hand, we must make every effort to capture as many of the Death Eaters as we can, using Mr. Malfoy's information, before they can escape to the Continent or beyond, or worse, regroup to form a renewed threat under someone else's leadership. Severus, you will have to work with the Aurors and take them to the Stronghold to see if there is any information that can be

gained there. Mr. Malfoy will provide whatever information he has, as well. Our alliance with him is dependent on his cooperation."

Snape and Malfoy both nodded in acknowledgement.

"On the other hand, we need to spread the correct version of what happened before the Ministry can claim credit for it and disseminate incorrect information. The Aurors and Healers who were at the Longbottom house tonight will start spreading the rumours, I'm sure, but we'll want appropriate 'leaks' to our contacts at the Prophet, the Quibbler, and the WWN as soon as possible. This is one instance where we want gossip, so tell the correct version to all your friends and neighbors as soon as may be. No details, mind you, and pretend you heard it from someone else, but spread it."

Everyone seemed happy with this; it was a simple enough task, and one they could fulfil with a certain amount of relish.

"On the third hand, we must also search diligently for Harry Potter, who, it appears, has fulfilled the Prophecy that was spoken before he was born. 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord' has done so, providentially many years before it was looked for. Somehow, an infant boy has struck a blow to protect us all. Now it is up to us to find him and keep him safe."

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But as the days and then the weeks went by, all of the Order's and the Aurors' attempts to find Peter Pettigrew and Harry Potter were fruitless. Since no one could remember where James and Lily had lived, it was evident that the *Fidelius* was still in effect, and therefore Harry still lived there. But that was all they knew. Rewards were posted for information leading to the location of Peter and Harry. The Wizards of Britain looked eagerly for the child reported to have been the Dark Lord's downfall, but no trace was found, and the papers started to refer to the Boy Who Lived, as they had dubbed him in the euphoric first days of November, as the Boy Who Vanished.

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Harry Potter eventually stopped crying for his mother, and seemed to adapt well enough to his new life, laughing and giggling and playing with the younger house elves. If he occasionally woke from a nightmare of green lights and screaming, Nanny was there to comfort him. Gradually the nightmares became less frequent. With loving care and with the resilience of the very young, Harry was healing.

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Peter Pettigrew didn't stay in New York long, nor did he contact the Wizarding community there. Driven by guilt and remorse and haunted by dreams in which he fled from the vengeful ghosts of his dead friends, he kept moving. He wasn't sure what he would do when his money and traveller's cheques ran out, but he was resourceful. He'd think of something.

To the Wizarding community at large, the long night of Voldemort's reign was replaced by a bright new morning of peace and hope.

And the *Fidelius* held.

Fidelius

As Time Goes By

Author's note: Since I'm still flying without a net here, I missed the fact that Albus and Aberforth Dumbledore should not have been wearing "robes" during the combat at Longbottom Manor. They should have been wearing "duelling robes" or "tunics", which they had previously transfigured their regular robes into. I will have to put the Dumbledore robes on my list of things to fix later, along with Remus's incredible disappearing and reappearing sofa (which appears again in this chapter).

Chapter Dedication to Bob: This long enough for ya?

FIDELIUS

Chapter Five

As Time Goes By

Harry and the House Elves

As the late autumn passed and winter set in, the house elves began to realize that it was likely to be a long time before someone came looking for Young Master Harry. This became apparent when two of Master James's friends came up to the Big House to look around. 'Mister Sirius Black Sir' and 'Mister Remus Lupin Sir' could get onto the grounds, but not into the house itself because of the wards, and spent some time looking through the ground floor windows and inspecting the outbuildings such as the carriage house and the stables, both of which had been out of use for decades. Ferny had tried to attract their attention, but the two Wizards had looked right past him without even seeing him. Then they walked down the road towards the town of Godric's Hollow, passing right by the Dower Estate without noticing that, either, or Nanny, who was jumping up and down on the front steps, frantically waving at them and calling to them.

A few days after that, Brandy went into town to visit the greengrocer and the butcher, since Young Master Harry Potter and the house elves needed to eat, and the kitchen gardens at the Dower Estate wouldn't be producing enough to support them until the following year. The greengrocer was, in fact, a Wizard, and he was used to the Potters' house elves showing up from time to time, since he and his ancestors had been supplying the Big House for several generations. This was the first time Brandy had been there since the *Fidelius* was cast, though, and her reception was very different. For one thing, she didn't get a reception at all. The normally quite friendly grocer

looked right through her and ignored her presence completely. It took her several minutes to discover that he wasn't being rude, but that he couldn't see her at all, even when she turned off her 'Muggles Can't See Me' power and stood on the counter in front of him. Sadly, because she did rather like talking to Mr. Greengrocer, Brandy took a basket and filled it with everything she needed, tried to figure out how much money she owed for it all – with some difficulty as counting things was not her best skill – and stuffed the appropriate amount of Muggle money, with some extra in case she'd miscounted, into the till. Then she went back to the Dower Estate to report her experience.

"I think we is on our own, Ferny," she said tearfully. "No one in town is seeing me, even when I am turning off my 'Can't See Me'. I don't think we is going to be getting any help with Young Master Harry Potter."

"Then we is doing the best we can," said Ferny. "Nanny is good at taking care of Wizard babies. She will teach him to read and write and be ready to go to school. We is rebuilding the house to get rid of the broken spots. In the spring, we is going to make a big garden – the best garden we can – to grow food. We is still getting money out of the Goblin pot, and Goblins was paying Muggles to send water and gas and 'lectricity so maybe Goblins is still paying. We worries about that if it stops. Mistress Lily liked using Muggle gas and 'lectricity but if it stops we does without it and goes back to the old ways. If we needs something from the village we can go and take it and put the money where the humans can find it. We gets clothes and books and toys for Young Master Harry Potter that way. And when Young Master Harry Potter is all grown up and is a Wizard, we gives him the wizard spell sticks and the rings we found – both Family Magic rings and even the Nasty Dark one – and he can make us all visible again. Yes. That is what we is doing."

And that was what they did. In cleaning up the house and preparing Mistress Lily and Master James's bodies for burial, they had found three wands – Lily's, James's, and a strange dark wood one that had rolled under the crib – and three rings – James's signet ring, the signet ring that had been left on the Messy Bad Man's finger in the kitchen, and a Nasty Dark ring with a skull and snake design that had been found in the nursery near the scorched spot on the floor. The two signet rings were Family Magic. Young Master Harry Potter would be needing his Family Magic ring in order to take control of all the Potter properties and magics when he was an adult, not to mention taking on any new house elves. The other Family Magic ring would have to be returned to the person who had lost it, or perhaps to his Heir, in order for that person to access his own family property and magic. And the silver skull and snake ring held so much Dark magic in it that it had burned Ferny before he dropped it, and he had then used Muggle pliers to pick it up safely and put it in a jewelry box. They had no doubt that the Nasty Dark ring was somehow involved with for their current predicament, but they had great faith that Young Master Harry Potter would eventually grow up to free them from it.

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Once the damage to the house was repaired, things settled down for the long winter. Harry stayed in the elf quarters throughout the winter, where it was small and cozy and warm and he fit in. Nanny took care of him and told him stories and sang elf songs to him, and by the end of the

winter he was learning how to talk and how to pick up things and put them away, just like a proper little elf would. Nanny beamed with pride. Even though she knew he wasn't an elfling, still, it wouldn't hurt for him to know how to pick up his things a little.

The other adult elves repaired the damage to the upper level of the house, pulling the roofbeam back into place, repairing the roof itself, and patching the ceiling and walls. The elves never did figure out how to get the electricity working in the upstairs again, even though they carefully replaced the wires in the walls just like Mister Remus Lupin and Mister Peter Pettigrew had done when it was first installed, so the bedrooms remained dark. The planks of the floor in Young Master Harry's room had to be replaced where they had been scorched, and the elves worked very hard at making the new planks look just like the old ones had before the Bad Wizard had exploded there. Likewise, all the plaster in Young Master Harry's room was taken down and replaced and then painted just like it had been, and the furniture rebuilt and all the toys repaired. This all took time and a lot of hard work, but if there was one thing the elves understood, it was hard work.

Whatever arrangement Master James had with the goblins was still in effect, because money, both Muggle notes and Galleons, kept appearing in the cauldron which was set aside for that purpose in the study. The Muggle water and electricity and gas service continued too.

In the village of Godric's Hollow, some of the shopowners had noticed some odd things. Items from the shelves would disappear at irregular intervals, and small wads of bills would appear in the tills without there being a matching receipt. This happened primarily at the stores that provided foodstuffs of various sorts, and the only one who had any idea of what was really happening was the greengrocer, one Martin Wiggins, who had one day found two gold galleons in with the pound notes. Fortunately he'd been manning the register himself that day, and not the Muggle girl who was the regular cashier. The presence of the galleons told him that there were elves in the vicinity.

Like many wizards who did not belong to the great families, Wiggins hadn't grown up with house elves and wasn't overly familiar with their ways, but he knew that some of them were trusted with running errands for their families. He'd even seen a few in his shop over the years, although not recently. He knew the Potter family had an estate house in the area, but the old couple had passed on years before and their son and his wife hadn't settled at the estate, as far as he knew. It was a pity, because supplying the house had been one of his major accounts in the old days, back when there was entertaining and wizards passed through the village on a regular basis. Now, though, it looked like someone was back. The galleons in the till told him that. Possibly some wizard had opened up a home in the area. Possibly there were still some elves at the Potter estate, taking care of it. He couldn't remember exactly where it was at the moment, which was about what he expected; that's how the magical gentry kept their privacy. He hadn't seen any elves or unknown wizards in the area, but that didn't mean they weren't around. Presumably they wanted to keep knowledge of their presence to a minimum, and given the things that were going on recently, he couldn't blame them. With You Know Who falling, and Death Eaters showing up in odd places, and babies disappearing – well, who knew what the world was coming to? At least he was fairly sure that his unknown customers weren't Death Eaters – they would have just taken what they wanted, he thought, shuddering at the idea. Whoever this was, they paid properly for what they

took, and even overpaid, if his estimates of what was missing from the stock was accurate. If they wanted privacy, he could assure them of that, at least. He showed the galleons to the cashier and told her that if she found anything like them in the till in the future, she was to bring them directly to him. Likewise, unaccounted sums of money were to be given to him to deal with. A very small compulsion charm, of the sort that was learned by almost everyone who dealt with Muggles on a daily basis, ensured that she would do so, and that she would promptly forget it. Then he went to some of the other vendors in the village, especially the ones who had mentioned stock outages or mysterious sums of money, and did the same – showing them the coins so they would know what to look for, he gave them the idea to come to him if they ever found anything a galleon, sickle or knut in their till, and he would simply exchange bank notes for the wizarding money and blur the memories, and no one would ever be the wiser.

It never occurred to Wiggins that possibly the arrival of the secretive new wizarding family in the area might be connected to the nationwide hunt for Harry Potter, the missing heir to the Potter estate. Not even though he *knew* the Potters had been local. Whenever he might wonder about who owned the elves that were shopping at his store, he would find himself distracted and start thinking about other matters.

The *Fidelius* held.

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In the life of a young boy, things change rapidly, and yet very little of it is worthy of note to anyone except him and his family. By the time the deep snows of winter receded, Harry was a toddler, and Nanny and Ferny had had to make two trips to the village to acquire clothes and toys for the growing boy. He spent the spring playing outdoors when the weather was fine and indoors when it was raining, and pretty much treated the three elflings as his siblings. By this time, Ferny had discovered that whatever magic it was that made them invisible affected them no matter where they were, even in Diagon Alley. Even to other elves. Still without direction, the Potter elves had to do what they thought best. There would be the need for food, and although there was money now, Ferny still doubted whether it would continue forever. The grounds of the Dower Estate were quite large, and the main estate larger, so Ferny drew up plans for an elaborate set of kitchen gardens to produce all the food they'd need. On a trip to the village bookstore to pick up picture books for Young Master Harry, Nanny had spotted a whole shelf full of books about gardening, and brought one back for Ferny. Ferny didn't read very well, so Nanny had to read it to him, but fortunately Young Master Harry didn't mind listening to chapters about crop rotation and wide bed planting, and he liked looking at the pretty pictures of flowers and bugs. Ferny got so excited he practically swooned, and soon all the elves were busy tearing down the old unused stable so they could use the boards and timbers to make raised beds and build a greenhouse. The tools Master James had bought were once again put to good use, and Young Master Harry got to bang things with his hammer, so everyone was happy. The elves visited the local nurseries for Muggle plants and bought seed for wizarding plants, and Young Master Harry had lots of fun poking holes in the dirt, and within days, encouraged by house elf magic, there were green seedlings popping up all over the place.

Harry's second birthday came, and was celebrated with a proper party. Nanny decided that Young

Master Harry was big enough now to move back into the Dower House, and so all of his toys and clothes and things were put in the nursery and Harry's crib was converted into a toddler bed. But that night Harry cried and couldn't be comforted, and the third time Nanny went in to try to convince him to sleep, she found him curled up under the bed with his blanket and his bear. The fourth time, he was in the closet. Eventually she realized that Harry had become so used to sleeping in the small elf house with everyone so close that the big empty room scared him. So she took him back to the elf house, and he was happy again.

The seasons passed, and winter came again, and spring and summer, and soon Harry was three, and difficulties caused by his upbringing began to become apparent.

Shortly after Harry's third birthday, he realised that he didn't look like the house elves, and he didn't dress like the house elves. The elves were properly outfitted in clean, neat tea towels and pillowcases with the Potter family crest on them. Harry wore robes for indoor play, or jeans, jumpers and trainers for outdoors. The house elves were in the habit of getting up before dawn and having an organizational meeting, just to make sure every elf knew what they were supposed to be doing that day, before Harry got up. Apparently Harry realised this at some point, and one morning the elves found their numbers were increased by one. Harry had wrapped himself in a bath towel, which was threatening to fall off at any moment since he had not figured out how to belt it on, and sat barefoot and cross-legged on the floor with the elves. He had somehow managed to get into the green food colouring and had painted streaks of it all over his face and arms.

"Aaaah!" shrieked Nanny. "Master Harry, what is you doing?!"

"Hawwy is a house elf," the boy replied with a huge grin. "Nanny and Ferny and Brandy is house elfs. Hawwy is a house elf too."

"No, Master Harry can't be a house elf! Master Harry is a powerful Wizard!" Nanny said, trying to make him see reason. The folly of trying to making a three year old see reason escaped her at the time.

"Hawwy wanna be a house elf!" the boy said stubbornly.

"Master Harry is a Big Person. He is a Wizard! House elfs is Little People. We takes care of Wizards. Master Harry is not a house elf!"

"Is!" said Harry.

"Isn't!" Nanny said, crossing her arms.

"Is!" Harry replied, crossing his arms just like her.

"Isn't!" yelled Nanny, magicking the green colouring off.

"IS!" howled Harry.

"ISN'T!" yelled Nanny, making a grab for the towel. Then she realised he wasn't wearing anything under it, and hurriedly gave it back.

"Is," said Harry, calmly taking her capitulation in the issue of the towel to mean the whole matter was settled.

Nanny whimpered and pulled her ears in frustration. Harry immediately started tugging on his own ears. "Master Harry, what is you doing?!"

"Make eaws gwow!" said Harry.

"Master Harry can't make his ears grow that way!" said Brandy, pulling the boy's hands away from his ears.

"No?" he asked forlornly.

"No," said Brandy and Nanny in chorus.

Harry burst into tears.

This in turn caused the other elves, who were all quite agitated by what they had seen, to run about pounding their heads on things. Harry's response, as could have been predicted at that point, was to try to bang his own head on the floor. Brandy screamed and slid her own hands in between his forehead and the ground to act as a sort of padding, while Ferny grabbed Master Harry's head and tried to stop him from pounding himself.

"STOP!" yelled Nanny at the top of her lungs. Surprisingly, it worked, and eight pairs of elf eyes and one pair of human eyes stared at her. "Master Harry only *thinks* he is a house elf. Master Harry is a Big Person and has to *learn* to be a Big Person."

"House elf," sniffled Harry. Nanny rolled her eyes skyward.

In the long run, Harry outstubborned Nanny, refusing to wear anything that a house elf did not, and refusing to practice talking like the voices on the Wizard Wireless Network that Nanny played for him. He would not go into his room and play with his toys. Instead he followed Brandy or Ferny around and tried to do the work the elves were doing.

Nanny eventually figured out how to cope with it. If Master Harry insisted on dressing as the elves dressed, then the elves would wear clothes. This was perhaps the hardest part of Nanny's program to sell the other elves on, because of the deeply rooted stigma of being given clothes. It was woven into the very magic that gave the house elves life. But Nanny figured out that if the elf put on a tea towel or pillowcase, and then transfigured that so that it only *looked* like clothes, then it didn't count. Especially when the elf was doing it for him or herself.

So every morning, Nanny would transfigure her pillowcase into whatever outfit she wanted Master Harry to Wear, and so did all the other elves, and then he would consent to get dressed. Nanny supposed it was rather odd to see an estate full of elves all wearing matching jeans, jumpers, and

trainers, but it worked.

The next issue was the matter of Harry's speech. Nanny always called him "Young Master Harry" and talked to him as was proper. She knew the difference between the way Big People talked and the way house elves talked, so she had been teaching Harry how to speak, having him repeat phrases heard from the Wizarding Wireless Network. She read books to him in proper Big People talk also. And when Harry was repeating what she taught him, he was flawless. But when he spoke on his own, chattering with the elflings and talking to Ferny about what was being planted, or asking Brandy what was for dinner, he used house elf speech. Nanny didn't know what to do about that. When she encouraged him to speak properly, he did, but he fell right back into talking like a house elf immediately. There was only one possible solution.

She started speaking like the Big People. And she encouraged all the other elves to start speaking like Big People. This was quite a change for most of them, and soon she was teaching classes of elves how to speak, as they all sat around the Wireless. The change was slow, but as the elves picked up the Big People's speech, so did Harry, and eventually everyone was speaking proper English.

Finally, there was the matter of Harry working around the house and estate. For the elves, it was just horrifying that a Wizard would want to do elves' work. But Harry adamantly refused to play with his toys if he was the only one playing. Everybody else was having fun doing things around the house, and he wanted to have fun too! When Nanny tried to teach him his letters and numbers, he refused, because he didn't want to do it alone. He even refused to look at his picture books any more. Reluctantly, Nanny gave in. Brandy and Ferny treated Harry like they would one of the elflings who was starting out to learn home care, even though Harry was already easily as tall as an adult elf. Most wizards thought elves used magic constantly, but in reality they preferred doing things by hand. Magic was used mainly to get from place to place, as when they popped into a room when called, or to put together a meal from previously prepared dishes. Brandy lovingly mixed and kneaded and baked the bread every day, and only used magic to slice it and make Harry's sandwiches from it. So there were a number of things Harry could help with, and as long as the tasks he was given were appropriate to his age, everything went just fine. The day Harry made his first jam sandwich all by himself, Brandy beamed proudly at him, and when he offered her half of it, she burst into tears of joy and had to go into the still room to calm herself.

All the other problems went similarly. House elves normally didn't use chairs, being more comfortable sitting on the ground or squatting. But if she wanted Harry to use a chair, so did she. House elves ate food like stews from one communal bowl, scooped out on pieces of bread. But if Nanny wanted to teach Harry to sit at a table and use a knife and fork and spoon, so did the elves. House elves rarely learned to read, but if Nanny wanted Harry to learn his letters and numbers, she had to teach letters and numbers to the elflings, too. If she wanted him to look at picture books, she made sure there were at least three elflings to look at the books with him. Nanny knew the sorts of games that Big People children played, and taught them to Harry and the elflings and made sure that the elflings, at least, knew that playing with Master Harry was part of their jobs.

Harry was almost five when the insoluble problem came up: magic. He was out playing tag with the elflings, whose magic had begun to come in. First one, then the others had begun to pop from

here to there, and it was natural for them to use it in their games. At first it was fun for Harry to chase after his friends and watch them pop away when he almost caught them, and he rapidly learned to tell where they'd pop back in to try to catch him, but eventually it became frustrating. An elfling popped out of his grasp, and Harry wanted more than anything to catch him, and suddenly Harry popped, too!

The world swirled around him for an instant, and he felt like he was falling through a very cold, dark place. There was no light, no sound, nothing to touch, not even himself. Then he fell out of it into light, warmth, into the soft grass and even the sound of Nanny screaming as he passed out was welcome.

The second time Harry popped was also accidental. He tripped and was falling down the stairs, and suddenly popped to the bottom, where he landed on his bum and didn't hurt himself. This time he didn't pass out. After that, he tried to do it on purpose a few times. He learned that he could do it if he really, really wanted to, but it took a lot of energy. One day he tried to do it twice in a row and got stuck in the cold dark between place, and Nanny grabbed him and rescued him and yelled at him and made him promise never to do it twice in a row again. He thought she was mean to yell at him, and it was years later, when he began to understand what he was doing, that he realised how badly he'd frightened her.

Other kinds of magic came to him the same way. If he absolutely needed to do something, he could, but it always took a tremendous amount of energy out of him, and it was almost always better to do things the regular way instead.

Nanny realised that Harry was reaching the age where he would need to learn how to use Wizard magic, if only to stop him from doing house elf magic. She had watched him like a hawk ever since he got stuck in elf space; he could very easily have died if she hadn't been watching him go and realized that he hadn't come out where he should have. Elf space was no place for humans, and elf magic would wear a human out, but there was no one to teach Harry how to use wizard magic. Nanny knew that when Master Harry was old enough, he would go away to Hogwarts and learn proper magic, but that wasn't going to be for a long time. She would just have to watch Master Harry very carefully until then.

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Sirius:

With James gone and Peter missing, Sirius and Remus pulled together as the two remaining Marauders, their temporary estrangement forgotten. Once the shock started wearing off and the initial excitement about the raid on the Longbottoms wore off, Sirius mourned James as he had not mourned his own brother. He held himself together long enough to arrange for the funeral, even remembering to notify Petunia and Vernon Dursley, Lily's only living kin (the Dursleys chose not to attend, but that was their business and nobody really missed them).

Two weeks after James and Lily's deaths was the full moon, and Sirius and Remus went out to Remus's cottage and ran free through the countryside and howled at the moon to express their

anguish and protest their loss. They both felt much better after that, although they would forever mourn their missing friends.

In order to partially avoid his grief, Sirius flung himself into his work for the Order and the Aurors, which were really the same thing at this point. He submitted reports of the Longbottom raid, testifying at the trials of those apprehended. He took a particular malicious glee in seeing his cousin Bellatrix Lestrange sentenced to life in Azkaban for her torture of Alice Longbottom. The use of the Cruciatus Curse on Alice and on Snape was enough for that; only the fact that no one, not even Snape, could testify to actually seeing her perform a Killing Curse on anyone saved her from the Dementors' Kiss. Both of the Lestrange males were sentenced to twenty-five years apiece for the rape of Alice Longbottom; the sentences were extended to life terms for various other atrocities carried out during their careers as Death Eaters. He also participated in a number of raids on the homes of Death Eaters revealed by the Snape and Malfoy information.

During Sirius' off-duty hours, he and Remus engaged in their personal investigation to find either Harry or Peter Pettigrew. Even if Harry was safe with someone under the *Fidelius*, if Remus was correct, Peter was out of its protection, and if someone found him, he could reveal the secret again.

Sirius knew where Peter's mother lived, and when he went to visit her he charmed her as he always had, but to no avail. She had no idea where her son was now. She did know, however, that he had planned to spend Halloween in Ireland with his sister, and provided Sirius with the appropriate information. Remus had to make the trip to Ireland, since Sirius couldn't take a day away from the Aurors, and he reported back that Peter had been there but left without warning some time early in the evening – and woe betide Peter if he showed up at Martha's again without a suitable excuse for his disappearance. Pairing that with information Snape had provided, that Voldemort had sworn in a new Death Eater that same night (the information being obtained from a house elf trained as a tailor, who could not describe Peter's face but gave his robe measurements exactly), they now feared the worst. Peter had obviously become a Death Eater, whether willingly or by coercion, and had broken the Secret. The bodies of both Potters showed spell residue typical of an *Avada Kedavra*, but also of another, unknown spell cast shortly thereafter. Beyond that, though, everything became muddled and unclear. There seemed to be no indication that Peter had handed Harry over to any other Death Eaters at this point, though. Surely someone would have used him as a bargaining chip if they had him. Therefore it was still necessary to track down Peter.

However, Peter had designed his security net well, and it took quite a long time staking out the Hogsmeade Owl Post Centre, together with the sending of an envelope with a tracer on it, to pick up the contact there. It took even longer to get the man to divulge the next step in the process; at one point, Sirius was even considering humbling himself to ask Snape for a favour in breaking the fellow, since the former spy had a way of getting information out of people that Sirius couldn't duplicate. But eventually they tracked the mail to the Muggle messenger firm, and here Remus took over. They already knew the name of Peter's mythical firm, so Remus contacted the messenger company, claiming to be from that firm, and complaining that they were missing three days' deliveries. He was then shown the messenger slips confirming that such deliveries had been made and signed for, and thus obtained the address to which they had been delivered.

They obtained the flat number from the concierge, who seemed to be of the impression that Peter lived there and was picking up his mail daily. They burgled the apartment cautiously just in case Peter really was still there; they knew exactly the sort of booby traps Peter would set up and didn't particularly wish to fall afoul of any of them. But their caution proved unnecessary. All the mail Peter had received since Halloween was piled up just inside the door, and the signs of a hasty departure were obvious: empty drawers spilled out, the closet standing open, toiletries gone, a fine layer of dust all over everything. There was no sign that the place had been ransacked. Peter's desk had not been touched, although it only contained the normal Muggle papers that one would expect to find. The only sign that a wizard had ever lived here was one plain robe left hanging in the closet, and an empty pain potion vial left in the rubbish bin.

The trail had ended. Sirius remembered that Peter had made a comment about hiding in Australia, but there was no way to tell if he had actually gone there, or if that was in itself a misdirection and that was really the last place they should look for him.

Faced with failure, Sirius fell apart for a week and locked himself in his flat until Remus came to drag him out of it. While they were cleaning up the wreck that he had made out of his flat in that time, he discovered the envelope of papers Peter had sent him for Remus, and decided to give it to now since Christmas was fast approaching. Remus whacked him about the head and ears with it for the very notion of waiting until Christmas, and then the two of them went out and got drunk, winding up, unaccountably, at Remus's flat. After a night spent on Remus's sofa, Sirius understood the situation much better.

On top of all that, there was the Lockhart situation. Sirius had filed a proper report on Gilderoy Lockhart, which had triggered a full internal investigation of Lockhart's arrest record. This took over a month due to the chaos resulting from the large number of Death Eater arrests and trials that sprang from the Longbottom raid and subsequent revelations and testimony from Severus Snape and Lucius Malfoy. Sirius was beginning to think the Lockhart investigation had been completely forgotten, since the braggart was still swaggering around the locker room every morning. In early December, however, he was called into the office of Amelia Bones, the Head of the Aurors, se.

"Auror Black, since you initiated the Lockhart investigation, I feel it appropriate to let you know the results of it. A close examination of Auror Lockhart's arrests and the convictions resulting from them show that on a number of occasions he did indeed influence a confession through the judicious use of Memory Charms to alter a suspect's memory. This was not true in all cases, of course. In a number of instances Auror Lockhart had indeed apprehended the correct individual. However, those who were innocent have been released from Azkaban and appropriate settlements have been made to compensate them and to guarantee confidentiality. A settlement has been reached with Auror Lockhart as well."

"Settlement?" Sirius didn't like the sound of that.

Head Auror Bones looked up at him through her monocle. "Settlement. You will understand, of course, that the Ministry in general and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in particular are considerably in the public eye at the moment, and there are political ramifications of

something like this that must be taken into account. While I, personally, would love to see Lockhart enjoy an extended stay in Azkaban himself for his abuse of authority, that would require a trial that would gain considerable publicity. Unfortunately, at this time, publicity is something the Department cannot afford. You are aware, I'm sure, that one of the Death Eaters apprehended at Longbottom Manor – the one you Stunned in the Floo Parlour, as a matter of fact – turned out to be one Bartemius Crouch, Jr. – the son of the man who is the head of this very Department and who was also heading the Special Tribunals of the Wizengamot for prosecution of Death Eaters. This is enough of a scandal, and Minister Bagshot has already removed Director Crouch from the Tribunals and may very well transfer him to a less sensitive position within the Ministry as well. We cannot afford to have anything cast further suspicions on the Tribunals – especially something like a rogue Auror performing Memory Charms to obtain false confessions. If it were to be made public, that could result in the release of dozens of Death Eaters, even those that are guilty. I'm sure you don't want to see that happen."

"No, of course I don't."

"Good. Then you understand the necessity of making a settlement with Lockhart. Given his obvious skill with the spells necessary, we offered him a transfer to the Muggle Obliviation Section of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes under Director Fudge, but he didn't accept that. In the end, he agreed to resign from the Aurors entirely, upon condition of confidentiality, to which we have agreed. This means that you, under your Auror's Oath of Duty, are forbidden to speak of the matter to anyone outside the Department."

"You mean he's just going to walk away from it?!"

"Unfortunately, yes. Any other option would have brought too much publicity."

"Couldn't you at least do something to keep him from doing Memory Charms on people again?"

"No, we couldn't," she snapped. "We couldn't force him to take a Wizard's Oath not to use the spell, nor could we *Obliviate* the knowledge of the Memory Charm from him. Not without a trial that would have brought the very publicity we need to avoid. The confidentiality agreement binds him as well; he can't reveal anything that happened during the time he was an Auror. In a private meeting with him, I did tell him that we would be keeping an eye on him in the future and that any further illegal Memory Charming done by him would be met with charges. He said he was considering travelling out of the country for an extended period of time, and that was agreeable to me. This is the best settlement we could have achieved under the circumstances, Auror Black. I hope you can come to terms with that."

"I'll have to, won't I, Ma'am?" Sirius replied tightly.

"Good. You are dismissed; report to your Commander for today's assignment."

Sirius saluted and left her office. He was far from satisfied with the result, but at least Lockhart wouldn't be wandering around Memory Charming people any more.

Secrecy or not, of course all the Aurors knew about it. Whether or not they had liked Lockhart, Sirius had now become that most dreaded of things, a whistle blower. The other Aurors drew away from him and found reasons not to associate with him. Soon he found himself partnered most often with Moody, because nobody else wanted to be paired with him. The two of them were working on the investigation of suspected Death Eaters within the Department itself, and three Aurors and one Squad Leader turned out to be wearing the shadowy Dark Mark. Although that was their own fault, somehow Sirius was blamed for their arrests and subsequent incarceration, and he was shunned even more and received fewer assignments. He could cope with things for the moment, in fact it gave him more time to focus on work for the Order, but Moody was threatening to retire after the trials were over. That would leave Sirius isolated, and he found himself thinking about his own career options.

These options had been changed by the death of Sirius' father the previous year. The old man had wasted away and died of grief after Sirius' younger brother, Regulus, who had always been the favorite, was killed. Sirius' mother had remained at the family house at Grimmauld Place, and shortly after the fall of Everybody Knew Who, she took the final step from sheer ugliness of personality into total madness and killed all the house elves except her favourite, who went by the name of Kreacher, and then herself. Sirius hadn't lived at Grimmauld Place since he ran away to live with the Potters when he was sixteen, and he'd pretty much ignored the family properties after his father died, letting his mother do what she would. Now the responsibilities of being the Head of the Family began to weigh heavily on him. At the moment, his closest direct male relation was the infant Draco Malfoy, and while he had nothing against the child, who was only slightly older than Harry was, he had no faith in Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy bringing up their child in the Light.

After Draco, the next males were Sirius's second cousins once removed, Arthur Weasley and his two brothers, the elder of whom had left the country early in the Dark Lord's reign. Sirius didn't care to hand the Black Family fortune over to a man who had fled at the first sign of trouble rather than stay and do something about it, and Arthur, the next in line, was none too responsible with money. Sirius had spoken to both Arthur and Molly many times over the past few years and knew who kept track of the finances in that family. As Head of the Family, he had offered them assistance, but they had their pride and refused to touch the Black money directly; he had, however, discreetly arranged with Dumbledore for "scholarships" to Hogwarts for the Weasley children since he rather doubted their finances would manage to get all six – no, seven, Molly had given birth to a girl just last summer, and hadn't Arthur been tickled pink about that – through school. They were already stretched with the oldest two in school, and there would be at least two years when all five of the youngest were in school at the same time. Hogwarts was not cheap. His scholarships would only cover tuition, but it was the best he could do without their knowledge.

Over the course of the next year, Auror work became less and less satisfying for Sirius. The Death Eaters were almost all in Azkaban, and the work of tracking down the few remaining ones was tedious. Peter's mother notified Sirius that Peter had been spotted in the United States. According to the report, he had been hospitalized as a John Doe. Since he had a British accent, somebody had got the British Consulate in on it, and they had managed to backtrack and identify him. By the time Sirius got there, however, he was gone again. There was no indication that he'd been

travelling with a small boy, so Harry's whereabouts were still unknown.

Moody retired in April, and as Sirius had predicted, no one else wanted to partner with him regularly. As the odd man out, he found himself relegated to handling paperwork more often than he was out in the field. Finally he had had enough, and handed in his own resignation. Amelia Bones, now Director of Magical Law Enforcement since Barty Crouch had been transferred to the Department of International Magical Cooperation, did not try to talk him out of it, and accepted his formal letter and his badge without surprise. Rufus Scrimgeour, who had taken her place as Head of the Aurors, seemed downright pleased to see him go.

Now without a job, Sirius found himself at a loss for something to do. He didn't really *have* to work, of course, but he would have to do something if only to keep himself from dying of boredom.

To keep himself busy more than anything else, he began a renovation of 12 Grimmauld Place. It went more slowly than the renovation of ... of ... wherever it was that he had renovated before had gone, because he didn't have help. James was gone, Peter was missing, Remus had his own job, and Kreacher, the only available house elf, had a tendency to undo everything Sirius did. He couldn't even think about getting Muggle workmen in to do the modernising, primarily because of the portrait of his mother that had been permanently charmed to the wall in the front hall. Most of the other Dark artefacts and little monsters that had taken up residence in the house over the years could be removed and/or evicted, but how could he possibly have workmen in to install electricity and update the plumbing when they would be continually berated by the old bat?

Remus solved the problem for him one day after he came over and spent half an hour listening to Sirius's mum going on about "HALF BLOODS AND HALF BREEDS AND FILTHY CREATURES!"

"Is that a load-bearing wall, do you know?"

"A what?"

"Is it just a plaster dividing wall, or does it hold up the rest of the house?"

"Just plaster, as far as I know."

"Ah. I have an idea." Remus banged on the wall a bit and discovered that there were two support beams on either side of 'Mum', but where she was it was only plaster and lathing. "Back in a bit," he said jovially, and bounced down the front steps. About an hour later, he was back with a bright orange plastic case in one hand and a hammer in the other. "Observe a master at work," he said, and struck the wall next to the portrait with the claw part of the hammer. A hole was bashed in the wall in short order, with Mrs. Black screaming curses at him the whole time. Remus then opened the plastic case and pulled out a Muggle implement of destruction which Sirius vaguely remembered having used before. A switch was flicked on the side of it, and the blade of the saw started vibrating back and forth. In fairly short order, Remus had stuck the blade into the hole and then run the saw around the portrait. The rather loud noise of the saw overpowered the sound of

Mrs. Black's shrieks. When he was done, Remus turned the saw off, put it back in its case, and then casually pulled down the portrait, frame and plaster and all. "You have to love a good battery-powered reciprocating saw," he said, grinning. "And Muggle tool rental places. Now, does the old beldam go in the cellar or the attic?"

Sirius applauded his genius, and stashed the painting of Mum in the cellar, where he hoped she grew mould.

With Mum out of the way, and Kreacher banished from the public areas of the house, it was a lot easier to get the renovations accomplished, and Sirius even found a company formed by Squibs who were used to updating Wizard houses, so the electrification of the house went without a hitch.

It was only a temporary patch, though, and soon enough Sirius once again found himself with time on his hands. He gave some thought to occupations again, and found himself at a loss. Being an Auror had pretty much been his dream job through school. The four of them had once spoken of opening a joke shop, but he doubted he'd have the heart for it now. The goblins did a better job of managing the family money than he ever could. He wasn't good enough for professional Quidditch, or patient enough for new spell development. He'd rather enjoyed the mayhem of demolitions on his house and the rebuilding afterwards, but he'd never hear the end of it if he entered a "service industry." He could always enter society, which was something he'd avoided at all costs, but the idea of spending his days and nights in an endless series of social events, chatting up dowagers while dodging their marriage-minded daughters, was not his idea of a fun time.

All in all, becoming a drunkard like Great-Uncle Crateris was looking like a better idea all the time.

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The owl from Algernon Croaker was unexpected, mainly because Sirius had no idea who Algernon Croaker was. The letter in elegant old fashioned copperplate script desired an appointment with Mr. Black, if he was not previously engaged, and since Mr. Black had no engagements at all for the next month or so, he rather inelegantly scrawled a reply suggesting a time the next day.

Mr. Croaker proved to be an elderly wizard who favoured the dress of the Victorian era. He looked around the ground floor of the house, with its new, open floor plan (Remus hadn't returned the reciprocating saw until he'd demolished quite a few unnecessary walls) and commented on the changes. "Last time I was here was in your grandfather's day, don't y'know. Quite a few changes you've made here, young man. Quite a few. Always thought the Blacks were traditionalists, m'self."

"Some traditions should be disposed of," said Sirius, shortly.

"I dare say," said Croaker. "Like that lovely portrait of Lavinia, eh?"

"She didn't match the décor."

"Damn few decors that woman would match, if you ask me," mumbled Croaker. "Dare say you're wondering why I'm here, correct?"

"Correct, Mr. Croaker."

"As it happens, y'did a signal service for one of my family not so long ago, and I feel the family owes you. I've come across an opportunity for a bright young man such as y'self, and I understand you're, er, between engagements at the moment?"

"You might say that."

"Albus Dumbledore speaks well of you. So does Amelia Bones."

"Do they?"

"Scrimgeour, now, he's a little less fond of you. Gather he'd prefer an Auror who's more likely to play by the rules, if y'take my meaning?"

"Rules are meant to be broken."

"Well, now, some are and some aren't. What I'd like to know, lad, is can y'tell which is which?"

"I'd like to think so," said Sirius. "I learned the hard way which pranks should not be played." He shuddered, thinking for a moment of James tackling Snivellus beneath the branches of the Whomping Willow, and the consequences that would have come had James run not quite as fast.

"Pranks, was it? I heard y'had a bit of a reputation as a hellraiser at school."

"Yes, I did. Well, the four of us did, two of us –"

"I know, two of you gone now, and the fourth making his own life now, isn't he? And after school, you trained up to be an Auror, but it wasn't quite what y'expected, was it? Or Albus and his bird watching club?"

"How did you-?" Sirius hadn't been aware that his connection with the Order was public knowledge.

"Now, m'lad, there's secrets and then there's secrets. I already know you're a man of action and quick thinking, else m'grand-nevvie might be in St. Mungo's next to his mum. I know you're a man of honour, and y'keep your word. And Albus's recommendation is good enough for me."

"Recommendation for what?"

"I cant say ," the old man said with a slight smile, "but the Department of Mysteries is always looking for a few good men."

Remus:

Armed with his new identity papers and records, Remus set about looking for a job – a real one, with a regular schedule and everything. Several of his off the books employers had given him reference letters. Even with his papers and references, though, he found he wasn't qualified for most office jobs. Most of them required that he either know how to type – and most of those jobs seemed to be set aside for women anyway – or have specialized skills which he would have to attend a business school, or go to university, to learn. With the coming of winter, the landscaping and construction work he had been doing thinned out; it wouldn't pick up again until spring. He could continue waiting tables, he supposed, and he could now get jobs in the better restaurants, which would assure him better tips, but that really wasn't his favourite job. The mingled odours of food, alcohol and smoke were too much for his heightened sense of smell. On the other hand, it was December and the annual shopping frenzy that beset London was in full swing; perhaps he could find something in retail that might carry over to a permanent position after the holidays.

So it was that at the end of a long day of putting in applications everywhere he could think of, he stumbled into a small bookstore, not one of the big chain ones, that had a "Help Wanted" sign in its window. The store was called "Dreamweavers" and had a Christmas-themed display of children's books in the front window. Remus entered, jingling the bell above the doorway. He spent a few moments looking around. Since it was a small store, it couldn't carry the variety that the large ones did, but there was a surprisingly wide selection of fiction and children's titles in the front room and non-fiction in the smaller back room, and some used books on rolling carts. Some books which had been "used" long enough to be called "rarities" were in the glass faced sales counter. A bored looking teenager was restocking the non-fiction shelves in the back room, and a friendly looking woman in her sixties was operating the till and handling the flow of evening customers. Mrs. Weaver turned out to be the owner of the store; she and her husband had operated it for a number of years. He asked for an application, but she said she didn't have any, that she would rather pick her employees by chatting with them, although she did want to check his references. She called the teenager up to take the counter and took Remus back into the non-fiction room to, as she said, "chat." It turned out to be one of the most thorough and grilling interviews Remus had ever had, but she was so nice about it that he almost didn't notice. Suddenly he discovered that he'd spent almost an hour talking to the woman, and that he had an offer of a job, which included a reasonable salary, flexible working hours, and an employee's discount.

"So, when can you start?" Mrs. Weaver asked, beaming at him.

"Well, I'm between positions at the moment, so I can start tomorrow since I don't have to give notice anywhere," Remus said. "But, er, there's one thing. I have, ah, previous engagements on certain days of the month. It's only one or two days, and I'm willing to work other days to make up for it, but ..." This was the point where job offers usually fizzled out, and he was ready for the refusal.

Mrs. Weaver stuffed a last book on a shelf. "Don't fret, we have a flexible schedule here, and I'm sure we can work it out. Do you have an objection to working on Sundays? Or the occasional evening?"

"No, ma'am, none at all."

"Good, then there shouldn't be a problem at all. Let's get a calendar out and pencil those in, shall we?" She bustled up to the sales counter and introduced Remus to Richard, the teenage clerk, while she simultaneously rooted around behind the counter to locate a calendar. Remus gave her the dates he would not be available for the next few months, noting rather anxiously that one of them was just the following week, and she marked up the calendar with those days. "Hm. All full moons," she commented. "I hadn't realised you were one of *them*."

Remus froze. "'Them' who?" he asked carefully. "I'm not sure I know what you mean." Mrs. Weaver certainly looked like a Muggle and not a witch, but some of the Muggle-born and half-bloods did return to the Muggle community and blended in quite seamlessly. It would be just his luck to have run into someone who could recognize his lycanthropy for what it was.

"I'm sorry, of course you wouldn't," she said, looking at the oblivious teenager, who was now ringing up a customer's purchase, in a way which was obviously supposed to be meaningful. "Not that anyone ever talks about it anyway. Don't worry, I don't have a problem with any of that, and your personal life is quite your own business, as long as it doesn't affect your work."

"I assure you, Mrs. Weaver, I won't let my personal life interfere with the job. I'm far too grateful for it," said Remus truthfully.

"That's all right, then," said Mrs. Weaver as if all was understood. "You didn't ask for these days either, but you'll be wanting them, too, I expect," she said, using a quickly sketched star to mark off a series of days that seemed random to Remus, starting with the Monday before Christmas and at approximately six-week intervals thereafter. "There. We can work out the rest of your schedule from that as we go, and it takes us up through May. If you're still with us then, of course, we'll work out the rest of the year."

"Thank you, I ... I appreciate your consideration."

"It's nothing. As long as you're discreet, and you are, I would never have known if we hadn't had to schedule days, I don't think there's anything wrong with any of it. Now, since you said you can start tomorrow, why don't you come in at nine and we can get you started before we officially open at ten?"

The whole conversation left Remus quite puzzled; he had the feeling he'd missed something vital. It wasn't until several days later, on his last day of work before the full moon, that he noticed the small shelf in the back room which bore titles such as Witchcraft for Today, The Compleat Book of Witchcraft, and The Witches' Bible Complete, by authors such as Gardner, Leek, Farrar, and Valiente. The covers of most of them featured the same five pointed star that Mrs. Weaver had used to mark his days off. He picked up one of the books curiously, and was soon howling in laughter, which eased some of the anticipatory pains he was feeling at the time. It was a good thing he was alone in the store. Those books were all about the Muggle conception of witchcraft, which was nothing like the truth, of course. Mrs. Weaver thought he was a *witch!* The Muggle witches apparently treated magic as a religious practice, and didn't really expect it to actually *do*

anything. But their sacred days were all the full moons, and so Mrs. Weaver was perfectly willing to let him have those days off so he could go and ... do whatever it was she thought he did.

Grinning, he took The Witches' Bible Complete up to the register to put it on his employee's account. If Mrs. Weaver thought he was a witch, he'd better read up on what she expected of him. Judging from the pictures of the attractive nude blonde portraying the Goddess in the book, it did look like an *interesting* religion. He rather thought Sirius would agree.

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Life settled into a comfortable rut. Remus had never been one to seek excitement for excitement's sake.

James and Lily's Wills were finally processed shortly after the New Year, after some delay caused by the manner of their deaths and a contest from Petunia Dursley, Lily's sister. Although she hadn't bothered to attend the funeral, the minute she found out there was a fortune to be had, she overcame her dislike of magic long enough to contact a solicitor and attempt to claim James and Lily's estates, claiming that since James had predeceased Lily, all his property was vested in her and when she died, it all came to Petunia as next of kin. Apparently she hadn't even remembered the existence of Harry. Her solicitor argued that Harry should be declared dead as well, given the circumstances, but the court had decided that since it could not be sure that Harry was dead, the estate would be held in trust for him until his eighteenth birthday, thus giving him one year after his majority to claim it. Only if he had not appeared by then would Petunia inherit so much as one knut. In the meantime, only the few specific bequests mentioned in the Wills would be honoured. One of those bequests was for a cash payment to one Remus Lupin, in remembrance of his great friendship. It wasn't a fortune by anyone's standards, but Lupin was used to living on a shoestring. He also knew about investing. With his salary from Dreamweaver's and the principal of the bequest invested so that he could take a portion of the interest, he could live better than he ever had before.

Things were finally looking up for Remus J. Lupin.

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Remus had taken to reading a little bit of everything that came into the store, if only to be able to make recommendations to the customers. One slow Monday morning, he was sitting behind the counter practically snarling at a paperback book when Mrs. Weaver came in for her afternoon shift. She would take over the till while he stocked the shelves with the new shipment that had just come in.

"Goodness, Remus, what ever has you so worked up? It looks like you have a serious grudge against that poor harmless book."

"Poor harmless book indeed. Collection of horrendous lies, is what it is."

Mrs. Weaver curiously turned the book in his hand so that she could see the cover. The title was

simply Werewolves , and the cover depicted three versions of a werewolf's head; a man with pointed ears and teeth, the stereotypical shaggy wolfman, and a huge grey wolf's head. She recognised the book as a newly published anthology of fantasy fiction. "Heavens, Remus, it's just fiction. You'd think you had a personal stake in it."

Remus flushed. It was too close to the full moon for him to completely control his emotions, and he really shouldn't have picked up this particular book for his morning's read. "I'm sorry, it's just ... I do have rather a strong personal interest in the subject."

"Yes, it is a compelling aspect of mythology, isn't it? Is it werewolves in particular or shapeshifters in general you're interested in?"

"Both, I suppose. I just hate to see the stories mangled so badly ... some of them are really very poorly written."

Smiling, Mrs. Weaver said, "Then you only have two choices – go back to the classics, I think there's a copy of the Metamorphoses on the shelf, the good translation, mind you – or write your own."

"Write my own?" asked Remus.

"Somebody wrote all these, you know," she said, waving her hand at the floor to ceiling bookshelves that lined the room. "If you think you have a better idea of how the stories should be written, write them yourself. I have it on good authority that publishers are always looking for new talent. And if it turns out you can't write them, well, maybe you won't be so harsh on the ones who do try. It does take an awful lot of nerve, you know, to put your words out where everyone can read them." She walked quickly to the back room and came back with another book, plucked the offending werewolf book out of his hands, and replaced it with How to Write Fantasy and Science Fiction . "Now off with you. The stockroom is full of boxes, and they won't get unpacked by themselves."

Remus saluted and headed off to deal with the new stock, but when he left for the day, How to Write Fantasy and Science Fiction went with him, and Mrs. Weaver smiled quietly to herself.

A week later, Remus cleared off his home desk, purchased a used typewriter and a ream of paper, and set to work.

Three days later, his employee discount was applied to a copy of Learn How to Type in Ten Days .

Six months after that, he sent off his first manuscript by Muggle post, and wondered if parents sending their children off to school for the first time felt this way.

After a further two months of checking his post box with ever increasing frustration, he received a letter from the publisher. *Here it is, my first rejection slip* , he thought, not realising that if it was a rejection slip, it would be accompanied by the returned manuscript.

Dear Mr. Lupin:

Thank you very much for sending us your manuscript, Children of the Night. Your concept of the werewolf as protagonist is quite interesting, and we are considering your novel for publication next year, but would like to see some revisions in it first. Specifically, we believe that as it currently stands it is unpublishable, but it could, with moderate changes, be acceptable. If you choose to submit it for our horror line, it would need to be rewritten with a bit more violence, and you should also make the relationship between the hero and his vampire girlfriend a bit more explicit. If you choose to submit it for our fantasy line, it will need more humour and the romantic aspect of the relationship should be played up instead.

In any event, we would appreciate it if you or your agent would make an appointment to contact our editor at your earliest convenience to discuss ...

Dazed, Remus read and re-read the letter several times, and was even tempted to pull out his wand and make sure it wasn't a prank letter from Sirius. When he went in to Dreamweavers for his shift, the first thing he did was give Mrs. Weaver a heartfelt hug and a kiss.

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Snape:

"Albus, there must be someone else. I'm not cut out for this!" Severus Snape set his cup down rather sharply on the tea table in Dumbledore's drawing room and ignored the wince the matching pot gave.

"There is no one else, Severus. Not unless you want to let Lucius Malfoy take all the credit. Merlin knows he'd be more than happy to take advantage of it." Dumbledore stirred his tea idly.

"Malfoy? Circe, no! He only came to me because he thought the Order could save his misbegotten hide. I'm sure he'd jump at the opportunity, of course. And likely he'd ride it all the way to the Minister's office."

"Precisely. I don't doubt that such a possibility was why Mr. Malfoy joined Voldemort's followers to begin with. It would be ironic if we were to be the ones to enable him to achieve his ambitions instead."

"Potter? A dead hero can't misuse his standing. And with Lily fallen by his side? How romantic. How tragic. The newspapers will have a field day."

"They already have. They're milking the Potters' deaths, and their mysterious appearance at the chapel, for all they're worth. But the Potters are dead, as you pointed out. They were, in the end, victims, regardless of how hard they resisted. We need someone living."

"The boy? The *Daily Prophet* is already hyping him as 'The Boy Who Lived.' You'd think they get paid by the word for these epithets."

"He's just a child, Severus. It would be unfair to him to hold him up as a symbol of anything, though it may be impossible to prevent that completely. Whatever he did, I doubt it was intentional, and the pressure of having to live up to it would be too much for a child. Even if we had access to him at the moment, I'd be loath to bring him up in the Wizarding world for just that reason. I hope that wherever he is, he is at least allowed to have a relatively normal childhood. He could never have that being a Boy Hero. An adult at least will be aware of the pressures and able to adjust to them."

"Black, then," Snape said with a shudder. "Though I'm reluctant to give him credit for anything, at least he'd put up a better front than I."

"You must be desperate if you're tossing his name out," said Dumbledore. He paused to take a sip of his tea. "Sirius is in a delicate position. He's already trying to live down the reputation his family has had for many generations. There would be – in fact there already are – those claiming that he was always a Death Eater, that he overthrew the Dark Lord, and that it's only a matter of time before he would become the next Dark Lord."

Snape snorted in disgust at the very idea of Sirius Black becoming a Dark Lord. After seven years as "best enemies" at school, Snape knew better than any other, perhaps, that Black didn't have it in him.

"Yes, well, most people don't know him as well as we do," said Dumbledore, correctly interpreting Snape's snort. "Most of them won't look beyond his family name and reputation. Above and beyond that, there's the fact that he's already working for the Ministry in an official capacity, however minor. If we used him, we would be backing the notion that everything that was done was done on behalf of the Ministry, and giving them the entire credit for the fall of Voldemort. They're already trying to take credit as it is."

"What would be so wrong about just letting them do that, then?" Snape asked. "With or without Black? Isn't the Ministry supposed to provide leadership and be looked up to by the public?"

Dumbledore looked at Snape over the edge of his teacup. "Don't tell me you've forgotten the lessons of Grindelwald so soon."

"I wasn't even born then, Albus. That was your war. And recent history isn't something your History of Magic professor seems to be up on, if you'll pardon my saying so."

Dumbledore frowned. "Professor Binns is the acknowledged expert on the Goblin Wars, Severus. We're lucky to have him."

"Yes, but the last Goblin war was what, two hundred years ago? History even for you, Albus. And Binns was dry even when he was alive. After he died when I was in fourth year, his teaching lost any sort of animation, and judging from what my Slytherins tell me, it's only got worse in the twelve years since." Snape steepled his fingers and looked at Dumbledore with a wry smile. "You must also remember my own background. I have a much better grasp on the Muggle affairs of the period than the Wizarding ones."

"True," sighed Dumbledore. "You have done such an excellent job of adapting to the Wizarding world since you first came to school that it's hard even for me to remember that you weren't always part of it."

"Exactly. I know about Hitler, of course, though only in generalities since my formal Muggle schooling never extended past primary school. My mother made sure I knew the Wizarding basics, and she always talked about Grindelwald as if he was exactly the same."

"The two were very similar, yes. At the time, the Muggle world harboured some rather virulent notions of blood purity which make our own look like petty disagreements. They seem to be getting past that now, fortunately, but they ... and we ... have a long way to go yet. Grindelwald was originally a low-level bureaucrat in the German Ministry, but like all would-be Dark Lords, he had ambition and, perhaps, a higher opinion of his own worthiness than he should have. He did study history, and saw that whenever a Dark Lord rose and attempted to impose his will from outside the government, he was doomed to failure. The rather spectacular rise and fall of Rasputin, who attempted to control both Wizarding and Muggle Russia within Grindelwald's own lifetime, was proof enough of that. On the other hand, the Chinese model has shown how successful a Dark Lord can be when acting within the system. Every one of the last eight High Mandarins of China has been what we would call a Dark Lord, and they have all had very long reigns, surviving through the turmoil of wars and changes of Muggle government while maintaining absolute control of the Wizarding World there. Some of them even lived to retire peacefully, handing over control to a chosen successor rather than waiting to be assassinated. It's not a system I would like to see enacted here, of course, but there are some who claim it has benefited the Chinese Wizarding population in the long run."

Dumbledore had now obviously settled in for a lecture; it wasn't often, these days, that he got a chance to return to his professorial roots. "Grindelwald sought to combine the two ideals. Working within the German ministry, he could establish control over the Wizarding population, while influencing the Muggle government along the same lines. He was able, with little difficulty, to influence a group of like-minded Muggle individuals who had an unhealthy fascination with magic and the occult – the Muggle understandings of them, anyway. The rest, as you know, is history. The Muggle racial purity movement actually got away from Grindelwald – I think, at the end, even he was appalled by what he'd created – and it took a war of proportions hitherto undreamed of to end it, together with an alliance of Wizards from around the world, acting outside any one Ministry's directives, to break through Grindelwald's wards and destroy him. Any of us could have been the hero of that war, you know. I just happened to be the one at the head of the group when we broke into his sanctuary. If Jean Bourgeois hadn't turned his ankle in the last dash down the tunnel, he would be the Destroyer of Grindelwald, the Saviour of the Wizarding World, and I just an obscure schoolteacher." His eyes twinkled at the younger man seated across the table from him. "And don't believe for a minute that I wanted the fame, either. Twice now they've tried to make me the Minister, and twice I threatened to run away to the Antipodes if they even thought about it."

"I just wish ... I just wish there was anyone else," said Snape, rising to his feet and pacing restlessly in front of the fireplace. "I signed on to be your spy, to work from the shadows to bring

down the Dark Lord, to ... to atone for my own sins, if you will. I didn't want to be a hero, and I don't want to be a bloody hero. That's a Gryffindor's job, not mine."

"Believe me, if there was anyone else, I wouldn't have been pushing this. You were and are a Slytherin, Severus, that means you have ambition. And I know that your personal ambition has always been for personal recognition of your potion-making skills. You are the youngest Master ever, and it's well deserved. But you have other attributes which deserve recognition as well."

"What attributes, Albus? My ability to slink about in shadows, hearing things I should not? My ability to smile and swear loyalty to a man who encourages his followers to commit atrocities in wholesale lots? My ability ... my ability to buy my own life by revealing a Prophecy which results in the deaths of your precious Gryffindors and their innocent children?"

"If anyone bears the responsibility for that, it is I," said Dumbledore gravely. "I knew you had that information and did not *Obliviate* you immediately. I helped you hide it so Voldemort could not find it through his random attempts at Legilimency, and I gave you permission to reveal it in an emergency. I, not you, made those decisions based on my own reading of the *entire* Prophecy ... which you never heard. I must admit, I never foresaw its coming true as soon as it did. I had feared that the Prophecy doomed us to another twenty years or so of terror, which is why your information was so vital; if we could not strike directly against Voldemort, we had to act against his followers, and in order to do that, we needed to know who they were. Both the Potters and the Longbottoms knew they were targets and likely to remain targets for many years, until their boys grew up to be strong enough to possibly vanquish Voldemort. We had already begun to formulate training plans for both boys. None of us thought he might be brought down by a mere infant." He replaced his own empty teacup on the tray.

"But that is why it so important that you do this, Severus. Harry may have vanquished Voldemort, either temporarily or permanently, but it is you who have almost single handedly provided the information needed to destroy the Death Eaters. For all Voldemort's power, he was only one man. The Death Eaters were many, and a greater threat because they hid behind their masks. They could be anyone, anywhere, and they could still have regrouped and threatened our very society without you. The Wizarding world needs a hero, and I'm afraid you're it. It needs someone outside the Ministry to whom it may look for reassurance that there are still those who will stand fast against the Darkness."

"But I was *part* of that Darkness!" Snape protested.

"Not for long. Not after you discovered its true nature. And after you did, you took horrible risks to bring us the very information we're using now to dismantle Voldemort's organization. Don't think I don't know some of the dangers you've faced, my boy. And don't think heroes only come from Gryffindor."

"You'd think they did, to hear people talk. Golden Gryffindors and Sneaky Slytherins. Even after we leave school, those labels follow us."

"That's another reason to step forward, then. How better to shake the stereotype?"

"For God's sake, Albus, *look* at me!" cried Snape, whirling to face Dumbledore and spreading his arms dramatically. "I'm the greasy git, the great bat. In less than two years I've established myself as the Terror of the dungeons. How could anyone possibly take *me* as a hero?"

"You underestimate yourself, Severus. You always have and you always will. That is, perhaps, one reason why I would trust you in the role I propose. You still think of yourself as the teenager you once were; I assure you that the man you have become is far from that. You are well spoken and charismatic when you wish to be. Your voice, in particular, commands attention. You may not know it, but quite a few of the sixth and seventh year girls have been crushing on you based on your voice alone. Though the fact that you're the only male teacher under sixty might also have something to do with it. I'm well aware, also that quite a few of your physical disadvantages are self imposed. You forget that I was trained as an alchemist myself, and practiced that art for many years. I'm well familiar with the use of protective unguents on the skin and hair to keep potions fumes from destroying them. And your complexion is only as sallow as it is because you don't get enough exposure to the sun. You'd look almost Italian if you got out a bit more. All that black you affect just makes it worse. A little colour wouldn't kill you, you know."

Snape looked at the Headmaster's robes, which today shaded from light blue at the shoulders to dark blue at the hems and had a myriad brightly coloured fish swimming across them. "I can't believe *you* are attempting to give *me* fashion advice. Would you have me looking like an aquarium as well?"

Dumbledore looked down at his own robes as a rather flamboyant guppy darted across the left sleeve. "Nothing of the sort, dear boy. My tailor tells me it takes a rather special sort of personality to wear these with any success. Perhaps in a hundred years or so you might manage it, but you're not ready for it yet. No, I had in mind the darker blues and greens. Perhaps a touch of burgundy, and maybe a little embroidery on collars and cuffs. Nothing too flashy."

"You know why I wear black."

"Keep the black for your work robes. That makes sense, it doesn't show the stains. But it's been three years, Severus. I don't believe she would have wanted you to remain in mourning forever. And you really will need to have something more presentable when you're testifying. And for the interviews afterwards, of course. And something for the formal occasions. And you really should decide whether you're going to wear your hair short like a muggle or long like a Wizard; this half length doesn't suit you ..."

"But who will teach my classes?"

"Oh, I'll cover them myself, don't worry. Or I'm sure Horace will be willing to come back for a day or two. It will all be taken care of, don't fret."

And so it was that two days later, Severus Snape found himself wearing a set of new green robes but missing the layer of Paracelsus' Protective Preparation that he wore whenever he was working or teaching, testifying at the trials of Bellatrix Lestrange and her accomplices, and giving interviews to the *Daily Prophet* and the Wizarding Wireless Network.

Within a week, Snape couldn't look at a news stand without seeing his own face staring at him from at least three magazine covers. *Witch Weekly* even described him as being "extremely distinctive, in a tall, dark and gruesome way."

Shortly after that, he started receiving fan mail. And marriage proposals.

That was when he fled back into the dungeons, locked himself in his work room, and swore he wasn't coming out. Ever.

Peter:

Peter Pettigrew knew there was a sizeable magical community in New York City, but he never contacted anyone in it. He disappeared into the larger Muggle community instead. In three days, he stayed in three different Muggle hotels, doing little other than sleeping and waiting for the pain in his hand to ease. Once he could shift to his rat form and use the front paw to walk on without too much pain, he began exploring the great city, both above and below ground. He had thought to lose himself among the rats of the city for the winter, but rapidly discovered that they were far larger and more vicious than he expected. After three fights in one day with large males defending their nests and feeding spots, he realised that while he would win many fights due to his superior thinking ability, he would lose others due to lesser physical strength or being outnumbered. He was hampered by not being able to use magic in his rat form. He got out of one fight by simply transforming back into his human shape and causing the pack of rats that had cornered him to flee in panic, but he knew he couldn't always depend on being in a position to do so. As it was, he had a chunk taken out of one ear and some long scores on his legs where the rats had gotten him before he shook them off. He treated them himself with topical antiseptics and bandages purchased at a corner drug store and hoped they would work as well as wizarding potions.

They didn't.

Two days later, he was thrashing in a fever induced by the infected wounds. In delirium, he was pursued by the vengeful spirits of James and Lily, chasing him through the cold grey streets of a city inhabited by men and women wearing the robes and masks of Death Eaters. They looked at him as he ran, turning their blank white masks to him, then away, going about their business, ignoring the fact that he ran and stumbled and fell and crawled among them. The dark mouths of alleys opened, offering him sanctuary, but whenever he ran down one of them, the paired shapes of a Grim and a Wolf waited for him, fangs bared and eyes aflame with red light. With a despairing moan, he would turn and try to find another way, but all ways led back out onto the streets where James and Lily waited, and the chase began anew.

He woke to find himself in a Muggle hospital room, with white light glaring off the walls and ceiling and chrome fixtures. A man in a white coat spoke, but the words were harsh in sound and the vowels were too flat and clipped and everything sounded all wrong. By the time he realised that he hadn't understood a word the man said, he was slipping away back into blackness again.

The fever did not return, and the Grim and the Wolf no longer stalked the back alleys of his

dreams. He woke again to darkness, the moans of someone else in a room down the hall, and the soft beeping of machines whose purposes he could only guess at. He tried to get out of bed, but burning pain shot up his thigh and his leg gave out. He hit the floor hard enough to make him see white starbursts and cry out, and by the time his vision cleared, there were people there to help him get back into bed, to examine his leg, and to give him an injection that caused everything to fade away again.

Detroit. He couldn't believe it. He was in a place called Detroit. Somehow he had lost three weeks of his life. He had no identification, no money, and the police had found him wandering barefoot down a city street waving a stick and threatening people with it. At least they had kept the "stick" and gave it to him when he asked, although he had to give them multiple assurances that he did not intend to harm anyone with it. A wizard without his wand was nothing, after all. He was thin and grimy and had long red scars on his legs where the rats had gotten him. The doctors told him the wounds had been infected, he'd had blood poisoning, and they had had to open them up to let the poison drain out.

They asked him who he was. He told them he didn't remember. They told him he was obviously British from his accent, and asked him how he had arrived in Detroit. He told them he didn't remember. They asked him for his insurance information, and he stared at them stupidly. The next day they moved him to a room that wasn't quite as nice.

More people came, doctors and psychiatrists and police officers, and they asked him the same questions over and over, and he gave them the same answers, until he almost believed it himself. They called him John, and after a few days he answered to it. Some kind of holiday came, and the regular hospital food was replaced with turkey and dressing and some kind of tart red jam on the side, but the next day it was back to normal again.

He took his pain pills and his antibiotics and his sleeping pills and learned to walk again, and wished he could just take one simple potion to clear the whole thing up, instead of going through all this Muggle crap.

A woman from the British Embassy came to see him. She took pictures of him and said not to worry, they would find out who he was and get him safely back home again.

That night Peter took his wand and transfigured his hospital pyjamas into something resembling reasonable clothing, then cast a Disillusionment and Silencing charms, and John Doe vanished onto the streets of Detroit in December.

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It didn't particularly matter to Peter that he had lost his money and his passport. He had his wand and his animagus ability, and those would get him wherever he needed to go. A grey rat missing a toe on its front paw nosed its way into a closed department store; moments later the security camera decided to have a fatal heart attack. The men's department provided Peter with all the new clothing, from socks to overcoat, that he needed. To his disappointment there was no money left in the till, but that was a lack that could be remedied somewhere else. The jewellery cases were

empty, or else he'd have helped himself there, too. He laughed bitterly to himself, the echoes harsh in the empty store. He'd killed his friends, why should he have scruples about a bit of petty theft? When he was satisfied with his acquisitions, a grey rat scampered out through the security grate again.

Life on the streets wasn't easy, and it was never constant. The rat travelled where it would, by box car or in the back of trucks, nibbling on the groceries being shipped here and there. Sometimes the man hitched rides, rode the train Disillusioned, or even bought a ticket when he had the cash.

The dreams that had beset Peter in his fever never truly went away; night after night he'd wake up in a sweat, convinced that Lily's spectral hands were about to close on his throat, or the Grim's sharp teeth were an inch from his tail. The worst nights were the nights he dreamed of Harry trapped in his crib, with his mother's body on the floor nearby, perishing of hunger and thirst. Those nights, he'd get up and leave wherever he was, catching the first bus, train, plane, or thumbed ride he could.

He could always leave a place, he discovered, but he couldn't leave his demons behind.

He began to drink heavily as a way of avoiding his dreams; when that ceased to work, he turned to pills and other substances that Muggles sold in back alleys. They weren't as good as a Dreamless Sleep potion, but they did the trick.

Peter lost track of how many summers and winters had passed. It was hard to tell when he could spend the winter in New Orleans and the summer in Vancouver, or an entire year in Los Angeles, where they didn't seem to have weather at all, just climate. He thought he'd visited about every town in the United States and Canada.

The one thing he was always aware of was when Halloween came. It was a big thing in the United States, and he shuddered when sweets in orange and black wrappers appeared in the stores, and children dressed as pirates and cowboys roamed the streets. He knew better than most what Halloween really stood for, and he lived in fear that on that night the dead might truly walk, and come for him. That night above all he made sure that he drank himself into insensibility, so that he would not know if they were there, or not.

It was Halloween again. Peter scored a handful of white pills; the man in the alley said they would do the job. A liquor store was about to close. Disillusioned, Peter crept in and hid in the back, waiting until the manager had left and the place was locked tight. He crept out and selected a bottle of the very best; none of the cheap stuff for this rat. Not tonight.

Either nobody had told Peter that certain pharmaceuticals should not be mixed with alcohol, or he forgot, or he didn't care. He gulped the pills, washing them down with liberal amounts of whiskey. The back room had a pile of boxes in it, and he crawled into the middle of the pile looking for shelter, and went to sleep.

The body of an unidentified man was found in the back of the liquor store the next morning, when the clerk put the boxes out for the trash. By that time, he'd been dead for hours. The police took the body away for a cursory autopsy; they had a pretty good idea what had killed him, judging from the empty whiskey bottle at his side but it wouldn't hurt to make sure. He lay in the morgue for a week, and when no one came to identify the body, they buried it in a numbered grave in Potter's Field.

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Peter woke up with a start as the white light blazed through the back of the liquor store. He tried to snatch up his wand to hex the person who had turned on the lights, but his hand passed right through it. Next to it lay the body of a man, curled into a foetal position, and Peter knew instantly what had happened. The light grew ever brighter, and he heard voices calling. Something was pulling him up, drawing him into the light, but there was a pull equally as strong holding him back. He thought he could see someone standing in the light. Someone waiting. Waiting for him? He threw up his arm to shade his eyes, and he could make out the forms of James and Lily standing there, between him and the light.

"Noooo!" he screamed, and he flung himself away, following the tug back into the darkness of the liquor store.

The light faded, and James and Lily disappeared. Peter stood over his body all night, and watched the police going through their routines the next morning. They zipped him up in a black rubberised bag and took him away, and still Peter remained in the store, unnoticed by all. What was he supposed to do now? Was he doomed to haunt the liquor store forever? He knew all too well that he'd just burned his bridge to the afterlife.

Haunting the liquor store was highly unsatisfactory, he decided. It had only been one day, and already he was bored. None of the damned Muggles could see him, so he didn't even have the consolation of being able to scare their socks off. Eventually he decided to see if he could leave the store, and to his surprise he could. So he wasn't the kind of haunt bound to a place. He ran through the types of haunts in his mind, surprised he could remember those long ago Defense Against the Dark Arts classes. Ghosts could haunt people, places or things, he recalled. Or they could be trying to impart a message, or have unfinished business, or be bound by a spell. A spell. He remembered the tug pulling him back, away from the light. When he inspected himself more closely, he could see it, and couldn't understand why he hadn't seen it before. A thin cord, colourless but sparkling, seemed to be tied around his ankle. It was stretched taut, and quivered with tension. It led due east, and Peter knew he had to follow it. With a soundless sigh, he drifted free from the place where he had died, and let the spell pull him where it would. Back to England. Back home.

The *Fidelius* was stretched almost to the breaking point. But it held. It held.

Fidelius
Return to Godric's Hollow

Author's Note: Annd – We're back! Apologies for the delay, but one of the characters went on vacation and refused to provide dialogue.

This whole chapter sort of made a left turn at Albuquerque, but even with the detour it wound up where I wanted it to be, and I found out some interesting things about the Department of Mysteries on the trip. Hope you like it!

Disclaimer: As always, anything you recognise is not mine, but belongs to the nice blond lady with all the money. The plot is mine.

FIDELIUS

Chapter 6

Return to Godric's Hollow

November 7, 1985 – The Department of Mysteries

By and large, Sirius Black loved his work. The Department of Mysteries had turned out to be just the place for him, just as Algernon Croaker had promised. There was excitement, and adventure, and just enough danger to keep him on his toes, but it also made him think more than he had been used to. In school, he'd mostly relied on James, Peter, and Remus to do that for him. In the Aurors, you weren't really supposed to think; that's what rules and regulations were for. In the Department of Mysteries, now, he never knew what would be coming at him on any given day. The Department was an uncategorizable melange of magical research and development organization, espionage agency and vigilante group. They did their own research, worked on adapting Muggle ideas to magic in a way that the magical community could accept, kept an eye on other groups that might be messing with Things Wizardkind Was Not Meant To Know, and quashed them if necessary (while stealing all their notes, of course). It had a budget that would have made the Department of Magical Law Enforcement turn green with jealousy if they'd known about it, and it was the considered opinion of the Department of Mysteries personnel that the Minister answered to them instead of the other way around. They also had fingers in other organizations, as Sirius had discovered that there were no less than six Unspeakables who had enlisted in the Order of the Phoenix apparently without Dumbledore's knowledge, not to mention the three that he had known about, and one had successfully managed to infiltrate the Death

Eaters, though apparently not producing the quality of information that Snape had. Sirius had muttered to himself that he was surprised the Department hadn't tried to recruit Snape, at which point Croaker had given him a look that made him wonder if perhaps they had.

Sirius's official job title was "Field Agent", although office opinion was that it should probably have been "Test Pilot." On any given day, he could be Sirius Black, playboy, circulating at a society gala and picking up the odd bit of information (not to mention the occasional attractive witch – the job was not without its perks), or he could be the guinea pig for a new potion or spell, or even sent time travelling to see just *how* far back the new and improved Time Turner could send someone. The answer was three years – much farther than any previous Turner. But like all other Time Turners, it wouldn't bring you back – you had to do that at one second per second, just like anybody else. He'd spent those years travelling abroad, and was rather peeved at first that the fall of Voldemort was just outside that range, but admitted to himself that he probably wouldn't have been able to resist interfering if he had gone back that far, so it was just as well. He really didn't understand about Time Paradoxes, but his training had insisted that causing one would be a Bad Thing. He did have three years' credit added to his pension, though.

In the centre of the Department of Mysteries was an artefact of stunning power that predated Hogwarts and probably even Stonehenge in antiquity. No one knew who had built it, or how, or why. It was simply there. It could not be moved, and so the Department, back in its early days, had simply built their offices around it, and the rest of the Ministry was built around the Department so as to protect it. It was an irregular stone archway, smoothly moulded of native stone instead of built, with what looked like a veil woven of multicoloured clouds hanging across it. From time to time images would flit across the veil, and for that reason, there were always at least three Observers on duty in the room at any given time. At least one of them, hopefully more, would see the images, and then they could be put into a Pensieve and reviewed at the convenience of the researchers. After many years of study of these images, it was believed that the Veil showed images, not of the past, present, or future, but of alternate dimensions where other things had happened. Some of these places were very strange, where history had gone very differently. There had been a few visions of worlds where even the basic definition of what was human was different. But those were few and far between. Mostly the Veil showed images of worlds similar to the real world, but with historical and cultural differences.

Once the function of the Veil was understood, it was natural for the Department to want to tinker with it, and so they had. So far, they had been able to figure out how to trigger images, and how to make them last longer, but there was, so far, no way to select a particular dimension, alternate history, or whatever it was, and no way for anyone to pass through. Any time something more material than air came into contact with the Veil, it disappeared in a burst of light and magical energy. There was considerable internal debate in the Department as to whether the item was destroyed completely or just transmitted to the other dimension, but either way, nobody particularly wanted to be the first one to find out. About a year ago, however, something remarkable had happened. What appeared to be a ghost or an astral traveller of some sort had come out through the Veil. The visitor was apparently an elderly Chinese man, clad in old-fashioned robes and wearing his hair in a long silver pigtail. A silver cord ran from under his robes, back through the Veil. The Observation detail at the time had almost had a collective heart

attack. The old man had floated about the room for a bit, then passed through the wall and into several of the other rooms of the Department, with the Observation detail and soon everyone else on duty at the time in hot pursuit. The cord kept stretching behind him, not breaking. A few random hexes went off, and some shields were set up, but nothing seemed to disturb the old man's progress, and after about half an hour he had floated back into the Veil Room, bowed solemnly to everyone, and disappeared back through the Veil.

Now that they had a clue on how to do it, the Department researchers tore after the problem with a vengeance. Astral travel was not a very common talent, and nobody currently employed by the Department knew how to do it. Several staff members were sent on fact-finding tours to Australia and Tibet to find out how the wizards of those cultures did it, but they sent back memos saying that it would be several years before they managed to learn satisfactorily. So the research teams decided to make a shortcut.

"You're sure this potion is safe?" asked Sirius.

"Oh, yes, completely," said the Department Potions Master and Head of Research, a rather strange fellow who looked much like Nearly Headless Nick and insisted on being called 'Doctor M.' Sirius reflected that if his last name were 'de Mimsy-Porpington,' he'd rather be called almost anything else as well. "We've tried it on a number of volunteers. One hour's astral travel, guaranteed return to your body. The Tibetans will be livid." Doctor M.'s glee was almost palpable.

"I should think they would be. Now how about the combination of the potion and the Veil? I will be able to get back, won't I?"

"We've tested that, too. We gave the potion to a cat, then chased the astral cat through the Veil. It came back just fine and reintegrated with its body when the potion wore off. Of course, it's been hiding under my desk ever since, but I'm sure I'll be able to lure it out eventually."

Sirius shot Doctor M. a suspicious look. He'd never been able to tell whether the man was pulling his leg or not.

"So you want me to take this potion, go through the Veil in astral form, explore what's on the other side for an hour and come back."

"You have a keen understanding of the situation, Mr. Black."

"What if all I want to do is hide under your desk afterwards?"

Doctor M. looked blank for a moment. "I doubt you could fit. But no matter, we'd Stun you, get your memories in the Pensieve, and then build a desk big enough for you to den up under, if that's what you wanted."

Sirius glared at Doctor M. and wondered if the man thought he was being reassuring. "Why do I always get the jobs like this?" he muttered to himself.

"Because you're the junior man, Mr. Black. When we recruit somebody junior to you, he'll get all the interesting assignments. I assure you, I did my fair share of them in my day."

Sirius thought that explained a lot about Doctor M. right there. But he had to admit to himself, he was kind of excited and proud to be the first one who would explore a whole new world, even if it was only for an hour. He wondered if those Muggle fellows who sat on top of explosives to be blasted into space felt the same way.

The time had come. Virtually everyone in the Department was seated in the banks of stone seats, supplementing the seven Observers in the front row. A cot was set up in front of the Archway, and Sirius, wearing only his trousers, lay down on it. The Research team used temporary sticking charms to fasten a number of small magical monitors to his chest, neck, and temples, and then raised himself up on one elbow so he could drink the potion. "Bottoms up," he said, then knocked the sparkling red liquid back all at once, as he'd been instructed. "Merlin, that's foul! Why can't you ... ever ..." The room spun around him, his eyes rolled up in his head, and he fell back onto the cot, unconscious.

After the moment of dizziness passed and the nasty taste disappeared, Sirius pulled himself together and sat up the rest of the way. He felt ... odd. He could see everything clearly, perhaps more clearly than he'd ever seen anything. The patterns the dust motes were making were particularly fascinating, but he pulled his attention back to Doctor M., who was saying something. He was close enough that Sirius should have heard him clearly, but it sounded like he was calling from a great distance, the sound muffled and indistinct. Sirius realised that his sense of hearing was almost completely gone, and that he'd never been aware of the sound of his own heartbeat and breathing until he couldn't hear them any more. It was quite unsettling. He tried to get up off the cot, and found himself floating above it as if he was weightless. Attempting to turn resulted in him flipping over so that he hung face down, looking down at his own unconscious body. A silver cord ran from his body's right wrist to his astral self's right wrist; it seemed to merge with his astral flesh rather than being tied or otherwise fastened around his wrist.

Doctor M. was looking up at him and pointing at his watch now.

Oh, right. I only have an hour. Better get on with it, then. Movement seemed to be accomplished by simply thinking about it, so he cautiously floated over to the Veil. In his current condition, he had a much better perception of the visions that flitted across it, as what had been flashes of colour resolved into images. Some of them were almost indistinguishable from his own dimension, some were indescribably odd. Suddenly one flashed by that caught his interest: a small boy, wearing a baggy t-shirt, jeans, and a loose jacket, running pell mell down the street, clutching an odd-looking stuffed animal. Sirius remembered running for the sake of running when he was that age himself. But the thing that attracted his attention was the child's face and hair. He was the image of James Potter – or as he imagined James would have looked at that age, since Sirius hadn't known him then. So, in that world, he realised, Harry hadn't been lost – or perhaps he had, but in a different way, since he seemed to be in a Muggle environment.

In that instant, he decided that that was the world he wanted to visit. Perhaps finding out what had happened in that world might give him a clue as to what had happened in his. The Veil stabilised

easily, and Sirius realised that even if no one ever went through it again, this was worth the experiment – the knowledge that the thing could be controlled, the visions seen more easily, by someone in astral form. Maybe it was the purity of the magic this way? He'd leave that to the theorists. He was a man of action, and he had a boy to visit.

Suiting the action to the thought, he dived through the Veil.

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November 7, 1985 – Somewhere Else

There was no sign of the boy, or of the street. At first, once the swirling colours stabilised into the material world again, Sirius thought he hadn't gone anywhere at all. He was still in the Room of Probabilities, still in the Department of Mysteries. But then he took a better look, and realised there were some major differences. For one thing, he was the only one in the room. His body was not there, or Doctor M., or any of the Observers or other staff. The platform in front of the veil was flat and empty, and no one at all sat in the tiers of seats. Did this dimension have no Observers?

The light was dimmer than he was used to, coming mainly from torches in brackets affixed to the wall, and an eerie glow from the archway itself, which was made, on this side, of ancient but neatly dressed stones fitted carefully together. The keystone bore a complicated rune on it, and the Veil – the Veil hung dark and menacing, without the light and visions he was used to. Somehow this version of the Veil terrified him, and the sight of his silver cord leading back through it, as the only connection to his own world, made him realise just how tenuous a link it was.

He had to remind himself of his mission. He had been focusing on the boy – where was he? With that thought, he found himself flying up and out of the room, passing through the building so fast no one even realised he was there. He flew over the afternoon streets of London faster than any broom could have taken him, southwest, leaving the city behind in only a few seconds.

One of the Muggle suburbs loomed large in front of him, and suddenly he found himself on the street. The little boy who looked like James was still running, although now he was panting and beginning to slow down. Still he kept going, and Sirius suddenly realised that he was being chased by a group of other boys about his age.

Sirius had grown up as the oldest son of an aristocratic family. He had been pampered and spoiled, and his parents had only permitted him to play with similarly privileged children. At Hogwarts, he and James had been cocks of the walk; any bullying that was going to be done would be done by them. He had never known what it might be like to be on the other end of it. He had never known the fear, the burning in the chest as one ran, the knowledge that whatever you did wouldn't be enough, that you'd be cut off and surrounded anyway, and whatever the bullies had planned would be worse, far worse, because you'd run. The little boy pelting down the walk, whether it was Harry or someone else, was frankly terrified, and his fear was almost a solid thing to the astral Wizard. It struck through him like a blade, chilling him through to the core.

Then the child ran right *through* him. Even if the boy hadn't seen him before, that made him aware of Sirius's presence, but not in a good way. With a scream, the little boy tripped and tumbled on the sidewalk. The boys behind him crowed with triumph; in only a moment, they would be on him.

Wizards could see ghosts, dementors, astral travellers, and such like. It was commonly accepted that Muggles couldn't. Nevertheless, Sirius crouched down to intercept the boys in an instinctive and desperate attempt to fend them off. He made a terrible face and hooked his hands into claws and yelled "YAAAARGH!" at them, as he might have if he were solid, and apparently it was enough. Judging from the boys' reaction, they could see him ... or they could see something, at any rate. The pack of them came to a shuddering halt, tripping over each other, and then they turned and ran away, screaming in panic.

Sirius turned to face the other boy, who was still sprawled on the sidewalk but had rolled over to see what was happening. On closer inspection, the resemblance to James was even stronger. The child was thin and pale, but the wild black hair and the shape of the features were all James's. Only the eyes were different; they were a clear green like Lily's. If James and Lily existed in this world, this was definitely their child. Sirius drank in the details; he could use this boy's description to provide a description of Harry for those who were still looking for him. The boy's face was scraped slightly from his fall, and an older scar, in the shape of a lightning bolt, marred his forehead. His jeans leg was torn now, and a bloodied knee poked through.

"I'm sorry," Sirius said. "I didn't mean to frighten you." He knelt down so as to appear less threatening, but it didn't seem to help matters any. The boy sniffled and crawled backwards, glancing at the stuffed toy that lay on the walk near Sirius, then up at the menacing Wizard, then at the toy again. It was a rather flattened frog, of the cheap sort one would win at a carnival game. Its green plush was worn thin in places, and one seam had opened and the stuffing poked out. It wore what had apparently once been a yellow felt crown sewed to its head, which was now flattened down and resembled a starfish more than anything else. "Do you want this? Is this your frog?" Sirius asked, not even sure if the child could understand him. He reached down as if to touch the frog, but of course his fingers passed right through it. The boy made a sudden move towards the frog, but was too frightened to complete it and touch the toy.

Sirius backed away to a safer distance, and the boy grabbed his frog, scrambled to his feet and ran off, limping slightly.

Sirius frowned as he watched him go. In this world, Harry was living like a Muggle, dressed like a Muggle, and was chased by Muggle bullies, but he was obviously a Wizard or else he wouldn't have been able to see Sirius. That meant ... that meant what? Were the James and Lily of this world Muggles, or at least living as Muggles? He closed his eyes and willed himself to be near James. Nothing happened. Then he tried Lily. Nothing happened. He thought, "Harry James Potter", and found himself near the boy again. The child shrieked and ran up the path to one of the houses. As he approached, the door slammed open, and a beefy moustachioed man appeared on the front step. One of the boys who had been chasing Harry peered out from behind the man. The little boy came to a halt again, looking back at Sirius and then at the man, clearly unwilling to go in either direction.

"Get in here, you little brat!" roared the man. "I heard what you've been doing again, and it stops now, do you hear me!" The boy hung his head and proceeded slowly to the house. "What is that? Have you been picking things out of the rubbish bins again? We'll have none of that, either! Decent people don't take things out of the garbage!" Harry walked into the house and the door closed behind him. Sirius realised that he could walk right through the wall himself, but he didn't want to frighten the child again. He settled for peering in the window, just in time to see the big man clout the boy on the ear and roughly take the plush frog away from him. The man went to the kitchen door, opening it just long enough to roughly thrust the frog into the rubbish can, while still yelling at the boy. "Now get cleaned up, boy, you're filthy and your aunt will want your help with dinner!" The kitchen door slammed shut, cutting off the boy's reply. Sirius waited a few minutes to see if anything else would happen. The boy stealthily opened the kitchen door, sneaked the frog out of the rubbish, and took it back into the house.

Sirius thought furiously. The boy was definitely Harry, but Lily and James were nowhere in evidence, and the boy was living with these people – his aunt? And the big man must therefore be his uncle, which meant ... which meant that after his parents' deaths, Harry must have been sent to live with his Aunt Petunia, Lily's sister, who Sirius only vaguely remembered meeting at the wedding. He had an even more vague recollection of her husband, Vernon; over the years Vernon had grown thicker and redder, and a good portion of his hair appeared to have left the top of his head and moved down to his upper lip, which is why Sirius hadn't recognised him immediately.

So if Harry was staying with these people ... where were the Marauders? Surely they couldn't all have died? He decided to see where they were, and concentrated on one Remus Lupin.

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In his own world, once Remus started to make a little money from the sales of his books, he'd renovated his father's old cottage into a snug retreat. He still spent most of his time living in London, where he now kept a rather more spacious flat, but weekends he stayed in the country. The old stone barn had also been renovated into a much more comfortable sanctuary for the nights of the full moon, with insulation to keep it from getting chilled in the winters, and the flagstone floor softened with old rugs and heaps of pillows that a wolf (and sometimes a large black dog) could sleep on comfortably. The grounds were nicely kept up, as Remus liked to do a little gardening now and then.

Sirius arrived in the back garden, and it looked like none of those renovations had happened at all. The glass panes in the windows were cracked, and shutters hung crookedly. The house had not been painted in ages. The vegetable garden had been cleaned up for the year, but it looked to be more extensive than Sirius was used to seeing, which probably meant that Remus was relying on it for a good portion of his food supply. A dull thudding sound drew Sirius's attention to Remus. The werewolf was using an old axe to split wood, presumably for the ancient wood-burning stove that Sirius and 'his' Remus had gleefully disposed of and replaced with a more efficient gas stove. Remus was wearing worn pants and a sweatshirt that had seen better days; a threadbare jacket had been removed and draped over the woodpile as he worked up a sweat. His face was thinner and more careworn than Sirius remembered; there was old sorrow in the eyes and the beginnings of grey in his hair, despite the fact that he was only thirty. He looked older.

Having apparently split enough wood, Remus filled his arms with it and turned to enter the house, and that's when he caught sight of Sirius's white form, floating shirtless over the cabbage patch.

He dropped the wood and staggered back in shock, gasping, "Oh, no. No. After all this time ..."
Sirius barely heard the words.

"Remus, it's me! You have to tell me what happened! You have to tell me ..."

But Remus either couldn't hear him or didn't choose to answer. His face contorted with grief and pain, and he staggered into the house.

Obviously Remus was under the impression that Sirius was, in fact, the ghost of this world's Sirius, which only raised more questions. Maybe Peter would have some answers. And maybe finding out where Peter was in this world would solve the problem in his own. Expecting the rush of movement, he concentrated on Peter.

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He was on a rickety landing at the top of a crooked flight of stairs. There seemed to be no one in evidence at the moment, for which he was grateful. He didn't particularly wish to scare the daylights out of any more people if he could possibly avoid it. The murmur of voices came from below, however, so there were definitely people in the house, wherever it was. Cautiously, he drifted down the stairs and stuck his face through a wall to see into the next room, ready to pull back in a second if it looked like anyone was about to notice him. In his experience, however, people generally didn't notice what was happening up by the ceiling. It had been a useful blind spot that had been instrumental in the success of several of their best pranks.

Sirius had never been to the Burrow, but it was obvious that that was where he was. Molly Weasley, like many Wizarding mothers, schooled her children at home, and it appeared that she also took in a few others from the area, probably to supplement Arthur's income. A Ministry salary only went so far, especially with a large family. The living room furniture had been transfigured into school desks, and five boys, four of them with red hair and one with brown, were working away at various tasks. The oldest redhead and the brown haired boy were about nine or ten, Sirius would guess, the youngest about five. Seven year old twins were attempting to bean their older brother with small wads of parchment when their mother, who was supervising their work, wasn't looking. From where Sirius was looking, he could also see two little girls, one red haired and one blonde, playing with dolls in a side room.

With the Weasley family plus two occupied downstairs, he would be able to do a quick search of the upper storeys of the house. Thinking of Peter and being here meant his friend had to be in the vicinity, didn't it? He went through all the rooms of the house, being able to identify pretty much which rooms belonged to which children. This was the little girl's room, this the room shared by the twins, this one by the oldest and the youngest boy who were downstairs. There was practically a line drawn down the middle of that room, one side neat, the other side a welter of discarded clothes, toys, and sweets wrappers. An old empty fish tank occupied the windowsill, its screened lid askew. No fish were in evidence; it was quite dry, and someone (probably the younger boy)

had been stuffing it full of parchment scraps. The other two bedrooms were Molly and Arthur's room and a room with neatly made up beds and that air of disuse that suggested it belonged to the two older boys, both of whom would be at school now.

Sirius drifted up the last flight of stairs and found himself in an attic full of boxes, furniture that was too old to use but not so broken that it had to be thrown out, piles of ancient bric-a-brac, and the assorted other effluvia that collects when a family lives a long time in one place. Most of it was covered with dust and cobwebs, disturbed in places by the passage of some small rodent or other. Sirius heard something scrabbling in the far corner of the attic, and came across a squirrel hiding acorns in an old school trunk. That explained the footprints in the dust quite nicely.

A sudden moaning and banging startled Sirius quite badly and he jumped – if he'd had a pulse in this form, it would have been pounding. It was the ghoul that the Weasleys allowed to live up here for some unknown reason – probably because no Weasley had ever had the cowardice to become a ghost, so they kept the ghoul as the next best thing. Sirius's presence seemed to have upset it; perhaps it felt its territory was being encroached upon. He heard Molly Weasley yelling up the stairs, "Will you quiet down up there?" and then start heading upwards, apparently bent on silencing the ghoul. Sirius took this as his signal to leave; there was no sign of Peter here.

There was one more Marauder left to visit, although Remus's reaction did not bode well for whatever he – or rather, this universe's Sirius – might be doing. Just before Molly burst into the attic, he closed his eyes and thought, "Sirius Black!" and zipped away in rapid astral flight.

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Wherever he was, it was dark, which was odd, because it was the middle of the afternoon. Given his lack of sense of feeling and hearing, he found himself quite disoriented in the darkness, having no sense of up, down, or whether or not he was moving. Suddenly he felt a tug in some indescribable part of himself, and with a pull and a jerk, he became aware of gravity again, and touch and sound and smell and taste, and almost immediately wished he hadn't. He lay on a thin pallet on a stone floor, covered with a rough scratchy blanket. His skin crawled and he itched, feeling as if he hadn't bathed in weeks, possibly longer. The air was cold and damp, and filled with the odours of mould and mildew and spoilt cabbage and stale urine and faeces and other things even less wholesome. Somewhere in the distance, a man was moaning, over and over again, a wordless sound of desolation and despair. Sirius sat up, wrapping the dubious comfort of the blanket around himself. His muscles ached as if he hadn't moved in a long, long time, and he was weak and shaky. Nonetheless, he remembered the training he had received as a field agent – if captured, find out as much as you can about your surroundings as fast as you can. Crawling at first, and then standing when his joints had loosened enough, he found the wall and then made a tour of the room. It was definitely a cell, being quite small, with rough stone walls and floor, and a door made of bars set too close together to slip through. There was a very narrow window set high in the wall, which provided a little fresh air and, now that his vision was adjusting to using only human eyes again instead of astral vision, a little light. He held up his hands so he could see them, noting the cracked and shredded nails, the skin stretched taut over his knuckles, caked with grime. Those weren't *his* hands. Those were the hands of a desperate man. A prisoner. Grimly, he realised that he, the astral Sirius Black, had somehow taken over the physical body of this

universe's Sirius Black. He was being held in captivity somewhere, and had been for a long time.

If his physical counterpart hadn't been able to escape in however many weeks or months it had been, it was highly unlikely Sirius would be able to now. He could no longer see the thin tie that had connected his astral body with his real body. He hoped it hadn't been broken; if it had, there was a good chance his body was dead, back in the Room of Probabilities, and Doctor M. would be trying to find out what had happened. If the cord had snapped, he was trapped here, in this body, in this room. And quite possibly would find himself in conflict with the mind and soul of the physical Sirius Black whenever he woke up – if the catatonic state which allowed the astral Sirius to take over as a walk in wasn't permanent.

From somewhere outside the cell, beyond the barred door, came sound. First, a dry, whispering sound, like old cloth being dragged across the stones. Then moans, whimpers, and finally screams from, Sirius presumed, the inmates in other cells. The air in his cell became cold, even colder than before, and he huddled in a corner, pulling the blanket tight around him as whatever it was outside approached. An intense cold swept over him, and he felt his breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart... his eyes rolled up into his head. He couldn't see. He couldn't breathe. His heart was pounding hard enough to shake his whole body with its frantic rhythm. He was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in his ears like a torrent of water, drowning out the sounds from the corridor. He was being dragged away from his borrowed body, outward, the roaring growing louder, and he suddenly knew where he was, what was happening to him, as a skeletal hand reached through the bars as if to grab him. It was a dementor, and that meant that he, Sirius Black, was in Azkaban. The dementor sensed him, was searching out his emotions, his feelings, would feed on him as if he were fresh prey, not the dried up and most likely insane wreck of a man who had been imprisoned here for Merlin only knew how long.

And since he was not really the correct soul for this body, it was succeeding in pulling him free; it would suck him in and destroy him, and somewhere back in the Department of Mysteries he would die if he hadn't already, and nobody would ever know what happened to him at all. Desperately he fought back, but the terrible draw pulled him loose, inch by agonising inch, and bits and pieces of memories of the real Sirius came to him, making it ever harder to hold on. His own insane laughter. Screams of men and women and the crackling of flames. A street blowing up. Peter cutting his own finger off. James and Lily lying dead in the ruins of the house at ... House at ... wherever it was. The memories came faster, going backwards now, but each one bringing with it its own pain, its own despair. Suddenly he came loose, he was fully astral again, and while the bodily senses went away, the astral vision snapped back into focus, and against the background of blackness that was Azkaban stood the dementor, in a way that perhaps no one living had ever seen, its true form hidden by physical robes and its ugliness visible only on the astral level. It was horrifying. It was dragging him in. He was going to die ...

And the silver cord came taut, with a summons that was even more irresistible than that of the dementor. The hour was up, the potion was wearing off. Sirius's body still lived, and his own world waited for him. With tremendous speed, he burst out of Azkaban, swooped across half of Britain, back into the deserted chamber, and through the dark Veil in the Archway.

His eyes snapped open again, and he was blinded by the light. Sound pounded in his ears. He could feel every crease, every thread in the mattress cover of the cot he was lying on. Curling into a foetal position, Sirius screamed.

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Still November 7 - Back in the Department of Mysteries

Sirius didn't wind up under the desk with the cat, but it was a close thing. Between the temporary hypersensitivity after the long period of reduced sensation, the medical team trying to check him out while Doctor M. was simultaneously trying to get his memories for the Pensieve, and the lingering effect of the dementor, he wanted nothing more than to run and hide in the dark. Fortunately, one of the Healers jumped on Doctor M. and threatened to drag him down the hall and lock him in the planet room if he didn't behave himself, and one of the other Healers recognised the symptoms of dementor exposure and pulled an emergency Honeyduke's bar out of the medical kit. The chocolate was incredibly sweet to his enhanced senses, and by the time he'd finished choking the bar down, he thought he would never want to eat the stuff again, but the dreadful chill was beginning to fade. The monitoring team removed the silver instruments from his chest and he was able to put his shirt and robe back on, which also went a long way toward warming him up.

By the end of his shift, Sirius had recovered enough to put his memories in the Pensieve, which got Doctor M. off his back, and to Floo home, where he staggered off to bed.

November 8, 1985 – 12 Grimmauld Place

His dreams were haunted by the other Sirius's memories, which were almost the same as his own, up to a point. But that point was terrible. In his dreams he relived that that Halloween, feeling the events as if they were happening to him. He felt the Fidelius break just before midnight, the sudden knowledge that he knew where James and Lily had been hiding pouring into his mind. He was out at a Muggle bar that night, and it wasn't safe to Apparate. He knew James had some vicious anti-Apparation wards up that he didn't want to run afoul of – he'd helped put them up himself. But his motorcycle was parked out in the lot, and he had the invisibility and flight boosters kicked in the second he got it started. He'd never pushed the Bonnie to its maximum speed before, but he did so now, making it all the way from London to the house in less than an hour, his face wind burned and raw when he got there. Hagrid was there already, which meant to Sirius that Dumbledore had also felt the spell break, and had already removed Harry from the ruined nursery. Harry at fifteen months was not a small baby, but he looked like a newborn in the half-giant's hands.

"Hagrid, what's happened? Where are James and Lily?" Sirius asked, leaping off the motorcycle before it had come to a complete stop. In the light from the headlamp of the motorcycle, he could see tears on the big man's face and sparkling in his beard.

Wordlessly, Hagrid nodded toward the house, where flames still flickered along the roofline. Amazingly, the lights on the ground floor were still on, and Sirius looked into the foyer through

the hole where the door had been blasted from its hinges. James's body lay sprawled in the wreckage of the room, his face twisted in the terror of his last moments.

"Ah, Merlin, no!" Sirius cried in protest. "You can't be ..." He sank to his knees on the steps, unwilling to go inside the house. Hagrid placed a huge hand comfortingly on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, lad. James was a good man."

"Hagrid, is Lily...?" He was unable to finish the question.

"Upstairs," said Hagrid, nodding his head in sorrowful confirmation. "Me 'n the Headmaster found her upstairs, in the li'l tyke's room. We thought for sure he was gone too, but then he just up an' starts crying. Gave us quite a shock, le' me tell yer. Quieted right down when I picked him up, though."

"Give Harry to me, Hagrid. I'm his godfather, I'll look after him."

Hagrid held Harry so that Sirius could confirm for himself that the boy was alright, but refused to let Sirius hold him. "Dumbledore told me to stay with him and not let anyone else take him, not even you, until he got back. He's ter go ter his aunt and uncle, Lily's family. They're his blood kin, after all," said Hagrid.

"Where did Dumbledore go?"

"Went to get Aurors an' a Healer or two fer Harry. This place is unPlottable, and we didn' know if it would be safe ter Apparate with him. He's got a bloody great mark where some kind of curse hit him an' he needs ter be checked out."

"It's safe to Apparate? I was afraid the wards might still be up."

"Firs' thing the Headmaster checked. Wards 're completely down."

"Then you'll probably be getting Muggle attention here soon. We're not very far from town, and somebody is bound to notice the fire, if nothing else. Here, take my bike in case you need to get Harry out of here in a hurry," said Sirius. He flicked his wand at the shining black motorcycle. "*Engorgio!* There, now you can use it comfortably. It handles just like a broom. I have things to do and I won't be needing it."

"Where are yer goin'? What do yer want me ter tell Dumbledore?"

"Tell him I smelled a rat. I'll be back when I can." Sirius smiled, a vicious, humourless grin, and Apparated away.

The memories of the dream Sirius flickered through the events of the next several hours, showing Sirius how his counterpart had tracked down Peter Pettigrew, cornering him in a Muggle neighbourhood near where his mother lived.

"Face me, Peter!" dream-Sirius yelled at the fleeing man.

Realizing he couldn't get away from Sirius on foot, Peter stopped and turned. Sirius saw an evil grin on his face which disappeared just before he spoke. "Lily and James, Sirius! How could you?"

"Wha-?" Sirius was surprised for just a second, which was long enough for Peter to get off a series of curses that made Sirius duck and roll before he returned fire. For a few moments, the quiet Muggle street rang with shouts of "*Reducto!*" and "*Diffindo!*" and spell blasts sizzled through the air. It ended with a tremendous explosion that knocked Sirius off his feet and stunned him, split the street open, and blew the tops off all the fire hydrants on the block. The cold water pouring down on him revived Sirius, but by that time, Peter was gone. Sirius crawled to the edge of the hole and looked down. What looked like a large pipe under the street had been exposed and cracked open, and the distinct odour gave away the pipe's identity as a sewer. Part of Peter's robe (conveniently the part with his monogram on it) was snagged on a piece of rubble nearby.

Wearily, Sirius got to his feet. At that moment, someone poked a wand into the back of Sirius's neck. Moving very carefully, so as not to risk them accidentally blowing his head off, he turned his head to see someone in the distinctive tangerine robes of the Department of Magical Catastrophes. "Don't move, Black! You're under arrest. The Aurors will be along any minute to take you in. Who was that poor sod you just blew up, eh? And all these Muggles! Never mind, we'll find out." The person with the wand raised his voice to address someone else.

"Blankenship! Get the memories of those Muggles before you Obliviate them! We need to find out what happened here!"

"Of course, Mr. Fudge," came someone else's voice. "It's standard procedure; we're already doing it."

Sirius knew what those memories would reveal: Peter accusing him, their duel, ending in an explosion which presumably killed Peter as it destroyed the street. This was classic Peter, all right, the ultimate cover your arse ploy. And no one would believe him. A hysterical giggle rose as he realised how badly they'd all screwed up. He couldn't hold it back. The giggle gave way to chuckles, then to guffaws and full throated laughter. He realised it sounded insane, but he couldn't help it. He just stood laughing at the injustice of it all as the Aurors arrived, removed his wand from his hand, and snapped it. He only stopped laughing when they Stunned him for transport to the Ministry.

Sirius woke half-laughing, half-crying, to see Peter Pettigrew's white face looming over him.

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November 7-8, 1985 – 12 Grimmauld Place

Peter had not been in any particular hurry to return to England and take up the perpetual haunt to which he knew he was doomed. Accordingly, he let the spell cord that bound him tug him gently eastward and drifted along. The passage over the United States, Canada and the North Atlantic

had been rather boring, but it did allow him time to think. Most of his life had been governed by fear. Fear of being picked on at school (solved by finding the guys who were most likely to do the picking, and joining them). Fear of getting caught during their pranks (solved by becoming the guy who covered their arses most times). Fear of Voldemort (solved too late by Harry blowing him up). Fear of death (solved, paradoxically, by dying – so far, it didn't seem to be too bad). There was really very little for him to be afraid of, at this point. Nothing much could hurt a ghost, after all.

He stopped in Ireland to visit Martha. He didn't dare become visible, just in case there might still be some Death Eaters in the area. And he really didn't want to distress his sister any more than necessary. Carefully keeping himself hidden, he spent some time watching Martha playing with Seamus, now a stocky five-year-old who enjoyed careening around the house screeching at the top of his lungs. A little of that went a long way, so at sunset Peter drifted off to check on his mother.

His mum was still living in the Muggle neighbourhood she'd retired to, enjoying her role as a widow of indeterminate age and more than adequate income, which allowed her to meddle happily in the lives of her neighbours, and he spent the evening watching her try to play matchmaker between the son of her next door neighbour and a young woman who had moved in down the block. Some things never changed, and Peter was glad she was happy. After she went to bed, he decided to check up on the other Marauders.

Peter had no idea where Remus's apartment was, since James hadn't told them the Muggle address and the Marauders had always used owls, mirrors, or in an emergency their patroni to communicate among themselves rather than Muggle post. That meant Sirius was the only one Peter could contact, as he had been to Sirius's flat many times and he had the Apparation coordinates memorised. He could undoubtedly tell Peter where Remus lived. Unfortunately, when he got to the flat, he found a Muggle family living there instead, and they had apparently been here for a while. Sirius had moved out. Peter considered the issue while floating in mid-air in the Muggles' living room. Where might Sirius have gone? He could be anywhere in England at this point.

Peter did know that the Blacks had owned a house in London, at Grimmauld Place. Peter had spent an uncomfortable week there the summer after fifth year, when his mum had been trying to foster the connection between him and the influential Black Family, before Sirius had decided he'd had enough and they'd both gone to James's for the rest of the summer. At the time, Sirius had sworn he would never go back, but Sirius's father had died and left him the Head of the Family. Perhaps he'd gone back to the old place? At the very least, someone there, perhaps a portrait or a house elf, might be able to tell him where Sirius was. His mind made up, he drifted off in search of a house whose location he only partly remembered.

It was past three in the morning when he found the house, aided by the fact that to a ghost's eyes, magical places stuck out like a sore thumb. He poked about a bit on the ground floor, noting that all the public rooms had been redone, and the aura of Darkness that had given him the willies so many years before had lightened considerably. It wasn't quite gone yet, but there had been a vast improvement. As he drifted up the stairs toward the family quarters, he heard a man's voice crying out. Was that Sirius? It sounded like he was in pain, or at least in the middle of a

horrendous nightmare. Moving more quickly now, he followed the sound and passed through the door to the master bedroom.

Sirius lay in the huge four-poster bed, twisted in sweat-soaked sheets. "Peter! PETER!" he cried out, following that with sobs that could have been laughter or grief.

Peter had no idea why Sirius would be calling his name, but he floated over. Instinctively, he tried to put his hand on Sirius' shoulder to shake him awake, but his hand passed right through the other man's shoulder. Well, talking to him would have to do. "Sirius! Sirius, wake up! You're having a nightmare! Wake up!" He felt some satisfaction as Sirius stopped sobbing abruptly, and his eyes snapped open.

"Who ... what ... Peter! YOU FUCKING *TRAITOR* !!" Sirius came up off the bed with his hands reaching for Peter's throat, but the violence of his attack sent him staggering right through the ghost. Whirling, Sirius snatched up his wand from the night stand and fired a Cutting Curse, then a Blasting Curse, through the silver-white form. "You betrayed James! And Lily! And *what the hell did you do with Harry?*!" he screamed as the curses blasted through Peter, destroying the wall behind him.

Peter discovered that there were, in fact, things that could cause a ghost pain, and that he could still fear. Perhaps it was just that he was such a new ghost, but the concentrated rage and disgust that Sirius was sending at him hurt him almost as much as Voldemort had years before, the raw emotion searing his ectoplasm with agony. And Peter was still as afraid of rejection as he had ever been, and was now faced with total renunciation by one he had loved – even idolised – while they were growing up. The onslaught of Sirius's emotions flayed Peter the way his spells would have, and with a shriek of pain and despair, he vanished, leaving Sirius panting, and the air of the bedroom at 12 Grimmauld Place filled with plaster dust.

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November 8, The Dower Estate, Godric's Hollow

Awareness returned to Peter as he materialised on a country road with the first light of dawn. In a panic, he looked around to see if Sirius was anywhere in the vicinity, but he wasn't. The only living thing was a hedgehog rooting about in the fallen leaves at the side of the road. Woods encroached on either side of the road, and the naked branches of the trees arched overhead gracefully. Through the trees on the side of the road he was facing, he could see a farmer's meadow. Slowly he turned to face the other side, dreading what he would see. The site of his haunt. The place where he would be bound forever as expiation for his crimes.

The other side of the road was deeper forest, with trees and evergreen underbrush thick enough that even in daylight someone standing on the road couldn't see in more than twenty feet. But as Peter expected, once he was focused on the forest itself, it rushed away to either side, revealing ... the well-kept gardens of the Dower House? Peter was astounded. He had expected to see the house, already damaged That Night, to be in ruins, the gardens overgrown and neglected. It was certainly all he deserved as a haunt. Instead, the house had been repaired, the fence that had taken

James's Blasting Curse had been fixed and repainted, and the gardens – well, the gardens were manicured to within an inch of their lives, the evergreen bushes clipped into elaborate shapes, the perennial gardens and annual borders cleaned up and mulched for the season. The grass on the lawns was absolute perfection, groomed, trimmed to exactly two inches in height, and with not a weed to be seen.

Peter drifted through the fence, feeling the wards – still functional wards! – as he passed through them. Hesitantly, he approached the house, but before he could work up the nerve to go through the front door, he heard the sounds of activity coming from elsewhere – possibly behind the house? He floated around the side of the house, through a topiary hedge, and stopped to gawk.

The entire back garden had been taken over by an elaborate series of raised bed gardens, all neatly framed with thick wood planks. Most of them had already been cleaned up and mulched heavily for the fall, but a band of busy house elves were harvesting late root crops and cabbages from a few still-active beds. Some of the beds had been set up with glass-covered boxes to keep whatever grew there warm and growing later into the season than they probably should have. And off to the side of the garden were several greenhouses, with elves busy there as well.

All of the elves, to Peter's surprise, were properly dressed. Each and every one of them was wearing blue jeans and a denim jacket over a bright red jumper, with white trainers and a blue knit cap. And every one of them, in the outer gardens at any rate, had paused in its work and was staring at him with wide eyes.

He drifted slowly forward, and one of the elves came forward to meet him, bowing nervously. "Excuse me for asking, sir, but are you a wizard? Can you see us?"

"I ... I was a wizard. Now I'm a ghost. And yes, I can see you. Shouldn't I?"

"You see, sir, nobody has been able to see us for years now, and we were hoping a wizard would come to help us, and teach the young Master."

"The young ... Master? Would that be Harry? Harry Potter?" Peter's voice was weak, with shock and joy and disbelief all mingled.

The elf nodded vigorously. "Yes, Young Master Harry Potter! We has ... I mean, we have been doing the best we can. Can you help us?"

"I just might be able to," said Peter, beginning to feel hope for the first time in years. "Where is he, do you know?"

The elf gestured at the greenhouse. "In there, sir. He's planting lettuces with Ferny."

"Thank you. You've been very helpful," said Peter, and he drifted across the gardens toward the greenhouses, with the elves scampering out of his way and chattering among themselves as he passed them. The elf he'd been talking to followed in his wake, going around the boxes instead of across them.

Inside the greenhouse, it was warmer, and the elves had mostly taken off their caps and jackets. A row of shallow growing boxes on short legs ran down the centre of the greenhouse, and an elf and a young boy were bent over one of them. The boy was dressed the same as the elves, although he was still wearing his jacket, with his cap stuffed casually into one pocket. His hair was dark and tousled in a way that was so familiar it would have broken Peter's heart if he'd still had one to break. The elf was making little depressions in the soil with his fingertips, and the boy was carefully placing a single seed in each tiny depression. "You see, Master Harry, we plant each seed just the correct distance from the other seeds, so that they will be the right distance apart for the grown plant. Then cover with just a little bit of compost, and sprinkle with some water." The elf rapidly demonstrated how to do this, the boy paying rapt attention. "When the entire box is done we'll cover it with glass so it will stay warm and moist and the baby plants can sprout."

"And then when the baby plants grow up into lettuces, Brandy can make them into salads for dinner, right?" asked the boy.

"Some of them, yes. And some we let go to seed so we'll be able to plant more later."

"Wow!" There was awe in the boy's voice. "All by themselves? That's the best magic *ever* !"

"All by themselves, Master Harry. And yes, it is the best magic." The elf Peter had been talking to scurried up to the elf who had been directing the planting and got his attention.

"Ferny, there is a ghost here – a *wizard* ghost. He has come to help us!"

Ferny turned with a gasp, to see the tall silver-white shape of the ghost hovering in the doorway. The ghost was not dressed like any wizard Ferny had ever seen; he was wearing Muggle clothes instead of robes, and not very good Muggle clothes at that. He had no wand. But if he was a ghost, then he had to have been a wizard, and Ferny accepted it at face value. He stepped forward, bowing and pulling his cap from his head in respect. "I remember you! You are Mister Pettigrew, one of Master James's friends! You've come back! It's been such a long time, we thought we had been forgotten."

"Not forgotten. Just hidden, perhaps too well. Your name is Ferny?"

"Forgive me, sir, I'm forgetting my manners. I'm Ferny, the Head Elf for the Potter Family. Master Harry, this is Mister Pettigrew, he was a friend of your parents, although you probably don't remember."

Harry came around the box, wiping the dirt from his hands on his pants, and held out one grubby hand in greeting. "Pleased to meet you," he said carefully. Then, to Ferny, "Did I say it right?"

"Yes, Master Harry," said Ferny.

Peter reached down, but his ghostly hand passed through Harry's fingers, and the small boy pulled his hand back in surprise at the chill. "I'm pleased to meet you, too, Harry. The last time I saw you, you were ..." *dead* , he thought. "... very small."

"You knew my Mum and Dad?" asked Harry curiously. "Can you tell me about them? The elves have told me all the elf stuff about them. Nanny says I should talk to a wizard about them, too."

"Your Nanny is right," said Peter. He was quite impressed with the little boy so far. If he'd had to predict how a child raised by house elves would turn out, he wouldn't have thought it would be this well. "Your father and your mother and I were all at school together, and then we stayed friends after that. So I can tell you some good stories."

"Can you teach me how to use my magic? I can use a little house elf magic, but it's really hard. Nanny says it will be better if I can use wizard magic."

"I've never heard of a wizard who could do house elf magic before," said Peter, whose eyebrows had shot up at Harry's ingenuous statement. "So I do imagine it's very hard. You're a little young to be doing wizard magic ..." Here the little face took on a woebegone expression. "But I'll do the best I can. There isn't much we can do without a wand."

"But I have a wand!" said Harry, his face lighting up again. "I have three wands! Nanny put them in a box for me for when I got big enough to use them. Can I try one now?"

Peter looked up at Ferny. This was going very fast, perhaps too fast. Ferny seemed to think so, too. "Now, now, Master Harry. What is the Third Rule of Tasks?"

"Finish what you start'," recited Harry.

"We have lettuces that we need to finish planting, and then Brandy will have breakfast ready for us," said Ferny. "After that it will be time for lessons, and Mister Pettigrew will talk to Nanny about teaching you magic."

The little boy pouted for a moment, but then returned to his lettuce planting. "'The sooner begun, the sooner done'," he said.

Ferny smiled in acknowledgment. "The Second Rule of Tasks. Very good, Master Harry. Gobbly, you stay with Master Harry and help him with his lettuces. Mister Pettigrew, would you like to come talk to Nanny about Master Harry's lessons?"

Rather bemused by the elf's take-charge attitude, which was something he'd never seen before in an elf – not that he'd ever had any long conversations with house elves before – Peter allowed himself to be led into the house, where he was introduced to Brandy, who was supervising three younger female elves who were making a large breakfast, and to Nanny. The female elves were wearing denim skirts and white aprons instead of the jeans along with their red jumpers and white trainers. Ferny and Nanny escorted him into what had been the front parlour of the house, which was now done up as a classroom with one child-sized desk and seven smaller ones, which Nanny proudly announced were for the elflings. Peter was astonished that the elflings were taking lessons too, but Nanny and Ferny explained how Master Harry would not take lessons unless the elflings were, too. He was quite pleasantly surprised to learn that Harry and all of the elflings now

knew their numbers and letters and how to write their names, and they were all learning how to read simple books. Harry was also learning how to do tasks around the house and garden, because he didn't want the elflings to do things that he couldn't. The elves were quite nervous when they made this admission.

"We hope that is all right, Mister Pettigrew. We know that wizards don't normally do housework, but Master Harry was not happy not doing anything."

"That's perfectly all right," said Peter reassuringly. "When he goes to Hogwarts, gardening skills will help him in Herbology, and cooking in Potions." The elves brightened and their ears perked up in relief. "I will take care of teaching Harry his magic, and Nanny, I'll help out with the other things a young man will need to know. Does he have any friends other than the elflings? Human friends?"

Nanny shook her head sorrowfully. "We has ... have not dared to take Master Harry away from the Estate since we are all invisible. Not even the wizard who lives in the town can see us. We were afraid to take Master Harry out in case he stopped being able to see us, too."

Peter was quite puzzled by this. "I'll have to see what I can find out about that. I'm pretty sure the spell wasn't supposed to work quite that way. I'll have to get it worked out before Harry is ready to go to Hogwarts, or else he might be invisible there. Are Lily's – I'm sorry, Mistress Lily's books still in the house?" The elves showed him the library where Lily's books were, and told him an elf would be assigned to him to move books and turn pages for him whenever he needed help, since he couldn't handle them himself.

The elves also showed him the boxes in which the three wands and the three rings were kept. He shuddered at the sight of Voldemort's wand and ring. "Take that ring and put it in a special box. It will have to be destroyed eventually, but there are probably spells on it that will have to be taken off first." He could tell there was something Dark about that ring; perhaps being a ghost made him more sensitive to it. "The second ring is for Master Harry when he grows up. He can start to wear it when he goes to school. The third ring ..." he paused, looking at his own signet. The last time he'd seen it, his own bloody finger had been stuck through it, but the elves apparently hadn't connected him, with his missing finger, with the gory digit abandoned by the Death Eater that night. "The third ring should be saved in case its owner can be found. As for the wands, we should see if Harry can use any of them. If not, he'll have to wait until he can go to Diagon Alley to buy a wand when he's eleven."

"Even the Dark Wizard's wand?"

"There aren't any spells on the wand itself to make it Dark," Peter explained. "If it's compatible with Harry's magic, there's no reason why he shouldn't use it. But I doubt it will be compatible at all, so you don't have to worry."

Peter had it all wrong, though – after breakfast and his writing lesson and story time, Harry would not be put off any longer and insisted on trying the wands. Reluctantly, Peter had him try one at a time, giving each a wave the way Ollivander had him do it years before. To his surprise, Harry

managed to get sparks to shoot from all three wands; gold from his father's, silver from his mother's, and red from the Dark Lord's yew wand. "Well, that's unusual. We'll have to try each of those wands out as we go. We may find you're better with one of them than the others."

The little boy was delighted. "That was way easier than using elf magic! Did you see, Nanny? I shot sparks! Wow!" That was the end of lessons for the day, as Harry was so enamoured of his new ability that he couldn't focus on anything else until lunch time, practicing with all three wands one after another, and sometimes with one wand in each hand.

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After a week, Peter had settled into the household as if he had always been there. During the day, he taught lessons to Harry and the elflings, and even to the older elves where he had exceeded Nanny's ability. In the evenings, one of the elves turned pages for him while he read Lily's books, and at night, after the elves had gone to sleep, he drifted about the grounds of the Estate keeping watch. He discovered that he was, as he had feared, now bound to the grounds of the Dower Estate, but it really wasn't so bad. The elves could bring him any books or anything else he needed, and he didn't require food, drink or sleep. He was rapidly learning to love Harry like his own child, and had made a private oath to protect him to the best of his ability. He had failed in his duty to his friends once; he was not going to fail their son.

By Christmas, he thought he had found out why the elves were invisible. It was because he, the Secret Keeper, had never told *them* where they lived. They were in the unusual position of being both beings who were part of the Family by oath, but also were part of the Potter property, and as such were hidden under the Fidelius. On Christmas Day, he gathered all of the elves and Harry in the parlour, and repeated the Secret while they all listened solemnly. The next day, Brandy took her shopping basket into the village and delightedly found that the greengrocer could see her now! She was so happy she started weeping and hugged the man's knees.

They also experimented with taking Harry into the village. While the elves were invisible to Muggles, Harry could be seen quite clearly, but nobody seemed to care terribly much that a young boy, without parents in sight, had suddenly appeared. While he was there, the children accepted him and their parents kept an eye on the black haired boy who was learning, for the first time, how to play with human children his own age. When the elves took him back to the Estate, children and parents alike simply assumed he'd gone home (which, in fact, he had). This relieved Peter considerably. It meant that Harry was going to be able to go to Hogwarts after all.

Peter thought very carefully about Harry's safety, and discussed it with Nanny and Ferny, who were the elves all the others looked to regarding Harry. More importantly, Harry looked to them almost as surrogate parents, while Peter himself had taken on the role of beloved Uncle. The elves brought Peter copies of the *Daily Prophet* and assorted news magazines so that he could get caught up on things in the wizarding world. What he saw concerned him greatly.

Not all of the Death Eaters had been caught. While Severus Snape had been instrumental in capturing the most dangerous ones, the ones whose thirst for blood and pain had stained the nights green with the light of the Morsmordre, many of the others had either escaped or been given

reduced sentences in return for their cooperation and provision of information. Some, such as Lucius Malfoy, had regained positions of prestige in society. Malfoy was being very careful always to be seen as a strong partisan of the Light, supporting the Ministry politically and giving generous donations to charitable organizations, but Peter didn't trust him as far as he could throw him.

Snape himself had been given the Order of Merlin, First Class, for his efforts. He was reclusive, rarely leaving the grounds of Hogwarts except for a few required Ministry functions during the year, some said because he feared the remaining Death Eaters, and some said because he didn't like publicity. Peter thought it was a combination of both. He still didn't like the man, and never would, but Merlin willing, they'd never come into contact with each other again. Peter was surprised to find out which side of the conflict Snape had come down on; like the others, he'd been quite sure Snape was firmly on Voldemort's side. Everybody else seemed to be quite sure he had been working for the Light. Peter still had his suspicions.

The papers and magazines also mentioned Sirius, although not Remus. Apparently the Head of the Black Family was a bit of a social butterfly, appearing at society functions with different witches on his arm each week. He had returned to the Black Family seat, as Peter already knew, and freely associated with everyone, even former Death Eater families. Peter no longer knew which side he was on, and he still remembered the pain of Sirius's attack on him in the bedroom at 12 Grimmauld Place. Of course, he'd been justified, Peter reflected, but still ... the Sirius he knew had not been so quick to curse, or so prone to use deadly force. No, Sirius might be Harry's godfather, but Peter was past his boyish hero-worship. He would withhold judgment, and if he saw signs that Sirius was reliable, he would allow him back into Harry's life. On the other hand, he didn't want to leave the man for years wondering if the boy was alive or not.

Remus also deserved to know. Peter knew nothing about the werewolf that indicated he might be unreliable, aside from possible continued association with Sirius. Remus had always been the steadiest of the four of them, and had loved Harry like the son he would never have himself, given the Ministry's rules prohibiting them from marrying.

There was also the question of Dumbledore and Voldemort. While Peter had no reason to distrust the elderly wizard, exactly, he also had shared the misgivings that the others had. Dumbledore was not cautious enough; he trusted too many. Peter, who had become professionally paranoid the last few years, agreed with Alastor Moody that Dumbledore shared his secrets too freely.

Dumbledore had vouched for Snape, which was a point against him. Still, Dumbledore had been, and still was, the leader of the Light (regardless of what the current Minister might say about that), and should know that Harry still lived. He had to be able to take that into consideration for future plans.

Accordingly, Peter decided to send an elf to the Hogsmeade Owl Post station with letters for Sirius, Remus and Dumbledore, telling them that Harry was well and would be attending Hogwarts when the time came. In the meantime, he was safest where he was and they should not look for him.

Because Peter knew something that no one else did.

Voldemort was not dead.

Fidelius
Welcome to Diagon Alley

FIDELIUS

Chapter 7

Welcome to Diagon Alley

July 21, 1991 – The Dower House, Godric's Hollow

"Master Harry, Mister Pettigrew, there is a strange owl here," said Nanny at breakfast.

"Let it in, by all means," said Peter, who was floating about an inch above his chair. He didn't eat breakfast anymore, but enjoyed spending this time at the beginning of the day with Harry. It was a time just to talk, before they got involved with their day's activities.

Nanny opened the kitchen window, and a brown owl flew in and landed on the back of the chair next to Harry. It had a parchment envelope clamped tight in its beak, and politely presented it to Harry.

The boy took it eagerly. Sure enough, there on the front was his name in green ink, and on the back was the Hogwarts wax seal. "This is it! It came, Uncle Peter!"

"And did you think it wouldn't? You've had your name on the list since before you were born, Harry. You'd have to have been a total Squib not to get in."

"I was afraid the owl wouldn't make it."

"We changed the wards just so the owl could make it, remember? Or weren't you sure you'd done it properly? And even if the owl hadn't made it through the wards, it could still have gone to the drop box like the other mail, and one of the elves would have picked it up." Peter leaned forward, his crossed arms "resting" on the tabletop. Even after all these years, he still mimicked the gestures of being alive. "Now, are you going to open it, or are you just going to admire the envelope? I think the owl is waiting for your reply."

The owl hooted in the affirmative.

"There, you see? So you'd better read it now. Brandy, could we have a treat for our guest?"

Brandy placed a dish of water and a plate containing owl treats on the table; the owl bobbed its head in thanks and hopped down onto the tablecloth to partake of its snack.

Nanny brought Harry the letter opener from the big desk in the library, and Harry reverently opened the envelope, being careful not to break the seal, but to peel it off intact. He wanted to keep it with his other letters, the ones he had received from his father's friends, Sirius and Remus. (His correspondence was limited enough that every letter was precious to him.) There were several sheets of parchment folded inside the envelope, and he slid them out and opened them.

"Please read them to me, Harry," asked Peter.

"HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY," Harry read, doing his best to pronounce the words in capital letters with due emphasis. "Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE (Order of Merlin –"

"That's just the letterhead. You can skip that. Read the body of the letter, Harry," said the ghost.

"Oh, right." Harry skimmed over the rather impressive list of titles and his own name, finding it amusing that the address was listed as 'Somewhere Safe'. "Dear Mr. Potter, We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31. Yours sincerely, Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress."

"And what else do you have there?"

"It looks like ... a list of books and supplies, just like it says in the letter, and a train ticket for the Hogwarts Express from Platform 9 ¾ at King's Cross station in London. I thought I'd just Floo into Hogsmeade."

"And miss the train ride? We can't have that. It's an important part of the whole Hogwarts experience. Gives you a chance to meet people before they get Sorted. Even the students who live in Hogsmeade Floo to London just so they can take the train back up. They don't actually collect the ticket, you know, but it makes a great souvenir for your scrapbook."

"Do you want me to read the supplies list?"

"Not right now. We'll check it over after we've sent your reply back. There's no point in abusing the patience of the owl."

Since the bird had finished its treats and was now contentedly dozing on the back of the chair, Harry doubted it was feeling particularly abused, but he obediently followed as Uncle Peter floated into the library. Seating himself at the big desk, he drew out a sheet of parchment, a quill and ink, and carefully wrote out the letter the ghost dictated.

"Dear Deputy Headmistress McGonagall, Thank you very much for your letter. I shall be pleased to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry beginning September 1. Yours sincerely,

Harry J. Potter."

"Very good," said Peter, looking it over while they waited for the ink to dry. "Your penmanship is improving."

"I've been practicing," said Harry proudly, as he wrote out the return address on an envelope. "The new non-splattering quills help a lot."

"All right, now let's write a note to your godfather and see if the owl will take that to the drop box when it takes this." Peter waited while Harry got out another sheet of parchment, and cleared his throat nervously before he began. This letter was the one that bothered him. While he had permitted Sirius and Remus to correspond with Harry at his birthday and on holidays through the drop box, the boy had never met the two living Marauders. Indeed, what Peter was about to suggest would be his first foray into the magical community at large.

"Dear Sirius and Remus, Today I received my Hogwarts letter. I have written to Deputy Headmistress McGonagall to convey" - here he had to spell the word out for Harry - "my acceptance. I am planning to go to Diagon Alley to purchase my school supplies on July 31, and I would be pleased to meet you both on that day if it is convenient. Perhaps we could take luncheon together. Yours sincerely, Harry J. Potter."

"Are you sure that's what I should write?" asked Harry. "That sounds awfully formal."

"The sort of letter where you're asking someone for something should be formal," said Peter. "And these letters mean that you are beginning to be grown up, and you should write as a grown up. But you could write a P.S. on the bottom with whatever else you want."

"P.S.," wrote Harry, sticking his tongue out in concentration, "I'm really excited about going to Diagon Alley and to Hogwarts. But I'm nervous too. I've never been away from home before and I hope everything will be all right. Is it normal to be scared and excited at the same time? Uncle Peter says it's normal, but I feel like I have eaten all the butterflies in the garden. I can hardly wait. Signed, Harry."

"Perfect," said Peter. "I like the part about the butterflies. Now do an envelope for that one, and then ... I think it's time you used that," said Peter, pointing at the box that contained James's signet. "Technically you shouldn't use it until you're eleven, but that's only a few days from now."

Harry put both letters in their envelopes, and removed the precious ring from its box. He used a cantrip to melt some red sealing wax, and pressed the ring down carefully to leave its imprint, carefully speaking the charm to make sure the letters could only be opened by their recipients as he did so.

"Can I wear the ring now, too?" he asked.

"You should wear it when you go to Diagon Alley," said Peter. "It will identify you to Remus and Sirius. Otherwise, you should wear it only for special occasions. Formal events and things like

that. There may be a few dances and balls when you're at Hogwarts, and you should wear it then. Also whenever you're meeting important people. And if you need to sign documents of any kind, which I really can't imagine happening until you're an adult, you'll need to use the ring to seal them if you're acting on behalf of the family instead of just yourself. When you come of age at seventeen, you can wear it all the time if you want. You should wear it on your right hand, whichever finger feels most comfortable, and it will size itself to fit."

"That is so cool," breathed Harry, trying it on for a moment before returning the ring to the box.

"Yes, it is. Now let's give these letters to the bird, and get on with our lessons for today. Just because you got your Hogwarts letter doesn't mean you get to skip your Latin quiz."

"That's okay. Even a quiz won't bother me today!" Harry replied with a smile. He gathered up the letters and dashed back to the kitchen to give them to the owl.

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July 21 – Minerva McGonagall's Office, Hogwarts

The owl didn't have to stop by the drop box, because the addressees of both letters were in the same place. Sirius and Remus had both returned to Hogwarts and were waiting in Minerva McGonagall's office for the return owl. This was a privilege she wouldn't extend to just anyone, but James, Sirius, Remus and Peter had been four of her favourite students, and the circumstances were extraordinary. Even so, Sirius was abusing the privilege with incessant pacing to and fro in front of her desk, while Remus was seated in a side chair quietly working on correcting a manuscript. "For Merlin's sake, Sirius, sit down! You're going to wear out my carpet with all that pacing. It's barely past noon, and we don't even know if the owl will return today."

"Didn't you send your fastest one?"

"Yes, but we have no idea where it was going. Harry could be living in New Zealand now, for all we know."

"No, it's closer, much closer. An hour from London on my bike, it was. No more than that." Sirius had told select individuals about what he had seen and experienced on his trip to the other world, and Remus, Minerva, and Albus Dumbledore were among that group.

"Sirius, that was in the other place, not this one," interjected Remus. "We don't know if they even used the same place to hide in both dimensions."

"It looked the same, from what I can recall. *That* Sirius knew where it was, but I can't remember, although I remember everything else about that night. Everything else was the same, right up until ... until that moment. Why wouldn't they have used the same place?"

"We don't know everything that led up to it, Sirius. So we don't know if everything was really the same, or if that was just the point where it became noticeable to you."

"Stop being so reasonable. It's not helping," snarled Sirius. Remus shrugged and returned his attention to his manuscript. They had gone over the subject of what happened in the other world so often they'd begun having the same discussions over and over, and there were never any concrete answers.

Harry's letter, of course, had not been the only letter sent out; over fifty owls had gone to the parents of children eligible to attend Hogwarts as first-year students, and some of them were already beginning to fly back through Minerva McGonagall's office window with variations on "Thank you, my little Eddie will certainly be there." Some few came back with notices that the families had made other arrangements for the education of their children, such as the Goodenough family, which, as McGonagall had predicted, had decided to send its eldest son to Durmstrang. With each owl that flew in the window to deposit its paperwork, Sirius jumped up eagerly, only to slump dejectedly when it was not from Harry. By the time fourteen owls had arrived and been relieved of their correspondence, the Deputy Headmistress was annoyed enough to snap sharply, "Mister Black, would you please stop bobbing up and down like a Bumble. I shall turn you into a desk ornament if you keep it up! And I just *might* forget to unTransfigure you when his answer does come."

Sirius subsided with a grumble.

Fortunately for his intentions not to end up as a paperweight, the sixteenth owl that came through the window bore Harry's response, as well as his note to the two Marauders.

While the two men were huddled over their letter, Minerva briskly made a copy of hers and summoned a house elf to take the copy to Headmaster Dumbledore. A moment later, the small fire in Minerva's office hearth flared up green and the Headmaster's head appeared in the flames. "Minerva, now that we have Mr. Potter's ... ah, just the men I wanted to see!" he said, realizing Sirius and Remus were in the office. "Could I see the three of you in my office when you have a chance? Thank you so much." He vanished from the flames without even waiting for their reply, secure in the knowledge that the two young wizards and the middle-aged witch would be along to see him shortly.

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July 21, 1991 – Albus Dumbledore's Office, Hogwarts

Dumbledore told the gargoyle to let his visitors up directly, without going through the rigmarole of a password. There was no point to it, with so few people in the school at present. As usual, overstuffed armchairs positioned themselves for his guests' maximum comfort, and the candy dish scurried to the edge of the desk. Severus was the only person besides Albus who consistently accepted its offerings, but it was always hopeful.

"Minerva, gentlemen ... Now that we have received Harry Potter's acceptance, we need to discuss what preparations must be made."

Remus and Sirius exchanged glances while Minerva sat upright on the edge of her seat. "What

preparations? I'll be attending to all the organization and scheduling matters as usual. He obviously doesn't need muggleborn intake assistance, which was something I was concerned about. There's no reason everything shouldn't go smoothly."

"No reason?" asked Albus. "Aside from the fact that we have no idea where the boy has been living all these years, or who's taught him what?" The customary twinkle was missing from Albus's eyes. "All we know is that we received one letter from someone purporting to be Peter Pettigrew almost six years ago now, followed by a series of letters from someone purporting to be Harry James Potter."

"The letter from Peter had our old passwords on it, Albus, and the letters from Harry have information that only Peter could have told him," said Sirius. "And this letter we got today was sealed with the Potter signet. Only Harry could use that." He passed the letter over for the older man's perusal.

"That's good, that's very good," said Dumbledore. "He wants to meet with you both before school starts. You should do it, of course, it will give us some idea of what he's been exposed to, and whether or not we need to worry about him tending to the Dark or the Light."

"He's just a child!" said McGonagall, shocked. "He's not even eleven until next week! He's far too young to be worrying about him going Dark."

"I assure you, Minerva, that a child can be steeped in Darkness long before he comes to school, and we've all seen the results. The boy who grew up to become Voldemort was one such. I did his muggleborn intake interview myself, and-"

"Voldemort was a muggleborn?" said Sirius in surprise.

"No, a half-blood, actually. Although at the time we thought he was muggleborn, and he'd been brought up in a Muggle orphanage. I didn't find out the truth until years later."

"Why wasn't this common knowledge? The purebloods would never-"

"Alas, by the time I managed to link the half-blood student at Hogwarts, who had disappeared several years after finishing school, with the unknown Dark Lord who sprang upon the wizarding world twenty years later, it was already far too late for that to have done much good. Many of them were bound to him personally by that time, and would not have been able to desert him if they had wanted to. Many of them already knew and didn't particularly care – he backed their agenda, and they assumed they'd be able to depose him easily after their victory. And many of them wouldn't have believed it if the *Daily Prophet* headlines screamed it, assuming that it would be a ploy intended to weaken Voldemort's position. I wasn't absolutely sure of it, in fact, until after he had fallen, when Severus and Malfoy were able to, ah, 'liberate' some of Voldemort's personal papers." He sighed heavily. "There were signs already in the young Tom Riddle which disturbed me greatly. I kept a close eye on him for the first few years, but he was on his best behaviour then and I never found anything that I could lay directly at his feet. I fear also that I was distracted by Grindelwald's rise to power, which happened concurrently. By the time I had

dealt conclusively with him, Riddle had already left school. But you can understand why I am deeply concerned about the young Potter. When a child as powerful as he must be, in order to fulfil the Prophecy at such a young age, is raised in isolation by a person or persons whose motives and allegiances are dubious, we must be careful."

"But he's a Potter. His family has been on the side of Light for generations," protested Minerva.

"And mine has been Dark for as many generations," said Sirius. "Yet I turned my back on it. I understand Albus's caution, Minerva. If we don't know what Harry has been taught, we don't know what he believes or what side he will ultimately be on."

"You talk as if the war were still going on," said Minerva. "You-Know-Who was vanquished years ago, the Death Eater trials are long over, the Death Eaters themselves sent to Azkaban, the Order disbanded for more than seven years now. Surely there's no danger-"

"There is always danger," said Dumbledore. "Severus and Mr. Malfoy are both convinced that Voldemort is not, in fact, dead, but fallen, his power broken. Whether he can regain his power is something that remains to be seen, and on this subject Severus and Mr. Malfoy differ in opinion. I do not know which is correct; we must wait and see. In the meantime, we are faced with the difficulty of ensuring that this boy, about whom we know practically nothing, does not rise to take his place. If he is, in fact, anything like his parents, he will be placed in Gryffindor, and I believe we would need have no further concern for him then; I trust you to keep him on the right track." Dumbledore turned again to Sirius and Remus. "The two of you are already in correspondence with young Harry, and he has asked to meet you in Diagon Alley. I would appreciate it if you would not only meet with him for luncheon, as he suggests, but offer to accompany him when he does his shopping. He did not mention being accompanied by an adult in his letter, and it would not be wise for any child of that age to be roaming about Diagon Alley alone. I want you to talk with him, get to know him. Get him to trust you, if you can. Find out who has been taking care of him, and what they have taught him. If it's Pettigrew, try to get into contact with him so we can find out what exactly happened that night. If he is still loyal to the Light, he may need help, and we should provide it. If he is Dark, we must be prepared to rescue Harry from him and find a place of safety where he may live. But Pettigrew is secondary. Your first concern must be Harry."

Remus stood, looking somewhat disgustedly at Dumbledore. "I'd be doing everything you asked anyway, just because he's a child, the son of my old friends. Light and Dark don't enter into it. He's a child and we have to look out for his welfare." He turned and walked to the door without waiting for Dumbledore to speak again. Sirius nodded apologetically at the older man and hurried out in Remus's wake.

"If you will excuse me, Headmaster," said Minerva, somewhat frostily. "I have to plan for this year's Muggleborn Intakes."

Dumbledore nodded, and she rose and left the office, leaving the old man behind his desk, alone with his thoughts.

July 31, 1991 – The Dower House, Godric's Hollow

Harry's eleventh birthday dawned bright and clear. Normally, Harry was up at dawn, along with the house elves, but today he had climbed out of his curtained bed even before the elves were stirring in their snug little house, and he had put on his glasses and watched the stars fade until the first birds started chirping. Turning on his bedroom light, he once again mentally thanked Uncle Peter for showing the elves how to reset the circuit breaker so the bedrooms had power again; it was much more convenient to switch on the light rather than light a candle or oil lamp. The night before, he and Nanny had carefully selected and laid out the clothes he would wear for his trip to Diagon Alley: Muggle trousers, trainers and shirt for comfort, and a dark green open-front robe with black trim to wear over them. When properly dressed, he combed his hair (although it always stuck up in the back no matter what he did) and ran downstairs for the morning elf-meeting. Ordinarily he helped in the garden in the mornings before breakfast, but Nanny didn't want him getting his good clothes dirty, so he did indoor jobs like setting the table which wouldn't muss him up.

He couldn't eat much breakfast, and spent the next hour alternating between watching the clock and fidgeting with his possessions. Finally, finally, the hour arrived.

"All right, let's go over everything one more time," said Uncle Peter as Harry stood, practically at attention before the fireplace in the parlour, where he had started a small fire. "You have your wand?"

"Check." Harry saluted with his mother's willow wand, which they had decided was the best and safest for him to bring with him today. After some experimentation, they had discovered that the willow wand was best for Harry to use for charms, while his father's mahogany wand was good for the simple transfigurations he'd been able to work. Like most children, his magic wasn't developed enough to do complex transfigurations on command yet, accidental magic being another kettle of fish entirely. The yew wand found in the nursery worked best, apparently, for hexes and jinxes, and presumably curses once he was able to cast them, and also counters and protections, but given how that wand had come to be in the nursery in the first place, Peter wanted to keep its existence a secret as long as possible. The willow wand would do well enough for the simple jinxes that Harry had been able to learn so far. He slid the slim wooden shaft into the sheath attached to his belt.

"Signet ring?"

"Check." Harry buffed it a final time against his shirt and displayed it to Peter. He had decided to wear it on the ring finger of his right hand.

"Money pouch and Gringott's key?"

"Check and check." The pouch already contained a few coins which Nanny had taken out of the goblin pot for him, but the expenditures he would be making today were greater than could be paid

from the housekeeping money, so he would have to visit Gringott's to get money from his education trust.

"Pouch of emergency Floo powder?"

"Check." He actually had two of these, one in his robe pocket and one in his trousers pocket. The Floo at the Dower House was active, since James and Lily had been aware that they might have to use it as an emergency escape, but of course the address was unknown to anyone because of the Fidelius. Under supervision of the elves, Harry had made a few practice trips between the Dower House and the Big House at Godric's Hollow, and had learned how to spin through the Floo without falling over at the far end, and how to roll to his feet if he accidentally fell over anyway.

"Supplies list?"

"Check." The list had been carefully marked up to indicate those things that Harry did not have to buy, mostly because they had them at home, such as cauldrons and the History of Magic textbook, which hadn't changed since James and Lily had attended school. Some of the other schoolbooks were the same, too, but Harry had written down the editions of the ones he had and would compare to see if there was a newer edition available. Then he planned to go through all the books and copy the marginal notes from his parents' books; there was no sense in wasting perfectly good notes.

"List of places to go other than buying school supplies?"

"Check," Harry said, waving the second list. "Gringott's to ride in the carts and get money, the *Daily Prophet* offices to get them to stop offering a reward for finding me – I wonder if I could talk them into giving me the reward for finding myself?" he asked.

"You can try, but I don't think you'll be successful. Maybe you can get Sirius to claim he found you, and split the proceeds. Or you could let Remus claim it. He probably needs the money." Peter thought that such a prank might appeal to the former Marauders.

"I'll ask them," said Harry. "Let's see, um, go to Quality Quidditch Supplies to look at brooms, have lunch at the Leaky Cauldron and ice cream at Fortescue's. Pick up pranking supplies at Gambol & Japes. Get my glasses adjusted at Smith's Opticals. I think that's everything." Harry and Peter had realized the year before that his vision was going bad, just as his father's had, and the eyestrain was causing Harry to use headache potions almost every day. Knowing that wizarding families rarely threw anything away and sooner or later everything wound up in the attic, the elves rummaged through the trunks in storage until they found several pairs of James's old glasses. They weren't perfect, and Harry had neither the spell knowledge nor the control to transfigure the lenses to the correct strength, but they were better than nothing. At Smith's, he could get them adjusted properly – maybe even get some new frames, since the ones he had were old-fashioned and looked kind of dorky, in his opinion.

"Incredibly overprotective house elf bodyguards?"

"Check," said Nanny, popping in next to Harry. She was wearing a new tunic made out of dishtowels, topped with a fashionable shawl that had been a lace curtain in its previous life. Harry really didn't like the idea of her wearing the towels out in public, but as an eleven-year-old he was beginning to understand these things. So that she could have something pretty, he had presented her with the curtain, which she had accepted with grateful tears, and now wore draped about her skinny shoulders. She also carried a leather bag in which to carry Harry's purchases.

"And check." Ferny's voice came from somewhere near Harry. While it wasn't exactly normal for a young child to be travelling about with only an elf for escort, it wasn't unheard of, either. Ferny and Nanny had argued over which of them should go, and it was eventually decided that they both should. Nanny would be visible, and perform the usual tasks of carrying her master's packages and watching out for him, while Ferny would remain invisible in case additional help was needed.

"Okay, now I have everything."

"Not quite. Put on your glamour."

"Oops. Sorry." Harry drew his wand again and waved it at himself, carefully casting the charms Peter had taught him. His hair, while remaining its standard mess, turned to a medium brown and the eyes behind his glasses frames became hazel. Without changing anything else, he looked like a different boy altogether.

"Good. That ought to keep people off you until the *Prophet* can get a story out. You look enough like James that anyone who knew him could recognize you, but people casually passing on the street won't."

"I know, I know!" Peter did have a tendency to repeat things from time to time. It was apparently one of the occupational habits of being a ghost. "Can I go now?" The boy was practically dancing with impatience.

"You remember who you can talk to and what you're supposed to say?"

"I remember. Talk to Padfoot and Moony, have them take me to the *Prophet*, don't tell anybody my full name if I can help it, don't tell anybody anything about where I live or who with, or that you're a ghost. Why not?" he asked curiously.

"It would raise more questions that you can't answer and I don't want to answer right now, okay? There are things I'll have to tell you when you're older, but for now we just need to get you off to school. Off with you now," Peter said reluctantly. He was nervous about today's outing. Harry had never been away from home longer than a few hours, and never farther than the village of Godric's Hollow. How would he cope with meeting strangers, with making purchases, and with navigating the crowded streets of Diagon Alley? Peter was sure it was safer now than it had been, say, fifteen years ago, but there were still places where a young boy could not wander safely.

Harry had no such worries. Today was his, today he was free to explore a whole new world! "Bye!" he chirped happily, and grabbed some Floo powder from the jar on the mantel. He flung it

into the flames, which roared up green. "The Leaky Cauldron!" he said clearly, then jumped into the flames and spun away.

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July 31, 1991 - The Leaky Cauldron

Harry whirled past a series of fireplaces, keeping his arms neatly tucked in so that he wouldn't lose his balance, and spun to a stop in a large, old-fashioned fireplace. He stepped out quickly while the fire was still cool and green, and moved aside to permit a heavysset witch wearing a purple cloak to use the Floo going out. Nanny popped in next to him, and he felt a reassuring nudge which meant that Ferny was beside him also.

The Leaky Cauldron proved to be a pub, of the shabby, old-fashioned sort that occupied some of the back streets of the village of Godric's Hollow, which Nanny and Ferny had never let him go into. There was light coming in from the street through dirty windows, and chandeliers with candles that coated the ceiling with soot. One wall was taken up with a long wooden bar, which was tended by an old barman with a face like a walnut. The opposite wall was where the huge fireplace was. One long table and several smaller ones took up most of the floor space in between. A rickety flight of stairs went up to the first storey, where Peter had said there were rooms where transients sometimes stayed, and there was a kitchen somewhere, judging from the scent of recently cooked food.

One door opened from time to time to admit someone from the busy London street, and Harry had to admit that he was extremely curious about what lay beyond that door. He itched to go exploring. The other door seemed to lead into a grubby back alley, but as he watched, people kept passing through the pub without stopping and went out through the back door, so he reasoned that there must be something other than a rubbish tip out there.

Even at this early hour, the bar had customers; a little man wearing a top hat sat on a bar stool drinking an ale, and three old women sat at a corner table nursing little glasses of something brown. One of them was smoking a long pipe, the smoke adding to the general dimness of the room. A pale young man wearing an old-fashioned suit and a purple turban was finishing breakfast at one end of the long table. Harry, flanked by Nanny and Ferny, uncertainly sat at one of the little tables. He was early, he didn't see either of the people he was supposed to be meeting here, and he was beginning to develop a headache already.

"Here all by yer lonesome, dearie?" a voice asked. He looked up to see a frowsy waitress next to his table. "Yer a little younger than our usual customers," she said, looking dubiously at Nanny, who cowered next to Harry.

"I'm waiting for someone to meet me," he said in a voice which, he was disgusted to note, shook a little.

"Spect that's all right, then," said the waitress. "Would yeh like a little something in the meanwhile?"

"Um, I'll have a pumpkin juice, please." The woman went away and returned with a pewter goblet full of juice, which Harry sipped slowly while trying to keep an eye on both the Floo and the door.

The fire roared green again, and a sandy-haired man, wearing a Muggle suit with a loose robe over it, emerged. He looked around, and Harry saw that his eyes were an almost unnatural clear amber, and gleamed in the dimness of the pub. He shivered just a little bit, not sure if he should be afraid. Then the Floo flared up a second time, and a tall, slim man with long wavy black hair pulled back in a ponytail stepped out. He was wearing a black tailored robe that looked almost like a long coat over trousers and boots.

The one with the amber eyes spoke first. "I don't see him. Are we early? Or has he gone off by himself?"

The dark-haired man looked at Harry and nudged his companion. "That's him over there."

"But ... his hair's all wrong. It should be black."

"How many times did Peter use a glamour in school to look like someone else? It was practically his trademark. Look at the hair. Look at the glasses. Just like James. And the scar's the same as the other one. That's got to be him."

The two approached Harry's table, and he fought down his nervousness.

"Harry? May we sit?" asked the brown-haired man.

"Um, I was told to ask for the password," Harry replied.

"Of course. 'We solemnly swear ...'"

"...that we are up to no good.' I'm Mr. Padfoot, my compatriot here is Mr. Moony."

"And we are both very glad to see you again after all this time," said the brown-haired man, sliding into the seat opposite Harry's.

"Mr. Padfoot? And Mr. Moony?" asked Harry.

"Sorry. Those were our *noms de prank*, back in school. I'm your godfather, Sirius Black, and this is Remus Lupin. You can call us Uncle Sirius and Uncle Remus if you like."

"Harry Potter," said Harry, holding out his hand to be shaken with due solemnity by the two older men. During this process, Sirius noticed Harry's signet ring, and nodded slightly to Remus, who finally began to relax. "Pleased to meet you. Mr. Wormtail sends his regards."

"And how is Peter? We haven't heard from him except for that one letter," said Remus.

"He's not able to write," said Harry, cautiously. "I do that for him, or one of the house elves."

"Is he sick? Was he badly injured?" asked Sirius. Although he doubted Peter's loyalties, there was no denying their friendship over the years, and he was concerned about his friend's welfare.

"He told me to tell you that he was doing well enough, and to please not ask questions for now. He'll be able to tell you someday, he said."

"When you go home, can you tell him we're very concerned about him and want to help him – and you – in any way we can."

"I'll tell him. But he's okay, really. He's safe at home, and there's nothing that can hurt him there. He said, if there's some way you could watch over his mother and sister, to make sure they're safe, that's all he was concerned about now. And he's sorry he didn't ask about that earlier?" he finished, uncertainly.

"I think we can do that," said Remus, gently. "Is there anything else he said to tell us, Harry?"

"Yeah, he said you should let me usurp Mr. Prongs' place now that I'm taller than the table. Does that make any sense to you?"

Remus looked blank, but after a moment, Sirius remembered the bit of banter and reminded him of it. That, more than anything, convinced them that it was Peter who had given Harry the information. The Marauder references just might have been uncovered by a spy, but no one else was privy to that last conversation. "Well, usurping is a definite possibility, but you really ought to earn your Marauder name first. 'Mr. Prongs Junior' isn't suitable for a usurper," said Sirius, and then of course he had to explain about the Marauders and their names.

"So I have to do a really good prank to earn my Marauder name?"

"Preferably on Snivellus," said Sirius enthusiastically.

Lupin gave a long-suffering sigh and slipped into Marauder-speak. "Mr. Moony would like to remind Mr. Padfoot that encouraging Mr. Prongs Junior to commit mayhem on a man who is not only old enough to be his father and an Order of Merlin winner, but who will shortly be one of his professors, is a profoundly bad idea. Mr. Prongs Junior should select his own targets from among his peer group in order to establish the new generation's legacy."

It took Harry a moment to sort that out. "I should prank a student? Okay, I can do that. Can we go shopping now?" he asked, with a lightning change of subject.

Sirius laughed. Harry sounded very much like James in that moment. "That's what we're here for. You have your list?"

"Both of 'em. A list of supplies and a list of places to go." He showed both pieces of parchment to the older men.

Remus raised his eyebrows over the lists. "There's quite a lot to do today, so let's go to it. You already crossed 'wand' off the supplies list, though?" he asked, returning the parchments to Harry.

"I've got one," Harry said, sliding his wand out of the sheath. "I think it was Mum's."

"May I see it for a moment?" Remus took the slim shaft and peered at the butt end of it. "Yes, that's Lily's all right. See the initials, LE, she carved on it?"

"She didn't!" said Sirius in surprise, leaning over to look.

"She sure did. She had a sister at home who kept taking her things, so she was in the habit of marking her books and belongings as soon as she got them. She didn't know any better with the wand, so she took a penknife to it."

"And then she was surprised when it stopped working?"

"Right. I only know about it because I was in Ollivander's getting my own wand when her father brought her in to get hers retuned. Ollivander was not happy, let me tell you. Chips and scratches are one thing, but deliberate mutilation of a wand? Sacrilege!" Laughing, he handed the wand back to the boy, who ran his fingers over the barely visible letters before he slid it back into its sheath. "Let's go then."

The two men rose, and Harry gulped the last of his juice before joining them. Harry started for the front door, but stopped when Sirius put his hand on his shoulder. "Not that way. Out this way."

They walked out the back door of the pub into a small walled courtyard, where there was nothing except the predicted rubbish tip and a few weeds. Nanny tagged along after them in proper house elf fashion, and Harry ignored her presence as he had been told to do, although he felt bad about it. Sirius drew his own wand from a forearm sheath and counted bricks, with Harry carefully watching in case he had to do this on his own some day. Reaching the desired brick, Sirius tapped it firmly three times with the tip of the wand. A small hole appeared in the brick and expanded rapidly until there was an archway leading onto a crowded, cobbled street. "Welcome," Sirius said, "to Diagon Alley." They stepped through, and the archway shrank shut behind them.

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July 31, 1991 – Diagon Alley

Harry could feel his eyes bugging out, and a grin spread across his face. He wanted to look at everything at once, and wasn't sure what to look at first. There were street vendors, store windows full of magical gadgetry, and wizards and witches in colourful robes, some with owls perched on their shoulders. A gaggle of children scampered by, walking a white ferret on a leash. "Whoa! This is so *cool!*" He gaped at a display of self-stirring cauldrons, reluctantly allowing Remus to steer him away from them.

"There will be plenty of time to look at things," said the soft-spoken man. "But Gringott's first, and then Smith's Opticals, and then it might be easier to see everything else."

It took them a while to get to Gringott's, partly because of the throngs of shoppers and partly

because Harry kept getting distracted by one thing or another and crossing the street repeatedly to look at whatever it was that had caught his eye, whether it be owls in cages at Eeylops or the new broomstick in the window of Quality Quidditch. Finally they reached the large white marble building that housed Gringott's. An extremely large person was walking up the stairs in front of them, making the small goblin at the door seem even smaller.

"Hagrid!" called Sirius, and the large man stopped and turned toward them. Harry stared at the stranger even though he knew it was rude; he just couldn't help himself. The man was eight feet tall if he was an inch, and had long bushy black hair and a prodigious beard to match. Beetle-black eyes shone out from among all the hair. He wore a black overcoat with large pockets, at least one of which was wiggling, over a canvas tunic shirt and striped wool pants.

"Sirius! Remus! Fancy runnin' into yeh here! Ain't seen yeh in dog's years!" the giant said in a booming voice. "An' who's this?" he asked, looking down at Harry, who had belatedly remembered his manners and was trying not to stare.

"Hagrid, this is my godson, Harry Potter," said Sirius proudly, but keeping his voice low enough so as not to be overheard. "Harry, this is Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of the Keys at Hogwarts."

"Harry Potter!" Hagrid's voice boomed out. "Pleased ter meet ya!" He reached down to envelop Harry's small hand in his huge one, and then suddenly became aware that a number of people on the street were staring at them. "Oops. I should not have said that." Sirius and Remus each took one of Harry's arms and hustled him up the remaining few steps, with Hagrid going behind them to hide the small boy with his bulk. Nanny scampered along with them.

Gossip travelled faster than a phoenix, and within moments a crowd was forming, with the words "Harry Potter" on half the people's lips and "Reward" on the other half. The uniformed goblin took one look at the situation and pulled a golden whistle out of his pocket, giving one sharp blast. Immediately, six goblin guards armed with nasty-looking halberds emerged from a hidden door and blocked the main entrance. Until the crowd dispersed, only those with legitimate business in Gringott's would be admitted, and the goblins would decide what was legitimate.

Inside the Gringott's lobby, all remained calm.

"I'm right sorry about tha', really I am," said Hagrid. "Didn' expect to attract so much attention. Buncha nosey parkers out there anyway."

"That's all right, I think," said Sirius, "but it means we'll have to go to the *Prophet* right after we get out of here."

"Tha's right, young Harry here mus' be gettin' ready for Hogwarts this year. I knew yer parents, yeh know, and a finer wizard an' witch I never met. Seven years I knew 'em at school, and then almos' another seven after, when you was born. Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mum's eyes."

"I don't remember them," said Harry sadly.

"Well, I do, an' others too, an' I'm sure they'll be glad ter tell yeh all 'bout 'em. You jus' come down to my cottage when you get to Hogwarts, any time yeh want, and I'll sit 'n tell yeh all the stories yeh want. Righ' now I have ter be about a little errand for the Headmaster. But you come see me, eh?" the big man said, clapping Harry on the back so hard it staggered him.

"I'll be happy to," Harry replied.

Sirius and Remus nodded farewell to Hagrid and took Harry to one of the tellers, who inspected Harry's key and checked a large ledger book. "Everything seems to be in order. Go through that door, please, Griphook will be along in a moment to take you to your vault. Your elf may wait for you there. Next!"

"Next" was Hagrid, who had followed anxiously behind them, still trying to shelter them in case a mob broke in trying to get at Harry. He leaned over and whispered to the goblin, showing him a letter of some kind. The goblin frowned at it, then directed Hagrid through the same door. Sirius, Remus, Harry, and now Hagrid waited in a narrow hallway that sloped sharply downwards, and had little railway tracks set in the floor. A goblin hurried into the room a moment later.

"Visitors to the lower vaults? One moment, please." The goblin whistled sharply and a small cart rumbled up the tracks toward them. Hagrid took up almost all the front seat, barely leaving room for the goblin, and Harry was jammed in between Sirius and Remus in the back seat. Nanny looked relieved not to have to get into the cart. "All right there?" asked the goblin. "Off we go!" And the cart plunged back down the tunnel into a maze of passages, careening right, left, right again, middle fork, and down sharp inclines while Harry screamed in glee. Uncle Peter had told him the cart rides were the best part about going to Gringott's.

The cart came to a sudden halt in front of a small door, and Sirius, who was looking slightly green, climbed out and then helped Harry. "Key, please," said the goblin as he hopped nimbly out of the front.

Harry gave him the key, and the little man unlocked the door, which bore the number 348. Clouds of green smoke came billowing out as it opened. When the smoke had cleared, Harry looked in at the piles of Galleons, Sickles and Knuts inside. "Wow! That's all mine?"

"That's your educational trust," said Sirius, who had begun to recover from the cart ride. "Your school fees have already been paid, so now you'll just need to take enough to buy your school supplies and incidental expenses during the year." He helped Harry pile handfuls of coins into his money pouch, which held much more than Harry thought it should. "That ought to last you for a while."

They climbed into the cart again and rattled off, going even deeper and faster. The cart hurtled along a narrow trestle bridge over a deep ravine, and Harry twisted around to try to look over the back of the cart and see what was down there. Sirius and Remus grabbed him and made him sit down facing front again. Suddenly the cart came to such a sudden stop that Harry lurched forward, right into Hagrid's back. The goblin jumped out again, and Hagrid clambered out with some difficulty, leaning against the wall until his knees stopped wobbling. This vault, which was

numbered 713, had no lock. To open it, the goblin simply ran his finger down the center of the door, which melted away like mist. Hagrid lumbered into the room, almost filling the door, and came out a moment later, tucking something into his pocket. Harry caught a glimpse of the room as he left it; it was completely empty.

"What did you get?" he asked Hagrid as the big man got back in the cart.

"Can't tell yeh that," said Hagrid mysteriously. "Very secret. Hogwarts business. Dumbledore's trusted me. More'n my job's worth ter tell yeh that."

The ride up was not as much fun as the one down, but Harry thought he saw a dragon down at the end of one of the passages, so he was quite satisfied when they found themselves back in the passage off the lobby. Harry thanked Griphook politely, and the goblin smiled, showing quite a lot of pointed teeth, and bowed in response.

Soon they found themselves out on the street again in front of Gringott's. By this time, the crowd had been dispersed, not many people being curious enough to brave an angry goblin. Hagrid gave them a friendly wave goodbye, and hurried off. Sirius and Remus led Harry down the Alley a short way until they stood in front of another largish building, although its green-painted façade wasn't nearly as impressive as the Gringott's building had been. A sign board proclaiming it the offices of *The Daily Prophet* hung out front.

"And it's show time," Sirius muttered. "I'm going to take that glamour off you for a bit, Harry. Don't worry, I can put it back for you after." With a wave of his godfather's wand, Harry was restored to his normal appearance, and they bustled into the offices of the *Prophet*.

A clerk at the front desk looked up to greet them. "Welcome to the *Daily Prophet*, where we print all the news before it becomes old," he said in a bored tone. "May I help you?"

"We'd like to see whoever is responsible for stories about Harry Potter, please," said Sirius.

"The rumour that Harry Potter was seen at Gringott's earlier today is unsubstantiated and there is no reward for reporting it," the clerk said.

"You don't understand," said Sirius. "This is Harry Potter. We want you to write a story that says he's been found, so people won't keep looking for him."

"What? Harry Potter's been ... oh, oh my. This is him?" the flustered clerk asked. Harry gave him a tiny wave. "You can prove it?"

"He's wearing the Potter signet," Remus pointed out. "He's the only one that can wear it. Anyone else would lose their hand if they tried to put it on."

"That's proof enough, then. My goodness! Harry Potter, right here in the office!" They were almost immediately surrounded by all the personnel in the office, who all wanted to introduce themselves and shake Harry's hand, but the clerk cleared a path through to an office belonging to

an editor named Miles Buncombe, who also engaged a round of hand-shaking once they were in private.

"Now then, Mr. Potter," he said, once he'd got everyone seated in comfortable chairs in front of his desk, "you understand people will be wanting to know where you've been all these years, what happened between you and You-Know-Who, all that sort of thing. We here at the *Prophet* appreciate your coming to us to tell us your story."

"There's not really much of a story," Harry said. "I've been living in secret with my uncle, and we want to keep it secret. There are spells so we keep our privacy. I don't remember anything about Voldemort because I was too little at the time – what?" he asked as the editor shivered dramatically.

"We don't say his name, Mr. Potter," whispered Mr. Buncombe. "Not even after all this time. You can, after all, because you're the one who vanquished him. You're sure you don't remember anything?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm told there was a big burned spot in the floor where he was. But there was nobody who saw what happened. I'm sorry."

"Big burned spot," repeated the editor, scribbling it down. "We can work with that."

"Mr. Buncombe, we didn't come here to give you a big story," Sirius put in. "We came because Harry will be starting school in the fall, and he will need to be able to do his shopping and so forth without being besieged by people trying to claim the reward for information leading to his discovery, when he has, in fact, already been, er, 'discovered'."

"Oh, er, the reward, yes. We'll be happy to pay that, of course. To whom should we send it?" Harry looked at Sirius and Remus, both of whom smiled and shook their heads.

"We don't need it, Harry. How about Hagrid? He did 'discover' you on the steps of Gringott's, after all."

"Okay, then. The reward should go to Rubeus Hagrid, at Hogwarts."

"Very well, we'll see to that. Now, you're sure there are no more details you recall?"

After repeated assurances that they knew no more details about That Night, and refusals to explain any more about Harry's whereabouts, they were able to make their escape. They ducked into a side alley immediately after leaving the office and changed Harry's appearance again, as well as Sirius's, since he was fairly well known in his own right. They judged that Remus was less likely to be identified.

Their next stop was Smith's Opticals, where "Call me Doc" Elmer Smith measured Harry's eyes with several odd silver implements and told him to find a pair of glasses frames he liked. "Make sure they're something you like, because you'll be wearing them a while," said the jovial blond

man. "These glasses will be self-adjusting, and the frames will grow with your face, so the only reason you'll have to come back here is if you want to change the style."

Harry tried on a number of frames before he found one he liked, and then ordered some additional charms on the glasses, such as one to keep them from getting spotty in the rain, and another one to keep them from falling off his face accidentally, since he thought he might be interested in playing Quidditch in the future, and Sirius said one couldn't have a star Chaser losing his glasses in mid-match, now could one? While Doc was fixing the enchantments on the glasses, Harry wandered around the shop and looked curiously at the many articles sold there besides glasses. There were crystals that stored sunlight and released it in the dark on command, telescopes that took pictures of the stars they were pointed at, monocles that would enable one to see through spells, magnifying prisms that cast large images of whatever they were placed on, and many other interesting things. Harry was looking at a glass eyeball that was looking back at him from its shelf when Doc came back with his glasses. "That's for a special customer," Doc said. "Lost an eye during the war against You-Know-Who. I made that magical eye for him; it can see through all sorts of things, see in the dark, you name it. Every so often I think of something new to add to it and he brings it in so I can tweak it. Very challenging work. Now let's try these on and see how they look, eh?"

Harry was very pleased with the silver frames, and happily paid the wizard, buying one of the sunlight crystals and a picture-taking telescope as well.

The next stop was Madam Malkin's for his uniforms. "Why don't you and Remus go on in," said the now red-headed Sirius. "There's something I have to go get, and I may as well do it while you're getting fitted. I'll meet you over in the Apothecary later, all right?"

Remus directed Harry into the clothing shop, saying, "He just doesn't like clothes shopping. Has trouble with salesgirls draping themselves all over him. Can't say I blame him. Let's get this done as fast as possible, eh?"

Madam Malkin herself, a plump witch dressed all in mauve, hurried to greet them. "Another one for Hogwarts? We'll get you set up with the lot, dear, never fear. There's another young man in the back. You just go jump up on the stool next to him and we'll get you all measured up."

Harry and Remus went into the back room, where Remus took one of the chairs for parents while Harry scrambled up on the stool. A pale blond boy stood on the other stool, already being measured by another witch.

"Hello," said the other boy, in a tone which said he was only talking to Harry because he was bored out of his mind. "You're for Hogwarts too, I suppose?"

"Of course."

"My mother's next door buying my books. My father is in an important meeting at the Ministry" said the boy, as if feeling the need to explain why he was here alone. "Is that your father?" he nodded at Remus.

"My uncle," said Harry, going along with the fiction they had decided to use. "And my Nanny."

The boy looked again, and this time spotted the house elf crouched at Remus's feet, rearranging the packages in her bag. "You have your own elf?" said the boy, as if impressed in spite of himself. "You know you can't bring it to school, don't you?"

"Won't need one there, will I?" said Harry nonchalantly, trying to cover the bad feeling that the thought of being away from Nanny gave him.

"I suppose not." The boy dismissed the subject of elves and found something else to talk about. "When we're done here, I'm going to drag my mother off to look at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll ask Mother to get me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow. Have you got your own broom?" the boy went on.

"Not my own, but I ride the ones at home," said Harry.

"Play Quidditch at all?"

"Don't know anybody to play it with, but I'm looking forward to trying it."

"I do -- Father says it's a crime if I'm not picked to play for my house, and I must say, I agree. Know what house you'll be in yet?"

"Of course not," said Harry.

"Well, no one really knows until they get there, do they, but I know I'll be in Slytherin, all our family have been -- imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?"

Harry grimaced. Of course the self-important little twit would be in Slytherin. He made up his mind to avoid being placed in that House if at all possible. "There's nothing wrong with Hufflepuffs," he said.

"Sorry," said the boy, not sounding very sorry. "I suppose your uncle there was one."

"Gryffindor, actually," said Harry, trying to avoid growling at the pointy-faced boy.

"That's a little better, I suppose," sneered the boy. "Why is he with you? Where are your parents?"

"They're dead," said Harry shortly. He didn't feel much like going into the matter with this boy.

"Oh, sorry again," said the other, still not sounding sorry at all. "But they were our kind, weren't they?" He eyed Harry's Muggle clothing doubtfully.

"They were a witch and wizard, if that's what you mean."

"I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you? They're just not the same, they've never been brought up to know our ways. Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until

they get the letter, imagine. I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What's your name, anyway?"

But before Harry could answer, Madam Malkin said, "That's you done, my dear," and Harry, not sorry for an excuse to stop talking to the boy, hopped down from the footstool.

"Well, I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose," said the drawling boy.

Harry didn't answer, but hurried out to the front room, where he ordered five sets of robes, three new casual robes for weekends since he thought he wouldn't always want to wear Muggle clothes, and a new cloak, scarf and boots for the winter. Nanny remained behind to pick up the order when everything was done; she would catch up with Harry shortly.

Remus and Harry stopped briefly to pick up a supply of parchments, quills, and ink, then hurried on to Flourish & Blotts for his books. There were shelves to the ceiling, filled with books of all sizes and colours, covered in everything from silk to leather to some sort of purple leaf. Shop assistants scurried up and down ladders getting books from the top shelves for the customers.

Stacks of all the required school texts were set on tables so students could just pick them up, but Harry went through them all checking the editions carefully. Then he went through the shelves looking for other things for supplemental reading. When he was done, he brought his pile of books up to the counter. Remus, who had picked up a few books of his own, raised his eyebrows at the sight of Harry's selections. "You have a little extra there, don't you?" he asked, picking up the Potions reference on the top of the stack. "This is a little advanced."

Harry shrugged. "I'm already ahead on the theory, it's just practice I haven't been able to do yet. Uncle Peter and Brandy showed me how to do some basic potions in the still room at home, and it was fun."

"Just like your mother. Let's hope you still think it's fun seven years from now," Remus muttered, replacing the book on the stack. Nanny caught up with them just as Harry finished paying for his books, and Remus shrank all the packages so she could carry them.

They headed across the way to the Apothecary, which was crowded with boxes of herbs, dried roots, and coloured powders, and bottles and barrels of mysterious slimes, nose-tingling tinctures, and pickled sheeps' eyeballs, among other things. Remus and Harry worked their way through the crowd to the counter, where Remus ordered a kit of basic potions supplies for Harry.

"Make that two kits, please, Uncle Remus" said Harry after tugging on Remus's sleeve to get his attention.

"Think you're going to mess up enough to need two kits?" asked Remus.

"No, but I want to have plenty if I do mess up. And when I get one right in class, I'll want to make it again by myself to be sure I can do it by myself. Potions is important, and I want to do it right."

"Now there's an attitude I wish more children had," said a stranger who was standing nearby.

Harry looked up, to see a tall, thin man with dark hair, black eyes, and a prominent nose, looking down at him. "You're starting at Hogwarts this year?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And looking forward to Potions?"

"Very much, sir."

"Good, then maybe I'll have one good student among the usual dunderheads." The tall man looked across at Remus, who had been listening to this exchange with an odd expression on his face.

"Your nephew, Lupin?"

The werewolf nodded, not trusting himself to speak at the moment.

"Wonderful. It should make for an interesting class."

Harry's eyes were getting rounder and rounder behind his glasses. He had figured out who this was. "Wait a minute ... you're ... you're ..."

"Yes, I probably am," said the tall wizard in a long-suffering tone that said he was used to people reacting like this to him.

"You're Severus Snape, the author of *Snape's Correspondences* !" said Harry.

"It was ... what?" asked Snape, visibly startled. "Why yes, but how did you...?"

"Wait here, please!" begged Harry, then he scrambled through the crowded store to where Nanny waited with the bag. "I need that package from the book store ... not that one, the other one ... Can you make it big again? Thanks!" He ripped open the parcel and extracted one of the books he had bought, and then had Nanny rummage through the back for a self-inking quill. The tall man was still at the counter when he returned. Harry held up a copy of a book, *Snape's Correspondences: A Concise Guide to Potions Ingredients and their Interactions* . "Could you sign this for me, Professor Snape? Please?"

"Of course," the tall Professor said, signing the title page with a flourish.

"Wow, thanks!" said Harry, blowing across the page to dry the ink. "This is so cool!" he said between puffs.

"Why did you even buy that book?" asked Snape. "I required it as a reference for my NEWT-level classes, not the firsties."

"I know, but it looks like it will be useful for lower-level stuff, too. We have Grosbeck's at home and it's so big I can't take it with me, and Uncle Peter said there's only one copy in the library at Hogwarts and all the sixth- and seventh-years hog it all the time. This looks like it's much better organized. And the little magnifying glass you need to read it is fun, too."

"Fun," said the Potions Master weakly. Harry ran back to Nanny to put the book and quill away, then darted over to an interesting looking bin of dried scarab beetles. "Are you enjoying yourself, Lupin?" he snapped at Remus, who was covering his mouth with his hand to hide his grin.

"Oh, quite," said the werewolf.

"I'm sure you are. All that's needed is for Black to be here, too," said Snape, sourly.

"Oh, but I am," said Sirius, who had just arrived.

"This is a new look for you, isn't it?" sneered Snape. "Are you planning on infiltrating the Weasley family?"

"No, just dodging jealous husbands – you know, the usual. Is Snivellus giving you a problem, Remus?"

"No, I was just introducing him to my nephew over there," said Remus, gesturing at the bin where Harry was now carefully picking out the biggest, shiniest beetles.

"Ah yes, the nephew. So what do you think of the boy?" Sirius asked Snape, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

"Seems to have potential. I look forward to teaching him."

"He's going to be a Gryffindor, of course," said Sirius confidently. "I'd lay money on it."

"I'll put a Galleon on that," said Remus, much to Sirius's surprise. "I'm thinking there's a good possibility for Ravenclaw. What do you think, Severus?"

Snape looked at the happy boy with his bag full of beetles. "I'll take your Galleon," he said. "The boy's a born Hufflepuff. Autographed copies, indeed!" He picked up his own order and stalked off, but there was a hint of a smile on his lips.

It was only when he was out on the street again that he realized he'd forgotten to ask the boy's name.

Remus and Sirius watched him go, and dissolved in laughter when he was safely out of the store. "D'you ... do you think he had any idea who Harry was?" sputtered Sirius.

"Couldn't have. He was half way civil to him. I'd like to be a fly on the wall of that dungeon when he realizes."

"You and me, both."

"Did you get Harry's birthday present?" asked Remus, as the clerk brought his order to the counter.

"I certainly did. Best owl they had at Eeylops, plus a perch and all the supplies. Beautiful

snowy," he said, pointing out the owl in her cage where he'd set it just inside the door. "I'm going to take her back to the Leaky – this isn't the best environment for her. Bring Harry over when he's finished picking out his bugs and we'll try to name her over lunch."

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July 31, 1991 – The Dower House, Godric's Hollow

Harry sat on the edge of his bed, happily contemplating the pile of packages from the day's shopping. Tomorrow he and Nanny would pack them in his father's old school trunk. He wondered how many of the books he could read before school actually started. The elves had told him that his owl, who he had named Hedwig, was the most beautiful owl they had ever seen, and promised to convert the gazebo at the end of the garden into an owlery especially for her, but for now she was perched on the back of a chair, with the window open to the summer night in case she wanted to go out to hunt. He thought about all the wonderful things he'd seen today, and the people he'd met, and he smiled as he pulled the curtains around his bed to make his sleeping space small and comfortable.

Today had been the best day of his life.

Fidelius The New Marauders

Chapter 8

Harry was up bright and early, as usual. The only reason he had actually gone to sleep the night before was that Nanny had slipped him a sleeping potion with his bedtime snack, otherwise he would have been up all night, tossing and turning and thinking about Hogwarts and wondering if he'd packed everything, and then, of course, he would have been totally exhausted during the day.

Breakfast was likewise laced with a mild calming potion, or else Harry would have eaten very little and probably lost what he did eat the minute he jumped in the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron. With the calmative in his system, Nanny and Brandy were able to get Harry to eat a good large breakfast with some hope of keeping it down. Brandy also packed him a huge lunch in containers that would keep everything hot and cold, and fretted about whether those Hogwarts elves would know how to feed her little master properly. Peter informed her that the Hogwarts elves did a terrific job of feeding young wizards; there had been plenty of wonderful food when he was studying there, after all. That just convinced Brandy that master Harry wouldn't want her cooking for him any more when he came back, and she burst into tears. Ferny patted her on the back awkwardly, and asked Mister Pettigrew not to help comfort anyone any more, please.

A last minute check of Harry's trunk revealed that he had been attempting to smuggle into Hogwarts three young snakes from the last batch to hatch in the garden. Uncle Peter pointed out that the school rules said he could bring *a* pet, which was Hedwig, and that it should be a cat, an owl, or a toad – nothing was mentioned about snakes. Besides, snakes would try to eat the toads, and the cats and owls would try to eat the snakes, and wouldn't that be a mess? Harry mumbled something about the snakes being too small to eat toads and Hedwig knew better than to eat anybody's pets, but he admitted that he didn't want them being eaten by somebody else's ill-mannered owl or cat. So he put them back in the garden and apologized that he wasn't going to be able to take them on a trip as he'd promised. They didn't seem to mind. They were too young to be good conversationalists anyway.

Once that little matter was settled, they ran through the checklist ("Ticket? Wand? Book to read in case you get bored? Pocket money for sweets? Incredibly over-protective house elf bodyguards?") and Harry shouldered the bag Nanny had given him to keep his books in and jumped into the Floo. This time, when he reached the Leaky Cauldron, Sirius and Remus were already there. Neither man was wearing robes this time; both were in casual Muggle clothing, and Sirius had a leather jacket slung over his shoulder. Nanny, clinging to the trunk which was bigger

than she was, popped into the pub a moment later. In contrast to the last time Harry had been here, the public room at the Cauldron was a hive of activity. It was full of families with parents trying to keep track of pets, trunks, and children who were as excited as Harry. Harry wasn't wearing a glamour this time, but nobody looked twice at him.

There was an awkward moment as neither Sirius nor Harry were sure whether he was too big to be hugged but too young to do the manly handshake, so they settled for Sirius clapping Harry heartily on the shoulder and ruffling his hair, which provoked a cry of "Hey! It took me long enough to make that lie down this morning!"

"Give it up, your father never managed to make his behave for more than five minutes at a time. The secret is to make it look all exciting and windblown, like you *want* it to be that way, right, Moony?"

"Oh, absolutely," said the quieter man, rolling his eyes. "Got everything, Harry?"

"I've already been through the checklist twice," said the boy. "And if I forgot anything, I can write home for it and this brilliant girl will get it for me straight away." He reached a finger through the bars on Hedwig's cage and she nibbled affectionately on it.

"She'll be able to find your home?" asked Sirius, curiously.

"Yeah, we fixed the wards so certain owls can get through. Hedwig, the Hogwarts owls, Ministry owls, like that. If you want, when I go home for holidays, they can be fixed so you two can send owls directly. Until then there's the drop box, if you wanted to write to Uncle Peter."

"Do you think he would want us to? He hasn't exactly been forthcoming over the past few years," said Remus.

"He might, now that I'm at school. It will probably be lonely for him there with just the house elves for company."

"He could come visit us for a while. It would be good to see him again."

"I don't think he would," said Harry. "Maybe he'll see you someday. But not now. He does miss you, though."

"We'll write him, then, and see what happens. In the meantime, we have a train to catch."

"How are we going to get to the station from here? Do they have a Floo?"

"No, we're going the Muggle way. Our transportation awaits," said Sirius, gesturing to the door leading to the street.

"If you're going to let Harry ride that contraption, Sirius, at least make him wear a helmet. I'll take the luggage and go ahead. I'll meet you at the station," said Remus. "Nanny had best come with me." Nanny did not look happy about being separated from Harry, but she nodded in

agreement. Elves weren't allowed in heavily Muggle areas, and even if it wasn't illegal, the elves got sick there. They had to stay, for the most part, in magical houses and areas, or around magical people, in order to flourish. The village at Godric's Hollow was an exception because it had been built on what was originally Potter land, and some of the original standing stones marking it as a safe place for magical folk were still up on the outskirts of the town. Muggle tourists came and took pictures of them sometimes, with no idea what they really were. There were several other towns that were the same way.

Sirius guided his godson out to the street, which was more crowded and grimier than anything he'd experienced in Godric's Hollow. Harry kept close to Sirius, trying to look in all directions at once.

Parked a short way down the street was a large, shiny black motorcycle with a helmet attached by its strap to the rear seat. "This, my boy," Sirius said proudly, "is a Triumph Bonneville T140 – the closest thing the Muggles have to a broom. I put a few modifications on her that the Ministry probably wouldn't approve of, so it's a good thing they don't know. We can't really open her up in town, of course, but it should be a fun ride regardless." He shrugged on his jacket, put on his black helmet, and passed Harry a glossy red one that mysteriously appeared from nowhere.

Once Harry was properly situated and clinging to Sirius, they went roaring off down the street, with Harry screaming in glee. This was almost as much fun as the Gringott's cart!

The ride didn't last as long as Harry would have liked, but it was exciting enough, as Sirius, with a fine disregard for the rules of the road, wove through the narrow streets full of traffic, dodging cars, buses and lorries. With the blaring of automobile horns as fanfare, they soon arrived at King's Cross Station. Sirius parked the Bonnie and warded it against motorbike thieves and traffic wardens, then led Harry into the bustling station. Harry rapidly picked out the magical families moving among the Muggle travellers, who ignored the trolleys loaded with trunks and owl cages being pushed by oddly-dressed individuals toward Tracks 9 and 10. Remus was waiting for them, casually leaning up against a pillar. Nanny, Harry's trunk, and Hedwig's cage were nowhere in sight.

Sirius stopped in the middle of the passenger concourse and placed his hand on Harry's shoulder, suddenly far less playful. "Harry, you should be aware that from now on ... well, things will be different. Up until now, you've been a child, both in Muggle society and among us. When you go onto that platform for the first time, though, and get on the train, you'll be a wizard. Not a fully trained one, that's what Hogwarts is for, but a wizard. Magic is a great and wonderful thing, but it's also terrible in the wrong hands. It's your responsibility to make sure you always know what you are doing and why. We won't mind hearing that you've pranked someone – it's sort of the family business, isn't that right, Remus?"

"You could say that," said Remus.

"But I don't ever want to hear that you hurt someone because you used your magic carelessly. Will you promise me that?"

"I promise," Harry said, nodding his head vigorously.

"Good boy. Now, once we go through the barrier, you'll be meeting all sorts of people. There's something special about this train ride, I think – the people you meet will be the ones that will be with you, for good or bad, for the next seven years, and maybe even longer than that. I met your father on the platform our first day, and Remus and Peter once we got on the train, and we knew by the time we got off at Hogsmeade that we would be together, one way or another, forever. We met your mother that day, and Snape and Malfoy, too. So pay attention, and keep your wits about you. You only get to begin once, and it's important to put your best foot forward."

"Can I start before I get on the platform?" Harry pointed at a group of people a short distance away. Two adults and a young girl stood next to a luggage trolley with an obviously brand-new trunk with a Hogwarts crest on it. The adults, undoubtedly the parents of the little girl, were looking from a train ticket to the platform signs on the wall in great puzzlement, while the girl was practically in tears with anxiety. "I think they're stuck."

"Well there's Platform 9," the father was saying, "and there's Platform 10. There *is* no Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$."

"It must be like that Alley place," said the mother in a reasonable tone. "We just have to figure out how to make the door open up, or something."

"Looks like she's Muggleborn," said Sirius. "The parents are never going to find the platform by themselves. Let's give them a hand, shall we?" He approached the bewildered parents with a friendly smile on his face. "Excuse me; I couldn't help overhearing. Are you looking for the Hogwarts Express?"

"Er, yes," said the father. "Hermione has her ticket and everything, but we can't seem to locate the correct platform. The ticket says Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, but..." He waved the ticket at the platform signs.

"Yes, well, the platform is protected so only wizards and witches can get on it. They usually have someone about to accompany the Muggleborn, but they seem to be running late. I was just about to take my godson here onto the platform. We can escort your daughter as well if you'd like."

The mother looked Sirius over, not knowing whether or not to be reassured by the fact that Sirius and Remus were dressed in perfectly unexceptional Muggle clothing. Her daughter was giving Harry a similar look. The casual clothing that Nanny had selected as being comfortable for him to travel in was apparently not what she expected junior wizards to wear. She herself was already wearing her school uniform skirt, shirt, and jumper. She needed only her tie, robe and pointed hat to mark her as a student witch, and Harry was sure she had her wand safely stashed in her shoulder bag. Both mother and daughter apparently came to the conclusion that the wizards were at least moderately trustworthy, and seemed to be the only game in town in any event. "We don't seem to be having any luck on our own, so any help you can give us would definitely be appreciated, Mr. ... er?"

"Sorry, I'm Sirius Black, my partner in crime here is Remus Lupin, and this is my godson Harry."

"Robert Granger," said the girl's father, offering his hand to Sirius. "My wife Frances, and our daughter Hermione. I must admit, even after the visit from the Hogwarts Professors to explain things and take us to Diagon Alley, when we couldn't find the platform I was beginning to be afraid we were the victims of an elaborate prank."

"You wouldn't be the first," said Sirius. "It sometimes takes a while for it to sink in. But don't worry, by the end of the year your Hermione will be fitting in perfectly well and all this will seem quite normal." An elderly woman with a stuffed vulture perched on her hat hurried by, and Sirius added, "Well, mostly normal, anyway. Now, I'm sure the children would like to be on the train as soon as possible to get good seats, so shall we?"

Since they wouldn't be able to cross the barrier to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, the Grangers said farewell to their daughter on the concourse, and Remus and Sirius led the children over to the wall between Platforms 9 and 10. Harry patted the wall with his hand. It certainly seemed solid enough. "All you have to do," said Remus, "is to walk directly at the wall. Don't stop and don't be afraid you'll crash into it, that's very important. If you're a little bit nervous about it, you can just go at a bit of a run so you don't have time to think about it. Here, I'll go first, and then Harry, why don't you help Hermione push her trolley through after me?"

Harry positioned himself next to, but carefully not actually touching, Hermione, and both of them watched solemnly as Remus walked briskly toward the wall. Harry must have missed it when he blinked, because one moment Remus was there, and the next he wasn't. Hermione was also startled, but she seemed determined to try it herself, and began pushing the trolley forward. Harry pushed from his side, and they rapidly approached the wall. He did flinch, closing his eyes for a moment in expectation of a crash as the trolley hit the wall, but it never came.

Instead, he found himself on a platform crowded with people, some in Muggle garb, some in wizards' robes, some in a combination of the two. A shiny scarlet steam engine headed up a column of black cars with red and gold trim. Parents and children pushed trolleys loaded with trunks and owl cages along the platform, while cats of every colour wound between their legs and clouds of smoke from the locomotive drifted over everything, occasionally spelling out messages. PREFECTS REPORT TO THE FIRST CAR was just fading, and was replaced by PLEASE PUT ALL BAGGAGE UNDER THE SEATS. An older student walked past Harry and Hermione, his trunk floating along behind him without benefit of a trolley at all.

"We did it!" said Harry.

"Of course you did. Wasn't any question about it," said Remus. "And here comes Sirius, and there's Nanny with your luggage, so we're all here. Let's just find a likely-looking car now."

Nanny pushed Harry's trolley over to them, and Hermione gasped at the sight of her. "What is *that*?" she whispered to Harry.

"That's my Nanny!" said Harry happily. "She's a house elf. She's been taking care of me till now."

"What about your parents? Don't they take care of you, too?"

"No, they ... they died when I was a baby."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said. Harry could tell that she was truly sorry for him, and not just saying it the way the boy in the robe shop had.

"It's okay. It happened a long time ago."

The two children and the house elf pushed their trolleys along, following Sirius and Remus as they wound their way through the crowd, picking up snippets of conversation as they passed.

"Do you have your toad, Neville?" queried the woman with the stuffed vulture on her hat.

"Of course I've got it, Gran," said her round-faced grandson, who seemed to be embarrassed both by his grandmother's reminder and his mother's enthusiastic farewell hug. "Ah, Mum, please!"

An Indian couple with identical twin daughters were arguing with a uniformed man as to whether they should be allowed to use a small flying carpet to transport their trunks and owl cages instead of a trolley.

"...Misuse of a Muggle artefact under the Ministry ruling of 1957!"

"But it's never been a Muggle artefact, it was woven in Bombay with the spells already in it, and it's been in my family since 1895!"

"But it's not *in* Bombay now, is it? And under Ministry law ..."

A little further down the platform, they wove past a large group of redheads. A short, roundish woman was haranguing teenage twins, while another boy about Harry's age and a younger girl attempted to pretend they weren't part of the family. An older son had already made a break for it and was heading toward the front of the train.

"Now, you two - this year, you behave yourselves. If I get one more owl telling me you've - you've blown up a toilet or -"

"Blown up a toilet? We've never blown up a toilet."

"Great idea though, thanks, Mum."

"It's not funny! ..."

As they pushed the trolley out of earshot of the redheads, Sirius leaned down and whispered to Harry, "Well, looks like that's your competition. Now all you need's a target and you're all set."

Harry already had a pretty good idea who he'd pick for the job of 'target' if he had a choice - that boy from the robe shop still annoyed him - but he resolved to keep an open mind.

"Here, this looks likely," said Remus. The cars closest to the end of the platform where the

entrance was were already almost full, but the cars further along had a number of empty compartments. "Pick a place and we'll get your luggage on board."

Harry grabbed his book bag and Hedwig's cage off the top of the pile of luggage and scrambled aboard the train, with Hermione following and Nanny right after her. Remus picked up Harry's trunk with little effort and shoved it onto the train, where Nanny grabbed the handle and dragged it down the corridor after Harry. Then he took Hermione's trunk onto the train himself, while Sirius kicked the trolleys toward an out-of-the-way corner.

"This one's empty. I hereby declare it ours!" said Harry, plopping Hedwig's cage down on a seat. Nanny pushed his trunk in and stuffed it under the seat, and then did the same with Hermione's trunk.

The girl goggled. "How did she put ... there's not enough space under there!"

"Magic, of course," said Harry nonchalantly.

"But they couldn't possibly fit!"

"If you're going to worry about little things like space, you're going to give yourself a headache before your first day is over," commented Harry.

"Can *you* do things like that?"

"Of course not! Messing with time and space isn't until something like sixth year."

"Seventh, actually," said Sirius, looking over Remus's shoulder. "Sixth is conjurations. We'll be off now ... technically we shouldn't even be *on* the train at the moment ... See you at Christmas, Harry, and remember to write your godfather occasionally."

"Every week," said Harry solemnly.

"Right. I was eleven myself once, I know you're going to forget as soon as the train leaves the station. Have a good year, Harry. Miss Granger, it was a pleasure meeting you." They bowed themselves out, escaping from the train just before a gaggle of third-year Hufflepuffs boarded to claim the next compartment over from Harry's.

Nanny gave Harry a big hug, standing on the seat in order to do it properly. "Nanny will miss her young Master," she sniffled indistinctly.

"I'll be home for Christmas, don't worry. I'll write, and you can read my letters to Ferny and the elflings, all right?" Nanny nodded tearfully. "Go along home, then," said Harry, giving Nanny a farewell squeeze. With a snap of her fingers, she disappeared.

Harry settled into his seat, looking out the window to see Sirius in conversation with a blonde woman on the platform. It did not seem to be a happy talk, and Sirius cut it short, waved once in the general direction of Harry's window, and he and Remus left the platform. Harry sighed.

While he was not exactly on intimate terms yet with his godfather, at least he and Remus had become friendly faces. Now he was heading off alone, or almost alone, into a new situation. But then, wasn't every first year student? So he needn't feel totally alone.

Hermione sat opposite him, still with questions about the house elves. "Do all wizarding families employ house elves? Do they do magic like wizards, and do they go to school like us? How do they do that with space? How did she pull your trunk when it's bigger than she is? How ..."

"Whoa, slow down!" Harry laughed. "At least stop to breathe in between questions. House elves take care of things for the older families, I think, and my family is one of the oldest. Not bragging or anything, but it just is. I was lucky Nanny and the others were there to take care of me when I was little." He ticked off her questions on his fingers so as not to forget any. "They have their own magic, and they don't go to school to learn it – some is instinctive, and some they learn from their parents. I don't know if the space thing was Nanny doing it or just a spell under the seats. House elves are very strong even when they're not using magic. I think I've caught up now. Next question!"

She blushed slightly. "I'm sorry to be asking so much. This whole world is all so new to me, I just want to know everything about it! Nobody in my family is magic at all, you see, and my parents were ever so surprised when I got my letter. I've been studying to find out all I can, of course, and I've read all our course books already. I just hope it will be enough. I'm sure all the students who grew up with magic will be so far ahead. I tried some spells, and most of them worked, but not all of them."

"A lot of it is new to me, too. I haven't been around a lot of wizards either; until now, all of my friends have been Muggles. But don't worry about catching up; there's loads of people from Muggle families and they all do well enough. You can't always get the right wand movements from descriptions in books. Sometimes someone has to show you. And if your magic just isn't up to a certain level yet, spells just won't work anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, just say I had all my parents' old school books – which I do - and tried a seventh-year spell – which I might have done ... even if I got the incantation and the wand movement right, I couldn't do it because my magic isn't up to that level yet, see? Everybody's magic develops gradually, and you won't be able to do a spell before you're ready for it. I could make a wand make sparks when I was six, but it was a couple of years before I could do much more than that. Most people aren't ready for more until they're our age anyway – that's why school doesn't start when we're younger."

While Hermione considered that, there was a bumping noise from out in the corridor, and a round-faced boy stuck his head in through the door. "Excuse me, are these seats taken? Everything's filling up fast."

Harry glanced at Hermione for agreement, and then both of them nodded. "Come on in. There's plenty of room."

The boy manoeuvred his trunk in and shoved it under the seat, solving the question of whether it was a spell on the seats, and placed a pet carrier on the seat opposite Hedwig's cage. While he was doing that, a pretty girl with brown hair in a long plait down her back also joined them, and both boys jumped up to help her put her trunk under the seat. The redheaded boy from the platform also looked in, but since all the seats were occupied now, he moved on.

"Thank you so much," the girl said politely. "I'm Tracey Davis."

"Neville Longbottom," said the other boy.

"Harry Potter," said Harry, "and this is Hermione Granger. What?" he said, as all three of them gaped at him.

"You're Harry *Potter*?" Hermione squeaked. "You're in all the books! I got some history books for supplemental reading, and you're in *Modern Magical History* and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*."

"Am I?" Harry asked, somewhat amused. "I'll have to borrow them from you and see if they got anything right."

"But it's in the *books*!" said Hermione.

"Doesn't mean it's right. Nobody's ever talked to me, or my Uncle Peter, about anything, so really they must not know very much," said Harry. Hermione looked stunned at the idea that what was in the books might not be right.

"There was that thing in the *Daily Prophet* a few weeks ago," put in Neville. "Did you really, you know, burn the house down around You-Know-Who? And then go live in Australia with the aborigines?"

"No, no! Did they say that? No, I don't know what I did, or even if it was me at all. And I certainly haven't been living in Australia."

"Didn't think so," said Neville with an air of satisfaction. "My Dad says you can't trust what the *Prophet* says half the time, and I guess he's right."

"Uncle Peter told me my Mum used to work for the *Prophet* before I was born," said Harry, "and she was the best reporter they had. But I guess it's gone downhill since then."

"My Dad's an Auror," said Neville, "so I guess he knows the real story on some of it."

"What's an Auror?" asked Hermione. "If you don't mind my asking."

"Dark wizard catcher," said Neville. "Though it's not as much a big deal these days as it used to be. Sometimes Dad complains they're not making bad guys like they used to. Of course that attempted robbery at Gringott's has them all hopping now, so maybe he'll be happy for a while. My Mum used to be an Auror too, but now she stays home with me and my little brother. What do

your parents do?"

"Both my parents are dentists," Hermione said. At his blank look, she explained, "They're like doctors that take care of people's teeth."

"Just their teeth? That's strange," said Neville. "Interesting, but strange. How about you, Tracey?"

The other girl hadn't said anything up to now, although she had been paying attention. She had pulled a leather-covered book out of her bag and was writing in it with a short black quill. "Hm? Oh, my Dad's in business. Buying things, selling things. You know, stuff. My Mum helps out." The train finally jerked into motion, and her quill ran across the page. "Oh, drat!"

"What are you writing?" Harry asked curiously.

"Just my journal," Tracey said. "My Mum said, since I was going to be taking notes in school about classes and things, I should also take notes about the people I meet and what happens – the important things – so that I'll be able to remember everything when I grow up."

"Are you writing about us?" asked Hermione, trying to peer over the top of the book.

"Just a little. Your names, and what you look like. Things like that."

"Can we see?"

"Um, no, I'm afraid the page is enchanted so only I can see it," said Tracey, tilting the book so Hermione could see that the page was entirely blank, even where the pen had slipped. "But I got all your names, which is the important thing. I'll just put it away now. Is that your owl? What's her name?" she asked to change the subject.

"This is Hedwig," said Harry. "My godfather got her for me as a birthday present. What's that in your carrier, Neville?"

"Oddly enough, my birthday present. My great-uncle got me this toad ... oh, no!" said Neville, realizing the door to the carrier was open. "He's escaped again. He doesn't seem to like his carrier. I'll have to go find him before he gets squashed. Excuse me." He got up and left the compartment, calling, "Here, Trevor! Where are you?"

Harry and the girls continued chatting, talking about what sort of things they liked to do. Neville returned after a while, glumly reporting that he had been unable to find Trevor. The conversation turned to what houses they wanted to be sorted into.

"I heard that Gryffindor was the best," said Hermione. "It's the house Dumbledore was in, you know. But Ravenclaw sounded good, too."

"I don't know about it being best," said Harry with a frown. "How could it be best for everybody? My Uncle Peter says people get put in the house that's best for them. He said some people try to

get in a particular house because of family or friends, but if it's not right for them it never works out well. I know my parents were both in Gryffindor, but that doesn't mean it's right for me."

"My dad was a Gryffindor too, but Mum was a Hufflepuff. I know Dad wants me to be in Gryffindor, though. How about you, Tracey?"

"Most of my family have been Slytherin," she said hesitantly. "But my Mum and an uncle were Ravenclaw. I've got an older brother in Slytherin now, and I expect that's where I'll end up, too. I hope you don't mind."

"Why should we mind?" asked Hermione.

"Well, some people don't like Slytherins very much because, well, some of them are kind of stuck up, and some of them have gone Dark. And their symbol is a snake and lots of people don't like snakes."

"That's a silly reason," Harry scoffed. "Snakes are cool! I found some in the garden and tried to bring them to school with me as pets, but Uncle Peter wouldn't let me. But there are Dark wizards from all the houses, aren't there? So it isn't just Slytherin."

Tracey relaxed a little. "I'm glad. Because I'd hate to make friends with someone and have them decide they didn't like me just because I was in Slytherin."

"Tell you what," said Harry. "Let's make a pact. The four of us, no matter what houses we get into, we'll stick together, okay?" He stuck his hand out towards the others.

"Sounds good to me," said Neville, putting his hand on top of Harry's.

"All for one, one for all?" said Hermione, adding her hand to the pile.

"Us four, no more," said Tracey, grinning. She put her hand on Hermione's, and then Harry put his other hand on top of hers, completing the stack.

At that moment, the door to the compartment slid open, and a boy stepped in. Two more large boys, unable to fit in the compartment, loomed in the doorway.

"Ugh," said Tracey. "Speaking of 'no more'..."

Harry recognized the intruding boy; it was the pale boy from the robe shop.

"I heard on the platform Harry Potter was on this car," the boy said. "And this is the only place I haven't checked." His eyes flicked over the girls dismissively and he considered Neville for a moment, then turned to Harry. "So is it true? It's you?"

"Last I looked, yeah," said Harry. He looked speculatively at the large boys in the doorway, wondering if they would get stuck if they both tried to come in at once.

The pale boy saw where he was looking. "My associates here are Crabbe and Goyle," he said carelessly. "And I'm Malfoy. Draco Malfoy." He said it like it was supposed to have some great importance to Harry. Tracey laughed quietly.

"Think that's funny, Davis? Get up and give me your seat. I want to talk to Potter here and I don't want to hear your snickering."

"That's no way to talk to a lady," said Harry.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows mockingly. "A lady? You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort." He glanced meaningfully at Tracey. "I can help you there."

He held out his hand to shake Harry's, but Harry didn't take it.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks," he said coolly.

Malfoy didn't go red, but a pink tinge appeared in his pale cheeks.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," he said slowly. "Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them, either. You hang around with merchants and common folk like Davis here, and it'll rub off on you."

Both Harry and Neville stood up.

"Just because your father is a bigwig in the Ministry, it doesn't mean you can throw your weight around here, Malfoy," said Neville.

"Oh, you're going to fight us, are you?" Malfoy sneered.

"Unless you get out now," said Harry. "In case it slipped your notice, your friends can't fit in here, so it's just you against the two of us." He drew his wand and pointed it at Malfoy. Neville hesitated only a second before following suit.

"The four of us," said Hermione, standing and pointing her wand at Malfoy, although there was a quiver in her voice. Tracey did as well.

Faced with four wands at short range, Malfoy backed off. "Fine. I'll go. But this isn't the end of this." He glared at Tracey, who held her wand pointed firmly at him. "And don't think I'm going to forget this, Davis," he warned, and left, slamming the compartment door behind him.

"Whew," said Harry, sheathing his wand and sitting down again. "I'm glad he's gone."

"I appreciate it, but you really shouldn't have done that," said Tracey.

"He had no right to insult you like that," said Harry.

"No, he didn't," agreed Neville. "I've heard stories about his family," he continued darkly. "They were some of the first to come back to the Light side after You-Know-Who disappeared. Said they'd been bewitched. My Dad doesn't believe it. He says Malfoy's father didn't need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side, and only came back to save his own skin. There were lots like that back then. By the way, Harry, what spell would you have cast if he'd pushed it?"

Harry looked blankly at him. "You know, I have no idea."

"Me, neither."

Both girls started to giggle, and then Harry and Neville joined in, and for a while all four of them were laughing helplessly. After they calmed down, Harry grinned to himself. He had found his target.

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Soon the snack trolley came around, and Neville and Tracey told Harry and Hermione all about the different kinds of wizarding sweets. Hermione said she didn't think her parents would like her eating many sweets (she had a bag of carrots and healthy snacks for the trip) but allowed herself to be talked into trying some Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. Neville was surprised to find Trevor hiding in among the Chocolate Frogs, and supposed he had just been looking for some company. With the toad rescued and safely stowed back in his carrier, they introduced Hermione and Harry to the joys of collecting Chocolate Frog cards. Eventually Tracey nodded off, since her mother had not been so foresighted as to dose her with Calming Potion the night before, and the other three settled down to read while the train rattled north through the golden afternoon.

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The sun was setting as the train approached the station at Hogsmeade. Harry and Neville stood "guard" in the corridor while the girls put their robes on, and then they changed places so the boys could change.

An announcement told them to leave their luggage and pets on the train, so Neville double-checked the latch on Trevor's carrier to make sure he wouldn't escape again, and then the four joined the crowds pushing their way off the train. They emerged onto a small dark platform, where the crowd milled around for a bit.

A booming voice called out, "Firs' years, firs' years over here!" A light appeared above the students' heads, illuminating Hagrid's hairy face. "C'mon this way, any more firs' years? This way, watch your step!" He caught sight of Harry and drew him aside slightly as the other first years passed. "I need to thank yeh fer what yeh told the *Prophet*, especially after I blew yer secret an' all. Yeh didn't have ter have 'em give me the reward an' all. I wasn' even thinking 'bout claiming it, ter tell the truth."

"That's why we thought we should do it for you," said Harry. "There was no point in letting someone else get it. Just do something fun with it, all right?"

"I am, I am. I'm addin' on ter my house to have a space where I can take care of some of the animals that get injured in the forest. Dangerous place, the Ferbidden Forest is. Come by and see me once yeh've settled in, I'll show yeh and yer friends around!"

"I will, thanks."

The steep, narrow path led out to the shores of a lake, its black waters as smooth as glass. A fleet of tiny boats was drawn up on the shingle beach. On the other side of the lake rose the towers and turrets of a vast castle, perched on top of a cliff face. There were oohs and aahs from the assembled first years.

"No more'n four to a boat," said Hagrid. "In yeh go. Watch yer step so yeh don't get wet!" With a little splashing and nervous laughter, the students piled into boats, with Harry and his friends all managing to get into the same one. Hagrid had one all to himself. "All right then? FORWARD!"

The boats moved off under their own power, forming a line that steered straight across the lake toward the cliff face. Harry thought for a moment that the boats were going to bump into the stone, when Hagrid pulled aside a curtain of ivy and they floated into a long tunnel. Finally they came to an underground harbor, where the boats pulled up and beached themselves and the students scrambled out. Then they clambered up a passageway in the rock after Hagrid's lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, oak front door. "Everyone here? Good." Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there. She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross.

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door wide and the students trooped into the wide entrance hall. They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from somewhere nearby, but Professor McGonagall showed the first years into a small, empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room.

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at

Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rulebreaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting." She glanced at Malfoy's compatriots, both of whom had chocolate smeared on their faces. "I shall return when we are ready for you. Please wait quietly."

"How do they do the sorting?" asked Hermione.

"Some sort of test, I think," said Tracey. "My brother said it was very hard, and I don't know if he was joking."

"A test? Our first day? But we don't know anything yet," moaned Neville.

Harry looked around and saw that everyone else looked terrified, too. The redheaded boy from the train was muttering to someone about wrestling a troll, and he was so pale the freckles on his face stood out starkly.

There was a gasp from the students at the back of the room as a group of ghosts streamed through the back wall. Hermione looked like she was going to faint. The ghosts were talking among themselves about somebody named Peeves, who most of them didn't seem to like very much. A jolly fat ghost in a friar's robe waved at the students and welcomed them all, hoping to see them in his house, which had apparently been Hufflepuff.

As the ghosts passed on through the front wall, Professor McGonagall reappeared and instructed the students to form a line. She led their somewhat wobbling formation through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall.

Although later he would become very familiar with the Hall and its floating candles, its tables laden with golden plates and crystal goblets, all Harry was aware of now was the wash of light, the mass of black-clad students, and the hundreds of eyes staring at him and the other first-years. His most important concern was not tripping over his own feet as they walked up to stand before the high table where the teachers sat.

Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard's hat. This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty. Brandy wouldn't have let it in the house.

For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth -- and the hat began to sing:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry

Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,

Where they are just and loyal,

Those patient Hufflepuff's are true

And unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,

if you've a ready mind,

Where those of wit and learning,

Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin

You'll make your real friends,

Those cunning folk use any means

To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!

And don't get in a flap!

You're in safe hands (though I have none)

For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The whole hall burst into applause as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again.

"So all we have to do is try that on?" whispered Neville.

"I don't think I want that touching my hair," said a girl next to Hermione. Harry had to agree, and wondered why nobody had ever cast a cleaning spell on the thing.

Professor McGonagall unrolled a long parchment scroll. "When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Hannah!"

A blonde girl stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. A moment's pause –

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

And so it went, with the line at the front of the room gradually becoming shorter while the tables grew more crowded.

Tracey was, of course, the first of them to be called. "Wish me luck!" she whispered to Harry. The Hat didn't take long with her at all, sorting her into Slytherin almost as soon as it touched her hair.

When Hermione's turn came, she was so eager she practically ran to the stool and jammed the Hat

on her head.

"RAVENCLAW!" shouted the Hat, and she almost skipped to the table.

The Hat took a long time with Neville, but eventually sorted him into Gryffindor. As he walked to the table, Harry didn't know whether the expression on his face was one of relief or not.

It was no surprise when Malfoy's turn came and he was sorted into Slytherin. His two goons had already been placed there, and Harry was beginning to be seriously worried about how Tracey would manage, being in the same house as those three. Harry was even beginning to wonder if he could manage to get sorted into Slytherin himself so she wouldn't be alone there.

Then, at last -- "Potter, Harry!"

As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like little hissing fires all over the hall.

"Potter, did she say?"

"*The Harry Potter?*"

"The one that disappeared?"

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him, and he just hoped his tie was straight. Next second he was looking at the black inside of the hat. He waited.

A small voice sounded in his ear. "Hmm. Now here's an interesting puzzle. Difficult, very difficult. There are so many options. There's courage here, but mostly untested. Not a bad mind, talented and not afraid of hard work, either. Quite a bit of native cunning, and you've had some tutoring in that regard, I see."

"Maybe Slytherin?" thought Harry.

"Cunning wouldn't be enough, you'd have to have the drive or they'd eat you alive in there," said the voice. "Why would you want to be in Slytherin?"

"To take care of my friend."

"Well, with motivation like that, better be – HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the Hat.

Harry took off the Hat and glared at it, feeling betrayed. He looked over at the Slytherin table and saw that Tracey was grinning madly at him, although Malfoy's lip was twisted in a sneer. What was that the blond boy had said a month ago? *Imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?* Well, now he was in Hufflepuff, and he wasn't about to leave.

As he placed the Hat back on the stool, he became aware that the whispers had ceased and the room was utterly silent as everyone stared at him. He could even feel the eyes of the teachers all

focused on one spot at the middle of his back, which suddenly started to itch. Holding onto his dignity for dear life, he lifted his head and walked deliberately toward the Hufflepuff table, which suddenly exploded into cheers and clapping as his new housemates rose to greet him.

Once he was seated at the Hufflepuff table, he could look up and see the teacher's table properly. Professor McGonagall looked a little shaken as she called up the next student after him, and he wondered why. Albus Dumbledore, at the centre of the table, seemed to be looking at him with a touch of confusion. Hagrid sat at one end of the table and gave him a happy wave. At the other end sat Professor Snape, who seemed to be glowering at him for some reason. Next to him was a young man in a purple turban, who Harry swore he remembered from somewhere – that turban was unforgettable – and next to him a short, plump witch who was clapping for him. The whole thing was very curious.

Harry looked down at his empty gold plate. He had only just realized how hungry he was. The snacks on the train seemed ages ago. Fortunately the rest of the sorting didn't take too long, and after "Zabini, Blaise" became a Slytherin, Albus Dumbledore rose to his feet. He beamed at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there. "Welcome," he said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you!"

The serving dishes on the table suddenly became filled with all sorts of food, and Harry felt a little buzz that he had sometimes felt when Brandy used the same trick at home to serve dinner. Feeling happily at home, he started loading up his plate, with the Fat Friar, who was sitting across from him, encouraging him to take just a little more of this and that.

Dinner was interrupted briefly by some shrieking from the new students and laughter from the older ones over at the Gryffindor table. When everyone had eaten as much as they wanted, the food vanished and the dishes were clean and sparkling again. Then the puddings arrived, and as everybody took servings of whatever they wanted - Harry opting for some strawberries with powdered sugar on them because if he ate anything heavier he'd burst – a sudden hot burst of pain flared from the scar on Harry's forehead. "Ouch!" he said, clapping his hand to his head.

"What is it?" asked Justin Finch-Fletchley, who was sitting beside him.

"Nothing, just ... a headache all of a sudden."

"Maybe you're allergic to the strawberries," said Justin. "Don't worry, I'll protect you from them." Jokingly, he tugged the bowl away from Harry, who just as jokingly pulled it back.

"Touch my strawberries and die," Harry growled, and Justin pretended to be afraid and took a slice of chocolate cake instead.

Harry looked up at the teacher's table again. Professor Snape was now looking down, poking at his own food, but the young man in the turban was looking steadily in his direction. Their gazes met for a moment, and then the young man turned to ask Snape a question.

The student sitting on Harry's other side was Cedric Diggory, a fourth-year, and Harry nudged him to get his attention. "Excuse me, but who's that sitting next to Professor Snape?"

"Know Snape already, do you? That's Professor Quirrell. Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. This will be his second year, and I'm glad he's back, there hasn't been the same teacher two years in a row in ages. The turban's new, though. Not a good look for him, would you say?"

"Not a good look for anybody," Harry replied. His headache was fading as fast as it had come on, and he was able to face his food again without feeling sick.

At last, the puddings too disappeared, and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet again. The hall fell silent.

"Ahem -- just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you. First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well. I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors. Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch.

"Finally, I must tell you that this year, the entire East Tower, from the third floor on up, out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry laughed, but he was one of the few who did. "He's not serious, is he?"

"Must be," said Cedric. "He usually is, when he says things like that. Sometimes he'll explain, more often he doesn't."

"Class schedules will be passed out tomorrow morning," said Dumbledore, as if he hadn't just threatened the entire student body. "For now, it's bedtime. First year students, the prefects will show you where to go. Off you trot!"

Most of the first years were tired and sleepy from too much food, and Harry was no exception. The prefects got them on their feet and led them out of the Great Hall and down a staircase into a broad stone corridor, brightly lit with many torches. One wall was hung with pictures which were mostly still lifes of food. There were portraits on the other side, and the prefect stopped in front of a large image whose frame ran from the floor practically to the ceiling. It showed a man sitting at a desk on a patio in a formal Italian garden. The man was dressed in clothing typical of the Renaissance and was writing with a quill on a parchment scroll. A litter of scribbled-on parchments lay at his feet.

"You are now standing at the entrance to the Hufflepuff Sett, which is where our common rooms and dormitory rooms are located. Our door guardian, as you can see, is the Scribe. He has no name other than that; this painting was rescued from a Muggle museum and he has long forgotten who he was when originally painted. We asked him to serve as our guardian after the Fat Lady complained about the décor in this hall and asked to be relocated to somewhere she would be less

tempted. Scribe, these are the new first years."

"Good, a new batch!" said the Scribe, putting down his pen and waving at the students. "I look forward to getting to know all of you. Give me the password and you can go on inside."

"Alligator pear", said one of the prefects, and the portrait swung aside to reveal a passage through the wall into a large room. It was full of squashy, comfortable looking chairs, dividing up the large room into smaller seating areas, and there were tables and desks along the walls as well. A large fireplace warmed the room, and there were doors to either side of it. "Boys' dorms on the right, girls' on the left. We'll take you down to your beds in a moment, but there's something we have to do first. I would like to present to your our Head of House, Professor Pomona Sprout."

The small round witch who Harry had seen clapping at his sorting came out of a side room carrying a very thick book. "Greetings, children," she said, putting book on a table. "This is the Book of Hufflepuff. It is a record of everyone who has ever been sorted into Hufflepuff. Each of you will have a page, which will have your name and date of sorting. You can put other information on it yourself if you want, from your favourite colour to the names of your children when you grow up and start a family. These," she said as one of the prefects put a stack of small black leather-covered books on the table next to the Book, "are abridged versions of the Book. In the front there is a list of all the living Hufflepuffs, and all the pages are in alphabetical order. If you want something to appear in the main book, you can write it in your personal book and it will update the main Book, and then the information in the big Book is available in everyone else's personal books. So don't put anything in the Book that you don't want hundreds of other people to know." The prefects passed out the small books to the new students, and Harry flipped to his own page under "P". Sure enough, it said "Harry James Potter, September 1, 1991." The rest of it was blank, although there were spaces where information could be filled in with helpful headings such as "Favourite Colour", "Best Friend", "Wedding Date", "Pet's Name" and "Shoe Size."

"We are now going to perform the Recognition Spell," said Professor Sprout. "I will speak the incantation, and then, starting, oh starting over there by the fireplace, each one of you will speak your name, and when everyone has introduced themselves, I will end the spell. Then you will know who everyone in all seven years are. Believe me, having everybody's names and faces connected in your mind is very important. It will make it easier for you to approach them, to talk to them, and make friends with them. By the time you graduate, you will know everyone in the classes above you and below you. And they know all the people above and below them, and so on. Is everybody here? Yes? Very good. *Agnitio!*" she incanted, waving her wand in a circular motion. Harry realized that all the students had filed in quietly while Professor Sprout was talking, and now the Common Room was quite full. A girl near the fireplace stated her name, and then the boy next to her, and so on. Emily Oldroyd, Charles Ryder, Maryella Jones. He could feel the power of the spell filling the room, touching everyone as the list of names grew. Frank Spicer, Margaret Pipchick, Nathaniel Duckwater. By the time the naming got round to the first years, the magic was like a clear pond filling the room, and the names dropped in like pebbles to make rippling rings that intersected with everyone else's. Hannah Abbott. Susan Bones. Justin Finch-Fletchley. Wayne Hopkins. Megan Jones (no relation to Maryella). Heather MacLeod. Ernie MacMillan. Eloise Midgen. Barnabas Moon. Harry Potter. Geraldine Rivers. Erica Roper.

Zacharias Smith. Gilbert Spinks. And on it went, until Professor Sprout spoke her own name and ended the spell, and Harry suddenly came back to reality, feeling slightly dizzy. The prefect next to him – Eliot Warren, Harry suddenly knew – put an arm around him for support until he got his balance back.

"When you were sorted into Hufflepuff," said the Professor, "you joined a family. A very large, extended family. As a family, we are all pledged to support one another, even if we don't particularly like one another. This doesn't mean we back one another blindly. If we see that one of our members is likely to do something wrong or stupid, our duty is to help them avoid that, rather than help them do it. We support the person, not their actions. And that is one reason why there has never been a Dark Lord or Lady from Hufflepuff, even though there have been those who practice Dark Magic from time to time. Hufflepuffs are not afraid of hard work. We do the best we can, and where we excel, we help others who are not as talented. In school, that means we rarely have the highest grade in a class, but we *never* have a failure unless someone is absolutely incapable of doing something. We are not afraid of doing what's right. When we play Quidditch, we play hard, but we abide by the rules. No cheating. We are just and loyal, but we are not pushovers. We are friendly but will not let ourselves be taken advantage of. At the end of the day, we are proud to be Hufflepuff!"

Murmurs of agreement came from all around the room. "And now, my little ones, it is time for you first years to go to bed. Eliot, if you would escort the boys to their room, and Barbara, the girls. Everyone else, you may stay up another hour if you want, but remember that classes start tomorrow first thing, and we should all be rested."

Eliot led Harry and his yearmates down a long, winding corridor to a door that read "First Years". Inside was a large room that had seven four-poster beds hung with black velvet curtains with yellow trim. Their trunks had already been set by their beds, and the boys all changed into their pyjamas and tumbled into bed. Harry drew the curtains around him and fell asleep almost instantly, and if he dreamed, he did not remember it in the morning.

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After the four heads of houses had done their various duties in getting their students settled, they met for a late cup of tea in the staff room. By the time Pomona Sprout got there, the other teachers, who had no house duties, had already got a head start on discussing an interesting subject: Harry Potter, and how he had wound up in Hufflepuff, of all places.

"You could have knocked me over with a feather," Minerva McGonagall was saying as Pomona entered. "I was sure the boy was going to be sorted into Gryffindor. He looks so much like his father."

"As long as he doesn't *act* like his father, I'll be happy," said Severus Snape. "I know, I know, no speaking ill of the dead, and I'm not forgetting what he did after he grew up a little, but you have to admit he was an arrogant bastard while he was at school, and I would prefer not to have that in my class. It's going to be bad enough with the Malfoy boy."

"It could be worse," said Filius Flitwick. "You could have them both in one class, the way I do." Severus shuddered but did not reply. "I must say, though, I'm looking forward to finding out if the boy has any of his mother's talent. She could have become a Charms Mistress if she had wanted to, I'm sure."

"Whereas I'm looking forward to seeing how he does with Transfiguration," said Minerva. "If he has half the talent his father did ..."

"I'll settle for him not blowing up my lab," muttered Severus. He was only paying half his attention to the discussion because he was wondering about something else. He had been watching the sorting closely to keep an eye out for Lupin's nephew, the promising boy he'd met at the Apothecary, but he hadn't seen him. Had he simply missed him? Or did the boy not come to school for some reason? His first-year classes, unfortunately, weren't until Friday, so he'd have to wait until then to find out if he was here, and if he wasn't, he'd have to ask Albus what had happened.

"I don't care what house he ended up in," said Rolanda Hooch. "I get him no matter where he is. I'm just looking forward to seeing how he flies. It could lead to some interesting Quidditch in the next few years. Hufflepuff could be the team to watch."

"We already have Diggory," said Pomona with some satisfaction. "With him at Seeker and Potter as a Chaser, perhaps, like his father ... oh, yes, we could be a team to watch indeed. We have a record number of new students this year, too. There's bound to be some talent in there."

"Yes, about those numbers ... how did you wind up with *twice* the number of students I got?" said Minerva.

"Maybe the Hat thought the students you have would be enough trouble that it didn't feel like giving you more? Merlin knows, the Weasley twins are enough to make any witch's hair turn grey, and now you have another one."

"But *fourteen* new students in one year? And Ravenclaw got twelve!"

Pomona shrugged. "Ask the Hat."

All the teachers were surprised when Dumbledore, who had been listening to the discussion but not participating, abruptly got up and left without a word.

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Harry's house-elf habits got him up before any of the other first years, and he opened his bed curtains to find light spilling into the room from a wide window. He was a bit puzzled by this, since he was pretty sure they were underground, but the window showed an excellent view of the hillside sloping down to the lake. He didn't waste time wondering about it, but grabbed his towels and headed off to get the first shower. By the time the other boys had dragged themselves out of bed, he was already clean, dressed, and finishing arranging his clothing in the wardrobe next to his

bed. He had been happy to discover that the black and white first-year's ties that he had bought in Diagon Alley had changed to the black and yellow Hufflepuff colours, and there were Hufflepuff badges on all his robes and his cloak.

Several of the upper-year students were up early, too, and they headed up to breakfast as a group as soon as the Great Hall opened. This was a good thing, because he had a chance to eat a full meal before a prefect arrived with a message from the Headmaster. He wanted to see Harry in his office, as soon as possible. Harry groaned. *How had he managed to get in trouble the first day?*

The prefect escorted him to a niche where a statue of a gargoyle stood. "Jelly babies" she said. This was evidently a password, because the gargoyle sprang suddenly to life and hopped aside as the wall behind it split in two. Behind the wall was a spiral staircase that was moving smoothly upward, and she told him to step on it. It carried him smoothly upward, and in a few dizzying moments he was standing on a landing before a door with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin. Before he could even raise his hand to the knocker, the door swung open. "Come in, my boy! Come in!" Dumbledore called, and Harry hesitantly stepped in. "Have a seat. Care for a lemon drop?"

"No thank you, sir. I just finished breakfast," said Harry, perching himself tentatively on the edge of the chair in front of Dumbledore's wide desk.

"All ready for your first day of classes?"

"I think so, sir. I'm looking forward to them."

"Did you receive your schedule already?"

"Yes, the prefects passed them out first thing. Why, is there a problem with mine?"

"Well, as to that ... there were some ... irregularities ... with the sorting last night."

"The sorting?"

"Yes, you apparently spent quite some time under the Hat."

"I did?" Harry really hadn't been aware of how much time he'd spent in talking with the enchanted haberdashery; if Dumbledore said it was a long time, then it was a long time. But he thought it had taken longer with some of the other students.

"Yes, and I took the liberty of having a word with it last night. It seems that the Hat wasn't really sure where to put you, that you showed aspects of several houses."

"It did say I had options."

"And did you want any of those options in particular?"

"Well, I did ask it, but it put me somewhere else."

"I see. Under the circumstances, then, we could reassign you to Gryffindor quite easily, and ..."

"I didn't ask it for Gryffindor, sir."

"You didn't?"

"No, I asked it for Slytherin."

The Headmaster's eyes widened in shock. "May I ask why?"

"Because a friend of mine went into Slytherin, and I was worried that some of the others there might treat her badly."

"Ah. Well. I assure you that Professor Snape keeps a very close eye on his students and wouldn't allow them to push each other around. But if you'd like, I could ask him to keep an eye on ... what is your friend's name?"

"Davis, sir, Tracey Davis."

"Keep an eye on Miss Davis. Of course. As to the other matter, however, we are still prepared to allow you to resort, if you wanted to."

"Into Gryffindor?"

"It was your parents' house, and the Hat believed you would do well there. It's a somewhat smaller group, as well, and Professor McGonagall could spare you more attention than Professor Sprout could."

"Sir, are any of the other students being given the option of resorting?"

"Er, perhaps one or ..."

"I don't want any special treatment, sir. It wouldn't be fair to anyone else, and I'm going to be having people talking about me enough as it is. If the Hat felt I'd be best suited for Hufflepuff, that's where I'll stay. Besides, I know everybody there already, sir."

"Well, if you're sure ..."

"I am, sir."

"Very well. Run along, you'll have plenty of time to get to your History of Magic class."

"Thank you, sir."

Harry heaved a sigh of relief as he escaped from the office. *What was that all about?* he wondered.

In Dumbledore's office, a side door opened and McGonagall and Sprout emerged. The little Herbology professor wore an expression she didn't use very often: anger. "Well, Albus, do you want to tell me *why* you're trying to steal the Potter boy away from me? You know the student's welfare is my responsibility. Why are you trying to interfere with my house?"

"We're concerned about the boy, Pomona, that's all. We didn't get all of the Death Eaters, after all, and if some of them have children in places they could reach him ..."

"Then he shouldn't be at school at all, Albus. He should stay wherever he's been, wherever it is that's so secure that even *you* can't find him."

"We just wanted him where he could be protected. Many of the Gryffindor students are the children of people who fought against Voldemort, and they could keep an eye on him –"

"And at least one Gryffindor is the nephew of a possible Death Eater. The very one who may have killed Potter's parents. You call that safe? You know very well that not a single Hufflepuff was ever even suspected of being a Death Eater, and I have plenty of children of Aurors and others who fought against You-Know-Who in my house. He'll be safer with my badgers than anywhere else."

"I have to say, I agree with Pomona," said McGonagall, much to Sprout's surprise. She had thought the Transfiguration professor would be in agreement with the Headmaster. "We've had this discussion before. If the boy truly has the temperament to be in Hufflepuff–"

"And he does, I've never seen anyone make the adjustment so easily," put in Sprout.

"Then your worries about what he might have been taught by now are moot. If he'd wound up in Slytherin I'd have given you a point, but–"

"He did ask to be put in Slytherin."

"For the most Hufflepuff of reasons," said Sprout. "To protect a friend."

"It's a very Gryffindor reason as well," said McGonagall. "I don't believe he would have gone there because of any natural affinity for it. And even if he had, I would trust Severus to keep him out of trouble. The boy is no danger to anyone, Albus. And he wants to stay in Hufflepuff. Who knows what might happen if you forced him to become something he isn't happy with?"

"Very well. I concede your points. Pomona, I apologize for questioning your ability to handle the boy. I had only his best interests in mind."

"That's the only reason I'm willing to let this ride, Headmaster," said Sprout. "If it had gone any further, I would have had to make a formal complaint to the Board of Governors. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a class to teach."

The two professors left. Dumbledore took a lemon drop and sucked on it pensively, pondering his next steps.

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By the end of the first week, Harry thought he would drop from exhaustion. That week, prefects were assigned to escort the first years as a group to and from classes, but they would be expected to navigate by themselves after that. They had to learn about the moving stairs, the invisible stairs, the doors that were walls and the walls that were doors. After the first day of classes was over, before they went to bed, they were given a tour of all the important rooms so they would know where the library and the practice rooms and the infirmary were. All classes had two houses together, so he saw each of his friends frequently; they got in the habit of getting to class early and staying late so they could talk. To his surprise, Harry found that each house had treated its children differently that first night: the Ravenclaws were assigned to study groups, the Slytherins got a lecture from Professor Snape on proper behaviour, and the Gryffindors had just gone to bed. None of the other houses did the class escorts either, but the Ravenclaws had been given detailed maps of the main library and a lecture on how to use the cataloging system.

Students of all classes and all years, for some reason, seemed to want to look at him, and there were lots of extra people in the halls on the way to his classes. He heard some of them whispering behind his back. "There, look ... see him? The one there? Yes, the one with the scar." Harry wished they would just go away, because they made it much more difficult for the Hufflepuffs to get to class on time. Eventually the other firsties started making up a formation with Harry in the middle when they were walking to classes, which made it harder for people to see him, and after a while they began to lose interest.

He only had to go to a few classes a day, but there was a lot of homework, and he needed practice time to work on spell casting, too. The free periods they had rapidly filled up with essays, research, practice, practice, and more practice.

Easily the most boring class was History of Magic with Professor Binns, who was a ghost and lectured a massed class of all four houses three times a week. It was sometimes hard to follow the lecture because the Slytherins were making jokes about other students (often him), the Gryffindors mostly fell asleep, and the Ravenclaws sat at the back of the room talking about something else. Taking notes wasn't really needed, though, because it turned out Binns always gave exactly the same lectures from year to year and several years ago someone had used dictation quills to get them all down word for word, so if something wasn't clear from class they could always check the transcript. According to Hermione, the Ravenclaws had made up their own study syllabus and were pretty much ignoring the lectures entirely, doing independent study so they'd be ready for the tests.

Astronomy class only met one night a week, but since that was at ten o'clock at the top of the tallest tower in the school, Harry was glad about that. His major problem with it was that it was with the Slytherins. It was nice to see Tracey, but he was always on his guard lest Malfoy or one of his cronies send his work sailing over the edge of the tower into the night.

Charms was also with the Slytherins, but at least there he could sit on the other side of the classroom from the obnoxious Malfoy. For this class, he used his mother's wand.

Herbology and Transfiguration were shared with the Gryffindors. He was already familiar with gardening, from all the work he did at home, and was happy to discover that Neville also had a love of working with plants, so the two of them paired up and rapidly became Professor Sprout's favourite first-years, though she tried not to show it in class.

Transfiguration with Professor McGonnagal wasn't so easy; although he knew the theory behind finding the similarities and differences between, say, a matchstick and a needle, actually changing those differences until the matchstick became a needle was a lot harder than it looked. But the professor showed off her animagus form the first day, and that was very cool. Harry wondered if he would ever be skilled enough to become an animagus, and set that as a goal for himself. He even wrote it down on his Hufflepuff page, and two days later a sixth-year student with the same interest offered to share notes. His father's wand worked better for him in this class.

For Defence Against the Dark Arts and Potions, the Hufflepuffs were paired with the Ravenclaws. Defence was Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays right after lunch, and proved to be a bit of a disappointment. Professor Quirrell stuttered so badly that his lectures were barely understandable, and his entire classroom reeked of garlic. His first few classes mostly dealt with finding the best way to run away from things, and there was little wand work.

The schedule meant that he got to spend all of his Friday classes with Hermione, since double Potions was in the morning. He was very excited about Potions class; since their double Potions session was the second in the morning, he and Hermione spent the first session in the library, where he showed her how to work with *Snape's Correspondences*.

They were waiting at the door when the first class, the Slytherin and Gryffindor first years, left. Neville and the red-haired boy, Weasley, were missing from the class, and Malfoy seemed to be seriously put out about something. Harry raised his eyebrows inquiringly at Tracey as she left the class. "Tell you later," she said with a smile.

"Meet you before lunch?"

"That works."

Between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, they filled the Potions classroom, even the seats in the back which were rarely used. They paired off at the worktables, and Harry and Hermione were sure to claim one right up front so they wouldn't miss any of Professor Snape's demonstrations. That it also got them away from the creepy bottles with pickled animal parts floating in them, which lined the shelves along the walls, was an added bonus.

Snape swept into the classroom right on the dot, wearing a black work robe instead of one of the deep coloured robes he usually wore for dinner. He took the roll, pausing after each name to look at the student in question as if memorizing their faces. When he got to Harry's name, he murmured softly, "Ah, yes. Our new ... celebrity."

Harry could feel himself blushing. Most of the students had stopped gaping at him by now, but he still didn't like having attention called to him.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking," Snape began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word -- like Professor McGonagall, he had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses...I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death -- if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

More silence followed this little speech. Hermione was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn't a dunderhead.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Asphodel ... they had just looked this up in the Correspondences! "A really powerful sleeping potion, sir?"

"Close. But close isn't enough when you're dealing with things that can kill you if you're less than precise. Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

"In my potions kit, sir?" he stammered.

"Very funny. Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?"

Now Harry was getting angry. He had opened the books. He had been over and over the books. But he couldn't remember every single thing, not with Snape staring at him that way.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Oh, finally, one he knew! "There is no difference, sir. They're the same plant."

Snape continued to stare at him for a moment, and Harry glared right back. "I call that one and a half out of three, Potter. You'll have to do better than that if you want to pass this class. For your information, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are indeed the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite. Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

There was a general rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Snape said, "And a point will be taken from Hufflepuff for your ... inappropriate sense of humour."

Snape then set them to brewing a simple potion for removing boils, while he strode about checking people's work. About half way through the brewing period, he stopped next to Harry's

workstation, looking down into Harry's bookbag, which lay open on the floor against the table leg. He reached down and plucked out a book. It was the copy of his *Correspondences*.

"Mr. Potter, why do you have this book in your bag? It's a much more advanced reference than you could possibly-" He bit off his sentence abruptly. The book had opened to the title page, and he knew whose it was. Suddenly all came clear to him. Those damned Marauders had pranked him *again!* And the boy had been in it up to his neck, and done it beautifully, too. Just like his bloody father.

"Because it's the best reference, sir," the boy had the gall to answer.

"See me after class, Potter. And one point from Hufflepuff for leaving your bag in the middle of the floor. It's a hazard." He dropped the book back into the bag and kicked it under Harry's workstation.

Harry returned his attention to his work. He and Hermione created a flawless potion, putting a portion of it in a vial for grading. Snape grudgingly gave them permission to bottle up the rest of it for use by the infirmary if necessary. All the potions had been handed in several minutes before the end of the class period, and Snape used the extra time to rearrange their seating arrangements. He broke up Harry and Hermione, leaving her at the worktable at the front, with Hannah Abbott for a partner, and moving Harry to the rear, pairing him with Ernie MacMillan.

"Pay attention! Until further notice, these are your assigned stations and partners. You may notice that I have put most of the Muggleborns up front. I am not doing this because I am discriminating against anybody, but because you all need the most work on basic technique, and I will need to watch you and correct you more often. I'll also want all of you in the front row to come here for special tutoring sessions on Tuesday evenings after dinner. These will continue until I think you are proficient enough to brew potions with less supervision. Again, this is not a punishment or a detention. I am merely giving you a chance to catch up with your classmates who have more experience. If you skip the tutoring, your grades will be your punishment. Is that clear?" All the students up front nodded vigorously. "Class dismissed."

Most of the students threw their parchments and quills into their bags and raced for the door. Harry put things away more slowly and went to stand before Snape's desk. Hermione waited for him by the door.

"I did not ask you to stay, Miss Granger. If you must wait for your friend, do it *outside* my classroom. And close the door when you leave." Hermione obeyed, leaving Harry alone with the hook-nosed professor.

"I suppose you thought that was funny, did you, Potter?"

"Thought what was funny, sir?" Harry honestly had no idea what the man was talking about.

"Pretending to be someone else when we met in the Apothecary. Lupin's nephew, ha! Pretending to be interested in Potions. Asking for my bloody autograph! Did Black and Lupin set it up? Did

they tell you they'd be leaving you to my so-called 'mercy' when I found out?"

"I wasn't pretending anything, sir. I really do like Potions. I think they're fascinating, the way everything goes together, and it's wonderful when I get one just right. I asked for your autograph because I respect your work. And I was wearing a glamour because the stupid *Daily Prophet* still had that reward out for me and I didn't want to be mobbed by people trying to claim it. I told somebody at another store that I was Mr. Lupin's nephew when they started asking questions, and I guess he decided that was a good cover story. I'm sort of an adopted nephew, I think."

Snape looked coolly at him for a few moments, as if trying to judge his sincerity, and Harry met his gaze directly, trying to will the professor to understand.

Finally the professor broke the standoff by clearing his throat and glancing away. "Do you really have a bezoar in your potions kit?"

Harry fished it out and showed it to him. "Yes, sir. It was in my mother's emergency kit and I thought it would be a good idea to keep it with my things. Just in case. I just ... for a minute, I completely forgot where they came from."

"Do you think I should give your points back?"

"Well, that last one was fair. I was creating a hazard, and I do know better than to leave something out where someone could trip over it. The other one is up to you, sir. I can see that you might have thought I was making a joke."

"Fine. One point to Hufflepuff for preparedness. You may go, Mr. Potter." Harry tucked the bezoar back in his bag and turned toward the door. He had his hand on the knob when Snape called to him again. "Mr. Potter. Now that I know what you can do, don't expect to slack off. You have a modicum of skill and talent. If you want to develop them further, you'll have to work at it. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"You may not thank me next week. Now go."

Harry practically bounced out of the classroom. He found Tracey telling Hermione all about how Malfoy had flubbed all three of Snape's trick questions. "So he started off saying, 'My father is-' and Snape interrupted him and finished the sentence with, 'not taking this class. And unless you want me to write to him and explain exactly why you have detention for the rest of the year, you won't mention him in this classroom again!' Malfoy turned the most amazing shade of green. It was beautiful!" She became serious again. "But then he sabotaged Weasley's potion and Neville had to take him to the infirmary. And Snape didn't see him do it, so he got away with it."

"Want to do something about it?"

"Sure, but what?"

"Let's go find Neville, and then I'll tell you all about four guys called the Marauders ..."

Fidelius True Colours

Chapter 9

TRUE COLOURS

Getting hold of Neville meant that a full explanation of the Marauders had to wait until after lunch and Harry and Hermione's Defence Against the Dark Arts class. All four of the friends had the rest of the afternoon free after that, so they sat under a tree down by the shore of the lake. First Neville reported that Ron would be all right. He was going to be kept over in the hospital wing until the next morning just in case, but by the time he was released he'd have no more than a few red spots on his face and hands where the boils caused by the potion boilover used to be. Then they all listened eagerly while Harry explained about the Marauders. Although they all got a good laugh out of his stories of some of the more imaginative pranks the original Marauders had played, the whole thing was almost derailed when Hermione said she wasn't really in favour of pranking.

"Random pranks are one thing, and they're bad enough, but singling out someone and humiliating him because you don't like him is something else. Some of the other students in my primary school did that to me, and it wasn't something I'd wish on anyone else. No matter who he is."

"Well, I don't like that either," said Harry. "It's never happened to me, but I saw it happen to some boys I knew at home, and I stopped being friends with the boys who did it. But I'm not talking about pranking Malfoy just because he exists, but because of something specific he's done. We could be more like, like avenging angels or something. We'll start with Malfoy, but we won't limit ourselves to him. If somebody does something bad and gets away with it, we prank them. They do it again, we prank them again. Eventually they get the idea and behave themselves."

"This is *Malfoy* you're talking about here," said Tracey. "Our families have been doing business together for ages – or should I say the Malfoys have condescended to favour us with their business – so I've known him for a couple of years now. He won't learn. He'll just strike back."

"That's why we use the Marauders name. Nobody will be able to prove it's us."

"But if your father was one of the original Marauders, and everybody knows that ..."

“That’s just the thing, nothing was ever proved. They didn’t really start until second year, and then after they left school, they kept sneaking back in and doing pranks to make people think the Marauders were still in school. So a lot of people thought they were in the class *after* my father’s. I’m pretty sure Snape knows, or can guess, but he won’t be able to prove it. And if our first prank involves something like, oh, access to the Slytherin Common Room, where he *knows* I don’t have access, then it can’t be me, now can it?”

“But that will make it obvious it’s me because I study with you!” said Tracey.

“Okay, so we’ll make it, um, somewhere you won’t go either. The boys’ showers, maybe. Didn’t you say you had an older brother?”

Tracey began to grin. “Yes, he’s sixth-year. Nobody would connect him with a prank on a firstie. And he doesn’t like the Malfoys either. He’d probably be willing to help.”

“Okay, so we have our location and our target.”

“What exactly could we do?” asked Neville. “None of us knows any really good spells yet. And Tracey’s brother probably wouldn’t be willing to put a charm on him; they could probably tell who cast it.”

“Not without checking everybody’s wands in the school,” said Harry. “I know some good spells, but you’re right, it should be a potion. Since he started this by messing with Weasley’s potion, it’s appropriate. I don’t want to do anything that will hurt him either, just humiliate him.”

“The Weasley twins pulled something on us our first day,” said Neville. “They put something on our bed sheets that made us all blue when we woke up. They said it was traditional for firsties to go to breakfast on the first morning wearing woad, like true Gryffindor heroes. I think Ron and Dean were going to buy it, but when Percy Weasley, who’s one of the Prefects, saw it, he realised who did it and made them give us the potion to wash it off.”

“How many Weasleys are there, anyway?” asked Hermione.

“Just the four of them at the moment, I think. I gather the twins are notorious for pranking. They’ll take shots at anybody. Gryffindors take most of it because they live right in our tower.”

“Woad gives me an idea, though,” said Harry. “It’s all natural and won’t show up if somebody checks for potions, right?”

Hermione nodded. “You want to turn Malfoy blue?”

“No, that would throw suspicion on the Weasleys. Although a fair number of people will think it’s them anyway, getting revenge for their little brother.”

“Ron says they prank him worse than anyone. They might not want to get revenge for him.”

“They might want to defend their own favourite target. But we still shouldn’t use woad. How

about another Muggle colouring agent?”

“Like a hair dye?” said Hermione.

“Yeah, that would be perfect. We could slip it in his shampoo. Give him, say, Weasley red hair. He’d hate that!”

“Would he be using a magical shampoo? I don’t fancy mixing a Muggle dye with something magical. There would be no way to tell how things would interact. Most of the Muggle chemicals aren’t in the *Correspondences*.”

“So we ask Tracey’s brother to do a scouting mission. Find out what kind of shampoo Malfoy’s using. Then we find something that won’t react badly with it and brew it. Tracey’s brother slips it into the shampoo.”

“And I take pictures of it when he realises!” said Tracey gleefully.

“If you can do it without being obvious,” said Harry. “Remember, we don’t want him knowing you have anything to do with it.”

“I have a little Muggle camera. They make them really tiny, much smaller than wizarding ones, but of course the pictures don’t move. I can send the film out by owl to be developed.”

“And then we sign the picture something like, To Ron From the Marauders, and Neville puts it on his pillow! Perfect!”

Three days later, they met in one of the practice rooms before dinner. Tracey had the information about Malfoy’s shampoo, plus the welcome news that he kept it in a shower-room cubby with only the weakest of protection spells. Tracey’s brother could break them easily, and then put them back so he’d never notice. Hermione borrowed Harry’s copy of the *Correspondences* for the evening and set to finding an additive that would do what they wanted.

“It looks like we could use henna,” she reported the next day. “That would give us a reddish-brown colour. Not Weasley red, but close. Our other options would be golden onion skins, but that would give us more of a yellow colour, or red cabbage, which makes robin’s egg blue. Most of the other natural dyes need a mordant, and most of *those* would conflict with the shampoo ingredients. Our dye doesn’t need to be very strong, and soak time should be practically eliminated, because Malfoy’s shampoo has a colour intensifier in it.”

“But his hair is practically white!” said Tracey.

“Maybe it would look sort of dingy without the intensifier,” said Hermione, shrugging her shoulders. “It works out well for us, anyway. Now the question is, where do we get some henna? It’s not in the standard potions kit.”

“Um, I have some,” said Harry. “There was some in my Mum’s potions supply rack, and I just brought a little of everything. No idea why she had it.”

“But that’s perfect! If we could get onion skins that would be great, too. Make it a little more orangy.”

“I’ve got an idea on that, too,” said Harry. Meet me here tomorrow? It won’t take long to brew, and then Tracey can give it to her brother.”

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Friday morning, everyone in the Great Hall was treated to the sight of Draco Malfoy reluctantly coming to breakfast with flaming orange hair. The palms of his hands and the back of his neck were orange, as well. The Slytherins made him sit at one end of the table all by himself, as if his strange colouration were contagious. The Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws whispered and pointed, but the Gryffindors were less polite and laughed uproariously. The Weasley twins received slaps on the back in congratulations, but those who knew them well would have said they looked as startled as anyone else.

Just before dinner, Tracey met them in the practice room and handed Neville a Muggle photograph of Malfoy in the Slytherin Common Room, looking at his hands in stark horror. His bright orange hair was damp and uncombed.

“Now that is a very good shot,” said Harry, looking over Neville’s shoulder. “Malfoy’s never looked better, I think. How did you get that picture back so fast?”

“I sent the film by express owl to Mum this morning. She went to one of those one-hour photo places and sent the pictures back this afternoon. I had to run all the way up to the owlery to get them.”

“Now let’s just sign it, and then Neville can plant it after dinner,” said Harry. “Er, should we use code names or just ‘The Marauders’?”

“We haven’t really thought about code names. We don’t want ones people could use to figure out it’s us.”

“Okay, here goes then.” Harry signed the back of the picture ‘To Ron From The Marauders’, and then used a charm Peter had taught him to obscure his handwriting. Neville took the picture and promised that he would be able to sneak it into Ron’s bed without anyone knowing.

On Saturday, gossip spread throughout the school that someone claiming the mantle of the Marauders, infamous pranksters from a generation ago, had claimed responsibility for Malfoy’s hair, which was even more flaming the second day. He had switched to a new bottle of shampoo in an attempt to wash the red out, but the intensifier in it just made the colour even stronger.

By Sunday, he looked like the most ardent Chudley Cannons fan in existence.

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A school like Hogwarts necessarily had many more classrooms than it actually had classes.

Professor Snape needed to have one classroom for the large lower year classes and another smaller but better equipped one for the NEWT-level classes. Professor Sinistra used a classroom for her Astronomy classes during the day but took the students to the top of the Astronomy Tower at night for actual observations. And Professor Kettleburn normally taught the Care of Magical Creatures classes outdoors at a set of paddocks near the hut belonging to Hagrid, who acted as his assistant, but he also had a regular classroom for occasions when he was teaching about smaller creatures or the weather was too inclement to go out. All the rest of the teachers had one classroom each.

The library and the Great Hall were open at all times except mealtimes for students to do their homework, but no spell casting was allowed in these rooms. It was recognized, however, that the students needed to practice somewhere. Accordingly, there were a number of classrooms which were used primarily as practice rooms. Potions was the only class which required constant supervision, so appointments had to be made to use the practice lab, with a NEWT student earning house points for keeping an eye on things. For all the rest of the classes, any room which wasn't being used at the time would do, and over the years most of the rooms had acquired collections of random things to be used for Transfiguration or Charms practice.

The best rooms, of course, were usually taken by groups of older students, but Hermione had found a small room in the Arithmancy corridor that apparently didn't see much use, judging from the amount of dust in it. The four friends promptly moved their practice supplies in and did a cursory clean-up. The next time they visited, they found that the dust was gone and the windows cleaned, so apparently their occupation of the room had been noted by the house elves.

On Sunday night before curfew, Neville found Harry in the practice room with a large book open on one of the desks, casting charm after charm at a handkerchief, which was flickering through an astonishing range of colours as he did so.

"There you are, I've been looking all over for you. What are you doing up here now? I thought you said your homework was all done."

"It is, mostly. But Snape gave me an extra project, and then I discovered how to turn it into a possible prank. So I'm practising."

"He gave you extra work already? He must really not like you."

"I think he likes me too much," said Harry. "We did that cleaning potion that's supposed to turn lavender at the end, you know?" Neville nodded; his class had done the same potion. "Well, mine came out lilac. And Snape took a point for it."

"Really? Mine wound up bright purple, and he didn't say anything about it. Of course, Goyle's was green, so he was angrier about that. But he didn't take points even for that."

"Of course he wouldn't, it's his own house. Anyway, I said it wasn't fair because I didn't even know what the difference between lavender and lilac was. So he said that sometimes subtle colour differences were important to how well a potion works, or even the difference between healing and poisoning someone, and if I could find a way to check myself, he'd give me my point back,

and give me an extra one besides.”

“So what’d you do?”

“I found a solution by accident, really. I was sitting in my common room this afternoon thinking about it, and I saw some girls changing the colours of their robes.”

“Why were they doing that?”

“They said to find out what colours looked best on them. Really, they all looked fine to me, and I told them so. But they had this book, see, and they let me borrow it. I have to get myself a copy of it, it’s brilliant.” He marked his place and closed the book so Neville could see the title.

“*Martha Merrymaid’s 1001 Household Charms* ? Harry, that’s a girl’s book.”

“Well, yeah, most of the spells in it are for housewives. But if you think about it, most of them can be used for pranking, too. Like here’s one for changing the flavour of foods. It’s supposed to make bland stuff taste better, but you could also use it to make somebody’s pudding taste like liver. Things like that. And most of the spells are things even first years can do. There’s a couple of hard ones in the back, but I can work up to those. Anyway, there’s a simple temporary colour change spell with a whole list of colours, so I got some parchment scraps and made samples, and labelled them on the back. So now I can compare something to make sure I got it right, and with practice I’ll learn to tell them without the samples.” He showed Neville a large batch of parchment strips in various colours. “And while I was doing that, I had an epi ... efip ... I made a discovery.” He carefully spread the handkerchief, which was a brilliant yellow, out on the desk. “I charmed this to be yellow, right? Now what happens if I put a green charm on top of it?”

“It turns green,” said Neville, as if it were obvious, which, in fact, it was.

Harry cast the charm and the cloth turned forest green. “Now, what happened to the charm for yellow?”

“It was broken?”

“Nope, because I didn’t stop it before I cast the green one. It’s still there. So, if I terminate the green one...”

“The cloth is yellow again.”

“Right. *Finite!*” The handkerchief reverted to its previous colour, and then he cast another charm to make it white. “Now, can you tell any difference between that handkerchief and this one?” he asked, pulling another one out of his bag.

Neville compared them closely, holding them next to each other to check shades of white and even feeling to see if the texture was different. “No, they look exactly the same. Except this one’s frayed on the hem a little.”

“Well, that one’s got about sixty layers of colours on it. I was trying to see just how many I could get on there before it caught fire or something.” Neville put the cloth down hastily.

“Now, imagine this is someone’s robe.” He changed it to match the black of their student robes. “And I see them in the hall, and I just flick my wand and go, *Finite* under my breath, and see...” The cloth was white again. “*Finite!*” Yellow. “*Finite!*” Red. “*Finite!*” Fuchsia. “*Finite!*” Malfoy hair orange. “If you were going down the corridor and your robe changed colour suddenly, what would you think? What would you do?”

“I’d think someone cast a charm on it, and I’d ... I’d use *Finite* to change it back,” said Neville, a smile breaking out on his face as he realised how Harry’s idea worked. “But with this, it would just change to another colour, right?”

“Right. And then you’d keep changing it until you got back to black, right? And then you’d stop. But if black was just another colour I’d added, the next time I saw you, I could use *Finite* again and you’d be right back to magenta or whatever.”

“And you can use the *Finite* in the halls because it isn’t really casting a spell. It’s just turning one off.”

“Mmhm. So the next time the Weasley twins turn you blue or whatever, we just get Ron to, er, borrow their robes while they’re out at Quidditch practice or something, and start casting. This one’s easy enough to cast until the cows come home, and then we can colour the cows. There’s another spell for patterns, too. Polka dots and plaids and paisleys and such. If we get the girls in on it, I think we can make some combinations that would make the Headmaster’s robes seem tame.”

“That would be wonderful. You’re an artist at this, aren’t you?”

“I’ve had some good coaching,” said Harry. “I think we can get you up to speed in the fine art of mayhem, too, and then the Weasleys had better watch out.”

“Speaking of Weasleys, I almost forgot why I was looking for you,” said Neville. “Malfoy’s decided that Ron is responsible for his new hair colour. Caught up with him after dinner and challenged him to a duel. And the git accepted.”

“What!” gasped Harry. “But it wasn’t his fault!”

“Ron’s got a temper and pride, and he didn’t want to look like a coward in front of everybody in the Great Hall. Best I could do was get myself named as his second.”

“We have to stop this. Somebody could get hurt.”

“Too right. I bet Malfoy knows all sorts of dangerous spells, and he’s really angry about his hair. Ron can barely pull off a Jelly-Legs Jinx.”

“Where are they now?”

“Ron’s in our Common Room, boasting about how he’s going to mop up the floor with Malfoy. Bet he’s down in the Dungeon doing the same thing.”

“Wonderful. So we’re not going to get either of them to back down as long as there are other people to egg them on. When and where is the duel?”

“In the Trophy Room, at midnight.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you there. You can tell them, that, um, that you asked me to referee since I’m in a neutral house. Then I’ll try to talk them out of it. In the meantime, it’s almost curfew, and I,” he said, patting the spell book, “have some preparation to do.”

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About 11:30, Harry crept out of the safety of his curtained bed and tiptoed out of his room. His roommates were sleeping soundly enough that he really needn’t have bothered, he thought, but there was no point in taking chances. The Common Room was empty, lit only by the red glow from the coals in the fireplace, and the portrait of Helga Hufflepuff snoozed in her frame. He pushed open the portrait and slipped out into the hall, being careful not to stub his toes on the stone threshold. As he quietly swung the portrait back into place, he realized that the Scribe was awake. The Italian garden had gone dark, but the scholar was still working by the light of a single candle on the desk.

“Here, who’s that?” the Scribe said.

“It’s just me, sir. Harry Potter.”

“And what are you doing out and about at this time of night?”

“Er, well, I’m trying to stop someone getting in trouble.”

“By getting in trouble yourself? I should tell someone you’re out, you know.”

“Please don’t, sir,” Harry pleaded. “They’re going to have a duel and I have to stop it. Someone could get hurt.”

“Sounds like there’s a story behind this,” said the Scribe. “Very well, then. Off with you. But you have to promise to tell me the whole story when you have time.”

“Are you going to tell anyone?” asked Harry anxiously. Even if he managed to talk Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy out of fighting, it would do none of them any good if the Scribe told the Headmaster and got them all expelled.

“I should, but I won’t. I’ll stay here until you come back. Run along, and beware of the second floor corridor on the north side. Some of the other portraits are having a party there tonight, and will still be up.”

“Thank you, sir!” Harry said, and dashed off.

When he reached the Entry Hall, he paused. The room was dark and cavernous, with only a few bars of moonlight falling across the floor from the high windows. “*Lumos!*” he whispered, and pale light shone from the tip of the wand held tight in his fist. It wasn’t enough to fill the whole Hall, but it made the marble banisters of the main staircase gleam in the light, and Harry slipped across the flagstone floor and up the stairs. He had soon gained the third floor and padded quietly through the Armour Gallery leading to the Trophy Room. The suits of armour cast weird shadows in the light, making the place seem even spookier.

He had almost reached the Trophy Room when he heard the distinct sound of someone entering the Gallery behind him. He extinguished his wand and ducked between two suits of armour. Peering out carefully, he saw Neville and Ron Weasley making their way hesitantly through the Gallery.

“Psst! Neville!”

Both boys jumped.

“Don’t worry, it’s just me,” he said, stepping out where they could see him by the light of Neville’s wand.

“What’s he doing here?” the red-headed boy asked Neville peevishly.

“I asked him to be the referee for your duel,” said Neville reasonably. “It was my duty as your second. Hufflepuffs make the best referees because they’re always fair.”

“Oh. Well, I guess that’s okay, then. You didn’t tell anyone else, did you?”

“No, just him. Harry, this is Ron Weasley. Ron, Harry Potter.”

“Harry Po ... *Potter* ?” stammered Ron, his eyes opening wide in surprise.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Harry, ignoring the other boy’s reaction. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

Cautiously, so as to avoid the hinges squeaking, Neville swung open the door leading to the Trophy Room, and candle light spilled out.

“It’s about time you got here,” Malfoy hissed, stepping out of the shadows between two of the trophy cases. His hair gleamed bright orange even in the inadequate light provided by the candles in their wall sconces. Another boy, somewhat weedy looking, followed him. “I was beginning to think you’d turned coward on us.”

“Gryffindors don’t turn coward!” Ron spat.

“No, you just sneak into people’s bathrooms and defile their hair care products!”

“Do not!” said Ron, displaying his total lack of eloquence.

“Calm down,” said Harry. “Let’s work through this like reasonable people, shall we?”

Malfoy started as if noticing Harry for the first time. “What in Merlin’s name are *you* doing here, Potter?”

“As Ron’s second, Neville asked me to step in as a neutral party referee,” said Harry.

“I would have worked it out with your second, but you stomped off without telling us who that was,” put in Neville helpfully.

“Malfoys do not *stomp*. We make dramatic exits. We do not stomp.”

“Pardon me for not knowing the difference,” said Neville. “But the fact is, you didn’t tell me your second’s name. I still don’t know who this is.”

“Theodore Nott,” said the other boy, speaking for the first time. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Neville Longbottom,” said Neville in reply.

“You are *not* pleased to meet them, Ted,” growled Malfoy, who seemed rather annoyed at losing control of the conversation.

“Just being polite,” said Nott.

“This a duel, not a tea party!”

“Right,” said Harry. “And since it’s a duel, I assume both of you have agreed to observe the provisions of the Wizard’s Code Duello of 1327?”

“Erm. The Code Duello?” asked Ron.

“Yes. I presume as both of you are from pureblooded families, you must both be familiar with it. I mean, I’m only a half-blood, and even I know all about it.”

“Of course we’re following the Code,” sneered Malfoy.

“Good, then you know as referee it’s my responsibility to try to settle the disagreement between you before you get on with the fight to the death.”

“To the death?” said both Ron and Malfoy.

“Oh, of course. If you can’t settle it, I step out of it except to clean up the blood and body parts left over from the disembowelling and make sure the loser’s wand is returned to his family and such. Longbottom and Nott here are to prop up anybody that falls down so he’ll be a better target, and to finish off anybody that’s mortally wounded but still flopping around. Clear?”

“Disembowelling?” croaked Ron.

“Still flopping around?” Malfoy squeaked. Both boys had gone pale.

“How else will honour be satisfied?” asked Harry. “Do you want to do the settlement discussions or go right on to the bloodshed?”

“I suppose we could give settlement a go,” said Malfoy, summoning up the tatters of his dignity. “I’d hate to get Weasley blood all over my robes.”

“Settlement’s okay,” said Ron, although with less aplomb than Malfoy had managed.

“Okay, then. Malfoy, you’re the challenger. What’s your problem with Weasley?”

“What’s my problem?! Haven’t you seen my hair?!”

“I think everybody in the school has seen your hair. What’s that got to do with Weasley?”

“He did it! He turned my hair this colour!”

“I did *not* !” retorted Ron while Neville shushed him.

“Why would he do that?”

“Well, because he, um, he...” Malfoy seemed to suddenly realize that if he told how he had sabotaged Ron’s potion, thereby causing revenge to be taken, he would be in danger of challenge, and subsequent disembowelment, himself. He decided to go with a safe claim. “Our families have always hated each other. Look what colour he turned my hair! It obviously has to have been him!”

“I’d actually say it was more likely to have been his older brothers. Ron’s more likely to just punch you in the nose,” said Neville, and Ron nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

“So why didn’t you challenge the twins instead? It does seem to be more their style of prank.”

“Probably because there’s two of them. And they’re two years older than us. And know even more dirty tricks than *he* does,” said Ron.

“That’s understandable, then,” said Harry. “Spending one’s entire school career transfigured into a cabbage or something would definitely be a Bad Thing. Ron, I’m going to ask you to swear on your honour and your magic – did you in fact have anything to do with turning Malfoy’s hair orange?” Harry felt safe in asking Ron for the oath since he knew the other boy hadn’t been involved.

“On my honour and my magic, I did not.”

“To the best of your knowledge, did your older brothers do it?”

“No. They were just as surprised as anybody else. Thought it was a great joke, though.”

“There. That’s settled. He didn’t have anything to do with it, so you should withdraw your challenge.”

“Withdrawn,” said Malfoy between gritted teeth. “But *what about my hair?* ”

“It is kind of bright,” said Harry. “Is that a charm, a transfiguration, or a potion?”

“Potion,” said Malfoy shortly. “Somebody put something in my shampoo.”

“Good. I do know a spell that might be able to get the orange out, then. It would just leave it kind of white, but that’s not too far from your natural colour. Would that be okay?”

“It’s better than orange.”

“All right, I’ll try it if you want, and if you promise not to go challenging me if it’s not exactly right. And you’ll owe me a favour.”

“What kind of favour?”

“I don’t know. I’ll think of something. Nothing bad, though. Okay?”

“All right, I promise not to challenge you. And I owe you a favour,” said Malfoy, although he clearly would rather not.

“Good.” Malfoy flinched slightly as Harry raised his wand. “*Crinis albeo!* ” said Harry, and the four watched anxiously as the bright orange colour gradually faded from Malfoy’s hair, leaving it a shining white.

“Is it done? What does it look like? Ted?”

“Looks good,” said Nott. “Not quite like before, but close. Take a look.” He steered his friend over to one of the crystal display cases, where there was a silver plate that was highly polished enough to be a decent mirror.

Malfoy looked eagerly, and ran his fingers through his now white locks, sighing with relief.

“Is everything settled now?” asked Harry. “Good, then shake hands and let’s all get back to our beds. We’re going to attract attention from someone if we stay here too long.”

Ron and Malfoy grudgingly shook hands, although both of them made a show of wiping their hands on their robes afterwards. Neville stepped out into the Armour Gallery.

“Mrreowww,” the other boys heard.

Neville jumped back into the Trophy Room and eased the door closed without slamming it. “It’s

Mrs. Norris,” he whispered. “She saw me! That means Filch is on his way!”

Through the door, the boys could hear the sounds of Mrs. Norris’ loud caterwauling, and the caretaker’s nasal voice.

“All right, I’m coming, my sweet! Show me what you’ve found!”

“We’re doomed,” Ron moaned.

“Look, there’s another door out,” said Nott. Indeed, there was another, smaller door almost hidden between two display cases. “I don’t know where it goes, though.”

“Wherever it goes, it’s got to be better than here,” said Harry. Nott yanked on the handle and he and Malfoy plunged through into a dark corridor. Neville and Ron were right behind them, and Harry brought up the rear, closing the door as quietly as possible. In the dark, he fumbled to fasten the door.

“Great. There’s no latch!” he complained.

“Run, then,” said Neville.

All three boys turned and dashed down the hall, which ended at a wide balcony. A gap in the balcony railing showed where the landing for one of the moving staircases was, but the stairs were moving, swinging away, with Malfoy and Nott clinging to the railing at the top. “So long, it was nice knowing you!” Malfoy called, and the two of them started to move carefully down the stairs.

On the balcony, Harry heard the door opening, and looked around to see if there was a hiding place. One end of the balcony had a tapestry covering the wall. Maybe if they ducked behind it ... “That way!” he said, pointing.

The tapestry proved to cover a niche with another door in it, and all three of the boys crowded into the niche. “We’ll never fit ... he’ll see us ... can you open the door?” said Neville.

Ron rattled the handle. “It’s locked!”

“Budge over,” said Harry. He firmly tapped the lock with the tip of his wand. “*Alohomora!*” There was a faint click and the door swung open. All three boys tumbled into the room as Filch’s steps approached the balcony.

Ron and Harry closed the door and then pressed their ears against it, straining to hear through the layers of wood and fabric.

“I see you now, you little hooligans!” Filch shouted. “You’ll not get away just because those stairs moved! I’ll catch up with you yet!”

“Good, he saw Nott and Malfoy on the stairs ... I think he’s gone to try to catch them. We’ll be okay in a minute. What *is* it, Neville?” Harry said, responding at last to Neville’s frantic tugs on

his sleeve. Then he turned around and saw, quite clearly, what *it* was.

They stood in a large, circular room, a tower room. A room in the forbidden east tower. And he suddenly realized just why it was forbidden.

Crouched in the centre of the room was a monstrous creature. It had a head like a lion, but its body was slim and covered with black hair and it had legs and hooves like a goat. Its tail was a serpent's body, with the serpent's head at the end of it. The snake part seemed to be awake and aware, but the lion had apparently been asleep when they charged into the room. It was only half awake, which was probably the only reason they hadn't been eaten yet, Harry thought in a moment of horrified clarity.

"Wake up! Wake up!" the snake was saying to the lion. *"There are intruders here! Bite them! Eat them!"*

The creature lurched to its feet and growled threateningly. Its eyes shone green in the dimness of the room, and Harry thought he could smell smoke. "Out! Out!" he said urgently.

Ron didn't need to be told twice, jerking the door open as the lion roared and leapt at them. Harry flinched, expecting to feel the beast's teeth closing on him any second, but it was brought up short by a chain that ran from the opposite wall to a collar around its neck. Its gigantic muzzle was only inches from Neville's face, where he stood frozen with fear.

"Burn them!" hissed the snake, and the lion took in a deep breath. Harry yanked Neville around and shoved him bodily through the open door, following on his heels. He slammed the door behind them just as the lion breathed a gout of flame at them. Only a few tiny licks of fire escaped as the door swung shut.

Ron and Harry dragged Neville to his feet, and the three boys ran for it. The stairs hadn't come back yet, so they had no choice but to head back through the Trophy Room. Fortunately Filch was gone, presumably trying to catch Malfoy and Nott. They pelted through the Armour Gallery and kept running, not stopping until they reached the top of the stairs leading down to the Entry Hall.

"I hope ... that door ... was fireproof," Harry gasped, trying to catch his breath.

"Better have been," said Neville. "That thing could burn the whole school down."

"What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in a school?" asked Ron.

"It's protecting something," said Harry. "Didn't you see? There was a flight of stairs on the other side of the room. Right near where its chain was."

"Well, whatever it's protecting, it can keep it," said Ron feelingly. "I'm off to bed. Coming, Neville?"

"Coming. You going to be okay, Harry?"

“Yeah, I can get to the Settle with no problem from here,” Harry assured him, and as they headed upwards to Gryffindor Tower, he headed down to the safety of the Hufflepuff dormitory.

As Harry climbed back into bed, he remembered the small package Hagrid had retrieved from the vault in Gringott’s, the same day that, according to Neville’s father, someone had tried to break into that same vault. Whatever Hagrid had picked up for Professor Dumbledore, Harry would bet that it was now at the top of the East Tower.

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The next morning, Harry and Neville were relieved to find that neither Ron nor Malfoy was blabbing about their midnight adventure, although Malfoy did seem a little put out to find that the other boys had not been caught and punished. He couldn’t very well tattle on them without getting himself and Nott caught, though. He did take great pleasure in telling anyone who cared to listen, and a great many who didn’t, about the very complex spell he had cast to restore his hair to its proper colour.

When the Marauders got together during free study time, Hermione and Tracey were both less than pleased to find out that Harry and Neville had been running around the castle at night, Hermione because it was a dangerous infraction of the rules and Tracey because they hadn’t invited her. Tracey, of course, was particularly interested in the routing of Malfoy and made Harry go over it in great detail.

“So how do you know so much about the Code Duello?” asked Tracey. “I’ve never even heard of it.”

“That might be because I made the whole thing up,” said Harry. “I was betting that Malfoy would be too full of himself to admit that he’d never heard of it either. And I was pretty sure Ron would fall for it. I was just hoping that Neville and Ted wouldn’t spill the beans.”

“You had me,” said Neville, “and Nott *really* didn’t want to be there. I think he’d have agreed to anything to be allowed to go back to bed. Wonder what Malfoy had on him to make him go along with him?”

“Oh, that’s just beautiful! Malfoy out-Pureblooded by somebody who’s making it up! And the wonder of it is, even if he bothers to look up the Code and finds it doesn’t exist, he’ll never be able to admit to it! Too bad you had to turn his hair back, though.”

“I wish you had time to do one of those colour stacking things on him. It would have been great to change his hair colour every time we saw him!” said Neville, and then Harry had to explain his colour charms and show his new favourite book to the girls. Hermione scoffed at it at first because the charms in it weren’t powerful, or obscure, or elaborate.

“Sometimes simple is best,” Harry said. “Everything in here is fast and I can do it *now* instead of taking five years to figure it out. That door unlocking charm saved our arses last night!”

“Language,” said Hermione absently.

“Well, it did!” said Neville.

“If you hadn’t been able to unlock the door, you wouldn’t have been almost *eaten* !” she replied. “Far better to be serving detention than being roasted by that ... that ... what was that, anyway?”

“Dunno. We haven’t taken Care of Magical Creatures yet. But anything that has two heads and breathes fire is not something I want to be too close to,” said Neville.

“Sort of makes you wonder what they’ve got up in that tower if that’s the sort of thing they have guarding it,” said Harry.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to try to find out how to get past it! That could be incredibly dangerous!” said Hermione.

“Okay, then I won’t tell you,” said Harry with a smirk. “Seriously, I was just wondering, that’s all. I’m no fonder of the idea of being a lion’s breakfast – either raw or toasted – than anyone else is. Now, has anybody got the hang of that butterfly-to-silk-flower transfiguration yet?” he asked, closing the subject.

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Two weeks later, they began flying lessons. Tryouts for the Hufflepuff house Quidditch team had been held in the interim, and all the first years had flocked to watch, even though they couldn’t try out themselves. Unlike the other houses, where people who had a spot on the team kept it and tryouts were only held for vacancies, Hufflepuff tried out all positions every year. Usually it meant that someone who had a position one year would keep it the next, but sometimes there were surprises, as when Cedric Diggory, their star Seeker, had unseated a sixth-year student for the position when he was only in second. The first-years watched eagerly, with the students from wizarding families explaining the game to the Muggleborns, and all of them swearing they were going to try out next year. They became even more excited when a notice was posted in the Hufflepuff common room stating that evaluations for flying lessons would be carried out on Wednesday. They would be sharing the session with the Ravenclaws.

As the day approached, Hermione became incredibly nervous. As a Muggleborn witch, she had never flown on a broomstick in her life – the closest she’d ever been was riding a stick horse when she was a little girl. It didn’t help that flying was one of those subjects that absolutely could not be learned from a book. Not that she didn’t try. She checked books on flying out of the library and read out loud about tips and tricks of broom handling until the rest of the Marauders were sick of it and Harry was wondering if he could go on the sick list that day and take the class the next day with Neville and Tracey.

Harry was none too complacent himself. He’d ridden on a broom before, of course, but not very high or very fast, given the size of the Dower Estate and the age of the brooms in the shed. They were in good repair, but still, a fifteen-year-old broom was a fifteen-year-old broom.

He was relieved when the classes reported to the wide grassy lawn and he got a chance to look at the two lines of school brooms. There wasn't one of them newer than the ones at home, and all of them had been battered, dinged and generally abused by years of students before him. While they were all standing around inspecting the brooms, their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, grey hair and yellow eyes like a hawk, and carried a much newer, better cared for broom over her shoulder.

"One guess what *her* animagus form would be," said Ernie MacMillan, who was standing next to Harry.

"Let's see... a wombat!" said Harry with a grin. Ernie snorted in reply.

Madam Hooch placed her broom on the ground at the head of the two lines of student brooms. "Welcome to the basic flying skills evaluation," she said briskly. "Today we're going to find out who needs lessons, and at what level – separating the pigeons from the swallows, as it were. If you've never been on a broom before, odds are you'll be needing a fair amount of training before you're comfortable in the air – and even if you don't like flying" – her tone said she really couldn't imagine *not* liking flying – "I guarantee you'll at least be competent on a broom before you leave Hogwarts. If you've had some experience, you may be moved into intermediate or advanced classes, and you'll be moved up in levels as your skills increase. For your information, nobody is allowed on the Quidditch or broom racing teams until I say your skills are up to it. For now, we're just going to practice getting our brooms in the air and landing again. We'll make a few touch-and-goes, and then a leisurely flight around the castle at low altitude. Well, what are you all waiting for?" she Hooch barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

The students hurriedly arranged themselves, and there was some jockeying for the best brooms. It wasn't surprising that the pureblooded students, who knew what to look for, got the better brooms. Harry glanced down at his broom. It was old and some of the twigs stuck out at odd angles, but at least both stirrups were firmly attached. Hermione's was worse than his, with scratch marks all down the handle.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," called Madam Hooch at the front, "and say 'Up!'"

"UP!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did. Hermione's simply rolled over on the ground, and Hannah Abbott's didn't move at all. Perhaps brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought Harry; Hannah looked like she would rather be anywhere else than here.

After several tries, they all had their brooms up and in hand. Madam Hooch then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows correcting their grips. "Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," said the flying instructor. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. Don't worry about getting your feet in the stirrups on this try. On my whistle -- three -- two -- "

Suddenly Hannah's broom launched itself, and the blonde girl shrieked as her feet left the ground. Her broom rose rapidly and zoomed away, heading off toward the Quidditch pitch. "Oh for Merlin's sake!" said Madam Hooch, and she reached for her broom, which leapt unhesitatingly into her hand without even being commanded. "Everyone stay put!" she snapped, and leapt effortlessly into the air in pursuit of the escaping broom.

Unfortunately brooms seemed to be herd animals, and what one did, others were likely to do. Hermione's broom quivered in her hands and took off with her clinging desperately to it while it circled madly above the other students' heads. Then it abruptly headed off around the castle to the south. Hermione obviously had no control of it at all, and was putting all her effort into not falling off.

It was quite obvious that Madam Hooch was never going to be able to catch both runaways, even if she'd known about Hermione's plight.

Harry said a word he'd learned from the older boys in Godric's Hollow and kicked off, pulling his broom around in a rapid turn and following Hermione. Even if his broom wasn't the best, hers was worse, and he could fly straight after her, while she was veering all over the place. "Try to force it down!" he yelled, but perversely the broom corkscrewed higher.

Hermione's broom pulled a tight curve around the southwest tower. Afraid that it was going to try to brush her off against the stonework, Harry pulled an even tighter turn inside her flight path. The south side of the castle, however, was where the Herbology greenhouses were, to take best advantage of the light, and Hermione was now right above the expanse of glass and metal, which had ornamental bits of ironwork that looked quite threatening from this point of view. It was here, of course, that the broom pulled into a tight rising spiral and then an abrupt roll. Hermione and the broom parted company at the height of the top of the castle wall, and she plummeted straight down towards the greenhouses, too frightened even to scream, while the broom made a break for it and headed south toward Hogsmeade.

Harry pushed his broom into a steep dive and managed to get under her. In a daring move, he let go of the handle and steered with the pressure of his feet against the stirrups. Hermione's weight plummeting into his arms almost tore him away from the broom himself, but instinctively he used his legs to centre the broom under them to take some of the impact. The broom sank almost to the tops of the greenhouses, but thankfully did not crash through. Hermione grabbed hold of Harry for dear life, and he settled her side-saddle in front of him. Steering awkwardly, he got the broom away from the greenhouses and brought it down to the ground.

The greenhouse doors opened, and Professor Sprout and her sixth-year NEWT class came running out. A sharp-eyed Ravenclaw had spotted Hermione and Harry and screamed, attracting everybody else's attention, and they had all watched the rescue breathlessly. "Mr. Potter! And Miss ... good heavens, is that Miss Granger? Are you both all right?" asked Professor Sprout.

"I think so," said Harry, feeling a little breathless.

"What on earth was that all about?"

“Flying lessons. Hannah’s broom went one way, and Hermione’s broom went another. Somebody had to catch her, so ...” He shrugged.

“Your flying was amazing,” said one of the boys. “You must have been practically born on a broom!”

“Not really. I’ve only flown a little, and never so high or so fast,” said Harry.

“Then your rescue of Miss Granger is quite extraordinary,” said Professor Sprout.

“Anybody would have done it,” protested Harry.

“On the contrary,” said Professor Sprout, nodding at the base of the tower where half of the first year group had just run around to see what had happened. “Apparently nobody else would have done it. Ten points to Hufflepuff, Mr. Potter. Let’s get you and Miss Granger back to your class, shall we?”

Hermione was beginning to come out of her shock, and tried to slide off the broom. Harry held her to keep her on it.

“Stay on the broom, Hermione,” he said gently. She looked at him with panic in her eyes. “If you get off now, you may never get on one again,” he explained. “But if you ride this one back to where the class is, you’ll be able to fly again later. I’ll walk right alongside you and keep a hand on the broom, all right? But you have to steer it.” She nodded hesitantly, and he slid off and then helped her shift her position on the broom to a normal flying position.

By this time, the rest of their class had reached them, and everyone wanted to hear the story, which the sixth-years were only too happy to tell them. Harry ignored them, helping Hermione steer the broom back toward the front of the castle.

The first-years, augmented by the Herbology class, got back to the flight ground at about the same time as Madame Hooch returned, with Hannah slowly flying the instructor’s broom, and the runaway carried over Madame Hooch’s shoulder. Then the story of Harry’s heroic rescue had to be told all over again, and Madame Hooch gave him another three points for getting Hermione to stay on her broom, and Hermione one for doing it. Then both girls and Harry were sent off to the hospital wing to be checked out, with one of the sixth-years to make sure they actually went.

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Everyone in the Hufflepuff Settle had heard the story by the time Harry had been checked out by Madame Pomfrey and dosed with a mild healing potion to counteract the muscle strains he didn’t even know he’d acquired. He intended to clean up a little bit before dinner, and was startled to walk into a barrage of applause and whistles from virtually every member of his House. Embarrassed and blushing, he tried to make a dash for the dorms, but the older students cut him off and directed him to Professor Sprout, who was beaming happily at him.

“Harry, I had a talk with Madame Hooch after the flight class was over this afternoon. She and I agreed that you should be moved into the accelerated flying classes. You have a great deal of natural talent for flying, and it only needs a little honing. I also think you’ve talked about trying out for the Quidditch team next year?”

Harry nodded, unable to speak.

“Well, I’ve had a talk with the members of the current team, and they’ve agreed to take you on as a junior member of the team this year. You’ll attend practices with them and help the Captain out with his paperwork, help organize the equipment, and so forth. The team members will all work with you to find out what position you might be best at. When Madame Hooch says you’re ready for game play, you’ll be one of the reserve players, and you can try out for a regular position next year. Is that all right?”

Harry nodded again and grinned, and the team members surged forward to slap him on the back and shake his hand. He understood what Professor Sprout hadn’t said. He wouldn’t be just given a place on the team if he wasn’t skilled enough to handle it, but he was being given the opportunity to train for it in advance and earn it if he wanted to. He couldn’t have asked for more, and in that moment, he was supremely happy.

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The rest of September and October passed rapidly, filled with classwork, homework, and Quidditch practice.

The two brooms that had run amok had been replaced by new Cleansweeps, and Harry was allowed to use one of them for team practice. He was rapidly catching on to the various manoeuvres and flying tricks used in the various positions, and hoped Madame Hooch would give him clearance to play soon. The other team members had tested him at the various positions and decided that he didn’t have enough muscle to be a Beater or the reach to be a Keeper, but he was the perfect build for a Seeker and would make an adequate Chaser as well, so he was being groomed for those two positions.

“You’re sure you don’t mind training me when I’m likely to go after your position?” he asked Cedric after an evening of Snitch chasing.

“Why should I mind? If you’re better than me, it’s best for the team that you take the position,” said the fourth-year. “It’s not like I’d be bounced from the team, either. I’m a reserve Chaser as it is, and this is Aidan’s last year. So even if you took Seeker next year, I’m pretty sure I could get the open Chaser slot, and then I’d still be the reserve Seeker if something happened to you. And that’s *if* you can beat me. We’re about even now one-on-one, but you haven’t gone up in a full practice yet, and a real game is worse. Wait until you’ve got the Quaffle and the Bludgers zooming around, and thirteen other players to keep an eye on. It’s a lot harder then.”

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Halloween almost seemed to sneak up on Harry. It was hard for him to believe that he'd been at Hogwarts almost two months already. He'd been dutifully writing letters each weekend, one to Uncle Peter and the elves and one to Sirius and Remus. All three of the Marauders were extremely pleased with the result of the orange-hair prank and the colour-changing robes trick, which had been used on a sixth-year Gryffindor who was bullying the lower years around. It only took three days of wearing randomly tinted robes, and losing house points for being out of uniform, before he got the idea.

The one thing that Harry had not told the older Marauders about was the encounter with the creature in the tower, which Hermione had discovered was called a chimaera, although she insisted that a "real" chimaera had three heads, while Neville thought that any number of heads beyond one was too many. Having got away with that little adventure without losing house points, Harry didn't want to risk one of the adults calling it to the Headmaster's attention and having points taken retroactively.

Everybody else seemed to think Halloween was very important, and there was a major feast scheduled. Harry had never really liked it. He knew that's when his parents had died, and he couldn't feel happy on the anniversary of a day like that. He usually had nightmares and headaches for a few days before and after. Uncle Peter had his own problems with that day, of course, so they'd never celebrated it at home, but just sat around being quietly miserable. The cheerfulness and excitement building up toward Halloween at Hogwarts was exactly opposite to Harry's own feelings, so he just kept quiet and let everyone else enjoy it. Professor Snape seemed to share his feelings about it, but it may just have been that the students were more likely to make careless mistakes when they were being distracted, so the Potions Master was forced to be sharp with them to keep their attention on their work.

On the morning of Halloween itself, the halls were filled with the delicious odour of fresh-baked spiced pumpkin muffins, which were piled on the tables for breakfast. Pumpkin pies were promised for the evening feast, which was sort of worth looking forward to, Harry thought grumpily. He hadn't slept well the night before. His morning class, which was double Herbology with the Gryffindors, didn't go very well, as he managed to get bitten twice by a Fanged Geranium, and a seedling Devil's Snare attempted to strangle his ankle. Transfiguration was worse, as his effort to turn a muffler into a coffee mug merely resulted in a knitted teacup which wouldn't hold a drop.

Hermione wasn't doing much better. She'd been on edge for a couple of days, and in Charms class, which she shared with the Gryffindors, Ron Weasley managed to say something which sent her into the girls' room in tears, and it took Tracey almost an hour to get her out. When they did come out, just before dinner started, neither girl would talk to Harry or Neville, but muttered, "Boys!" and went off to find some other girls to talk to.

When Harry went to the Great Hall for dinner, he gaped at the decorations that had been put up. Live bats hung from the ceiling and walls of the Hall, and swooped over the tables in small flocks. Pumpkins with grimacing faces carved in them decorated the tables, and candles inside them flickered, sending strange shadows across the food. The Hogwarts ghosts were all present, causing a distinct chill whenever they passed by, and Peeves the poltergeist was on a tear, pelting

the students with wrapped sweets. Cedric and Harry practiced their Seeker skills by grabbing the tasty missiles out of the air and tossing them at other members of the Quidditch team.

Once everyone was settled, the food appeared, and even Harry had to admit it was a feast worth waiting for, even if it was a bit heavy on the pumpkin. There was pumpkin soup with nutmeg, and hot mashed pumpkin with butter, and chunks of roasted pumpkin, and fresh pumpkin juice. There were a lot of things which weren't pumpkin as well, though, so nobody complained. Even the late arrival of Professor Snape, still clad in his black work robes instead of the dark colours he customarily favoured for dinner, didn't distract the students from their food.

Half way through the meal, Harry began to feel very odd indeed. Everything in the Great Hall was developing a strange shimmer around it, in an assortment of colours he couldn't put names to, even after his extensive practice for Potions. He found himself staring at things which he normally didn't pay any attention to, but which were absolutely fascinating tonight for some reason. He was staring at the embroidered Hogwarts crest on his napkin, when Percy Weasley attracted the attention of everyone in the Hall by standing up and loudly declaiming, "Right! There will be no duck spanking on my watch!" Having said what he apparently needed to say, the Gryffindor sat down and calmly returned to his dinner. The Weasley twins, several seats down, gaped at their older brother and started laughing uproariously.

Percy's odd statement seemed to be the trigger for others. Random students at all four tables began standing up and declaiming odd things, including Hermione, who accused the girl sitting across from her of having a mother who was a hamster and a father who smelt of elderberries. Professor Sprout stood on her chair and started singing a song about being a teapot. Percy, not to be outdone, got back into the act by standing, turning toward the Ravenclaw table, and loudly pronouncing, "No wife of mine will frequent a back-street gerbilmancer!"

In response, a dark-haired Ravenclaw girl stood and yelled, "That's assuming you ever even *have* a wife!" and pelted him with a handful of mashed pumpkin, which caught him right in the face.

This started the Great Hogwarts Food Fight, and soon the air was full of flying comestibles. The Slytherins took the worst of it, of course, as all three other houses pelted their table with mashed pumpkin, mashed potatoes, fruit compote, and anything else that was messy. The Slytherins doggedly gave as good as they got. The house elves helpfully refilled the serving bowls with fresh ammunition.

Oddly enough, a number of students seemed to ignore the food fight entirely.

Perhaps twenty students were managing to doze off, despite all the shrieking and laughing, with their heads pillowed on their arms, or curling up on the floor under the tables.

Somewhere around two dozen other students were now into full-blown speech making, with the most notable examples being Percy, who seemed to believe he was running for Minister of Magic despite the fact that he was wearing a faceful of pumpkin, and three Ravenclaws, including Hermione, who were reciting a rather peculiar Muggle movie word for word. Harry himself was in the process of reciting the House Elf Rules of Tasks to Cedric, who was listening with rapt

attention, when suddenly all the shadows in the room gathered themselves into one huge black blotch and leapt at him. Harry screamed and pitched over backwards, out cold before he ever hit the floor.

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Severus Snape had been having a bad day. The students, of course, had been distracted all day. The only saving grace was that today he had the seventh years all day, and they were at least able to maintain some focus – if it had been the younger years, the potential for havoc would have been much increased. Professor Trelawney, or as he thought of her, That Fraud Trelawney, had asked him to make a special potion for a project her advanced Divination class was doing after the feast, and he had simply assigned that to the afternoon seventh year class. He also had to make a batch of fresh Calming Potion during the free period between his last class of the day and dinner, since Albus had never given up the idea of letting the students gorge on sweets in celebration of this holiday. At least he'd been talked out of letting them wear fancy dress. Before he could start on the Calming Potion, however, That Other Fraud Quirrell had walked into his classroom and started asking questions about potions which could be used to ward off various Dark creatures. Normally Snape would have been quite happy to indulge in such a discussion with a colleague, but Quirrell's questions were so inane, and took so long to get out due to his stutter, that the Potions Master quite lost his patience, and stalked off to his private workroom, leaving Quirrell standing gaping in the classroom.

The delay, unfortunately, meant that he would have to go directly from his workroom to the feast without changing from his black work robes into the clean dark green robes he had intended to wear, or cleaning the protective salve from his skin and hair. He felt altogether grubby, and it showed in his mood.

Quirrell was already at the head table when Snape finally made it to the Great Hall. The Potions Master was quite prepared to hex the man into insensibility if he asked about potions again, but all he said was, "It's a p-p-pity you m-m-m-missed the soup. It was q-q-q-quite excellent."

Snape grunted in reply and reached for his wine goblet. As was his custom, he paused to savour the bouquet, and realized there was something off about the smell of it. Probably his nose was still full of potion vapours. He put the glass down and summoned a goblet of water with which to clear his palate.

That was when Percy Weasley stood up and made such a bizarre statement that it was bound to go down in the annals of Hogwarts weirdness, which were quite extensive, given the nature of the institution. The reaction of his brothers indicated to Snape that the younger Weasleys had quite possibly orchestrated Percy's outburst.

If that had been it, he would have let it go, chalking the prank up to the sort of adolescent letting-off of steam which normally happened at these affairs. Unfortunately, it seemed to trigger off a series of similar declarations by other students. Even Pomona Sprout was affected, with Minerva McGonagall, who sat next to her, staring at her in shock.

Then the food fight broke out. That drew most of the teachers down from the head table to try to quell it, except for Sprout, who was still dancing, and the Headmaster, who was seemingly conducting the music to which she pirouetted. McGonagall was immediately accosted by a Ravenclaw second-year, who clung to her robes and tearfully pleaded, “But Professor, I don’t *want* to be an avocado animagus!”

Snape was in the process of separating two fifth-year Slytherin girls who were attempting to scrub each other’s faces with mayonnaise when a shriek of terror, high and piercing, cut through the sounds of combat. He spun and watched Harry Potter, recoiling from some unseen threat, topple backwards and fall to the floor, where he lay twitching and spasming.

That set off an entirely different type of hysteria, as suddenly the great majority of the students were also screaming and trying to get out of the Great Hall.

Dumbledore, it seemed, was now entirely lost in some alternate dimension. He stood and roared something totally incomprehensible, launching a series of truly spectacular hexes at something only he could see, and then he fell forward to lie motionless, draped across the Head Table. Although his hexes had no effect other than to scatter the bats and explode a few of the floating candles, the bright bolts of colour sizzling through the air over the students’ heads increased the panic. Some of the students had escaped into the body of the castle, with Quirrell in hot pursuit, before Flitwick had the presence of mind to charm the Great Hall doors closed.

Clearly, drastic measures were called for.

Snape touched his wand to his throat, using *Sonus* to make himself heard over the din. “*QUIET! Nobody move! The next person to eat, drink, fling or toss any food or drink loses fifty points from their House!*”

The dreadful threat resulted in the immediate cessation of hostilities, as students all over the room put down, or in some cases spat out, various treats and culinary ammunition, and the noise died down enough that he was able to proceed without further assistance from the spell. He turned to McGonagall, who was nominally in charge with Albus down, but who seemed to be somewhat out of her depth.

“Professor, this looks to me like someone put multiple potions in the food. Would you tell the house elves not to clear away any of this mess until I’ve had a chance to go through it and find out what exactly is in everything? That includes the things still in the kitchen.” The stern Scotswoman nodded briskly and snapped her fingers to summon the head of the elf staff.

“Madame Pomfrey, will you-”

“I’m already doing triage,” she snapped from where she was running her wand along Dumbledore’s body. “Don’t tell me how to do my job, Professor.” After a moment, she had Hagrid pick up Dumbledore and Professor Kettleburn pick up Potter to take them both down to the hospital wing while she sorted out the other students.

“This batch has been dosed with Babble-on Broth,” she said after a rapid diagnostic on several of the students who were still happily prattling on and completely ignoring the rest of the world. “Probably in the gravy. It’s a standard prank item at Zonko’s and will wear off harmlessly in about half an hour. The worst that will happen is that they might be embarrassed about some of the things that they said. These others,” she said, pointing at the nearest sleeping child, “have been dosed with some kind of sleep aid. It’s probably best to make them comfortable and let them sleep it off. They should wake naturally in a few hours. If they don’t, we’ll worry about it then. The rest of them,” she said, pointing out a few students who were acting very oddly indeed, “got some kind of hallucinogen. Some of the ones who got out of the Hall probably got that as well, so they may be a challenge to find. They’ll need to be herded down to the hospital wing where they can be watched until we find an antidote. Right now, I’m going to go see about Albus and the Potter boy.” She turned on her heel and strode out of the Hall.

McGonagall and the remaining teachers began to sort out the affected students, grouping the babbling students together so they could babble at each other and transfiguring benches into sleeping bags for the sleeping children.

“*Weasley twins, front and centre!*” Snape roared. The twin menaces trotted to the front of the room.

“We didn’t do it!” they said, in perfect unison.

“Do you honestly expect me to believe that you let the chance to prank a holiday feast go by untaken? This has all the earmarks of something you two would do!”

“Well, we did put—”

“-some Giggle Goo in the Treacle Tart—”

“-but that hasn’t even been served yet—”

“-so this definitely isn’t us.”

The two faces staring up at him had more than a little panic on them, and he was inclined to believe them. So the next suspects were –

“*Marauders! Whoever you are, I want you up here right now!*”

One small figure disengaged from the mob and hesitantly came up to Snape, who frowned down at him. “Longbottom? You’re a-?”

“Marauder, yes sir,” said Neville Longbottom in a small voice.

“What about the others? You can’t be the only one.”

“Well, one of us is over there,” said Longbottom, waving a hand in the general direction of the babblers. “And I think one of us ran away. And the last one just got—”

“Taken down to the hospital wing,” said Snape with a sigh. “It would have to be Potter. Did any of you have anything to do with this?”

“Oh, no, sir,” said Neville earnestly. “We don’t *do* random pranks. And we wouldn’t get caught by our own pranks anyway.”

“Not unless you wanted to make someone think you hadn’t done it,” said Snape. Judging from Longbottom’s wide-eyed look, that little nuance hadn’t occurred to him, and Snape kicked himself for suggesting it.

The non-affected students, including Longbottom and the Weasleys, were led out by the available Prefects to go to their Common Rooms, with orders to clean up and not to let any of the food remaining on their clothes ‘somehow’ get into their mouths. McGonagall and Sinistra remained in the Great Hall to keep an eye on the sleepers and babblers, while the rest of the staff started to herd the hallucinators down to the hospital wing. It took a while, since they had a tendency to wander off. Once the affected were delivered, most of the staff went off to look for those who had run away and might be hiding somewhere.

Snape was snarling in frustration by the time they reached the hospital wing, but got himself under control when he saw Madame Pomfrey leaning over Albus Dumbledore, who lay twitching on one of the hospital beds. “Poppy! What’s going on with Albus and Potter?”

“Both of them were dosed with multiple potions, which are interacting badly. I don’t dare give either of them anything else until I know exactly what they were dosed with. Until then, I’m using spells to keep them restrained. Marcus said Potter was thrashing about quite a bit when he brought him down, and I was afraid he’d hurt himself otherwise. They’re both dreaming actively, judging from their eye movements. I have no idea what’s going on in their heads.” She stood up and sighed, looking down at her patient. “I suppose we should consider ourselves lucky that they were the only two who took combinations.”

“Only those two ...” mused Snape. “No, I don’t think it was luck. I don’t think it was luck at all.” Snape spun on his heel and headed for the door.

“Where are *you* going?”

“To get samples of the food and analyse the potions, what else?” snapped Snape. “I trust that you can keep everything under control until I get back.”

It was going to be a long, long night.

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Harry had no idea where he was. Perhaps it was the Forbidden Forest, and if so, he never wanted to be there again. He could see nothing but black tree trunks and thorny, leafless undergrowth. Water dripped from the branches and reflected the light of the waning moon. Harry was barefoot, and wore only a thin silk robe which barely sufficed for modesty and did absolutely nothing for

warmth.

Harry had read that if lost, one should stay where one was in order to increase the chances of being found, so he huddled at the base of a large tree and tried to stay warm and relatively dry, calling out from time to time to attract attention if someone was looking for him. After a while, he began to wonder if anyone was even aware he was missing. There were no sounds of anyone else in the forest, but he did hear something scratching about in the brush near him, and he was less than pleased with that. Finally, his teeth chattering with cold, he realized that he would have to start moving if he was to avoid freezing, and he staggered off in hopes of finding some kind of path or any sign of civilisation. The ground was mud mixed with stones which cut Harry's feet, while the mud squished greasily between his bare toes and weighed down the hem of his robe. The thorny vines snagged the fabric, and before long there were long rents in the sleeves and skirt of the robe.

A flash of colour caught his eye, and he diverted his path towards it. To his surprise and joy, he saw Professor Quirrell standing in the centre of a clearing, looking about curiously. It was the purple of his turban that Harry had seen. Oddly, the Professor didn't seem to be actively searching for anything, or terribly concerned at being in the forest in the middle of the night.

"Professor!" Harry called, running into the clearing. "Here I am! Were you looking for me?"

Quirrell whirled to face him, surprise on his pale features. "B-boy! Wh- what are you d-d-d-?"

He was interrupted when his purple turban started unwinding itself, coming down in loops and swirling around the teacher's thin frame. It moved like a serpent, sinuous and supple, and somehow it managed to slither across the mud toward Harry without dirtying itself. It even talked like a serpent. "*Come, boy, put me on! I'll keep you warm and safe. I'll give you everything you need.*" One end of the fabric reached Harry's foot and began to wrap around his leg.

"No, no!" shouted Quirrell, grabbing the other end of the fabric and yanking it taut. "You're mine, not his! You promised!" With another yank, he pulled Harry's foot out from under him, spilling him backwards into the mud.

"*The boy is mine!*" hissed the cloth, struggling to get out of Quirrell's hands even as Quirrell gathered it up. When the Defence teacher refused to let go of it, it turned on him and started swirling around him, wrapping itself tightly around his throat.

Harry decided that this interval while man and hat were both otherwise occupied would be a good time to be leaving. He didn't even bother standing, but crawled rapidly back into the trees, leaving behind the sounds of a choking man and ripping fabric.

Once safely away from the clearing, Harry regained his feet, and once again started off. As before, he had no idea which direction he was travelling in, but at least now he had someplace he was actively trying to get away from.

When another clearing opened up, Harry was more cautious about looking into it. Here he saw

two people, both men, but neither of them seemed to be moving. They stood locked in combat, with their hands around each other's throats, absolutely motionless. Harry tiptoed into the clearing, but neither gave any sign of life, although their robes moved gently in a random breeze. Consumed by curiosity, Harry approached them, until he could see their faces. One of them was a blond man unknown to Harry, his lips twisted in a rictus of hatred. The other ... was Harry's godfather, Sirius Black.

"Sirius?" Harry whispered. "Sirius, what are you doing? Come on, let's get going. You can help me get back to Hogwarts." He tugged at Sirius' robes and patted at his face, but there was no change. It was as if Sirius were carved from stone. "Sirius?"

"He can't help you, boy," hissed a voice from the tangled vines at the edge of the clearing. *"No one can help you. It's just you ... and me."* There was a scratching sound like something with claws scrambling towards him.

Harry ran. He didn't know what it was that was following him, and he didn't particularly want to know. The mud sucked at his feet, slowing him down, and he was panting from the exertion as he burst into another clearing with no warning.

This clearing was filled with clear moonlight, from the huge full moon hanging in the night sky. A body lay face down in the mud, and Harry recognized him immediately. It was Professor Snape, his rich burgundy robes bedraggled and filthy, a trail of blood snaking down from somewhere under his hair across his face. Over the fallen Professor stood a beast, a gigantic wolf. Its fur was rough and brindled, brown and grey, and its amber eyes shone eerily. It whirled to face Harry, baring its sharp white fangs. With a shriek he turned and fled the clearing as it attacked. He made the shelter of the trees barely ahead of the beast, feeling its hot breath on his legs and a tug on his robe as its teeth snapped only inches behind him. For whatever reason, it did not follow, but returned to its position over the fallen man. It turned its muzzle up to the moon and howled, filling the woods with a sound that was at once terrifying and mournful.

The sound died away, and Harry slowed his headlong flight, mainly because he'd stumbled into a patch of thorns that tore at his legs, and he had to pick his way out carefully. All the while, he expected to hear the wolf coming after him, or possibly the turban, but there was no sound except for his own harsh breathing.

After he was disentangled from the thorns, he wrapped his legs with strips of his robe to protect them if that happened again, and set out once more. There just had to be a way out of this forest. There had to be.

Another clearing opened up in front of him, and this time it was lit with firelight. Trembling, he crept up to its edge and peered around the bole of a tree, trying not to be seen. Torches were mounted in brackets on tree trunks circling the clearing, and in the centre was a flat, rectangular stone. A huge serpent lay coiled upon it. As if sensing him, it reared up and hissed at him.

"Run! Run, little one! But you shall not escape in the end!"

Harry ran. He didn't bother stopping to see what was in the next clearing, getting only a brief glimpse of a chair twined with golden chains, or the next, where he ran past a dark lake with human-like shapes rising out of it.

Exhausted, he finally stumbled and fell in a clearing that contained only a large, roughly carved stone goblet, mounted on a pedestal. Blue-white flames flickered along its edge, dimly lighting the clearing and casting shadows among the trees.

“And so here we are, boy. In the end as in the beginning. All your running, all your search for help, useless. It's only you ... and me.”

Harry had long since figured out that he was dreaming. There was no other explanation for what was happening. But why wasn't he waking up?

The shadows gathered, took substance, shrank and took solid form, becoming a homunculus, no less terrifying for its small size. It was wrapped in shreds of black silk that looked like they were torn from Harry's own robe, and sharp teeth and red eyes gleamed in the light as it approached. It pulled a wand out of its robes, incongruously large in its clawed hand.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!” The malevolent words rang out, and a beam of green light illuminated the clearing. Harry did the only thing he could, and rolled frantically out of the way. The beam seared past his ear and struck the goblet full on. The stone split, forming a wide crack, and blue fire poured out like water, streaming across the ground. Harry scrambled around until the pedestal was between him and the monster, but it just kept coming, laughing a high-pitched, evil laugh. Desperate, Harry pushed at the stone goblet, tilting it. With a groaning noise, it fell over, spreading a sheet of flame between Harry and his tormentor. Fortunately, the nasty little creature seemed reluctant to cross the flames, but it was only a matter of time before it occurred to it to go around them.

From somewhere nearby, Harry heard voices.

“...imens!”

“Harry, Harry can you hear us? Are you getting any response, Severus?”

“Nothing, Headmaster.”

“Try it again.”

“I don't want to risk damaging his-”

“Try it again!”

“LEGILIMENS!” shouted Snape at the same moment Harry yelled “Professor!” The trees rushed away, and there was a frustrated shriek from the homunculus as the bright fire surged and filled Harry's vision with brilliance that burned and filled his head with pain.

When the light cleared, Harry was lying on a bed with crisp white linen sheets, and Professor Snape was staring deeply into his eyes.

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“I don’t believe it! You punched Snape in the nose?!” exclaimed Neville, when Harry was allowed to have visitors the next day. Morning classes had been cancelled because there were still so many students (and teachers) in the infirmary, but most of them would be released by lunch, so afternoon classes would proceed normally.

“I think I broke it. There was blood and everything,” said Harry, with a certain amount of relish for the gore.

“What did he do?” asked Hermione in horror. “He must have taken every house point ever! Are they going to expel you for attacking a professor?”

“Nope, no house points taken, and I’m not expelled. After Madame Pomfrey put his nose to rights, I apologized. I’d just been through the most awful dream, and that spell he was doing on me *hurt*, and then I woke up and his nose was right there in front of me ...” Harry shuddered with the memory. “Anyway, he said I got that one for free, but if I ever even thought about hitting him again, he’d render me down for potions ingredients. I think he would, too.”

“What happened after?” asked Tracey.

“Well, they didn’t want to let me go back to sleep in case I started dreaming again, so Madame Pomfrey dosed me with Pepper-Up Potion and the Headmaster gave me a journal and told me to write down everything that happened in my dreams, ‘cause there was a lot of weird stuff, you know? And I have to keep doing that for a while, in case I have more strange dreams.” He showed them the leather-bound journal resting on his night table. “By then Professor Snape had figured out what was in the stuff people ate and drank, so they were just giving out the antidotes and putting people to bed. I think the last one they brought in was Malfoy. Professor Quirrell found him hiding in Greenhouse Four. Apparently he thought he was a hedgehog. Quirrell got him out from under the potting tables, but he got scorched by Professor Sprout’s Flame Flowers and his turban was all singed, and Malfoy got sick from eating some bugs he found on the floor, so they both stayed the night.” Harry gestured at two beds with curtained partitions around them at the other end of the infirmary. “Madame Pomfrey wanted the Headmaster to stay the night too, so we just stayed up and talked about stuff all night.”

“You talked to the Headmaster? Oh that must have been so exciting! You could learn so much from him!” said Hermione.

“You’d think that, but he mostly wanted to talk to me. He said it was important to him to know what the students thought about classes and their lives and things. So I told him things about classes, and what I learned when I was little, and playing in the village with the Muggle boys and things like that. It was really weird, though, because I kept forgetting details when I was talking to him. About all I found out about him was that he likes the really sour kind of sweet, and he had

a bad experience once with some Every Flavour Beans so he doesn't eat them now. Oh, and he has a phoenix named Fawkes, and we swapped stories about owning birds for a while. It was better than the last conversation I had with him, at any rate. Finally Madame Pomfrey told us we could both go to sleep, but about then Professor Kettleburn came in and he was all upset about something, so the Headmaster left with him." Harry leaned forward conspiratorially. "It was about the you-know-what in the East Tower. Professor Kettleburn said it *bit* itself and it was dying, and then the Headmaster put up a silencing spell so I couldn't hear any more."

"You didn't – you didn't tell the Headmaster about *us*, did you? The Marauders, I mean?" Tracey whispered.

"Of course not. What do you take me for?"

"It doesn't matter," said Neville miserably. "Snape knows. I had to tell him when everything got strange last night. He thought we might have done it. Well, first he thought it was the Weasleys, then he thought it was us."

Harry groaned. "We're in for it now, then! He's going to be all over us!"

"Maybe not. He knows about me and you, but I didn't tell him Hermione and Tracey's names. I just sort of waved at the groups you were in, so he maybe doesn't know who you are for sure."

"He'll be able to figure it out easily enough. All he has to do is ask Pomfrey who visited me today," said Harry. "If we keep our noses clean for a while, maybe it won't be too bad. What happened to the rest of you after I fainted, anyway?"

"I wound up reciting the entire first half of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*," said Hermione. "Then that horrid babbling stuff wore off, and we were sent back to our common rooms and I went to bed."

"I thought something was chasing me, and I panicked and ran and hid in the practice room," confessed Tracey. "One of the prefects found me and brought me here and they gave me a potion and sent me to bed when I wasn't feeling quite so jumpy."

"You guys were lucky you didn't get all of the potions the way I did," said Harry. "That business with the dreams was really nasty. I heard Professor Snape say that someone stole some of the Dream potion he'd made for the Divination class and put it in some of the pitchers of pumpkin juice. Then there was the babbling stuff in the gravy, and who knows what the hallucinating stuff was in. My bad luck to get all three."

"I don't know about that," said Hermione. "There were only two people who got all three potions, you and the Headmaster. And after the babble stuff wore off, but before they sent us up to the Tower, I saw Professor Snape come in to check the food, and he spent a long time on the wine glass at his own place. So maybe somebody tried to slip him multiple potions, too?"

"Didn't he come in to dinner late?" asked Harry.

“Yeah, he did,” said Tracey. “So he didn’t have time to eat or drink before everything started happening!”

“So maybe ... maybe someone was trying to hurt the three of you. And they put other potions in people’s food at random to cover it up. But who would do something like that?”

“I can think of somebody,” said Neville grimly. “Death Eaters.”

“But didn’t they round them all up when You-Know-Who died? Harry killed him!” said Tracey.

“There’s some say he isn’t dead. No offence, Harry, but my dad doesn’t believe it. He’s still looking for him. Not all of the Death Eaters were caught, either.”

“But how can there be a Death Eater in the school? Surely the Headmaster or Professor Snape would *know* !”

“Apparently not. They’ll be looking out for one now, though, because I’m sure if we can figure it out, so can they. They won’t tell anybody about it, though, ‘cos they won’t want to frighten us.”

“Maybe it wasn’t just the three of us they were after,” said Harry. “Maybe they were trying to get whatever it is that’s in the East Tower. Professor Quirrell did come back all burned. Maybe that lion-thingy got him!”

“It’s a chimaera,” said Hermione. “And if the snake part bit the lion part ... ooh, that’s ugly!”

“But if it was him, he didn’t get all the way past it, otherwise he’d be gone with whatever it is he’s looking for. I’m sure they’ll replace the chimaera with something else to protect it. But what?”

“Probably another of Kettleburn’s creatures. We don’t have an in with Kettleburn, but didn’t you say Hagrid invited you to come visit him some time, Harry? Maybe he knows what’s going on.”

Their conclave was interrupted by Madame Pomfrey and Harry’s lunch tray. She shoed all the rest of the students out to tend to their own luncheons, and informed Harry that he was to try to take a nap after eating. If he slept through the afternoon without problems, he would be released to return to his common room before dinner.

He dreamed of Quidditch, and catching the Snitch. When he woke, he wondered for a bit whether he should bother writing it down because it seemed so normal, but he did so anyway, dutifully recording the date and time. Dinner was spent telling everyone a carefully edited version of what had happened to him, and hearing everybody else’s stories about the odd things that happened the previous night. After dinner, instead of settling down with homework, he pulled out some parchment and a quill and started to work on his weekly letter.

“Dear Uncle Sirius and Remus, You are not going to *believe* what happened to me this week ...”

Fidelius
Lady Fair

A/N: I swiped some of Lee Jordan's dialogue during the first Quidditch match – with appropriate modifications because Harry isn't playing, of course.

Chapter 10

LADY FAIR

Tooby was easily the happiest elf on the Dower Estate. He had been one of the elflings raised along with Master Harry, and he had learned how to read and write and all manner of other things. He had turned ten, the age when a young house elf begins to take on adult duties, when Master Harry was nine. Nanny and Ferny had asked him to continue taking lessons with Master Harry, since the most important job for an elf was to make his Master happy. They promised him his pick of adult jobs once Master Harry had turned eleven and gone away to school. So Tooby had kept his elfling name for an extra two years and was really very good at writing and speaking proper English by the time Master Harry's birthday came around. Then Master Harry had gone away to Diagon Alley and came back with the most wondrous creature! Her name was Hedwig, and Tooby had been fascinated with her soft white plumage and round golden eyes and gentle hoots. He had asked to be allowed to take care of Hedwig. Old Birdy, who had kept the owlery for the Potters back when there were many birds coming and going daily, decided that he was not up to taking care of a reopened owlery, even if there were very few birds, so he agreed to train Tooby in the ways of owls.

Tooby was a very good student, and learned all about how to keep the owlery in good condition, how to keep the water and food dishes filled even if there were no owls in residence because one never knew when one would come to visit, what toys owls liked, how to tie letters to their legs, how to banish owl waste and pellets to the compost bin, how to take care of a sick owl, and even how to prepare a nest box in case Master Harry's owl decided to lay eggs. This was a possibility since another owl, a boy owl named Henry, had been obtained to handle messages for the household. But Henry was not as nice as Hedwig, Tooby thought. Hedwig seemed to agree. Since Tooby could read, several books on maintenance of owls and owleries had been purchased, and Tooby now had his very own bookshelf. When he had learned everything to Old Birdy's satisfaction, Tooby became Birdy and Old Birdy retired to help Brandy in the kitchen, where it was warm all year and his joints wouldn't hurt. The newly renamed Birdy looked forward to the day when Master Harry was all grown up and there was a family in the Big House again and the owlery would be busy with owls and messages coming and going the way it had been before the

Bad Wizards had ruined things. He couldn't wait.

As the keeper of the owlery, Birdy had his own little living space right under the owlery, which had been a crawl space beneath the floor of the former gazebo, in case an urgent owl came at night. So far, there had been none, since Hedwig usually arrived in the morning and the only other owls to visit were those from Mister Sirius Black, which arrived in the afternoon usually. He also had the duties of going to pick up the post at the drop box Mister Peter had set up all those years ago, which was where most of Master Harry's mail still arrived. There had been quite a lot of it after the article in the *Daily Prophet* in August, and Master Harry had allowed Mister Peter and Nanny and Birdy to help him sort it out and figure out which pieces of mail should be answered by Master Harry himself and which could be ignored or answered by one of the house elves. Master Harry had become bored with the mail quite rapidly, since quite a lot of it was either thanking him for killing Voldemort and telling him how great he was, or asking him to do something for someone he didn't even know, or making rude comments about where he should be living and what he should be doing. There were also the occasional death threats, which Mister Peter insisted should be forwarded to the Ministry for handling, and sometimes random gifts, which Master Harry appreciated but mostly couldn't use. By now, Birdy was sort of a personal secretary in addition to taking care of the owlery. Every day he would pop in to check the drop box and pick up the day's copy of the *Prophet*. Mister Peter would go through the mail and tell Birdy which letters (if any) should be sent on to Master Harry and which should get a polite note saying that Master Harry was not available for the interview or whatever else it was the person wanted. If there was any mail from Master Harry, of course, that would take precedence, and Birdy would hold the letter so Mister Peter could read it to the household elves.

On the first Saturday morning in November, a winged white shape ghosted out of the dawn sky and slipped through the special portal which kept rain and snow and cold air from getting into the owlery, but allowed free access to the birds. Hedwig settled on her favourite perch and helped herself to an owl treat from the bowl while waiting for Birdy. She didn't have to wait long; the young elf popped in right away. Hedwig was a young owl herself, and was very conscious of the way things should be done. She carefully held her leg out so he could untie the letter, and only then nuzzled him to encourage him to give her a little pet before he popped away to the Dower House with the letter. Then she headed out again, aiming toward London and her second delivery of the day.

Birdy dutifully brought Master Harry's note to Mister Peter. The ghost, of course, never really slept. When there were people or elves to interact with, he behaved almost like a living person, except for being intangible. When everyone else on the Estate slept, he was more a creature of habit after the manner of ghosts, patrolling the grounds and the house invisibly. He would usually end up in the front parlour in the wee hours of the morning, and wait in a passive, almost dormant state until dawn, when the rest of the household awakened. So Birdy was not surprised that the parlour seemed empty when he first entered. Mister Peter shimmered into view as Birdy crossed to the desk with the letter.

"Is that from Master Harry?"

"Yes, Mister Peter. Hedwig brought it at first light."

"It's a day early; usually his letter comes on Sunday. Perhaps something interesting happened." He floated over to the desk with some eagerness.

Birdy broke the seal on the letter and extracted the parchment sheets from the envelope, spreading them out so that Mister Peter could read them, and then politely stepped back so the ghost could read the letter first.

Less than five minutes later, Birdy was scrambling to get Henry awake and ready for a flight to Mister Sirius in London while Mister Peter dictated a letter to a frantically scribbling Nanny.

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Sirius Black was not, by nature, a late sleeper. In school he had usually been one of the first risers, which meant that he got the hottest water in the showers and the freshest food at breakfast, but also meant he was less than popular with the other boys when he disturbed them on Saturday and Sunday mornings. As an adult, he rarely slept past six except when he'd been out exceptionally late the night before, when he might stay abed until eight or nine.

Given Hedwig's usual schedule, he was usually able to read Harry's weekly correspondence over breakfast, giving it priority over the Sunday edition of the *Daily Prophet*. But when a familiar-looking parchment was lying next to his plate on a Saturday morning, he knew something was up. Breakfast was forgotten as he read, and almost as soon as he had finished, the new house-elf he had obtained to replace the increasingly ineffective Kreacher brought him another letter, this one addressed in the spidery handwriting that belonged to Peter's amanuensis.

Padfoot, it read, I presume you've had a letter from Harry and have read it by now. I also presume you're at least as concerned as I am. Something is going on at Hogwarts and we need to find out what it is. I can't leave here at this time so will depend on you to investigate. You are his godfather, after all. Regards, Peter.

He swore at the letter as a substitute for the rat, at least partially because it actually hadn't immediately occurred to him to go check on what was happening – "Who do you think you are, telling me my job, Wormtail? Who's the godfather here, dammit!" – and then stomped upstairs to change clothes. The clothing he had selected for the last motorcycle ride of autumn before putting the Bonnie away for the winter was not at all appropriate for an impromptu parental visit to Hogwarts.

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Albus Dumbledore knew quite well that he was not infallible – as an example, he need look no farther than the two men now sitting in his office. One was a member of the Black Family, one of the most notoriously pureblood-elitist Dark families in the Wizarding World. The other was a half-blood, raised in the Muggle world for the first and arguably most formative years of his life, with a nonaligned witch mother and a Muggle father.

Before these two boys had been Sorted, had he been asked to predict their futures, Albus would

have guessed the first to become active in the elitist movement, perhaps as a protégé of Nox Malfoy in the Ministry, since he was possessed of singular talent, charm and charisma in addition to being the Heir to the Black Family. Had Sirius Black joined forces with Nox's son, Lucius Malfoy, they could have been a dangerous combination, especially if they backed the Dark Lord Voldemort, whose power was growing at the time Sirius entered school. Albus's main concern at the beginning of that first year was to keep the young and rebellious James Potter out of Sirius and Lucius's circle for fear that the arrogant young man might be seduced to join the Dark side. After all, James's grandmother had been a Black.

As for the other boy, he would have predicted that Stephen Severus Snape would succeed in Ravenclaw, where his sharp intelligence would be most valued. Given the boy's brilliance, Albus fully expected the young Snape to pair up with the Muggleborn Lily Evans, whose abilities equalled his, and that the two would go on to bring new life to the rather stodgy field of Potions. Perhaps they would even marry and produce a new generation of exceptional Hogwarts students.

Albus would never have predicted that Sirius would be Sorted into Gryffindor House and, at only eleven years old, turn his back on everything his family represented, instead teaming up with James Potter, Peter Pettigrew and, also to his surprise, the gentle young werewolf Albus had decided to admit to the school as a little "social experiment", eventually becoming a staunch supporter of the Light. He never would have predicted that Severus would be Sorted into Slytherin, promptly abandon his Muggle first name and become "more pure-blooded than the pure-bloods" in his search for acceptance, even to the point of entering Lord Voldemort's service and becoming a master of the Dark Arts.

And he never would have predicted that now, more than twenty years later, these two would be seated in Albus's office, joined in concern over the son of the deceased James Potter. Yet here they were, Sirius looking every inch the young aristocrat in visiting clothes that resembled a Muggle suit, but with a discreet touch of lace at collar and cuffs, his hair drawn back in a Head of Family pony-tail, while Severus wore a casual black jumper and trousers, topped with a burgundy robe embroidered on the collar with discreet alchemical symbols in silver thread, his hair pulled tightly back and braided into a plait which reached most of the way down his back. They'd been in the room together for five whole minutes now, and insults had yet to start flying. It was amazing.

It was as well, perhaps, that Albus had never aspired to being a Prophet, and he said as much as he poured cups of tea for the three of them. Severus looked at him rather oddly and seemed about to speak, but Sirius interrupted whatever thought the Potions Master had.

"I wasted three years in Divs, and I'm no better. Which reminds me." He dug into the pocket of his Muggle trousers and fished out two galleons, passing them to Severus as Albus looked on curiously.

"Thank you," said the Potions Master, pocketing them. "I shall have them framed as a memento."

"Now then, Albus," said Sirius, "would you mind letting me know exactly *what the Hell happened here on Halloween?* "

"Now, now, Sirius, you know how pranks get out of hand," said Dumbledore mildly. "The Halloween feast has been a traditional target for pranks ever since parties whose identities have never been discovered gave the entire Slytherin table jack-o'-lantern heads just before the pudding was served – you remember, that was your seventh year, wasn't it?"

Severus snorted in disgust at the memory – his hair had reeked of raw pumpkin for days afterward – and Sirius looked at the Headmaster narrowly. That had been one of his finest pieces of Transfiguration, and he was proud of it, but he wasn't expecting to be called on it so many years later.

"Unfortunately, this year we had several different pranksters hit, and multiple potions in the food caused unforeseen side effects. Although there was some chaos and minor injuries as a result, everyone's recovered and no major damage was done. We've already given detentions to the pranksters who put the Giggle Goo in the treacle tarts, and trust we shall apprehend the other culprits shortly."

"That's the official story, am I right? Now what *really* happened?"

Albus sighed heavily and sat back in his overstuffed chair. "Really? Four separate potions were introduced into food and drink served during the feast. Severus had the good sense to order the house elves to keep samples of everything and spent hours checking it all out. There was Zonko's Babble-on Broth in the gravy and Giggle Goo in the pudding - none of which was actually eaten. These were things any of the students could have obtained in Hogsmeade the previous weekend. The seventh-year potions class had made a dream-inducing agent mixed with a sleep potion which was intended to be taken by the advanced Divinations classes as part of a project assigned by Professor Trelawney."

"Trelawney? I don't think I know her. Is she new?" asked Sirius.

"She's been with the school about twelve years now, since Professor Pythias retired. She's a descendant of Cassandra Trelawney, and came highly recommended," said Dumbledore. "This dream incubation lab has been part of her class for the past four years, with no previous problems. This time, the dream inducing potion wound up in the pumpkin juice."

"How easy would it have been for a student or someone to take some of it?" Sirius looked askance at Snape.

"I have twelve students in my N.E.W.T. potions classes this year, Black. They each made a cauldron of this stuff on Wednesday morning. It had to be stirred at intervals over the next day, and they all took turns to come in and stir all the cauldrons. Any one of them could have had the opportunity to take some of the potion, but I have questioned them all and they have denied doing so. Wednesday afternoon I had the seventh-year general class in that same classroom. Thursday, I had the second and third years in a different classroom, so I had the N.E.W.T. workroom warded to let me know if an unauthorized student entered. The wards were untouched."

"Sweet Merlin, didn't going to school with ... well, with *me* ... didn't it teach you anything?"

Leaving cauldrons like that is practically an invitation!"

"Fortunately, we have yet to see a set of students the like of you and your little gang," said Snape acidly. "The Weasley twins are well on the way, but they're not there yet. In any event, the worst the dream potion did was to put a number of students to sleep at table, and give them exactly the sorts of dreams that Trelawney intended. It was the last potion that did all the damage. That one was a powerful, long-lasting natural hallucinogen, magically enhanced. Some of the ingredients were quite exotic, and it may take some time to track the sources down. The students who got that one experienced a variety of delusions, and we had some people believing they were being attacked by their tableware while others believed they were some sort of creature. There was a very strong fear component to the delusions, which resulted in a number of the students escaping from the Great Hall and hiding in various places all over the school. It took hours to find and retrieve them all."

"We are quite fortunate that there was as little overlap as there was," said Dumbledore. "Harry, regrettably, was one of the few who received doses of all three potions."

"How few?"

"Er. Two."

"Yourself and Harry. Albus, why are you making me pull the details out of you like this? I don't want to have to practice my Auror interrogation skills on you, but I will if I have to."

"There was an attempt at dosing a third person with a combination," said Snape. "Myself. I arrived late to dinner, so did not have a chance to eat or drink anything before the chaos broke out. Indeed, I had just noticed that my wine smelled off – it had both the dream potion and the hallucinogen in it. Additionally, it turned out the gravy on my potatoes was laced with the Babble-on Broth. Harry's pumpkin juice had both the dream potion and the hallucinogen, as did the Headmaster's mead. The strong flavours of both of those drinks masked the tastes of the potions. My wine, however, was completely ruined. I can only assume that the person responsible did not know how sensitive a Potion Master's sense of smell is, or how delicate a good vintage can be. It is the presence of those two potions in three separate beverages that proves that this was not a simple prank that went too far, even though we are attempting to pass it off as one."

"Why exactly are you trying to sweep this under the rug?" Sirius asked Albus. "I should think you'd want an official investigation so that the guilty party could be found quickly and sent to Azkaban. Just the selection of the three of you as intended victims tells us it has to be a former Death Eater, or a sympathizer."

"I've been receiving hints directly and indirectly through the Board of Governors that certain parties at the Ministry wish to exercise direct control over Hogwarts," said Dumbledore.

"Bringing in Aurors to investigate would risk them acquiring information about the running of Hogwarts that has always been confidential, and that might threaten the school's autonomy. In addition, it would frighten the children and distress their parents. Now that we are aware of the threat, we will be well able to protect Harry. Finally, we believe that it will be easier to find the

poisoner if he thinks we think it was an accident and doesn't know we're looking for him."

With this Sirius had to be content, although he had the feeling no good would come of it. Dumbledore was determined to keep the matter as private as possible. He did agree that Sirius could investigate discreetly to find the source of some of the more unusual ingredients in the third potion.

Despite Dumbledore and Snape's assurances that Harry was quite well, and would suffer no lasting consequences of the experience (except possibly some interesting dreams for a while), Sirius insisted on going to the Hospital Wing to confer directly with the mediwitch in charge.

"Very well then, allow me to escort you," said Severus, as the two rose to leave.

"I do remember where the Hospital Wing is," said Sirius.

"Where it used to be. The castle moved it a few years back, when Madam Mensana retired." The revolving staircase carried them smoothly downwards. "Feel free to wander around for the next few hours trying to find it if you wish."

"Mensana's gone? Who's the new mediwitch, then?" asked Sirius, dismayed. He had been counting on being able to wrap the old witch around his finger, the way he had as a student, to get her to tell him everything.

"Madam Pomfrey is matron now," said Severus.

"Not Perilla Pomfrey? Hufflepuff, one year after us? Held the record for melting the most cauldrons in one year in Potions?"

Severus shuddered. "No, thank Merlin! This is Poppy Pomfrey, an older sister. Ravenclaw, a few years ahead of us. She's a fully certified Healer, extremely professional, and knows her way around a potions lab, too, although the brats keep her busy enough that she relies on me to keep the Hospital Wing fully stocked."

The subject of Poppy Pomfrey exhausted for the moment, the two men walked through the halls of the school in silence. Most of the students were either out enjoying what was possibly the last nice day before the onset of cold weather, or denned up in the library or their common rooms. One group of giggling girls dashed past them, apparently eager to get somewhere. Snape frowned at them and snapped, "No running in the halls!" They slowed down immediately and walked past in a most decorous manner, shooting curious sideways glances at the stranger who was accompanying their Potions professor. Then as soon as they were out of eyeshot, giggles accompanied the sound of running feet once more.

It occurred to Sirius that they had no clue who he was, or that there was anything unusual in his walking alongside Snape. When they were in school, he had felt that the hatred between them was so great that it had attained legendary status and had soaked into the very walls of the castle, to be echoed there forever. Now that all seemed so petty and long ago. The war against Voldemort,

and the years since then, had put schoolboy rivalries into perspective. The satisfaction of turning his rival's hair pink, and the exhilaration of the flight from Slytherin vengeance immediately thereafter, faded to insignificance next to, say, the fight alongside the same Slytherin to save the Longbottoms from Bellatrix LeStrange.

As they descended a staircase, he stopped on a landing. "Snape."

Snape, several steps below him, stopped and turned to look up at him, raising an eyebrow inquiringly.

"I'd like to clear things up between us. There's no reason we have to go on the way things were in school. Neither of us are the boys we were then. Think we can start over?" He held out his hand.

"If that was an apology, it's the worst I've ever heard," said Snape. He slowly and deliberately ascended the steps, bringing himself to the landing where Sirius was standing and reclaiming the psychological advantage his height gave him. "No, it's obvious you never intended that as an apology. Possibly you think you have nothing to apologize for."

Black blinked in confusion, confirming Severus' suspicions, but then he seized on this new possibility for peace-making. "If it's an apology you want, Snape, then you'll have it – I just never thought you'd accept one. I do regret how we behaved then, and—"

"Do you? Regret it, I mean? You and your gang spent seven years terrorizing Slytherins in general and me in particular, ever since we met on the Express and you thought you deserved the compartment I was sitting in. In sixth year, you nearly killed me, and wound up saddling me with a Life Debt to your partner-in-crime. For six years after we left school, we had nothing to do with each other, and I was quite happy with the situation, believe me. Then you dragged me into the Longbottom affair, during which, I recall, I took a Cruciatus for you. Since then I've seen you at any number of Ministry and social functions which I have had the misfortune to have to attend over the years. Never, in all that time, have you bothered to apologize, or even to approach me. The only one of your Marauders to offer me an apology for anything was the one who had the least to apologize for – the one whose life you endangered as surely as you did mine."

"Remus? But he wasn't—"

"Wasn't he? Surely you realized what would happen if your plot was successful? You must have known that if I had been killed, or bitten and received the Curse, your good friend, gentle and innocent though he was, would have been taken by the Ministry and had his head cut off as a warning to all others of his kind?" Snape watched the colour drain from Black's face. "No? Curious – I had wondered whether you were truly Dark enough not to care, or were just that thoughtless. I see it's the latter. Why does Lupin continue to put up with you? In any event, your little act here has little to do with you or me. It's all to do with your godson. Potter."

"Harry? No, I—"

"Don't try lying to me, Black. You're right, neither of us are the boys we were, and I can see right

through you. Gryffindors shouldn't play Slytherin games. Not if they hope to get something out of it. No, you are concerned that I'd take my revenge against you and Potter out on the boy's unprotected hide."

Black flinched slightly, telling Snape he'd guessed right.

"You're harsher on him than the others in his class. All the special assignments, the extra work, taking points for the tiniest reasons ..."

"Has he been complaining to you, then? I'm surprised, I'd thought better of him than that. Or is he merely telling you what goes on in class, and you read my motive between the lines? I am always harsh with my students, Black. Potions is the least forgiving of magical arts, and if they don't learn to follow the instructions and use the proper procedures almost instinctively by fifth year, N.E.W.T. level study would be truly hazardous. I cannot tolerate sloppiness in my class. A poorly performed spell in Charms or Transfiguration merely fails, or can be reversed – in Potions an error can be life threatening."

Snape turned and began descending the stairs again, clearly not caring whether Black followed him, but continuing to talk. Black did follow. "As for revenge – I will have it, but not the way you think. Harry is blessed both with his mother's talent and with such discipline as I have rarely seen in older students – Merlin alone knows where that comes from, certainly not from his father – and a drive to succeed that is almost Slytherin." Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Snape strode along the corridor toward the Hospital Wing, his robes billowing in his wake. "I believe that the boy would be capable of functioning at a higher level than most of his classmates, but since it is not possible to advance him, I have settled for giving him additional work of a sort which challenges him to think independently and develop skills which will be useful to him in the future. So far, I have not been disappointed. I believe that by the time he leaves school, he will, if he wishes, be qualified to apprentice with the finest Potions Masters of Europe. For the next seven years, Black, I shall have him ten months of the year. You shall have him two, at most – unless he goes back to his secret hideout again, in which case you'll have him even less. It is I who shall mould him, shape him, teach him what he needs to know. By the end of his seventh year, Harry will be more my child than yours or Potter's." Snape came to a sudden stop before the Hospital Wing doors and whirled to face Black. "And that, Black, will be my revenge."

"You won't – you won't force him?"

"No. I shall encourage him to follow his dreams and talents, find ways to lead him where he wishes to go. Even if he chooses not to pursue the field of Potions, I shall help him in whatever field he desires. I am not without a certain amount of influence these days," he said bitterly. "I might as well put it to some use. And that way I shall satisfy the doubly-damned Life Debt you saddled me with. When the boy becomes a man, my debt will be paid and my conscience will be clean. Can you say the same of yours?"

"All right. All right," said Black, his hands raised in surrender. "I don't think I could stop you. I won't fight you on this. But I warn you, if any harm comes to Harry as a result..."

“Threats are childish and unbecoming, Black. And you shouldn’t make a threat you might not be able to fulfil. Are you quite finished?”

“One condition, Snape. If you ever have a son, I demand the right to teach him the ways of the Marauders. It’s only fair,” Black said as Snape’s face showed his surprise. “You take our only child, I want a shot at yours.”

“I fail to see why you should think I’d be in a position to have a son,” said Snape. “I know very well I’m not a prime catch on the Marriage Mart.”

“Maybe you’re not the handsomest man in the world, but I think you underestimate the value of the Hero of the War against Voldemort,” said Black with a grin. “Not to mention the youngest man to qualify as a Potions Master in several centuries. And I think you’re not looking at what’s right under your nose. Of course, considering the size of the nose in question ...”

“What on earth are you babbling about?”

“Oh, nothing. Just that I happen to remember what Pomfrey – *both* of the Pomfrey sisters – looked like.” He used his hands to sketch out the shape of a generous female figure in the air, then laughed and pushed open the Hospital Wing doors.

Snape followed, fuming as he watched Black greet Poppy Pomfrey effusively, bending over her hand to kiss it as if he was in the ballroom of a Great House instead of in the Hospital Wing. A slight blush came to the Healer’s cheek as she led Black off to her office to have a private conference about the health of his godson. Snape’s business would wait until Black had gone.

Snape watched them go, suddenly aware as he hadn’t been before of the curves hidden beneath Poppy’s starched uniform. He had never loathed Black more than he did in that moment.

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Saturday morning was crisp and clear and cold, and some of the older Hufflepuffs had advised Harry to get out and enjoy it while he could, since the weather was likely to turn nasty any day now, and then stay nasty for months. The New Marauders were caught up enough on their homework that they felt they could take the day off, and Harry, for once, had no Quidditch practice. The Gryffindor and Slytherin teams, preparing for their first game, had booked the pitch solid for the weekend. In view of all that, after due deliberation by the group, it was decided that they should take Hagrid up on his offer to let them visit him, which Harry had not yet had a chance to do.

Hagrid usually didn't attend breakfast in the Great Hall, so Harry sent a school owl, since Hedwig hadn't returned from her other deliveries yet, off with a short note asking if it was all right for them to visit. The bird returned a few minutes later with a reply scribbled on the back of Harry's note, saying that Hagrid would be at home and would be happy to see them. So they bundled themselves up in their warmest clothes and woollen cloaks, and headed off across the grounds to the gamekeeper's hut at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Both boys had a tendency to run ahead

and then back to the girls, who were walking more sedately, with the result that Harry and Neville travelled about twice as far as Hermione and Tracey did. They all had to be careful on the steeply sloping path, which led first to a small stone circle and then out again onto a hillside from which they could look down on the gamekeeper's house and the Forest beyond. "Ooh, look at that!" said Hermione. "When he said he was adding on to his house, he wasn't kidding!"

The original part of the gamekeeper's hut was obvious, a smallish, round building of rough hewn wood on a crude stone foundation. The walls and wood-shingled roof had been patched and repaired over the years, but all in all the place had seen better days. The new addition was also round and easily twice the size of the original building, with the result that it looked vaguely like a figure 8. Its wooden walls, however, were smoothly finished above a foundation of carefully set stone. There was a massive chimney at one end, from which white smoke issued, and high windows let in light all around beneath a slate roof.

Hagrid came out to greet them as they approached the house. "Harry, good ter see yeh again! C'mon in, I'll show yeh 'round!" He ushered them into the smaller, older part of the building. The furniture in the room was all Hagrid-sized, which meant there wasn't much space. There was a wide table with bench seats, an armchair next to a smaller reading table covered with books and papers, a dresser and a wardrobe. A large bed, hastily made up with a patchwork quilt, took up most of the rest of the space since it was obvious that the overhead sleeping loft was far too small for someone Hagrid's size. The ceiling was festooned with dangling hams, sausages, dead pheasants, and pots and pans hanging like gigantic windchimes over the table. Other household goods hung from hooks on the wall near the gigantic fireplace, where a copper kettle full of water bubbled gently over the fire. What little wall space was left was taken over by the large, obviously new door that connected the hut with the newer addition. Two dogs' beds, one occupied by an enormous but elderly boarhound, were shoved under the table to make room on the floor.

"Now then, introduce me to yer little friends, will yer, Harry?"

"Oh, right. Hagrid, please meet Tracey Davis and Hermione Granger, and Neville Longbottom," Harry said formally. Nanny had drilled his manners into him, and he was embarrassed that he'd almost forgotten.

As her name was mentioned, Tracey did a curiously graceful little dip. Hermione did the same, although a bit more clumsily. Hagrid did an awkward bow to the girls in response, muttering, "Ladies." Neville bravely stuck out his hand, which was engulfed in Hagrid's and heartily shaken. "Glad ter meet yer, Neville. I remember yer Dad, he was a good lad. I look forward ter knowin' yer." Neville obviously wasn't sure about his father being a "good lad" – from what little the Gryffindor had told his friends, Frank Longbottom seemed stern and formidable – but he murmured polite thanks to Hagrid.

The large man got the children settled on the seats around the table, serving tea and large, rock hard cakes that the students pretended to nibble at after Hermione almost broke a tooth on one. Harry slipped one to the large dog under the table, and the beast gnawed on it happily. "What's your dog's name, Hagrid?" he asked.

“That’s Fang. Don’t worry ‘bout him. He’s a big sissy, he is. Bark’s worse than his bite, and his breath is worse than both.”

“Do you have another dog? There’s another bed under here.” Neville was clearly hoping to be able to get rid of one of his own cakes.

“Oh, that’s Fluffy’s bed. He ain’t here righ’ now. Loaned him ter someone who needed him for a bit. Good guard dog, Fluffy is.”

Tea was interrupted when the new door opened a bit and a house elf stuck his head in. Harry was delighted to see the elf; the elves in the castle were quite strict about not being seen as they went about their jobs, and he’d been feeling homesick for little green faces.

“Mister Hagrid, sir, Poddy hates to interrupt, but the baby is awake again and needs feeding, sir, and he isn’t letting Poddy do it.”

“I’ll come take care of it, Poddy. You get a new poultice ready fer afterwards, all righ’?”

The elf nodded vigorously and vanished, and the large man heaved himself to his feet. “Come on, then, I’ll show yer the new wing and introduce yer ter its firs’ resident.” He led the way through the double doors into the large, clean space which had obviously been designed with him in mind.

Harry looked about curiously. The room was warm, heated well by its stone fireplace, and there were work tables of various sorts around the room. A large cabinet full of interesting-looking jars stood beneath one window, and the elf was standing on a work table near it, pouring various herbs into a large mortar. But his attention was drawn most by the occupant of a small, temporary pen that had been set up where it could take advantage of the fireplace’s warmth, but not too near, because it was filled with straw.

It looked sort of like a colt, but it obviously wasn’t a regular horse or pony. It had long, delicate legs and a slim neck and head. Its little hooves were cloven like a deer’s, and it had a long tail with a tuft at the end. Its fine hair, which looked like it would be very soft, was a pale gold in colour, although its mane and tail tuft were white. Its eyes were large, expressive, and very purple, and a pearly bud of bone gleamed on its forehead. The small creature was bleating in distress as they entered, but when it saw Hagrid it lurched to its feet and leaned its head over the edge of the pen to nuzzle the big man’s hand and receive a caress in return. Once it was up and moving, the children could see that it had been wounded recently; it was limping and had a nasty jagged cut over its hip.

“Oh, he’s beautiful!” breathed Tracey, moving forward and offering it her fingers to sniff.

“What sort of animal is he?” asked Hermione. “Is he some sort of deer? Or an antelope?”

“Nothin’ so common as that,” Hagrid replied. “This here is a unicorn foal.”

“I thought they were supposed to be pure white,” said Tracey.

“Adults are white, but the foals are gold like this for the firs’ year. Right rare it is to see one, too. Their dams are usually that protective, yeh’d be taking yer life in yer hands to get near one.”

“Where is his mother, then?” asked Harry. The foal was obviously too little to be out on its own.

“Dunno. I found this little ‘un in the Forest last week, all tangled up in a patch of Mile-a-Minute vine. If I’d been even a little bit later, it would have grown right over him,” said Hagrid. “I cut him loose and brought him to the edge of the Forest where I could keep an eye on him until his mum found him, but she never did. So I’ve been feedin’ him and keepin’ him in here where it’s warm, and the Perfesser and I are tryin’ to figure out how to heal that cut on his hip. It’s a nasty one, it is.”

Neville leaned over the edge of the pen to get a look at the wound while the baby unicorn investigated Harry’s pockets to see if there was a treat there. “Huh. Take a look at this, Harry. The cut looks like that scar on your forehead.”

Harry leaned over to get a good view. “You’re right. Only, it zigs where mine zags.”

“No, it’s exactly like it,” said Hermione, her gaze flickering from the unicorn’s flank to Harry’s forehead. “You’re used to seeing yours in the mirror, so it looks backward to you.”

Hagrid got down on his knees and took a closer look at the unicorn’s wound and Harry’s scar. For once, Harry didn’t mind someone looking at it that closely; it wasn’t as if the gamekeeper was staring at it out of pure curiosity. “I think yer young lady’s got the righ’ of it,” Hagrid said slowly. “Mebbe that’s not just a cut on him, but a curse scar like yers. An’ if that’s what it is, he’ll probably never see his mum again, neither.”

Harry shuddered in sympathy for the little unicorn. “Can he be adopted by another unicorn?”

Hagrid shook his head sadly. “Unicorns don’ work like that. If his mum is dead, he’ll have to be hand raised, and he’ll never live in the Forest with the rest of ‘em. But he’ll manage. He’ll be right popular with the girls in the Perfesser’s classes. Bet they’ll spoil him like anythin’.”

“Won’t he be popular with the boys?” asked Harry.

“Well, boys an’ unicorns, they don’t usually get along too well. Older boys, anyway,” Hagrid said, noting that both Harry and Neville seemed to be quite taken with the orphaned foal. “Now, who’d like to help me feed him?”

Shortly, Hermione was settled in the straw bedding holding a bottle of warm milk for the foal, while Neville and Tracey petted it gently. Tracey was singing a soft lullaby to it, which it seemed to like. “Tha’s good,” said Hagrid approvingly. “Lots of magical critters like music, they do, but I’m not too good in the singin’ department. Fluffy likes it when I play the flute to him, though. Calms him right down. Mebbe I’ll try me flute with this little fellow. Harry, I hear yeh’re good

with Potions. Would yer mind helping me and Poddy with the poultice fer that cut? If it is a curse scar it won't heal him, but it will make him more comfortable 'til I can get Perfesser Kettleburn, or mebbe even Snape, to come look at it."

Harry happily agreed, and soon he and Hagrid and Poddy were discussing the various herbs that could be used in the poultice. When all the herbs were ground up, mixed with soothing oils, and warmed in a ceramic bowl over a candle flame, he helped Hagrid smear the mixture gently over the wound and covered it with a bandage to keep it in place.

Since the unicorn would never live with the herd in the forest, they decided to give him a name, and finally settled on calling him Bolt because of the curse mark. There had been some discussion of calling Harry "Bolt" (or "Mister Bolt") as his Marauder name, and then calling the unicorn "Bolt II", but Harry firmly refused to be called Bolt and have a unicorn named after him.

Eventually, however, rumbling stomachs reminded them that it would be a good idea to go back to the castle for some luncheon. While Neville and the girls went off ahead, Harry hung back to talk to Hagrid. "Hagrid – do you know if the chimaera made it? The one from the tower?"

"How'd you know about that?" Hagrid asked. "S'posed to be a secret, that is."

"I heard Professor Kettleburn telling the Headmaster about it when I was in the Hospital Wing," said Harry. "So, did it?"

"Well, seeing as you already know 'bout it – no, he didn'." Hagrid glanced off toward the Forest, and following his gaze, Harry saw a large mound of disturbed earth at the edge of the trees.

"Are they going to be putting something else in to guard the tower?" Harry was watching Hagrid's face closely and saw a guarded expression cross it. "They are, aren't they? You loaned Fluffy to the Headmaster to protect what you took out of Gringotts. But what can one dog do?"

"Never you mind 'bout that, Harry. Yer tryin' to find out 'bout things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin'. That's between Professor Dumbledore an' Missus Flamel—" Hagrid caught himself up short. "Go on and get yer lunch, Harry." A pat of his massive hand nearly knocked Harry off his feet and pushed him in the direction of the castle.

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Harry was thoughtful as he ran to catch up with Neville, Hermione and Tracey, but the train of his thoughts was derailed when he entered the stone circle where they had paused to wait for him. Tracey and Hermione were taking turns making that curious bobbing movement, and Neville was bowing to each of them in turn. All three of them were laughing.

"What's all this, then?" asked Harry.

"Etiquette lessons." said Hermione. "Tracey says Wizarding manners are different from Muggle

manners, and I asked her to show me. It is very different,” she said confidently.

“I noticed that at home, too. Nanny taught me all these fancy things, but when I actually went out into town, I noticed they didn’t do all the things she said, like bowing and stuff. So I figured it was just, you know, Nanny, and did it mostly to make her happy. Uncle Peter said I should know it, too, but he didn’t seem to think it was really that important. You mean that’s the difference between Wizard and Muggle manners? I think I like the Muggle way better. Less to remember.”

“Maybe, but you’re going to be an important person when you grow up, Harry. People are going to expect you to do social things like balls and parties when you grow up, because you’re, you know, a Potter, and all that. And they’re going to expect ...” Tracey gestured helplessly in Hermione’s direction. “... Because you ...” She seemed at a loss for words.

“Why are they going to expect Hermione to know it because of me? It’s not like we’re going to be married, or anything.” Neville made a choking noise, Tracey put her hand over her eyes, and Hermione went pale. Harry narrowed his eyes. “Okay, what am I missing here?” asked Harry. “Did I do something I shouldn’t have?”

“Harry, have you ever heard of a Lady Fair?” asked Tracey.

“No, should I have?”

“How about a Life Debt?” asked Neville.

“No. What’s that?”

“A Life Debt is a bond made when a wizard saves another wizard’s life. Then the second wizard owes the first a debt until he can repay it, either by saving the first wizard’s life in return or provides some service that they both agree repays the debt. In medieval times, there were whole contracts drawn up on how to repay Life Debts.”

“Okay, but I don’t see ... oh. I guess I saved Hermione that day, didn’t I? So now she owes me this Life Debt thing?”

“It’s different with witches. If a wizard saves a witch’s life, he’s supposed to be kind of responsible for her, and she’s his Lady Fair. You know in the old stories, where the knight saves the princess from a dragon or an evil sorcerer and then they get married?”

“You mean I have to marry Hermione because I saved her from a runaway broom?” yelled Harry. Hermione winced. “Sorry, Hermione, but I need to know.”

“Well, no. Nobody still does things that way for real. Your guardians can’t even start to negotiate a marriage contract until you’re thirteen. But people will expect you, to, you know, be nice to her, and escort her to Hogsmeade when we can go, and things like that.”

“Okay, I can do that.”

“Good, because we’re going to need to do some work to repair her reputation after you repudiated her.”

“Repudi ... *when did I repudiate her?* ”

Neville, surprisingly, was the one who replied. “Susan told Lavender that you repudiated Hermione in front of everyone in your Common Room. She said you told everyone that Hermione wasn’t your girlfriend.”

“What? I was *talking* to Gilbert Spinks, who was doing that stupid song, you know, ‘Harry’s got a girlfriend, Harry’s got a girlfriend...’ And I told him Hermione wasn’t my girlfriend to shut him up. *That’s* what this is about?”

“Well, Lavender had already told everybody about how she would be your Lady Fair because you saved her. And when you said that in your Common Room, Lavender said you’d repudiated her, and the girls decided it was because she was a Muggleborn and wasn’t pretty and wouldn’t be able to move in society. So they were being, I guess, kind of catty about it, and Parvati told Padma and then Padma told Hermione because they were in the same House and thought she ought to know what people were saying about her,” said Tracey

“I thought it would blow over, that people would forget about it,” said Hermione. “I think the whole thing is just ridiculous, of course. Antiquated. But people kept talking behind my back, and then there was that thing with Weasley in Charms...”

“When you spent the whole day in the lav? What did he say to you?” asked Harry, dangerously.

“He said ... I had corrected him on his pronunciation. He kept saying *Wingardium Leviosa* all wrong and I was just trying to help, but he said ... he said I shouldn’t correct him since I wasn’t even enough of a witch to be your Lady Fair.”

“So when I found Hermione in the lav, she told me what was happening, and I promised to teach her proper manners, and we’ve been practicing,” said Tracey. “Did you see her curtsy to Hagrid?”

“I am going to kill Ron Weasley,” muttered Harry.

“What about Lavender?” asked Hermione. “*She* really started all this.”

“I’ll kill them both. Or maybe fix them up together. They deserve each other.”

“We can deal with them later. Let’s fix this first.”

So it was that at lunch that day, the first and second years giggled to see Harry enter the Great Hall with Hermione on his arm. He escorted her to her seat at the Ravenclaw table and gave her a little bow before going to his own place with the Hufflepuffs. And Hermione told Padma who told Parvati who told Lavender who told anybody else who would listen that the repudiation was all a mistake, and Harry Potter had asked Hermione Granger to be his Lady Fair. And all the girls

sighed and said how romantic it all was, and all the boys shuddered and resolved not to save any girls' lives if they could possibly avoid it.

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The first weekend of November had, indeed, been the last weekend of fair weather, and the rest of the month settled in very cold. The ground froze solid, and the lake was covered with ice all round the edges, but the movement of the giant squid who lived in the lake kept it from freezing in the centre.

The Quidditch season was soon to begin. The first game scheduled was Slytherin against Gryffindor, and Harry couldn't wait to see it. Madame Hooch had cleared Harry to play, declaring him a natural on a broom, so even though he was just on the reserve squad, Harry was officially the youngest player on a House team in a century. Cedric had promised to sit next to him during the game and explain everything to him.

At eleven o'clock on the second Saturday in November, virtually the entire population of the school took places on the raised Quidditch stands. Harry and Cedric had managed to get seats in the first row, squashed in between Aidan Cullen, Hufflepuff's Captain and star Chaser, and Charles Ryder, the sixth-year Keeper. Harry was bombarded with Quidditch commentary from all sides.

"...Slytherin has won the House championship for the last seven years in a row. They're brutal players, just brutal. Some accuse them of cheating, but they do keep it legal. Just barely, mind you ..."

"... Gryffindor's got two major problems. First, they depend almost entirely on their Seeker getting the Snitch, and they just haven't had a good Seeker since Charlie Weasley ..."

"They did have hopes for Percy Weasley after Charlie left school, but the boy is just dreadful on a broom ..."

"Those twins weren't bad last year, though, bound to be good this year, too ... just not Seeker material."

"SECOND," said Aidan, continuing his train of thought, "They didn't develop players across several years. Almost their entire team left a couple of years ago, leaving a fourth-year as their most senior player last year. *A fourth-year!* Wood does the best he can, but with most of the team second- and third-years, well, they just don't have the experience or muscle to deal with older, stronger players. And they have virtually no reserves. If any of their players get hurt, they have a big problem."

"Oh, here they come!" Screams and cheers drowned out the chat, as two teams emerged from the dugouts and met Madam Hooch at the centre of the field. Harry had to agree that the Gryffindor players did look very small compared to the Slytherins. The Slytherin Captain, Marcus Flint, was particularly huge, and Harry wondered if he might have some troll blood. Oliver Wood, the

Gryffindor Keeper and Captain, now in his fifth year, was on the burly side, but no match for the Slytherin. Next to the all-male Slytherin team, the female Chasers and Seeker for Gryffindor looked particularly delicate.

"I want a nice clean game, all of you," said Madame Hooch. Then she gave a loud blast on her silver whistle. Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off.

Leaning forward with his forearms on the railing, Harry couldn't help but wish he was out there now, looking for the Snitch or tossing the Quaffle. He tried to pay close attention to the rapid-fire commentary for the match.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor -- what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too--"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."

The commentator was wearing a Gryffindor scarf and seemed just a wee bit biased; he was being closely watched by Professor McGonagall.

"And she's really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve -- back to Johnson and -- no, the Slytherins have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes -- Flint flying like an eagle up there -- he's going to sc -- no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and the Gryffindors take the Quaffle -- that's Chaser Patricia Stimpson of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and -- OUCH -- that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger -- Quaffle taken by the Slytherins -- that's Adrian Pucey speeding off toward the goal posts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger -- sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which -- nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes -- she's really flying -- dodges a speeding Bludger -- the goal posts are ahead -- come on, now, Angelina -- Keeper Bletchley dives -- misses -- GRYFFINDORS SCORE!"

Gryffindor cheers filled the cold air, with howls and moans from the Slytherins. Most of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs cheered for the Gryffindors as well.

The Gryffindor Seeker, a spunky second-year by the name of Katie Bell, was circling high above the field, trying to stay out of the way of the Bludgers until the Snitch came into view. In contrast, the Slytherin Higgs was flying in and out of the melee in a successful attempt to distract the young Gryffindor players.

"That Stimpson, she's new," said Cedric, as the Slytherin Beaters sent a Bludger at the girl and caused her to miss the Quaffle. "Not the best flyer. Maybe she'll get better. Bell would probably have been a better choice, but they needed her for Seeker. You need the best flyer there."

"Slytherin in possession," Lee Jordan was saying, "Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys, and Chaser Spinnett, and speeds toward the -- wait a moment -- was that the Snitch?"

A murmur ran through the crowd as Adrian Pucey dropped the Quaffle, too busy looking over his shoulder at the flash of gold that had passed his left ear.

Harry saw it, and so did the Gryffindor Seeker. From her high vantage point, she dived downward after the streak of gold. Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs had seen it, too. Neck and neck they hurtled toward the Snitch -- all the Chasers seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing as they hung in midair to watch.

Bell was faster than Higgs, and Harry cheered her on as she put on an extra spurt of speed –

WHAM! A roar of rage echoed from the Gryffindors below -- Marcus Flint had blocked Bell on purpose, and her broom spun off course, the young Seeker holding on for dear life.

"Foul!" screamed the Gryffindors.

Madam Hooch spoke angrily to Flint and then ordered a free shot at the goal posts for Gryffindor. But in all the confusion, of course, the Golden Snitch had disappeared from sight again.

"Is it always like that?" Harry asked Cedric.

"Sometimes worse. Slytherin is the only team that does that sort of thing deliberately, but you might get clobbered accidentally by Gryffindor – they can be very aggressive too. Not the Ravenclaws, so much."

Since Harry was paying close attention to the Slytherin Seeker, he was the first one to notice that something was wrong, as Higgs' broom suddenly jerked about erratically, then gave a lurch as if it was trying to buck him off.

"Cedric, look! Higgs' broom! It's trying to throw him off!"

"Can't be ... but it is! That's not even a school broom, it's his own. Wonder what's ... wow, look at it go!"

Lee Jordan, with his eagle eye trying to see everything that went on in the game, was the next to spot the misbehaving broom.

"And Higgs makes a dive into the middle of the game ... has he seen the Snitch? No, it looks like his broom is out of control! Merlin, he's flying SIDEWAYS! The Gryffindor Chasers are scattering ... come on, Stimpson, *move* ! Oh, bloody hell!"

With the Seeker now clinging desperately to his broom, the rogue Cleansweep shot through the main body of the players, sending Gryffindors and Slytherins dodging in all directions. Patricia Stimpson, the inexperienced Chaser, was frozen in terror, right in front of the Hufflepuff stands, blocking Harry and Cedric's view of the action, until Higgs' broom slewed sideways and ploughed

into her. Carried by his momentum, the two of them crashed directly into the Hufflepuff seats, where people leaped to safety as best they could.

Aidan flung himself to the side, sprawling across several younger girls, while Charles Ryder attempted to scramble backwards, though the press of people behind him ensured he didn't get anywhere. Both Harry and Cedric were trapped by the crowds on either side of or behind them. Cedric, in a move born of extreme self-confidence or insane desperation, flung himself forward over the rail and dangled from the edge of the Hufflepuff house banner to keep himself from plummeting to the frozen ground below. Terrence Higgs and Patricia Stimpson, totally out of control, crashed at full speed into the stands where he had been standing.

The Hufflepuff section of the stands was full of chaos and screaming students, some trying to get away from the crash and others trying to get to it to try to help the injured. The hysteria spread to other parts of the stands as well, hindering professors who were trying to make their ways to the scene of the accident. Professor Sprout, who was seated in the middle of the Hufflepuffs, was closest but was unable to make her way through the crowd of panicking students, some of which were crying and clinging to her. Professor McGonagall and Headmaster Dumbledore were fighting their way over from the commentator's box, while Professor Snape attempted to calm the Slytherins. Professor Quirrell was knocked right off his seat and down a stairwell by a group of girls fleeing the Ravenclaw stands. Marcus Flint, looking extremely shaken, flew up near the Slytherin stands to get advice from his Head of House. Snape stabbed his finger down toward the dugouts, where Madam Pomfrey was stationed during games to deal with any injuries that might happen, and then at the Hufflepuff stands. The usual assumption was that any accidents might happen on the ground (usually a student making contact with it at high speed), not in the stands, and Madam Pomfrey was thus situated some distance away from where she was now needed, without a broom. Flint took the point and flew down to offer the mediwitch a lift up to the stands. He carefully avoided the side of the banner where the Weasley twins were performing a rescue of Cedric Diggory, who was beginning to lose his grip.

In the middle of it all, Katie Bell caught the snitch, winning the game for Gryffindor, but nobody noticed for quite some time.

With Madame Pomfrey attending to the injured, the other professors were able to calm the other students and get everyone moving back to the castle. Some fifteen minutes after the crash, Cedric, still shaking from the narrow escape, started looking for Harry, and when he couldn't find him, Professor Sprout took a headcount.

Harry Potter had vanished. Again.

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A/N: For those of you who have been following my husband's sig line about Harry's handkerchief, unfortunately that bit didn't make it into this chapter. Next one. I promise.