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Summary: For those who are new to this series this is the sequel to "The Marauders read Midnight Guardian" in which the Marauders and Lily start reading "Midnight Guardian" by Ksomm814, an AU of "Prisoner of Azkaban". I have permission from the author to write this and I hope you enjoy my series and if you haven't read the Midnight Series I hope you enjoy that one too since it's one of my favorites. Have fun!

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"The Marauders read Trials of a Champion"

Unlike the previous day, the morning shined bright and sunny. James Potter woke up and the first thing that came to his mind was flying. He looked at the two cots in his room and woke Remus up. He was about to shake Sirius when he remembered Sirius long and suffering complaints about being woken up the previous day. So Remus and James went down for breakfast where they found Mr. and Mrs. Potter lively chatting with Lily Evans.

After a fulfilling breakfast Mr. Potter left for work and the teens were discussing flying when Sirius came barreling downstairs.

"Sirius, there's no need for running. I kept your breakfast warm for you," Mrs. Potter scolded.

"No, not breakfast. James, you want to come upstairs," he said making breathless nodding his head towards the stairs.

"No I don't, we are going flying," James said bewildered.

"I think we should keep reading *The Lord of the Rings*," Sirius said.

"But we finished yesterday," James said back.

"We haven't read the *sequel*," Sirius said gritting his teeth.

"OH," said Lily understanding, "Yes, the *sequel*. It's fascinating. We should go now." And she pulled James and Remus with her upstairs.

Mrs. Potter shook her head, "I really need to read that book."

Once inside James' room Sirius handed him a stack of papers.

"This fell on my head while I was getting dressed," Sirius said.

"Trials of a Champion", James read, "Promising title."

"Why do the future books keep falling on your head?" Remus asked, Sirius shrugged.

"Because if they fell on someone else's head they could cause damage. There's nothing here to cause damage to," Lily said shaking Sirius' head.

"Hey!"

"Let's read this," James said.

"Yes, but let's go outside. It's such a nice day," Lily pleaded.

They got a blanket, went through the kitchen to get Sirius' breakfast and went to the garden. There they set the blanket under a tree and Lily started reading.

Disclaimer: This story is based on the Goblet of Fire, which is not mine. This story is also a continuation of Midnight Guardian. Reading that story first would probably help understand this story.

"Well, that's obvious," James snorted.

"James! The author is just letting you know in case you stumbled on this first!" Lily scolded.

Chapter 1

A Summer at Hogwarts

"Much better title than the first title of the other book," James said beaming.

The warm summer day would be a welcome to anyone if you weren't Harry Potter.

"Why not?" Sirius asked worried, "I thought Harry was with us now. He should be cherishing the summer days!"

The perfect weather would mean outdoor sports, lazing in the sun or even simply hanging out with friends for any normal teenager but Harry wasn't normal, even by the standards of the wizarding world which was saying a lot. Most students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry went home during the summer holidays but Harry remained. Last summer at his former residence, Number 4, Privet Drive, everything took a turn for the worse. His Uncle, Vernon Dursley, had decided to take his anger out on Harry and if it hadn't been for the interference of Sirius Black, Harry doubted he would even be alive today.

Growls were heard.

"Thank you Sirius," Lily whispered.

"No need to," he said back.

Sirius Black had escaped a wizard prison called Azkaban (the first to ever accomplish it)

"You know, now that we're over the whole shock, that is quite an accomplishment," Remus said.

"Trust Sirius to do the impossible," James said laughing. Sirius looked quite pleased with himself.

to protect Harry, his godson, although everyone believed something entirely different. For twelve years, the entire wizarding world thought Sirius had betrayed Harry's parents to a dark wizard known as Voldemort then killed thirteen muggles (non-magic folk) and a wizard named Peter Pettigrew with a single curse. In reality, Peter had been the betrayer, framing Sirius for the crimes by faking his own death. He then remained in his Animagus form (an ability to transform into an animal at will) for twelve years with the Weasley family. Once the truth had been revealed, Sirius had finally been given a trial, found innocent and was granted legal guardianship of Harry to protect his godson from being sent back to the Dursleys since Harry's temporary guardian, Remus Lupin, was unable to apply for the position.

"We already know all this," James complained.

"Yes, but the author is reminding you in case you haven't read the first book or read it a long time ago," Lily explained slowly. James huffed.

Remus Lupin had been there for Harry through thick and thin providing a family that Harry so desperately needed. Both Remus and Harry had bonded immediately with their similarities that were almost uncanny. They both felt alone and misunderstood in the world, suffering more than anyone but them could even begin to understand. They were both judged for something they had no control over. Harry was the-boy-who-lived and Remus was a werewolf. It was that judgment that prevented Remus from adopting Harry, his cub, legally as his own.

"Bigoted stupid laws," Sirius muttered. James was shredding some of the napkins they brought. Remus smiled at his friends' outrage on his behalf.

This resulted in a rather unique arrangement. Sirius Black was Harry's legal guardian but had a tendency to act like more of a child than an adult

"I am not denying it," Sirius said grinning.

which left Remus Lupin to be the parent for both Harry and Sirius. Remus was the voice of reason and was usually backed up by Harry.

"Excuse me Lily, could you read that again," Remus asked. She complied. "See, even the author knows I am a voice of reason."

"The author never said you were *a* voice of reason, just *the* voice of reason compared to Sirius, and that's easy to be," James said and Remus glared at him.

When that happened, Sirius knew better than to disagree with the two since all three wizards had a stubborn streak to them. Harry would eventually give in when Sirius transformed into his Animagus form Padfoot (or Midnight as Harry still called him) but Remus couldn't be swayed.

"Yes, I am immune to Sirius puppy eyes," Remus said. Sirius transformed and snuggled close to him wagging his tail, "Now this is just ridiculous" Remus huffed.

Normally students weren't allowed to stay at Hogwarts over the summer but Professor Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, had requested it because he needed the help of Harry's guardians. For what Harry didn't know but could tell Sirius was certainly excited about it. Both Sirius and Remus had promised Harry they would fill him in when they could but it was still annoying to be kept out of the loop. Who was Harry going to tell anyways? Only Harry's friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger along with Ron's family knew Harry was actually staying at Hogwarts. As far as everyone else was concerned, Harry was spending the summer at The Noble House of Black, a place he had never seen and, according to Sirius, never wanted to see.

"Believe me you don't", Sirius muttered.

Spending his summer at Hogwarts had been both a blessing and a curse for Harry. Unlike every other witch and wizard under the age of seventeen, Harry was allowed to use magic during the summer as long as he was on school grounds. The bad side of being at Hogwarts was the endless training Sirius put him through, especially when it was nice outside. Sirius loved having duels outdoors to train Harry in using everything around him.

"So you're exhausting my son? Let the poor boy have some fun!" James glared at Sirius.

It's not that Harry wasn't grateful for what Sirius was doing or didn't learn something new in every session. It was the fact that Sirius was so good at what he was teaching that Harry

never had a chance in beating the man. Everyday Harry left feeling disappointed in himself no matter how much Sirius tried to assure him he was making progress.

Today wasn't any different. Sirius had sent Harry out onto the grounds with a ten minute head start to hide and learn then layout of the land before Sirius came looking for him. The forest was off limits as was anywhere else beyond the front gates. Harry didn't want to cause any damage so hiding anywhere near the castle was out of the question. He wasn't a good swimmer so the lake wasn't a favorable option either. That left Hagrid's Hut or the Whomping Willow. Not really a lot of choices.

"He could hide in the tunnel," Sirius said.

"No he can't, firstly," Remus started ticking points off with his fingers, "he doesn't know how to get in. Secondly, he has to be able to see you to attack and finally, knowing you I bet you would keep an eye to see if the Whomping Willow was to quiet." Sirius grinned sheepishly at the last remark.

The Whomping Willow is out of the question and Hagrid's Hut is too obvious.

Remus raised an eyebrow in a victorious pose and Sirius tried to block his face from view with a napkin.

Looking out at the lake, Harry figured he should be unpredictable for once. He ran as quickly as possible towards the lake. He only had a few minutes before Sirius was to come out so there wasn't much time to think of a strategy. He couldn't take off any of his clothes since it would be a giveaway to where he was. Hurrying over to where there was a patch of weeds coming out of the water, Harry stepped into the cool water quietly until the water was up to his nose, so that his glasses remained dry and he could see properly. With a flick of his right hand, Harry had his wand in hand and ready to use. He knew he would have to be patient because Sirius would only give him one shot.

It was nearly another ten minutes before Sirius came down to the lake with his wand ready. Harry remained still as he watched his godfather stroll the shoreline almost casually but alert nonetheless. Sirius had a way of noticing even the smallest of details which annoyed Harry to no end.

"Doesn't annoy only you," Remus muttered and James agreed.

It only took one mistake and the 'lesson' would be over.

Time seemed to go by at an excruciatingly slow rate. Harry needed Sirius to turn around. He couldn't risk Sirius noticing his movement. It was a cheep shot but right now it was the only one Harry could take.

When Sirius finally turned away Harry had to bite back the urge to strike then and there. From the slowness of the turn, Harry figured Sirius didn't completely believe that he was alone in this area. With no attack coming, Sirius started to walk back towards the courtyard. Seeing his opportunity, Harry slowly raised his wand out of the water, pointing it at Sirius.

"Finite Incantatem. Stupefy," Harry whispered. He had learned the hard way Sirius usually placed a defensive shield around himself. Hopefully it was something simple so his spells wouldn't bounce off it and back at him.

Harry could hardly hold back his excitement when the spells hit Sirius directly in the back then fall to the ground.

"Yes!" James high fived Remus. Lily clapped.

"Well done Harry," Remus praised him.

"Hey, you're all Happy he stunned me," Sirius complained. No one paid him any attention.

Carefully, Harry crept out of his hiding place, his wand still at the ready. After drying his clothes with a quick drying charm, Harry slowly approached Sirius. The man was lying face down on the ground, his wand still clenched in his hand. He wasn't moving but Harry knew looks could be deceiving. Sirius was the type of person to fake being unconscious to make a point or to have a laugh.

"He knows me so well," Sirius said smiling.

"Accio wand," Harry said softly. Sirius' wand flew into his outstretched hand. Pocketing the wand, Harry kept his own on Sirius as he slowly knelt down and checked for a pulse like he had been trained to from Remus. Remus had always insisted on checking on the opponent's well being. Harry didn't know if it was from personal experience or not. He wasn't brave enough to ask.

"It's just the right thing to do Harry," Remus said.

Once Harry felt the steady pulse, he let out the breath he didn't know he had been holding. He was about to sit back on his feet when a hand quickly grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him forward. Harry landed on his back and looked up to see Sirius' smiling face causing Harry to groan in annoyance. He had messed up again.

"Very good, Pronglet," Sirius said as he helped Harry sit up. "You nearly had me. What was your first mistake?"

"He checked for a pulse," James said.

"Well, he couldn't just leave Sirius there," Remus said defensively.

"You're dealing with the enemy here Remus. They are not going to be polite and do the right thing. They are going to use any mean to take you down. You don't get close to the enemy without binding him or her first!" Sirius said.

Harry shrugged his shoulders as he looked away. He really couldn't hide his disappointment in failing yet again. He had been closer today than any other day but he still managed to do something wrong. "I'm sorry for wasting your time," Harry said quietly. "I just can't seem to get this."

Sirius moved closer to Harry and pulled him into a one armed embrace. "Hey, you're doing just fine," he said reassuringly. "What we're doing here is *not* easy but it's something you need to learn. You need to be able to protect yourself. This is something you can't learn from a book but through experience, your own experience. Everyone has their own style. What works for me won't necessarily work for you."

"I know," Harry said in a tired voice as he holstered his wand and handed Sirius back his own. "I'm just so frustrated. I just thought I actually had you this time."

Sirius nodded. "You nearly did," he admitted. "Just remember that even though someone appears to be harmless that doesn't mean they are. You did the right thing in disarming me but we are all born with five weapons: two legs, two hands and one head.

"Told you," James said.

Moony taught you well last summer but he's a little too—er—proper.

Remus huffed while Sirius and James tried to muffle their laughter. "It's not my fault that I am a nice person."

He would have done exactly what you did—checking on the opponent's health—but you can't do that. *Your* safety has to come first. Remember what I told you about the Death Eaters—"

"—they are supporters of Voldemort who will do anything and everything to take me to their master who is still out there somewhere," Harry recited from memory. "I know, Sirius, I know. All I've heard this summer is Death Eater this and Death Eater that. What's changed from last year?"

"Nothing's changed," Sirius said quickly. "I just want you to be prepared. That night you faced the Dementors for me made me realize that you are not a little boy anymore, regardless of what Dumbledore may think. You need to be ready for what's really out there. I know your teachers and Moony started the process last summer but they were only scratching the surface. I know you hate this but I would rather have you prepared and alive than caught by surprise and dead. I don't want to lose you, Pronglet."

"Me too," James said.

"You don't want to lose him?" Lily asked.

"No, I mean. I can't lose him because I am dead and all," James said miserably, "but I'd rather have him prepared."

She nodded with a sad smile.

Harry looked up at Sirius and nodded. He knew Sirius meant well and when the man put it that way Harry had to agree with him. He would rather be ready for what was coming too, whatever it was. "I don't want to lose you either," Harry said with a soft smile. "Thanks Sirius. I'll try harder next time."

Sirius grinned. "I really don't think that's possible Harry," he said with a laugh.

"Are you calling my son thick?" James growled.

"You *are* trying every time we do this. It's not effort that you're lacking. It's just experience. Just be patient oh young student of mine. This is something even fully trained wizards struggle with."

"Always jumping to conclusions James," Sirius said, "don't worry. I forgive you." A piece of bread came flying from James direction.

Harry glanced out at the calm lake. He had to admit that he did enjoy his time with Sirius no matter how nerve-wracking it was. Sirius was always honest with him, treating Harry more like an equal than a little kid...at least until he was scolded by Remus for telling Harry too much. Remus had been on an assignment for Professor Dumbledore for the past week and a half which meant Sirius had free reign on Harry's training for the time being, something Remus had been reluctant to allow.

"Why?" Sirius asked Remus, hands on his hips.

"Because no sane person would let you responsible for anything," Remus answered calmly, "I shudder to think what you are teaching Harry." And he shivered theatrically.

"Have you heard anything from Moony?" Harry asked softly, breaking the silence. He didn't want it to appear like he preferred one guardian over the other but he couldn't help worrying. Remus had never been gone this long without sending either of them an owl before.

"Aw, how cute," Lily cooed.

"No I haven't," Sirius said casually, noticing the tone Harry had used. "There's nothing to worry about Harry. Moony is fine. In fact, it's a good sign that he's been gone so long. It means people are actually listening to him...although I don't know who in their right mind would do that."

"Anyone but you two," Lily said pointing at the black haired boys that smiled innocently back.

"Anyone but you?" Harry offered knowing that Sirius was only kidding.

Sirius smiled brightly. "Of course," he said, "and it is only a matter of time before I have you fully trained, my young apprentice, in the ways of mischief and rule breaking. Moony won't even know what hit him when we're through."

"Oh, no," Remus muttered.

Harry let out a sigh. This was a common discussion. Sirius wanted Harry to follow in the footsteps of the Marauders by pulling pranks but Harry felt uncomfortable with it. He had spent years as the person being picked on to find anything of that sort funny. The problem

was Sirius didn't know everything about Harry's years with the Dursleys. Harry had been reluctant to tell him or anyone else anything besides what they had already learned.

Returning his attention to the lake, Harry couldn't help but think back to the craziness the past year had brought him and everyone around him. He didn't regret anything that happened but he did wonder if anyone else did. He looked down at the grass that he started nervously pulling at. It had seemed like a dream come true when Sirius and Remus became his guardians but Harry couldn't help wondering if it was what they really wanted.

"Don't be silly Harry. Of course that's what we want," Remus said and Sirius nodded vigorously.

"Sirius, are you happy?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Yes," Sirius answered.

"He's not asking you," Lily rolled her eyes.

"Yes he is, he said and I quote: **"Sirius, are you happy?"** therefore I am entitled to answer," Sirius finished. The others just groaned.

Sirius looked over at Harry in confusion. "What in the world are you talking about?" he asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders as he stared at the grass he was still pulling. "It's just that, well, you're free now," he said uncomfortably. "Do you ever want to just get your life back and not be here?"

Sirius pulled Harry into a fierce embrace. "Pronglet, don't you ever think I don't want to be here," he said firmly. "The three of us, you, Moony and I are a family.

"Exactly," Sirius and Remus said in unison.

I wouldn't trade that for anything. I missed twelve years of being with you. I'm certainly not going to miss any more if I can help it. You're stuck with me whether you like it or not."

Harry returned the embrace, burying his face in the chest of his godfather. It was such a change for Harry to have people that actually wanted him around. The Dursleys always made Harry believe he was nothing more than a freak, something Sirius and Remus were still trying to convince Harry was false. Last year Harry's magic had started to mature prematurely

coming in powerful bursts every now and then. They were completely unpredictable, painful to whoever was on the receiving end and exhausting on the sender's end.

Although no one around Harry was really concerned about this development, Harry couldn't help worrying. He didn't want to hurt anyone, especially Sirius and Remus. The problem was the two guardians seemed to believe that the only way to control the bursts was to continue practicing, hence the daily duels that rarely ended with Harry being victorious.

With notice of the sun starting to set, Sirius and Harry retreated back to the castle to clean up for dinner. Sirius had taken the liberty of showing Harry 'the essentials' during the first week of the summer which included the kitchens where Harry found an old friend.

"Harry didn't know his way to the kitchen?" James asked horrified.

"Harry isn't like you. Breaking the rules and causing trouble all the time," Lily said with a raised eyebrow.

"But, the kitchens," James continued with a lost look.

The house elf, Dobby, was now working for Professor Dumbledore at Hogwarts and appeared to be as happy as he could possibly be. Dobby had started jumping for joy when Harry had arrived since it had been Harry who had freed Dobby from his previous master, Lucius Malfoy.

"What? Oh, I *so* wanted to have seen that!" Sirius said laughing.

There had been two extremely amused and confused Marauders forcing Harry to explain how he had managed to pull it off with Dobby putting in his two knuts every now and then. Both Sirius and Remus found Dobby's fanatic devotion to Harry entertaining and instantly befriended the little creature, cornering him in secret to request his help in looking after Harry. The Marauders knew they wouldn't always be at Harry's side and felt better knowing someone or something would be keeping an eye on their charge.

Entering their quarters, Harry stopped in the doorway when saw someone familiar had been waiting for them. "Moony!" he said happily as he hurried to the waiting arms of Remus Lupin. "When did you get back?"

Remus let out laugh as he wrapped his arms around Harry. "About an hour ago," he said. "I just finished discussing everything with Dumbledore." He looked up Sirius with a raised

eyebrow. "So what have you two been up to since I've been gone? Causing trouble like the old days, Padfoot, and pulling Harry along with you?"

"Obviously," said Sirius proudly.

"Oh ye of little faith," Sirius said as he sat down in a nearby armchair. "I'll have you know that Harry has all of his homework done already and we have been practicing his dueling every day.

Sirius huffed at that.

Honestly Moony, you need to trust me a little more. Do you really think I would ever do anything that would put Harry in harms way?"

"I'm just double checking, Padfoot," Remus said backing off. "Anyone in my shoes would do the same. *You* would do the same."

Sirius thought for a moment then nodded. "You're right, I would," he admitted. "Harry, go clean up for dinner. We'll leave as soon as you're ready."

"That's so parenty of you Sirius," James said, "Our baby is all grown up!" he finished through fake tears hugging Sirius.

Harry wanted to protest but a push in the direction of his room from Remus proved the effort would be wasted. Once in his room, Harry quickly changed his clothes and put on a casual robe. The entire staff was at the school so Harry figured he needed to look somewhat presentable. Since Remus had left on assignment, Sirius had preferred on either eating in their quarters or in the kitchens. Sirius had said the food was better this way but Harry knew it was because Sirius didn't want to eat dinner with Professor Snape.

"Who would?" James asked looking sick at the prospect.

The two of them seemed to hate each other more than what was humanly possible. Sirius was incredibly defensive, always acting whenever Snape said anything out of line about Harry, Remus or Harry's father, James.

That night was like any other during this summer at Hogwarts. After an early dinner, Harry spent two hours in the library while Sirius and Remus met with the Hogwarts staff. Harry's topic of the night to study was personal shields. He finished his work quickly allowing him to

write a few letters he would send with Hedwig. His letters rarely said much since he wasn't supposed to say anything about his training but at least he was staying in contact with his friends.

By the time Sirius and Remus were released from their meeting and found Harry, all three of them were extremely exhausted and ready to call it a night. They retreated to their own rooms eager for a peaceful slumber to end the long day. What they didn't know was that none of them were going to get much sleep or peace that night.

"Why? What happened?" Sirius asked

"The chapter ended, so we will only know if we read the next," Lily said.

"Then read!" James urged her.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Chapter 2

Unwanted Dreams

The room was rundown, filthy and lit only by the fire in the fireplace. One person was sitting in an armchair in front of the fireplace while another knelt at the side of the chair. The man who was kneeling was wearing a black cloak that covered all of his features but his hands were visible. They were visibly shaking and there were only nine fingers total. It was clear for anyone who had read the 'Daily Prophet' that this man was Peter Pettigrew.

Growls and muttered 'backstabbing traitor' were heard.

Peter Pettigrew, also known as Wormtail because of his Animagus form (a rat) by his former friends, had been taken into custody by the Ministry only to somehow escape after the Black Trial had completed. No one knew how or if they did they weren't talking. Aurors were not searching for the escapee but had little success. Finding one rat with only four fingers on his left front paw was like finding a needle in a haystack.

Pettigrew's soft, fearful voice filled the room. "My Lord, there is a little more is you're still hungry," he said.

"Please tell me Peter did *not* go looking for Voldemort," James begged.

"I am afraid he did," Remus said with a grim expression.

The individual in the chair spoke but his voice didn't sound human. It was high-pitched and shockingly cold. "Not now," he hissed. "Move me closer, Wormtail." Wormtail did as he was told, moving the chair closer to the fire then knelt back down. "Where's Nagini?" the high-pitched man asked irritably.

"Who's Nagini?" Lily asked.

"Some other Death Eater scumbag," Sirius muttered.

"I—I'm not sure, my Lord," Wormtail answered nervously. "I think she's exploring. May I ask how long we are staying?"

"That remains to be seen," said the high-pitched voice. "We must wait for the Quidditch World Cup to pass. Every witch and wizard in the blasted Ministry of Magic will be watching

for any unusual activity, double-checking everyone and everything. That is the way it must be."

"My Lord, must you use Harry Potter?"

"NOOOOOOOOO!" four voices were heard.

"No don't use my baby, leave him alone!" Lily begged.

Wormtail asked softly, almost fearfully. "He is well protected now at Hogwarts with the mutt and wolf as his guardians. Anyone else would be easier..."

"Oh thank you for the kind words Peter," Sirius growled, "And to think we were your friends!"

"Easier, that is true but I have my reasons," the high-pitched voice said firmly. "It must be Harry Potter. I have plans that will work regardless of any protection that fool, Dumbledore, believes he has on the boy. With a little courage from you, Wormtail, everything will go as planned. Is that too much to ask from a coward like you?"

"I so very much hope so!" James said.

"My Lord!" Wormtail said in a panic. "I—I was the one who brought Bertha Jorkins to you! She was useful! She had information—"

"Oh, so betraying your friends wasn't enough. You took some other poor victim to Voldemort," Sirius hissed.

"Bertha Jorkins?" Remus asked, "Isn't she that gossip that spread that rumor about you and the Giant squid?"

Sirius nodded with a scowl.

"—yes, she did but it was more of a stroke of luck than anything. Don't lie to me. You know what I do to those who lie. Her information was invaluable, that is true. You will be rewarded, Wormtail. There is a task you will be allowed to perform, a task many of my followers would give their right hand for but it must not be revealed yet. When the time comes you will be just as useful as Bertha Jorkins was."

"Why do I have the impression that Voldemort literally means give his right hand?" Remus asked.

"Because he probably does," Lily said.

Pettigrew quivered in fear. "You....you are going to kill me too?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"Why would I do that?" the high-pitched voice asked slyly. "Bertha was killed because it was necessary. We couldn't have her going back to the Ministry with what she had seen now could we? I am supposed to be dead and *you* have the entire Ministry of Magic hunting you. Modifying her memory was out of the question. Memory charms are breakable which would leave us back to our problem of being identified."

"And Voldemort wouldn't have had his leisure morning killing," James mumbled darkly.

Silence filled the room. The owner of the high-pitched voice must have been in deep thought because Pettigrew said nothing. He merely waited for 'his Lord' to speak again. "Patience, Wormtail," the high-pitched voice said distantly. "Once my faithful servant is in place at Hogwarts Harry Potter will be as good as mine.

"No,NO,NO! Moony and I won't let you touch a hair of my godson's hair do you hear me?" Sirius yelled.

Lily looked at him, "No he doesn't."

That is the way it must be." There was a faint hissing noise. "I think I hear Nagini," he said then started hissing.

A few moments later a large snake that was almost twelve feet long entered from the next room, hissing back at the man with the high-pitched voice who hissed back. It was almost like they understood each other. It was almost like the man could speak whatever strange language snakes spoke. Pettigrew remained where he was kneeling but it was clear the sight of the snake and man hissing at each other was making him nervous...well, more nervous that he was already.

"According to Nagini there is an old Muggle standing in the next room, listening to everything," the man with the high-pitched voice said in english as the snake curled up on the rug near the chair.

"OH, NO! Run muggle run!" James yelled.

RUN! Don't let him see you!

"Who's saying that?" Remus asked.

"No idea," Lily answered.

Pettigrew jumped to his feet and hurried over to the door and pushed it open to reveal an old man with a walking stick, staring at Pettigrew in alarm. It was clear the man had a bad leg and therefore would not be able to go anywhere in a hurry. Grabbing the man by the arm, Pettigrew pulled him into the room so they were facing the back of the chair.

"How much did you hear, Muggle?" the high-pitched voice asked curiously.

"What are you calling me?" the old man asked boldly.

"A Muggle, meaning you are not a wizard therefore no one of importance," the high-pitched voice said coolly.

"Just because he isn't a wizard doesn't mean he is not important," Sirius snapped.

"For Voldemort it does," Remus said grimly.

"You speak nonsense," the old man said, his voice firm. "I've heard enough to go to the police. You've committed murder and you are planning more! When my family finds out I'm gone they'll go to the police for me."

"You have no family, Frank Bryce," the hidden man said quietly. "You live alone on these grounds. You should know better than to lie to Lord Voldemort, *Muggle*. Turn my chair around, Wormtail so I can face this Muggle who dares stand in my way."

"How does he know that?" James asked. Shrugs was all he got.

NO! Run while you still can! He'll kill you!

"Who keeps yelling?" Remus asked bewildered.

Pettigrew let out a whimper but did as he was told. He slowly turned the chair until it was facing the old man who instantly dropped his walking stick and let out a loud scream. Voldemort raised his wand, pointing it at the screaming man. Words were muttered followed by a flash of green light erupting from the wand. The screaming stopped abruptly as Frank Bryce crumpled to the floor.

NO! PLEASE NO!

He was dead.

In his room at Hogwarts, Harry Potter finally awoke from his horrid dream, breathing heavily, drenched with sweat and his lightening bolt shaped scar on his forehead was burning.

"Harry dreamt all this? Why?" James asked.

"But then it's ok. It's just a dream. Voldemort isn't planning anything and no one died," Sirius said relieved.

"I don't know," Remus said biting his lips.

It took a moment for Harry to realize he was being held in place and looked up to see the blurry faces of Sirius and Remus. His started to shake as he stared at his guardians fearfully. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening.

Sirius and Remus slowly released the teenager. "You were screaming in you sleep, Harry," Sirius said worriedly. "We've been trying to wake you for the past five minutes. Do you want to talk about it?"

Harry closed his eyes and felt a tear fall down his cheek. How could he tell them? *How can I not?* "It—it was Voldemort," Harry said, his voice as shaky as his body, "and Pettigrew. Voldemort killed a woman named Bertha Jorkins after he got some information from her. He just killed a Muggle named Frank Bryce. He's putting someone here to get to me—"

Sirius instantly pulled Harry into his arms while Remus ran out of the room. "Its okay, Pronglet," he said softly as he started to rock Harry back and forth in an effort to comfort the teen. "It was just a dream—"

"Exactly. Just a dream," Sirius repeated trying to calm himself and the others, "No need to worry."

"—but my scar hurts," Harry interrupted. The pain was slowly going away but it still hurt which was something Harry hadn't felt in years. "It only happened when Voldemort was at Hogwarts during my first year. I know he's not here so why does it hurt like this?"

"Oh, no," Lily said desperately, "that does not sound good."

Sirius remained silent as he held his godson. Harry didn't like the silence. Sirius always seemed to have an answer for everything even if the answer was 'Let's ask Moony'. To Harry, his guardians had all of the answers.

"Well he certainly overestimates us a bit," Sirius said.

"Every kid thinks their parents know everything," James said.

Burying his face in his godfather's chest, Harry just held on tightly, not even hearing Remus return with company.

"Sirius?" Remus asked softly.

"His scar is hurting," Sirius said as he looked over his shoulder at Remus, his eyes silently begging the werewolf to dampen his fears. "Please tell me this isn't what I think it is."

"What? What do you think this is Padfoot?" James asked shaking Sirius.

"Don't know James!"

A gentle hand rested on Harry's shoulder forcing Harry to look up and see Professor Dumbledore looking down at him sympathetically. Their eyes met and for a long moment, nothing was said as they stared at each other. When Dumbledore finally broke the eye lock, Harry buried his face back in Sirius' chest, wanting nothing more than to forget everything he had just seen.

"Dumbledore?" Remus prompted. "It's more than just a nightmare, isn't it?"

"It is difficult to say at this point," answered Professor Dumbledore, the usual pleasant tone absent from his voice. "I know the last thing you want is to relieve what you have witnessed, Harry, but in the chance that it is true, we need to know. Can you do that for us?"

"No! Why don't you leave my baby be! He just had a traumatic experience!" James yelled.

"But if Voldemort is plotting against Harry it's better if Dumbledore knows so they can do something," Remus said.

"Ok," James shrugged.

Relaying his nightmare was honestly the last thing Harry wanted to do but how could he refuse when asked that way? Pulling himself out of the arms of his godfather, Harry looked up at Professor Dumbledore and nodded then started retelling what he had witnessed. Remus had pulled up chairs for Dumbledore and himself while Sirius remained sitting on the bed, facing Harry. Both Sirius and Remus appeared ready to jump in the moment Harry started having trouble but that time never came.

Once Harry had told the three wizards everything he could remember, Professor Dumbledore thanked Harry and urged him to try and get some sleep. That was easier said than done. Harry was still shaken up and ended up retreating to the sofa in the common room with Remus who insisted he was wide awake and sent Sirius to bed.

Since Harry could barely keep his eyes open by the time he reached the sofa, Remus covered him with a blanket and ushered Harry to lie down with the teen's head resting on the werewolf's leg. Gazing into the dying fire, Remus didn't even notice when Harry had drifted off to sleep. All he knew was that Albus Dumbledore believed Harry's dream was more than a simple nightmare.

"I don't like this one bit," Lily said biting her lip.

The sound of soft voices slowly pulled Harry out of his slumber. The first voice sounded like Sirius while the second sounded remarkably like Mrs. Weasley. Not wanting to wake up yet, Harry let out a groan as he rolled over, pulling his blanket over his head earning a chuckle from someone nearby. His head was resting on something firm but not hard which was odd. His pillow was usually so soft.

"Well, my leg is definitely harder than a pillow," Remus said and Sirius poked his leg to test it. Remus swatted Sirius' hand away.

A gentle hand started rubbing his back, pulling him further out of his grogginess. Harry groaned again in protest, curling into a ball underneath the blanket. For some reason he felt exhausted like he had been awake the entire night. It was then Harry remembered having a nightmare although the details were a little sketchy. It had been about Voldemort and Pettigrew but that was really all Harry could remember.

"Come on Harry," Remus said gently. "It's time to get up. Don't you want breakfast?"

"That always works with me," Sirius said.

"We know," three voices chorused.

Harry pulled his blanket off of his head and looked up at a blurry Remus with his tired eyes for a moment before closing his eyes again. "Too tired," he mumbled as he pulled the blanket tightly around his body. Normally the food threat worked on Sirius but Harry never ate much, a lingering affect of his years with the Dursleys which Sirius had a habit of scowling at. According to Sirius, Hedwig (Harry's owl) ate more than Harry did.

All of them were scowling too.

"Let him sleep, Moony," Sirius said from the fireplace. "Not everyone rises at dawn like you do and after last night Harry deserves to sleep in."

"Last night?" Mrs. Weasley's voice asked quickly. "What happened last night?"

Sirius let out a sigh. He knew Harry probably didn't want everyone knowing about what happened but there was no way Mrs. Weasley was going to back off now. She was probably just as protective of Harry as both Marauders were. "Just a nightmare, Molly," he said nonchalantly then grinned. "Harry's fine. Remus has seemed to forgotten teenagers need sleep in his old age."

"I AM NOT OLD!" Remus cried.

"That's not what the book said; grey hair," Sirius said smirking.

"You are older then me!" Remus countered outraged.

"Which doesn't mean you are not old!" Sirius said back.

"Old age!" Remus cried then looked at the fireplace and smiled. "You'll have to excuse us, Molly. We look forward to seeing your family at the World Cup." He saw Mrs. Weasley bite back a smile and with a *pop* she was gone from the fireplace. Remus then turned his attention to Sirius as he pried himself out from under Harry's head and stood up. "Mr. Moony would like to remind Mr. Padfoot that he is treading on dangerous territory. Mr. Moony wasn't the one who sat on his arse for twelve years."

"Uh, oh," James said his eyes twinkling.

Sirius' eyes narrowed as he stood up. "Mr. Padfoot would like to remind Mr. Moony that while he was gallivanting around France, Mr. Padfoot was training to take down anyone who dare oppose him," he countered. "Do you dare, Mr. Moony?"

"One galleon on Remus," Lily said.

"I accept the bet," James said.

"Hey, no betting! Besides, I can take Moony any day of the week," Sirius said confidently.

"Yeah, right!" Remus sniggered.

"Wanna bet too?" Sirius said through narrowed eyes.

"OK! Same as Lily."

Remus took a step towards Sirius. "Oh, I dare, Mr. Padfoot," he said firmly. "Wands then?"

"Count on it," Sirius said as he took a step towards Remus, pulling out his wand and twirling it between his fingers. "When I win, Harry is allowed to sleep as long as he wants today and every day for the remainder of the summer."

"If you win Padfoot, *if*. And that is highly unlikely," Remus said.

"If you win, Padfoot, and that is a very big if," Remus corrected. "If I win, you get to have *the* talk with Harry, agreed?"

"Hey, no fair! That is Moony talk," Sirius cried.

"What's the matter Padfoot? Afraid you'll lose?" Remus teased.

"In your dreams."

Sirius scowled. That was clearly the last thing Sirius wanted to do and Remus knew it. This was considered a Remus conversation, at least in Sirius' mind. "Now that is just cruel, Moony," he said, "but I agree."

Without another word, Sirius and Remus left for their duel. Knowing that he wouldn't be able to fall asleep now, Harry emerged from the blanket and retreated to his room to change clothes. He had learned quickly that there were times when Sirius and Remus needed to be

their old selves without him to remind them how much had changed. That was why Harry questioned his guardians from time to time if they were happy with this arrangement. It seemed like they would be so much happier without having to worry about him.

"No we wouldn't. Prongs! Tell your son to stop doubting!" Sirius cried.

"It's those stupid muggles that made him feel like that," James growled, "If I get my hands on them," and he was twisting a napkin.

Once he had changed clothes and cleaned up, Harry left the 'Marauder Quarters', as Sirius had called it and strolled down the hallways until he reached a window where he could see his guardians clearly. They were in the middle of the courtyard, dueling and laughing. Harry had to smile at the sight. It was nice to see them so relaxed like normal people.

"A galleon for your thoughts, Harry?" the pleasant voice of Professor Dumbledore said from behind.

Harry turned around quickly to see Dumbledore smiling at him and shrugged his shoulders as he turned back around to watch his guardians again. "They're happy," he said softly. "Without me to worry about they would be happy like this all the time."

"No, we wouldn't, we would be miserable without our little Pronglet," Sirius said, "Tell him Dumbledore."

Dumbledore stepped forward so he was standing on Harry's left. "Possibly," he said thoughtfully. "Did you ever consider that you are the reason they are so happy? Remus Lupin was a distant and guarded individual before you entered his life a second time. In a matter of weeks that barrier he had placed around himself had already started to crumble. *You* did that Harry. He needed you as much as you needed him."

"Yes, see! I needed you. You said so yourself in the other book. When you had Padfoot caged!"

"Do we need to remember that," Sirius said glumly.

Dumbledore was silent for a moment before continuing. "Sirius Black, on the other hand, has always acted impulsively. He went after Peter, escaped Azkaban and rescued you from you uncle. The Sirius I know now is cautious because of you. He thinks before he acts

"Never thought the day would come," Lily said dryly. Sirius scowled while James and Remus tried to muffle their laughter.

because he has to consider someone other than himself for a change. Everything he does now will affect you since he is responsible for you."

Harry let out a sigh and turned around so his back was facing the grounds. "That's what I mean," he said in frustration. "He has to worry about me. I—I just want them to be happy." His gaze fell to the floor as he rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "They shouldn't have to worry about me having nightmares...I...I just feel like I'm taking advantage of them," Harry clarified. "They do so much for me—"

"No! They do what normal parents do!" James cried strangling his napkin, "Not that you would know what that is."

"—do they?" Professor Dumbledore inquired. "Harry, they do what guardians usually do, they care. Your aunt and uncle deprived you of knowing that and for my part, I am deeply sorry. That sort of upbringing is not normal. What you have with your guardians is. It will take time to adjust, Harry. Have you talked to Sirius and Remus about this?"

Harry nodded. "They think I'm mad," he said softly.

"Yes we do!" Sirius said crossing his arms.

Professor Dumbledore let out a chuckle. "I doubt that," he said pleasantly. "They probably don't understand what you're feeling is perfectly normal for children who have been in your situation. You have grown up to believe you are unimportant so it is only natural for you to consider Sirius and Remus' feelings before your own. Let them be the adults, Harry. Let *them* take on the responsibility. Allow yourself to act your age for once...within reason of course. I can assure you the staff could certainly live without some of the pranks your godfather would like to pull but a little humor wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing."

"I think we should start strategizing," James said, "Dumbledore just said he wants humor." Lily huffed.

"I'll let Sirius know," Harry said quietly. He knew Dumbledore had a point about the way he had been raised but how could he act like a normal fourteen-year-old when this was normal for him? This was who he was.

It was nearly lunch time when a happy Sirius and a scowling Remus found Harry in the library.

"YES! Pay up," Sirius said happily and James extended his hand to Lily. Lily and Remus paid up very disgruntled

Harry didn't have to ask who won and just listened as Sirius started talking excitedly about the Quidditch World Cup that they would be attending tomorrow.

"Quidditch World Cup! I wanna go!" James said drooling. The other three groaned.

Apparently Sirius had been given premium seats from the Ministry in an attempt to apologize for imprisoning him for twelve years. Sirius accepted the trio of tickets and demanded to know who was going to be in the spectator's box with them. As it turned out, they would be with the Weasley family, the Malfoy family

All of them groaned.

along with a few others from different countries.

The game tomorrow would be Bulgaria facing Ireland and according to Sirius, Bulgaria had a fantastic Seeker named Viktor Krum. Noticing Sirius' tone, Harry could take the hint. He knew Sirius was telling him this so Harry could take some pointers from Krum for his future Quidditch games. All of the members of both teams would be flying on Firebolt brooms just like Harry's (which had been a gift from Sirius last Christmas) so Harry knew the game was going to be extremely fast-paced.

James hugged Sirius and said, "Are you going to give me a Firebolt too Paddy?"

"They haven't invented them yet Prongs!" Sirius said patting James head.

They left early the following morning for the match dressed in muggle attire by the means of a portkey, a mode of transportation that tended to make Harry a little uneasy with the abrupt tug he felt behind his navel. Despite the early hour, Harry was wide awake. He had been too excited to get much sleep the night before and knew he would probably be paying for it later. How could anyone sleep the night before the Quidditch World Cup?

"Impossible! I couldn't sleep now and I am not even there!" James said exited. Lily mumbled "Quidditch nut".

They arrived just beyond the first collection of tents and dropped their portkey into the large box with others that had already been used. With a hand on each shoulder, Harry let Sirius and Remus direct him to where they needed to go. Neither of them said a word which made Harry feel a little nervous. They only time they were quiet was when they were in protective mode. It was almost like they were expecting something to jump out and take Harry away which was ridiculous. Who would do anything with so many people around?

"Actually, that would be a great opportunity. With so many people it would be very easy to go unnoticed," Remus said.

"MOONY! DON'T RUIN THE QUIDDITCH CUP EXPERIENCE!" James bellowed.

As they walked, Harry could see people stopping whatever they were doing and staring before they started to whisper to each other. Occasionally Harry could hear them mutter "Sirius Black!" or "look its Harry Potter!" which made Harry groan in annoyance. Why did people have to be so rude? Harry felt Sirius tighten his grip and knew Sirius felt the same way.

"Must be dead annoying," Lily grunted.

"Especially for Sirius," Remus said.

"Why?" Sirius asked.

"Well, because not everyone will believe you are innocent and they will be giving you dirty looks and be suspicious," Remus explained.

They reached the edge of the wood at the top of the field to see several redheads surrounding a fire that just started in front of two shabby two-man tents. Harry broke into a grin at the sight. He could clearly make out Mr. Weasley and the twins, Fred and George who were two years older than Harry. There was no sign of Harry's best friends, Ron and Hermione, or the youngest of the Weasley children, Ginny.

Remus leaned over so his mouth was by Harry's ear. "Remember what we talked about, Harry," he whispered. "I know we can trust the Weasleys but there are too many around that

could hear. If people found out where the-boy-who-lived was staying and what he was doing they may want the same treatment for their children."

"But Harry is there because Dumbledore requested Moony's and Padfoot's assistance. He's not there because he is getting special treatment," James protested.

"People won't care. They never look deeper on things. They'll just see that Te-Boy-Who-Lives is allowed to stay at Hogwarts and do magic and their kids are not," Lily said grimly.

Harry nodded in response. He knew there were special circumstances allowing him to stay at Hogwarts this summer and also knew no one was supposed to know there were special circumstances. Whatever the reason Dumbledore needed Sirius and Remus to help, Harry wasn't going to be the one to divulge the information. He had to prove that he could be trusted.

Fred and George were the first to notice the three newcomers. "Hey Harry!" shouted Fred as he quickly stood up along with his brother. "Hey Professor Lupin!" Both of them looked at Sirius nervously as if they were at a loss for words...for once.

"Why are they nervous about me?"

"Well, because until the other day you were a deranged lunatic convicted murderer. They haven't got used to the idea of you not being a murderer," Remus explained. Lily and James muffled their laughter. Sirius narrowed his eyes not understanding why they were laughing until:

"Moony! I am not a *deranged lunatic*!"

It struck Harry as strange at first that Fred and George were still addressing Remus as 'Professor Lupin'. Didn't they know Remus had resigned from the teaching position he held last term? Noticing the apprehensive looks the twins were giving Sirius, Harry decided to take on the roll as mediator. The last thing he wanted with his family and the Weasleys was tension. "Fred, George, I don't think you've met my godfather," Harry said brightly. "Sirius Black."

Sirius nodded at the two then glanced over at Mr. Weasley who was standing up to join his sons. Mr. Weasley was slightly taller than Sirius and had flaming red hair just like his wife and all of their children. It was deemed a Weasley trait making them easy to pick out in a crowd. "Arthur," Sirius said with a smile. "You seem to be missing a few."

Arthur smiled back. "Ron, Hermione and Ginny are fetching some water," he said cheerfully. "They should be back any moment. So will you three be spending the night or are you going to head back after the game?"

"The game," James mumbled dreamily.

Remus gently pushed Harry towards Fred and George. "Why don't you three find the rest of the group?" he proposed. "You have ten minutes before we come looking for you."

Knowing better than to protest, Harry just nodded then left with the twins. The moment they were out of ear shot, George stepped in front of Harry, blocking his path. "All right, oh honorary brother," he said with a suspicious look in his eyes. "We want all of the details of one Sirius Black. Don't leave anything out."

"He is quite annoying. He mumbles in his sleep," James said.

"That's when he's not snoring, of course," Remus added. They received murderous glares from Sirius.

Harry instantly grew nervous. Why did they want to know? Did they think Sirius was like the Dursleys? Did they honestly think Sirius would ever do anything to hurt him? "Er—what do you mean?" asked Harry. "Sirius and Remus are great. Sirius is my godfather and Remus is like an uncle to me...a good uncle. They would never—"

"Yes, we would never ever hurt our Pronglet!" Sirius cried and Remus nodded fervently.

"Whoa Harry," Fred said quickly as he moved to George's side. "We never meant that they would harm you. We both know Professor Lupin would never let anything happen to you and from what Ron's told us, Mr. Black is just as protective if not worse. We're just curious. He was in Azkaban for twelve years. How did he keep his mind with the Dementors there?"

Harry just shrugged. He really didn't think it was his place to talk about Sirius' past like this. "Sirius doesn't like to talk about that much," he said honestly.

"Who would?" Lily said.

Who would?

"Oh, Lily! You agree with our son! How cute!"

"Sirius is lots of fun. He keeps trying to make me pull a prank on Snape—"

Lily huffed. The boys laughed.

"What?" Fred asked in surprise.

"A prank?" George asked then grinned before glancing over at his brother. "Today could be an interesting day after all, Forge. Pointers from the only man to ever escape Azkaban would be priceless."

Fred returned the grin. "I agree," he said then looked at Harry, smiling brightly. "You have been most helpful, Harry."

"I love those two," James said happy. Sirius nodded in agreement.

"Harry!"

Harry looked past Fred and George to see Ron, Hermione and Ginny carrying a kettle and a couple of saucepans of water. He held back a sigh of relief. He knew the twins meant well but he didn't like being cornered and forced to answer questions, especially questions he wasn't supposed to answer. He hated lying but he really didn't have much of a choice.

"You made it!" Ron said happily as he tried to walk without spilling any water. "You won't believe the people we've seen. Is the fire started yet?"

"Once Dad got over the fascination with the matches,"

"What's so fascinating about matches?" Lily asked.

"Well they light up in fire just like that," James said snapping his fingers, "no words, no wand." Lily looked at him and then started laughing. James was quite put out by this.

George answered then looked back at their campsite. "C'mon. Professor Lupin will be coming to find us if we're not back soon."

"Professor Lupin is here?" Hermione asked eagerly. "Maybe we can go over notes for classes."

Harry shifted his weight nervously. "Er—I thought you all knew," he said uncomfortably. "Remus resigned after everyone found out about his other side. He's not a teacher anymore."

Hermione stared at Harry, her eyes wide. Clearly she hadn't heard. "He what?" she asked in shock. "Harry, he's the best teacher we've ever had! How could he resign? Who cares if he's a werewolf."

"Good Hermione!" Sirius cried.

It's not like he would ever hurt any of us!"

"Exactly!" James bellowed.

Harry rubbed his eyes under his glasses as they started to walk back to the Weasley campsite. This was certainly going to be interesting. Hermione was a Muggle-born and didn't have the prejudices that those who had been raised by witches and wizards had. Remus had explained everything after Harry had accidentally found out.

Remus mumbled incoherent words that sounded like 'Snivellus', 'greasy git' and 'going to pay'.

Most people saw werewolves as nothing more than dark creatures who would rather kill you than look at you.

"BOOOOOOO!" James and Sirius cried.

Harry had a hard time believing that. Remus was such a pacifist. He would never hurt anyone.

There were three more redheads when they returned.

"THREE MORE! How many kids do the Weasleys have?" Lily asked astonished.

"Apparently, quite a lot," James said.

Percy, who was two years older than Fred and George had recently graduated from Hogwarts, seemed to be the intellectual one of the younger five. He had been a prefect and Head Boy which had embarrassed his younger brothers to no end. They all thought Percy was wound too tight.

Standing to Percy's left was a redhead who was built like the twins, short and stocky unlike Percy and Ron who were long and gangly. His face seemed to have so many freckles that it could be mistaken for a tan. He had muscular arms, one of which housed a burn that had a soft shine to it. The redhead standing to his left was tall with long hair that was tied back in a

ponytail. He wore an earring resembling a fang and looked like he had just returned from a rock concert; not exactly the image Harry had in his head for any of the Weasley children.

"Cool!" James breathed.

"You're back!" Mr. Weasley exclaimed as he motioned for Harry to come over. Once Harry did, Mr. Weasley put his hands on Harry's shoulders and turned him to the three redheads. "Harry, I don't believe you've met Charlie," he said positioning Harry to directly face the redhead in the middle, "my second oldest and Bill, my oldest. Charlie works in Romania and Bill works in Egypt."

"Pleased to meet you," Harry said politely. "Ron talks about you two all the time."

Bill and Charlie smiled. "Is that so?" asked Bill in amazement. "We've heard an awful lot about you too. Actually, Ron couldn't seem to shut up. I think we know more about you than you do."

Harry didn't know what to say. He knew Bill was joking around but it had been an annoyance of his ever since he entered the wizarding world that everyone knew more about his life than he did. Remus and Sirius had helped fill in the cracks when it came to his parents and his time with them but it still stung. Why did everyone think his life was their business?

The next thing Harry knew he had been grabbed by Sirius and pulled away from the Weasleys.

"SIRIUS! STOP MANHANDLING MY SON!" James cried.

It took a moment for Harry to figure out that several individuals coming towards Mr. Weasley. The one leading the group was certainly the most noticeable with his yellow and black striped Quidditch robes. His nose looked like it had been hit by a Bludger at least once, short blond hair and blue eyes.

"Why hello Arthur!" the man said with a smile to Mr. Weasley. "What a day! Perfect weather and the turnout...unbelievable."

"Ludo!" Arthur said happily. "The man of the hour!" He looked around at his children. "Everyone, Ludo Bagman is the reason we have such good tickets."

"Ludo Bagman! My son is meeting Ludo Bagman!" James said delighted.

"Who's Ludo Bagman?" Lily asked.

"Who's Ludo Bagman!" James cried horrified, "Just the best beater ever!"

He returned his gaze to Bagman. "My sons: Percy, Charlie, Bill, George, Fred and Ron, my daughter: Ginny, Ron's friends, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter. Standing with Harry are his guardians, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black."

Bagman's eyes went wide at the mention of Harry's name and quickly focused on the scar on Harry's forehead. He then looked over at Sirius and Remus who were looking at Bagman as if daring him to continue to stare at their charge. "Sirius Black," Bagman said uncomfortably. "Your story is almost as legendary as your charge's. How *did* you manage to escape from Azkaban?"

Sirius wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders. Harry had heard the entire story how Sirius used his Animagus form to escape. Apparently, the Dementors didn't affect someone as much as long as they were in their animal form. "If you knew, Bagman, everyone would find out," Sirius said evenly. "I don't think we need *everyone* finding that little tidbit out, do we?"

"Now, now Sirius," Remus warned. "I'm sure Ludo didn't mean anything by it."

"I love when Moony does that. He sounds like he is scolding you but he is actually scolding the other person," Sirius said.

"No, not at all," Bagman said quickly and returned his attention to Mr. Weasley. "You certainly have quite a crowd, Arthur. We'll catch you later. Good day." Bagman left as quickly as he could without looking like he was fleeing for his life.

A moment later a wizard appeared at their fireside with a *crack*. The man was dressed in a suit and tie, had straight and short grey hair, and a thin toothbrush moustache. Sirius' grip on Harry tightened as he quietly growled at the man. Harry just watched the man glare at Sirius as he continued walking past them, apparently in some sort of hurry.

"Sirius," Remus warned again. "Remember we're all on the same side. Whatever Crouch did to you in the past should stay in the past. There's nothing we can do about it now."

"Er—what did he do?" Percy asked hesitantly.

"He sent me to Azkaban without a trial," Sirius said bitterly. "To him I was nothing of importance so my rights didn't matter."

The boys all growled.

Remus put a hand on his friend's shoulder, once again serving as the voice of reason. "But you were proven innocent, Sirius," he reminded calmly. "Today isn't the day to focus on past mistakes. Let the kids have their fun. The World Cup doesn't happen every day."

Sirius let out a frustrated sigh. Of course Remus was right. Releasing Harry from his hold, Sirius turned the teen around so they were face to face. "I'm sorry, kiddo," he said sincerely. "Old wounds are the hardest to mend."

Harry nodded and wrapped his arms around Sirius. If anyone knew anything about old wounds it was Harry and Remus. Perhaps that was why the three of them got along so well. They all understood each other better than anyone else. "It's okay," Harry said softly. "I understand."

"That and they complement each other," Lily said.

"How so?" Sirius asked.

"Well, you're a jokester and Remus brings out the, pardon the pun, serious part that you have hidden *very* deep down. Remus is usually serious and you bring out a more relaxed part of him. Harry is more like Remus so he identifies with him but he needs you to lighten him up. That's why you work well now too except it's the other way around with James, he identifies with you and needs Remus to keep him grounded."

The three boys nodded satisfied. She described them perfectly.

Chapter 3

The World Cup

"YES! FINALLY! QUIDDITCH! BEST SPORT EVER!"

"JAMES! That's more than enough!" Lily scolded.

The day progressed slowly. Apparently Percy was a tad obsessed with Mr. Crouch (his boss) so the news of what he had done to Sirius shook the new Ministry employee up a little bit. To Percy, Mr. Crouch could do no wrong. Ron, Fred and George could only roll their eyes. They had heard enough about Mr. Crouch to last a life time.

As the day progressed, the large group seemed to split into to. Mr. Weasley, Bill, Charlie and Percy sat with Remus and Sirius, talking quietly while those still attending Hogwarts ventured off to browse the salesmen who were selling various items. Ron bought a miniature Viktor Krum only to regret it when Harry found someone selling what looked like binoculars with knobs and dials. They were called Omnioculars which allowed one to replay what they saw in slow motion for ten Galleons. Harry bought three pairs while Hermione bought programs.

"How nice of Harry and Hermione," Lily said approvingly.

Running low on time, they met up with Fred, George and Ginny then hurried back to see the 'adults' were waiting for them.

"You do realize we are in the so called 'adults' group," Remus told Sirius.

Sirius stared at him for a while and then said "Freaky!"

Mr. Weasley led the way with Sirius and Remus following the crowd. Harry tried to take everything in without losing step. He had never seen anything like it. They ventured through the wood for nearly twenty minutes until they reached a clearing with a huge stadium. Gold walls surrounded the enormous pitch which was all Harry could see.

"It seats a hundred thousand," Sirius said softly into Harry's ear. "Close your mouth, Harry. Just wait until we get inside."

Younger Sirius was gently closing James mouth.

Harry's mouth snapped shut as he looked up at Sirius and smiled. They both knew that this was all new for Harry. The Dursleys had never taken Harry anywhere

Growls were heard, napkins were shredded.

so it was up to Sirius and Remus to make up for it. They hadn't said anything to Harry because they knew what Harry's response would be. Harry would insist that they didn't have to do anything but seeing the smile now present on Harry's face was all that Sirius and Remus needed to know this was exactly what Harry needed.

And if they wanted to know how Harry's smile was they just had to look at James.

Mr. Weasley's voice pulled the three of them out of their thoughts. "Muggle-Repelling Charms are put on every inch of it," he informed the awestruck children. "Whenever Muggles come near they instantly remember some important appointment and leave."

They reached the nearest entrance that was already swarmed with shouting people. Mr. Weasley handed his tickets over to the witch who instructed the Weasleys and Hermione to head up to the Top Box. Once they had entered, Sirius handed his tickets over and was instructed to follow the Weasleys. They walked up the stairs until they reached the very top and into a small box positioned in the middle of the field.

"I wanna be in the Top Box too!" James whined. Lily patted his head.

There were two rows of chairs. Harry was immediately pulled by Ron to the front row. Looking down, Harry couldn't believe the scene below. Countless witches and wizards were taking their seats above a long oval pitch. There were three golden hoops on each side of the stadium fifty feet high. Directly across from them was a large blackboard with gold writing magically appearing and disappearing. A strange golden light seemed to surround everything, becoming brighter and brighter. It became too overwhelming, too blinding.

"WA'S HAPPENING!" Sirius cried.

Harry collapsed.

"WHAT!" James cried.

"MY BABY IS SICK!" Lily sobbed.

Sirius and Remus hurried to Harry's side as Mr. Weasley quickly pulled Ron and Hermione back. Bill held Ginny back while Charlie and Percy prevented the twins from advancing. Silence filled the box. Remus propped up Harry's upper body, removed Harry's glasses and pried open one of Harry's closed eyes. He could only gasp in alarm at what he saw. Harry's eye was unnaturally bright. He pried the other open and saw the same thing. Remus glanced at Sirius who leaned forward to get a look.

"WA'S HAPPENING MOONY!" James was shaking Remus.

"Dunno James! Sirius, help!"

With effort Sirius managed to extricate Remus from James grip.

Sirius could only stare in shock. "That's not normal," he muttered. "Has this ever happened before, Remus?"

Remus shook his head as he released Harry's eyelid. He gently touched Harry's forehead, checking for any sign of a fever. "Harry," he prodded gently. "Harry, wake up."

"MOONY! You wanna wake him up! Gentle is not going to do it!" Sirius cried.

There was no response. A small hand touched Remus' arm causing Remus to look up and see a house elf staring at him. It was wearing a tea-towel that was wrapped around it in the resemblance of a toga. The creature looked dreadfully frightened. "Young Mr. Wizard needs shielding for his eyes," the elf squeaked. "He is seeing the magic around us. Too much for young Mr. Wizard."

"Harry can see the magic around?" Lily asked shocked.

Remus instantly pulled out his wand and tapped it on Harry's glasses which suddenly turned into sunglasses. He gently put them back on Harry then looked up at the house elf and smiled. "Thank you," he said sincerely. "May we know your name and the name of your master so we can thank you properly?"

The house elf blushed by the statement. "My name is Winky, sir Mr. Wizard, sir," said the elf. "My master is Mr. Crouch. I is saving his seat for him. He is very busy wizard, master is. Winky is a good house elf."

"Yes you are," Remus said with a smile. "The next time I see your master I will let him know. Thank you again, Winky."

"You're so nice Moony!" James said and Remus blushed.

Winky bowed her head and quickly retreated back to her seat. The sound of Harry groaning pulled everyone's attention back to the unconscious teenager. As Harry opened his eyes he was confused to see that the room was significantly darker than before and his head was throbbing. Out of the corner of his eyes (where the sunglasses didn't cover) Harry noticed brightness. He reached up to pull off his glasses only to be stopped by Remus.

"Leave them on, Harry," Remus said softly. "They'll help for now. Do you think you can sit up?"

Sighs of relief were heard.

Harry nodded and sat up with the help of Sirius and Remus. He looked around and noticed that everyone was looking at him. Harry groaned as he grabbed his aching head. *So much for an uneventful day.* He felt himself being lifted into a chair and looked up to see the worried face of his godfather. His headache was slowly decreasing but it still hurt too much to ignore.

"Give him an aspirin!" Lily cried.

"A what?" the boys asked bewildered.

"An aspirin, for the pain!" she said with a 'most obvious thing in the world' look.

"You mean a pain killing potion," James asked.

Lily scowled and mumbled, "Always forget about potions on the holidays."

The boys tried to muffle their laughter but were unsuccessful.

Lily's scowled deeper and said, "Hey, I spend my holidays with muggles ok! I go to my default muggle upbringing!"

"But it's very funny!" James said, "Slughorn's favorite student forgetting about potions!"

"Are you all right Harry?" Sirius asked desperately trying to stay calm. "Can you make it through the game?"

Harry nodded again. "I'm fine," he said with a forced smile. He knew Sirius had been looking forward to this and wasn't about to ruin it for his godfather. "I just have a small headache. It's nothing really."

"No Harry! Go ahead and say the truth!" Sirius said, "Your health is more important than the cup!"

All of them were shocked with James nodding in agreement.

Sirius looked at Harry for a moment as if he was internally debating whether to believe the teen or not. "Are you sure?" he asked then stood up when Harry nodded. "All right but if you start feeling any worse I want to know about it; no matter how small it may be, agreed?"

"Agreed," Harry said with a true smile. Of course he had no intention of saying anything no matter what but Sirius and Remus didn't have to know that.

All of them smacked their own head in one way or the other grunting. Finally Remus had to stop Sirius from banging his head on the floor.

The tension in the room seemed to lift immediately. Hermione sat down to Harry's left while Ron sat down on Harry's right. Sirius and Remus took seats behind Harry with the remaining Weasleys took seats around them. Fred, George and Ginny were in the first row while Bill, Charlie, Percy and Mr. Weasley were in the second. Ron immediately pulled out his Omnioculars and started looking out at the crowd. Hermione started looking through her program but Harry could have sworn that he saw her watching him. He figured she was just worried and ignored it the best he could.

"Hey!" Hermione exclaimed. "We get to see a display of the mascots from each team. That should be quite a sight."

"It will be," Mr. Weasley confirmed. "Creatures are brought from the representing countries, not something you see every day."

Throughout the next half hour the box slowly filled with people. Mr. Weasley shook hands with most of them with Percy right at his side. When the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, arrived,

Groans were heard.

he basically ignored Percy, moving to Harry who he treated like any concerned parent would.

"WHAT?" Lily cried outraged, "After almost sucking Harry's and Sirius' soul out he pretends to be his *friend*!"

Harry had to hold back any comments or actions he wanted to take towards the man who had tried to send his godfather to the Dementors but it was difficult. Fudge was clearly trying to show everyone in the box how 'close' he was to the-boy-who-lived.

"Well, you're NOT!" Sirius yelled angry.

Remus was clearly holding Sirius in his seat the entire time even though both of them appeared to be a second away from attacking the Minister.

"Oh, I'd want to see what happened if I just happened to *accidentally* let go of Sirius," Remus said with an evil grin. The other three mirrored his grin.

They hated it when Harry was used as some sort of publicity prop and knew Harry hated it too.

The Minister moved on and was now talking loudly to the Bulgarian Minister even though the man didn't seem to understand a word of English.

"Why do people think that if someone doesn't know the language shouting will make them understand," Remus said annoyed, "HE'S NOT DEAF!"

Annoyed beyond all measure, Remus stood up and started speaking to the Bulgarian in what must have been his native tongue. The Bulgarian smiled at Remus and started talking back. Within a few moments they were laughing much at the disgust of Fudge.

"You know Bulgarian Moony?" Lily said impressed.

"I like languages. But I just started with Bulgarian. My mother taught me French," he answered.

Sirius coughed something that sounded an awful lot like 'bookworm'. Remus looked for one of his famous pillows and finding none in the outside had to resort to glaring.

The Bulgarian and Remus shook hands then took their seats. Remus was instantly aware of everyone from his group staring at him. "What?" he asked innocently

"Oh, Moony, what did you say?" James asked grinning.

and that was all the Weasley's needed to pull their attention away from Remus. Sirius and Harry bit back smiles. They knew Remus had done that to put Fudge in his place more than anything. It was amazing how effective Remus' methods could be.

"Yep! He's our little angel with a devil's tail," Sirius said fondly.

The Malfoys were the next to enter.

Everyone groaned again.

Sirius and Remus kept their faces looking out at the stadium and silently urged Harry to do the same. Harry was only happy to concur. Lucius Malfoy and his son, Draco, seemed to be evil to the core. Draco Malfoy and Harry were rivals ever since Draco had made fun of Ron's family on their first journey to Hogwarts. Harry could never be friends with a bully like that.

Fudge and Mr. Malfoy talked for a bit like they were old friends that made Harry's stomach churn.

"Birds of a feather," James mumbled.

"More like Fudge is stupid enough for Malfoy to manipulate," Remus groaned.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and knew that it was Sirius silently reminding him that he wasn't alone. Harry tuned out the rest of his conversation and handed over his Omnioculars to Sirius. He really couldn't see through them with sunglasses anyways.

"A bunch of slimy gits that's what they are," Ron muttered.

Before Harry knew it Bagman's voice filled the now packed stadium. It was a good thing his headache was basically gone or all of the shouting would have only made it worse. "Welcome ladies and gentlemen to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!"

James was practically drooling.

Bagman announced. "Without further ado, the Bulgarian Team Mascots!"

The blackboard now read BULGARIA: ZERO, IRELAND: ZERO but no one was watching the blackboard. Everyone was watching a hundred beautiful women gliding onto the pitch. Almost instantly a hand covered Harry's sunglasses. Harry was about to protest when the soft voice of his godfather entered his left ear. "Trust me," Sirius said. "You don't want to make a fool of yourself because of a Veela. Cover your ears, Harry."

"AHHHHHHH! VEELA!" the boys shut their eyes and covered their ears. Lily rolled her eyes.

"You can't feel the effects from the book!"

"You never know," James said keeping his eyes screwed shut. Lily kept reading.

Harry did as he was told and covered his ears as he closed his eyes. He waited until a gentle hand on his shoulder told him it was okay to look. There were angry yells from the crowd. The Veela were now lined up along one side of the pitch. Looking over at Ron, Harry held back a laugh to see his best friend in such a dazed state. Harry lightly smacked Ron on the back of the head, bringing the teenager around.

"Huh?" Ron asked. "What'd ya do that for?"

"Poor Ron," Sirius said sympathetically.

Harry let out a laugh while Hermione rolled her eyes in annoyance. He looked over his shoulder at Sirius and mouthed a 'thank you'. Sirius was right. Harry really didn't want to make a fool of himself especially with so many people around.

"And now the Irish National Team Mascots!" announced Bagman.

A flash of blinding light entered the stadium, forcing Harry to look away and close his eyes. He heard the crowd 'ooooing' and 'aaaaing' at what sounded like loud gunfire. Harry could only guess that it was fireworks. A hand touched each of Harry's shoulders. Slowly, Harry opened his eyes to see a rainbow over the stadium that transformed into a shamrock as it started to rain shimmering objects. As it soared over them, Harry realized that it was gold coins raining down which struck Harry as odd. How could anyone afford to do that?

"They must be awful rich," Lily said.

"Leprechaun gold! It's not real gold and it vanishes after a while," Remus explained.

"Leprechauns!" Mr. Weasley said excitedly as he looked up. Harry would have to take his word for it. It just looked like a shamrock to him with the sunglasses on.

The shamrock dissolved as Ron handed over a fistful of coins to Harry. "For the Omnioculars!" he said happily.

"Oh, poor Ron. He doesn't know," Lily said.

"Yeah but I doubt Harry is going to tell him that the gold vanished," James said, "He'll want for Ron to think that he paid his debt."

It was then that Harry finally saw the leprechauns which were tiny bearded men dressed in red and carrying lamps that were either gold or green. They took their spot on the opposite side of the field from the Veela, sitting cross-legged. Harry made a mental note to research Veela and leprechauns when he got back to Hogwarts.

"MOONY! STOP POISONING MY SON! YOU'RE TURNING HIM INTO A BOOKWORM!"

"And what's wrong with being interested?" Lily asked crossed.

"No, nothing, Lily dear. Very good thing," James tried to placate her.

"And now the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team!" Bagman roared. "Dimitrov! Ivanova! Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaand Krum!"

Seven scarlet figures arrived onto the pitch so fast that it was impossible to make anyone out. The entire crowd roared the moment Krum's name was announced, Ron being one of them. As they slowed down, Harry was able to see that Krum looked older than the eighteen years he was supposed to be. He was thin with sallow-skin. He had a large curved nose and thick black eyebrows.

"And now the Irish National Quidditch Team!" Bagman continued. "Connolly! Ryan! Troy! Mullet! Moran! Quigley! Aaand-Lynch!"

The boys all applauded hard.

Seven more blurs entered the pitch but these were green. They positioned themselves so they were facing the Bulgarian team. Harry picked out the Seekers and focused on them. There was a loud whistle and the game begun. Harry had tuned out Bagman's voice. The game was

so fast paced Harry was afraid to even blink. The crowd was so loud that Harry was certain he would go deaf at this rate. He watched as Krum searched for the Snitch almost lazily. He didn't even realize that Ireland had scored.

Applauses and whistles were heard.

Every now and then Harry would glance at the rest of the game only to return his gaze quickly to Krum. It was clear that Lynch was watching Krum instead of searching for the Snitch himself. Ireland scored two more times before Bulgaria managed to score. Once they did, Harry thought he heard Mr. Weasley yell something but the crowd was too loud for him to make it out. His eyes were transfixed on Krum as the player took off like a rocket. Had he seen the Snitch?

James was practically bouncing on his spot on the floor.

Lynch flowed as Krum dived quickly. They were heading towards the pitch too fast for any sane person to attempt. Harry's eyes widened as he realized what was going to happen. Krum hadn't seen the Snitch. He was taking his competition out of the game. Krum quickly pulled out of the dive. Harry closed his eyes and looked away, expecting to hear Lynch hit the ground. All he could do was wish that Lynch didn't get hurt.

All of them closed their eyes. After a while Sirius opened one eye and cleared his throat.

"Hum, Lily, you can't read with your eyes closed." She blushed and kept reading.

Silence rang through the stadium. Harry quickly opened his eyes to see Lynch on the ground without a mark on him. "Er—what happened?" he asked.

"Lynch bounced," Ron said in amazement. "How could he do that?"

"How did that happen?" James asked.

"I think Harry did that," Remus said.

"How?" Lily asked.

"Dunno, just have a feeling he did."

Before anyone could say anything else, Lynch mounted his broom and took off after Krum. "That was the strangest Wronski Feint I've ever seen," Charlie commented. "He was supposed to go *splat* not bounce."

Looking up at Krum, Harry could see the Seeker was just as mystified as everyone else then quickly started searching for the Snitch again. The teams jumped out of their astonishment and continued playing. Once again Harry focused on the Seekers, ignoring anything Bagman said. There was a penalty to Ireland which sent the mascots into an uproar. The leprechauns started taunting the Veela who retaliated and started to dance. Harry looked away and covered his ears along with the rest of the males around him. It was only when Hermione started tugging on Harry's arm that he felt it was safe to look.

"The referee!" she shouted pointing at the referee who was now under the Veela's spell.

Everyone laughed.

The mediwizard quickly came out and kicked the referee, forcing him to come out of his daze. The game continued but was starting to get ugly. The Beaters were doing anything and everything to take out the opposing Chasers, Keeper and Seeker. Some were nearly knocked off their brooms and several fouls were awarded.

The leprechauns started taunting the Veela again who finally lost control. They attacked the leprechauns, throwing handfuls of fire at them. Their faces changed from beauty to birdlike with scaly wings coming out of their shoulders. Harry cringed at the sight and returned his attention to the players flying above the field. Ireland scored again before one of Ireland's Beaters hit a Bludger towards Krum, hitting him hard in the face.

"OUCH! That's gotta hurt!" Remus said.

"You think!" James, who was very acquainted with bludgers, said.

Krum was now covered in blood but before a timeout could be called Lynch suddenly dived with Krum quickly following him. Krum was certainly the better flyer and was catching up to Lynch quickly. They were side by side as they dove towards the ground as fast as their brooms could take them.

"They'll crash!" Hermione cried out.

"No they won't!" Ron shot back.

"Lynch will!" Harry corrected and Lynch did, this time there was no bounce.

They all winced.

"Where's the Snitch?" Charlie asked loudly.

Harry saw Krum holding the small golden ball in his hand. "Krum's got it!" he shouted. "It's over!"

"Aw! Already," James whined.

The scoreboard started to flash: BULGARIA: 160, IRELAND: 170. Screams erupted from the Ireland fans. Even though Krum had caught the Snitch, Ireland still won. It seemed too impossible. In all of Harry's experience the Seeker who caught the Snitch actually won the game.

"Why did he catch the Snitch then?" Lily asked.

"Ireland was a lot better. They were already 160 points up. He wanted to end it on his own terms," James said.

"I can't believe it!" Ron shouted as he clapped his hands. "The idiot! You don't catch the Snitch when you're more than one hundred and fifty points behind!"

"Ireland was better," Harry said matter-of-factly as he also applauded. "*Krum* wanted to end it *his* way. Rather brilliant."

"See! Harry agrees with me!" James said beaming and Lily mumbled "Quidditch nuts".

"Well look what it got him," Hermione said as she looked down to see Krum. "He looks awful."

Harry turned around to look at Remus and Sirius with a smile on his face. Remus pulled out his wand and tapped Harry's sunglasses turning them back to normal eyeglasses. Harry had to blink a few times to get used to the light but it certainly wasn't as bright as before. Everything looked normal. Now he just wished he knew what happened.

"Have a good time?" Remus asked as he pocketed his wand.

"EXCELENT! BEST TIME OF MY LIFE!" James cried.

"I didn't ask you, James," Remus said.

Harry nodded. "The best," he said happily as he maneuvered around his chair to them and hugged both of them at the same time. "Thank you," he said sincerely. He really didn't know what else to say. Both Sirius and Remus returned the embrace, not caring who may be watching them.

"Dis is your son?" a gloomy voice curiously asked behind them.

Sirius and Remus quickly turned around to see the Bulgarian Minister of Magic. Remus gently ushered Harry so he was standing in front of them. "My son, no," Remus said diplomatically.

"He's as good as. Moony! Why are you not saying that?" James asked.

"Well, Harry is pretty well known. The Minister would know he is not my son." James scowled.

"This is Harry Potter. Harry, this is Mr. Obalonsk, the Bulgarian Minister of Magic."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Harry said as he extended his hand which Mr. Obalonsk shook.

"Da pleasure is mine," Mr. Obalonsk said with a smile. "You are quite a legend, Harry Potter. If you and your family ever wishes to visit, do not hesitate to contact me." He looked up at Remus and Sirius. "Very polite young man," he said. "You must be very proud."

"VERY!" four cries came.

"We are," Remus said pleasantly. "You have an excellent team and an exceptional Seeker."

Mr. Obalonsk smile widened as he shook hands with Remus and then with Sirius. The entire box was flabbergasted at the interaction. A werewolf and an ex-convict were on better terms with the Bulgarian Minister than their own Minister was.

"Serves him right," James said laughing.

The box suddenly lit up so that everyone could see inside. Harry started to feel uncomfortable with being watched by so many and backed up into Remus.

"Now, a round of applause for the Bulgarian team!" Bagman shouted.

The Bulgarian Quidditch Team came up the stairs and entered the box. The crowd applauded as Bagman announced the players one by one. Each player shook hands with Mr. Obalonsk then with Fudge. Krum, who was last, looked even worse up close. He now had two black eyes and his entire face was covered with blood. Harry couldn't help but notice Krum still had the Snitch in his hand. The moment Krum's name was announced the noise of the crowd seemed to magnify a tenfold.

Once Krum shook hands with Fudge, Mr. Obalonsk pulled him over towards Harry. "Viktor, I would like you to meet a fellow Seeker, Harry Potter," he said as he motioned to the fourteen-year-old.

"Harry is meeting Krum! Harry is meeting Krum!" James said excited. Lily rolled her eyes.

Krum's eyes widened at the name as he glanced at Harry's forehead, noticing the trademark scar. He reached out and shook Harry's hand. "Pleasure to meet *the* Harry Potter," Krum said in awe. "I have heard a lot about you."

"The pleasure is mine," Harry said shakily, overwhelmed at actually meeting Viktor Krum.

"Like father like son," Lily muttered but James was too overexcited to notice.

He was silently hoping he wasn't looking like an idiot in front of an international Quidditch star. "I've heard a lot about you too."

Krum smiled proudly as he handed the Snitch over to Harry. "Practice hard, Harry Potter," he said. "Maybe ve vill face each other in a few years." Krum nodded to his Minister then followed his team out of box.

"Uhh! The Malfoy kid is going to go green with envy!" Sirius said.

Harry stared at the Snitch in his hand. He couldn't believe it. Viktor Krum just gave him the Snitch he caught! Harry's hand tightened around the small golden ball, its wings now slowly flapping. He had hardly noticed when the Ireland team came up and was introduced. His brain had seemed to stop working. He barely realized hands resting on his shoulders until a voice filled his right ear.

James was drooling again and Sirius put a napkin under his chin. James was so entranced that he didn't even swat Sirius hand away.

"Snap out of it Harry," Sirius whispered. "Everyone's staring."

That did it. Harry quickly turned around and looked up at his guardians with a big smile on his face. Both Sirius and Remus couldn't hold back their amusement as they watched Ron appear at Harry's side, his eyes wide at the sight of the Snitch. The Weasley siblings surrounded Harry, all of them wanting a closer look at the infamous Snitch. All in all, it was a great day for Harry.

Smiling Lily turned the page for the next chapter.

XXXXXXXXXXXXX

Chapter 4

Fears from the Past

"Ok, I liked last chapter's title better!" James said.

With everything that had happened Harry had wanted to stay with Ron and Hermione in the Weasley tents but Sirius and Remus wouldn't allow it. All it took was that *look* Sirius usually gave him meaning 'we've talked about this and no one can know about it'.

"See! You've got a *look* too," Remus said pleased.

"I can honestly say that my *look* is not as bad as yours!" Sirius said dryly and Remus scowled.

Word had passed quickly that Viktor Krum had given the Snitch he caught to the-boy-who-lived making Harry the most sought out person by the press, only adding to the reasons they needed to depart as soon as possible.

They walked with the Weasleys and Hermione to their campsite. Harry quickly bid goodbye to everyone, making sure to tell Ron and Hermione he would write to them. Remus pulled out the portkey Dumbledore had given them and waited for Harry to join him and Sirius. When Harry did, Remus held out the portkey for Sirius and Harry to touch then muttered the password 'sanctuary'.

With pull from behind their navels, they disappeared and reappeared in their quarters at Hogwarts. Without a word between them, the three collapsed on the sofa, completely exhausted. Harry let his eyes close as his body started to lean to his left. With the silence and peacefulness currently surrounding them, Harry finally felt all of the tiredness he should have felt the previous night and then some. Within a matter of minutes, Harry was asleep with a soft smile still on his face.

Sirius and Remus glanced down at the sleeping teen leaning into Remus' shoulder. "Do you want to talk to Dumbledore or should I?" Sirius asked quietly. "He should probably know what happened today."

"Yes! Please! We want to know!" James cried.

Remus let out a sigh. "I'll do it," he whispered. "I tend to listen better when Dumbledore gets technical in his explanations and Harry *will* want an explanation."

"Translation: as a bookworm I will understand better when Dumbledore gets technical, and I will pour through thousands of books with him before I reemerge into civilized society again," in the absence of pillows, James received a roll on the head for that.

Remus carefully lifted his right arm and wrapped it around the Harry, allowing him to slowly lie down on his lap. "Did you notice Fudge and the Malfoys after Krum gave Harry the Snitch?"

"Bet they weren't happy," Sirius mumbled.

Sirius held in a laugh. "I don't think I've ever seen that family so jealous," he said candidly then turned serious. "Fudge is an idiot. I can't believe you came to his rescue like that. What were you thinking?"

"YES MOONY! What were you thinking?" James asked.

"I highly doubt he was helping Fudge," Lily said dryly.

"Rescue?" Remus asked in confusion. "I was basically badmouthing Fudge to Obalonsk. That was why he was laughing so hard. I just apologized for Fudge acting like git because he is one."

James hugged Remus and said delighted, "They grow up so fast. I am so proud!"

Sirius grinned. "Moony, sometimes you surprise me," he said proudly as he stood up. "I'm beat. I can take Harry to his room so you can visit the old man before it gets too late." Carefully, Sirius picked up the small fourteen-year-old and shook his head slowly. Harry was too light for anyone near his age. "This kid needs to gain some weight," he muttered to no one in particular.

He entered Harry's room and gently set Harry down on the bed. Carefully, Sirius pried the Snitch out of Harry's fingers, pulled out his wand and immobilized it. He then placed the golden ball on Harry's bed side table, knowing Harry would probably want to know where it was first thing in the morning. Careful not to disturb the sleeping teen, Sirius slowly removed Harry's shoes, glasses and wand holster with wand still firmly attached before covering him up with a blanket.

Kneeling down at Harry's bedside, Sirius ran his fingers through Harry's hair like he had over a year ago at Privet Drive, when he had posed as the faithful dog Midnight. Harry let out a moan as he leaned into the touch. It had surprised Sirius when Harry had hugged him and

Remus after the match. Most teenagers wouldn't openly show affection towards their guardians in public.

"Definitely not," James said with an expression of horror.

But Harry was different. For some reason Harry felt the need to thank Sirius and Remus for everything they did for him. This worried Sirius. It worried him that Harry felt like he didn't deserve what every other child with loving parents seemed to take for granted. That was something Sirius hoped he could change. Harry did deserve everything and more that every other child got. Harry deserved to be loved.

"And we love you Harry!" Lily cried.

Harry was pulled out of his slumber by someone gently shaking his shoulder. He groaned in protest as he slowly opened his eyes to see Remus' blurry face. Harry groaned again, trying to roll over but Remus kept a firm grip on Harry's shoulder. Mindlessly, Harry reached out for his glasses, found them on his bedside table and put them on. Remus' face came into focus...Remus' *worried* face came into focus.

"What? Why?" James cried.

"Harry," Remus said gently as he sat down on the edge of Harry's bed. "Something happened last night."

"What?"

"Did someone get hurt?"

"Who got hurt?"

"Tell us already!" the four cries came at the same time.

Harry quickly sat up as fear flooded him. His first thought was that something happened to Sirius but how could it? Sirius had come back here with them. Harry remembered that. His next thought was of Ron and Hermione. Had something happened to them? Had something happened to the Weasley family last night after they left?

Remus took hold of Harry's shoulders and waited until their eyes met. "Harry, everyone is fine," he said reassuringly.

"So why did you have to scare us like that?" Remus cried angry.

"Moony, that was you," Sirius said calmly. Remus glared at him.

"Last night after we left there was some wizards hurting muggles. Some say they were Death Eaters but no one real knows for sure. They were scared away when the Dark Mark appeared in the sky." Noticing Harry's confusion, Remus continued. "The Dark Mark is Voldemort's symbol. It hasn't been seen for years. Voldemort and his followers usually set it off after they killed someone. It was everyone's worst fear to come home and find it above your house."

"Why would that scare Death Eaters?" Lily asked.

"Well, because those are the Death Eaters that didn't go to jail. They must have renounced Voldemort or made deals giving others up. I bet the last thing they want is Voldemort back," Remus explained.

Harry shifted nervously. "Was it over mine—er—that night?" he asked.

They all shuddered and Lily let out a little sob.

Remus shook his head. "Voldemort never...well...finished that night," he said softly as his gaze fell. He was silent for a moment before looking back at Harry. "It's all over the 'Daily Prophet' today, Harry, so I just wanted to warn you. If you have any questions, please ask."

"So everyone's okay?" Harry asked hesitantly.

Remus nodded as he smiled, knowing everything was just finally sinking in for Harry. "I talked to Molly this morning," Remus said. "They had just gotten home when I fire-called. I assure you they are home, safe and sound."

Harry let out a sigh of relief. He didn't know what he would do if anyone had been hurt last night although there still was something plaguing his mind. "Er—so what does the Dark Mark look like?" he asked curiously.

Remus pulled out the 'Daily Prophet' he had hidden in his cloak and handed it over to Harry. There, on the front page, was a black and white photograph of a large skull with a serpent

coming out of its mouth like it was the skull's tongue hovering above the treetops. Harry could understand why people feared it; just looking at the picture sent chills down his back. The headline made Harry even more uneasy: **SCENES OF TERROR AT THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP. This was what Ron and Hermione had to deal with last night?**

"Don't worry Harry! They are fine now," Lily patted the paper.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean that you don't feel bad for what happened. Even if everything is fine," James said knowingly, "My dad has been in some dangerous situations and afterwards, even if he comes back without a scratch, it takes a while before we stop being worried that he'll get hurt again"

It hit Harry hard. Sirius had been right. Remus had been right. The Death Eaters were out there. "Why now?" Harry asked quietly. "It's been thirteen years. Why did this have to happen now?"

"Well because Voldemort may be hurt and weak but he's not gone. He isn't going to stop until he regains power again, no matter how long that may be," James said grimacing.

Remus gently pried the paper out of Harry's hands then moved closer to the teen and ruffled his already messy hair. "I honestly don't know, cub," he said. "Maybe they were just getting restless and wanted to have what they would consider fun. It's over now so there's nothing we can do about it. All we can do is keep our guard up in case something else happens. Maybe nothing will. Maybe this was just a one time thing."

"Why do I highly doubt that?" Sirius said.

"That's a lot of maybes," Harry muttered nervously as his gaze fell. "You don't think this has anything to do with my dream, do you?"

"No, definitely not. That dream was just a dream," Sirius said calmly.

"Sirius, just because you keep repeating it doesn't make it true," Lily said.

"Stop being a pessimist," he cried.

"I'd rather be a prepared pessimist than an unprepared optimist," she said back.

There was a brief silence before Remus cleared his throat. "It's difficult to say," he said honestly. "Dumbledore doesn't think so. Sirius and I already asked. I know this may be hard

but try not to worry about it. From what Sirius tells me you have another training session with him today to worry about."

"Sirius, stop torturing my baby!" James cried. Sirius looked sheepish.

Harry groaned in annoyance as he fell backwards, his head hitting his pillow. "Great," he muttered. "It's just another day when I can prove how incompetent I am. Why can't Sirius just give up? I'm un-teachable!"

"No you are not!" Lily scolded.

Remus held in a chuckle. "That's not what I hear," he said candidly. "According to Sirius you're learning faster than most wizards twice your age and with twice of your experience. He has a lot more experience than you, Harry. Don't take it so hard. Sirius isn't one for patience.

"Understatement of the year," James said laughing. Lily and Remus joined and Sirius scowled.

If you really were 'un-teachable', he would have given up by now. He's proud of you and so am I."

"Really?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Of course we are!" came four cries.

"You're the best Pronglet ever!" Sirius said.

"He's the only Pronglet," James pointed out.

"Oh, shuddup," Sirius mumbled. The others laughed.

Remus laughed as he stood up. "Yes really," he said. "Now if you hurry, there should be some breakfast left in the Great Hall." He turned and walked towards the doorway, stopping the moment he reached it to look back at his charge. His face was now serious; all signs of happiness had left. "You do know that you can tell us anything, right?"

Harry was confused. Where was this coming from? He hadn't kept any secrets from his guardians since they became his guardians. Not knowing what really to say, Harry just nodded and watched as Remus left. His mind started working quickly trying to think of

something he had done wrong but nothing came to mind. He hadn't caused any trouble...at least none any that he was aware of.

"Why did you say that Moony?" Lily asked.

"Dunno," he answered and the four had looks on their faces as if they too were trying to remember something Harry may have done.

Early that afternoon Harry found himself participating in the infamous training session. Thankfully this one was just a series of duels to serve as a refresher course. Sirius won the first two but Harry managed to disarm and bind Sirius in the third, much to Sirius' disbelief and Remus' joy. It had taken nearly ten minutes for Remus to stop laughing.

Sirius glared at Remus who was also trying to stifle a laugh.

The following two duels Harry wasn't so fortunate. By the time the fifth one had begun he was exhausted and sore. His muscles were screaming, slowing down his reflexes. When Sirius disarmed him for the fourth time, Harry let out a sigh of relief. He had made it. He knew the last match hadn't been much of a challenge for Sirius but at least he got through it.

"Padfoot! What did I tell you about torturing my baby?" James said with narrowed eyes.

"I think that's enough for today, Padfoot," Remus said as he approached Harry, conjuring a few benches for them to sit on. The moment he reached the teen, Remus let out a sigh as he wiped the sweat off of Harry's forehead with his sleeve. "You could have said something, you know."

Harry shook his head. "I'm fine," he insisted. "I swear."

"I swear Harry has that answer taped somewhere and he just has to open his mouth for that to come out. He doesn't even have to think anymore," Lily shook her head.

Remus looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow for a few moments before sitting down on one of the benches. "Have a seat, Harry," he said as Sirius handed the phoenix core wand back to Harry then sat down beside Remus. "We need to talk."

"Uh, good things never come when a parent say that phrase," James said.

"But Harry didn't do anything," Lily protested.

"You don't know, maybe he finally decided to turn the fifth floor corridor into a swamp," Sirius said excitedly rubbing his hands.

"BLACK! How many times do I have to tell you to stop with the swamp business?" Lily cried.

Harry instantly grew nervous as he sat down on the bench across from them. It was never good when an adult said that. Harry was once again trying to remember anything he had done wrong and was once again drawing a blank. *Is this what it's like to have parents?* Harry had to wonder. "Er—what about?" he asked nervously. "I haven't done something, have I?"

"No, not at all," Remus said reassuringly. "We want to talk to you about yesterday at the World Cup...when you collapsed."

"Yes please, we all want to know what happened," Remus said impatiently.

"Oh, that," Harry said in relief. "Well, I really don't know what happened. Everything just got so bright all of a sudden. It was too much and—er—you know. I'm sorry if I scared you."

Sirius rubbed his hands together almost nervously. "I think you scared your friends more than us," he said. "We've seen these outbursts, Harry. They haven't. They *will* ask about it. I know you want to keep this a secret but what if something happens during the school year and we aren't here to help you? Perhaps telling them—"

"—no!" Harry interrupted as he quickly stood up. "No, they can't know." He let out a sigh as his gaze fell. "They'll be afraid...I know they will. I—I can't handle that again. It was bad enough when everyone found out I can speak to snakes...this will only be worse."

"No they won't be scared! You can tell them! You think they will but they are good friends! Tell them!" Remus urged.

"Ok, Moony. Calm down. He'll tell them eventually. I am sure of it," Sirius rubbed Remus back.

Harry sat back down and buried his face in his hands as he leaned forward, his arms resting on his legs. How could he make them understand? How could he make them see? They didn't know what it was like to be scrutinized for every little thing you did. They didn't know what it was like to be watched all the time like he was. Harry couldn't afford to be different. Harry couldn't afford to be a freak.

Freak.

Perhaps that was what Harry feared the most. Remus and Sirius had told them that even though this sort of magical development was unusual, it wasn't unheard of. It had happened to others. That meant Harry wasn't alone...he wasn't a freak. He had spent years being called that by his relatives. What if they had been right all along? What if he was indeed a freak?

"You are not a freak. I am going to kill that good for nothing sister of mine," Lily shouted angry. The others weren't in a better state shredding napkins and mutterings ways to kill the Dursleys.

Harry felt a gentle hand on his back coming from the left while a hand from the right rested on his right shoulder. It took Harry a moment to realize Sirius and Remus had moved so they were sitting on each side of him. Both of them sat there in silence for a while, not wanting to push the subject until Harry was ready. Eventually, Harry moved his hands up, through his until his fingers interlocked across the back of his neck. He stared at the ground unable to think of anything to say.

"We're not going to force you to do anything, Pronglet," Sirius said finally breaking the silence. "It's your decision. We just don't want you to have to face it alone. Last term you had Remus here helping you. You know you can owl us whenever you want but we won't actually be *here* to help you through it."

"And your friends will! Tell them!" Remus cried.

"Last term it only happened when we were working on the Patronus Charm," Remus added. "This summer it's normally happened during dueling so we figured you would be all right...until yesterday. We don't know why that happened there of all places and neither does Dumbledore.

"Oh Great! If Dumbledore doesn't know, who's going to know?" James asked exasperated.

He's looking into it but right now he just wants us to be careful in case it happens again." Remus glanced at Sirius who just shrugged his shoulders unhelpfully. "We just want to make sure someone has your back in case something happens," he added.

"I know," Harry said tiredly as he continued to stare at the ground. It made sense but Harry just couldn't bring himself to trust his friends with something like this. He was too afraid he would scare them away. "I just can't. I can't tell them. I can't tell anyone. Does that make me a bad person?"

"No! Just makes you normal!" Sirius said pointedly looking at Remus who smiled shyly. He had been worried when he was keeping his secrets that his friends would hate him for lying on top of being a werewolf. But they understood.

Both Sirius and Remus couldn't hide their confusion. That was the last thing they had expected to hear Harry say. "Not at all," Remus said quickly. "Why would you think that?"

Harry shrugged. "I should be able to trust them but I can't...not with this," he admitted. "Does that make me bad person?"

"No," Sirius said gently. "It makes you human, Harry. You have a right to be afraid. In the past people had always thought the worst of you first and asked questions later. The problem with that is Ron and Hermione never were a part of that group. They stayed by your side before. Why wouldn't they now? What makes this different?"

"Yes! See! Tell them!" Remus urged.

Harry shrugged his shoulders again. He actually knew the answer but wasn't about to say anything. He wasn't about to tell his guardians that he was afraid of his friends seeing him as a freak or possibly a danger since he had no control over this yet. Perhaps that was why Sirius was pushing him so hard. He was trying to help Harry find his breaking point when these episodes would happen. The problem was there was no distinct point. They came and went. The only certainty was their unpredictability.

Not wanted to continue this conversation, Harry let out a sigh as he sat up straight. "Is it okay if I head back?" he asked quietly. "I'm really tired..."

"Sure Harry," Remus said with a nod. "You've had an exciting few days."

"Quidditch World Cup," James mumbled dreamily.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Harry buried his hands in his pants pockets and retreated to the castle. He knew it was probably wrong to walk away from the conversation. He knew Sirius and Remus were right but he just couldn't shake the feeling that telling Ron and Hermione was wrong. He could be careful. As long as he didn't involve himself in any extensive duels, no one would get hurt. It could work. No one would have to know.

When Harry finally reached his room, his exhaustion was finally hitting him at full force. Crashing on his bed, Harry didn't even bother removing his glasses or his wand holster off of

his wrist. He simply buried his face in his pillow, drifting off to sleep almost instantly. Whatever decisions he had to make, they could wait until later.

Harry opened his eyes, surprised to find his room dimly lit. That was really all he could make out. His glasses had been removed but after a few seconds of feeling around he found them on his bedside table. After rubbing any remaining drowsiness out of his eyes, Harry put his glasses on and let his room. The Common Room was empty making Harry wonder how long he had been asleep. He figured it had to be past dinner meaning that Sirius and Remus were probably at their meeting with the Hogwarts Staff.

Looking around the room, Harry figured he should head to the kitchens for some dinner then spend some time in the library researching leprechauns and the Veela.

James glared at Remus and mumbled "Turning my son into a Ravenclaw."

He had to admit it wouldn't hurt to know a little about the creatures, especially the Veela and any other creature that could have that sort of affect on a person. It would also be smart to know how to counter it.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Harry was taken by surprise. He thought he had been alone. Looking in the direction of the voice that sounded remarkably like Ron's and saw Ron's head floating in the fireplace. Cautiously, Harry approached the fireplace. "Er—Ron?" he asked hesitantly.

"Why was he surprised?" Sirius asked.

"Because he never used the floo to talk to people. If you are not used it's quite a shock to see a head floating in the fire," Lily explained. The boys just looked lost.

A smile appeared of the flamed face of Ron. "Harry!" he said excitedly. "I've been trying to get though all day. Did you hear?"

Harry sat down in front of the fire and nodded. "Remus told me," he said. Although Harry usually called Remus Moony, around people he tried to call both of his guardians by their first names. He knew if a certain group of twins found out his guardians were actually their roll

models, the Marauders, they would pester Sirius and Remus constantly for information. "Are you okay?"

"Everyone's fine," Ron answered. "It was scary though. Everyone sort of went mad when the mark appeared in the sky. Aurors nearly attacked Hermione and me when we came out of the woods. They actually thought one of us had done it."

"That's stupid! Two fourteen year olds wouldn't know how to conjure the Dark Mark," Sirius said.

"Why would they think that?" James asked.

"Well if you let me *read* you'll know." Lily said annoyed.

Harry looked at Ron with a raised eyebrow. Considering that he had just learned about the Dark Mark yesterday, Harry figured that Ron and Hermione were probably in the same boat. "But you don't know how to do something like that," he said in confusion.

"That's what we said," Ron said with a touch in annoyance in his voice. "It didn't help that whoever did it used my wand—"

"WHAT?" four voices cried.

"How the hell did they get his wand?" Remus asked confused.

"—*what*?" Harry interrupted. "How did they get a hold of your wand?"

"Good question Harry!" Remus said and the others rolled their eyes. Sirius pointed out:

"Moony, that's the first question that comes to mind, hence, both of you asking it." Remus smacked Sirius' head.

Ron looked uncomfortable. "I don't know," he admitted. "Trust me. I got it from Hermione and my parents. It doesn't help that whoever did it got away. They found Crouch's elf but she insists that she didn't do it. You should have seen it. He sacked her right there in front of everyone. Hermione was furious.

"Why did he sack the elf?" Lily asked outraged, "She couldn't have conjured the Mark more than the kids could have."

"Yeah, but from what dad says this Crouch guy is a stickler for rules, so he would sack the elf just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time," James explained grimly.

Did you know that we needed dress robes this year?"

Harry was caught off guard by the abrupt change in topic. "Er—yeah," he said uncomfortably. "Sirius and Remus took me to Hogsmeade the week our book lists came out and went a little overboard. I thought guys were supposed to hate shopping for clothes."

Ron grinned. "What did they do?" he asked eagerly.

Harry let out a sigh. "They bought me an entire new wardrobe and burned whatever I had left from the Dursleys," he said bluntly then smiled as he remembered the entire bonfire with Sirius and Remus.

"YES! Well done!" James cried happily hugging Sirius and Remus.

"I think Sirius enjoyed it a little too much. He changed into Midnight at started ripping the clothes to shreds. It was quite a sight."

They all laughed.

Ron looked at Harry for a moment. "Are you all right?" he asked. "You really scared us when you collapsed—"

"See, his friends are worried. Tell them Harry!" Remus urged.

"—I know and I'm sorry," Harry said sincerely. "I really don't know what happened. Dumbledore's looking into it but I don't think it's anything serious. I was probably just overwhelmed with everything. I hadn't slept the night before so everything probably just hit me at once."

"Harry James Potter do not lie to your friend!" Lily scolded.

"Are you sure?" Ron asked hopefully. "I mean, Mr. Lupin and Mr. Black wouldn't let you stay so I thought..."

"You know, I am getting tired of this Mr. Black business. Who in their right mind would call me Mr. Black? Makes me feel old."

"But you are old in the Book Paddy!" James said with a straight face. Lily and Remus roared with laughter and Sirius glared.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "That had nothing to do with it," he admitted. "I had a dream about Voldemort and Pettigrew the other night. They've been a little overprotective ever since. I don't really remember it but whatever happened was enough to scare Sirius and Remus because my scar hurt when I woke up—"

"—*WHAT!?!!*" Ron asked quickly. "Harry, the last time your scar hurt—"

"—I know, Voldemort was at Hogwarts," Harry finished for his friend, instantly regretting bringing up the topic. The last thing he wanted to do was worry Ron and Hermione. "He's not here, Ron. Trust me, I'd know. Dumbledore would know. My scar hasn't hurt since then. Everything's fine here...a little boring at times but fine. Hermione would actually be amazed how many times I've used the library."

Ron stared at Harry with a horrified look on his face. Perhaps that wasn't a smart thing to say. "Harry, please tell me you are *not* turning into another Hermione," he pleaded. "I don't think I could take it."

"Yes! Thank you Ron, please bring my son back to his senses," James begged. Lily rolled her eyes.

Harry grinned. "Not even close," he said honestly. "There's just nothing else to do during the meetings I'm not allowed to attend. Believe me. Starting September 1st, I fully plan on staying away from that place as long as I possibly can."

James sighed relieved.

Ron smiled, clearly relieved. "Good," he said then scowled. "I have to go, Harry. Mum needs to use the fire. Talk to you later?"

"Sure," Harry sat as he stood up. "Bye Ron."

With a *pop*, Ron's head vanished from the fireplace. Now really feeling the consequences of missing dinner, Harry left the quarters for the kitchens. He knew the route by heart and was there in no time. He reached the painting of a bowl of fruit that concealed the entrance and tickled the pear. After hearing it giggle, Harry watched as the pear turned into a large green handle. He grabbed the handle and slowly pushed the door open.

Soft voices filled Harry's ears making him stop in mid-motion. He hadn't expected someone else to be there. Weren't they supposed to be in a meeting? Harry had to make a quick decision. He could quickly close the door and forget dinner, he could enter and let who ever was in there know they weren't alone anymore, or he could sit and listen for a moment.

"Sit and listen!" the boys cried.

"That's not nice," Lily scolded.

"Then don't talk where you can be overheard," James said dryly.

The sound of his godfather's voice made the decision for Harry. "I don't know Moony," Sirius said. "This Tournament...there are just too many things that could go wrong. With everything going on: Harry's dream, Death Eaters at the World Cup, the Dark Mark...bringing students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang is just too risky. It's too risky for Harry."

"Well this is a change," Remus said in amazement. "Usually I'm the one overreacting about security. Do you really think Dumbledore would let anything happen to Harry? Do you really think Harry will just stand by and let something happen? You are his teacher this summer, Padfoot. Don't you have confidence in *your* student?"

Sirius scowled. "Of course I have confidence in Harry," he said firmly. "It's everyone else my confidence lacks in. Must I remind you what Harry had to face his first two years here when he was supposedly under *Dumbledore's protection*? I will *not* stand by and let *my godson* become a target especially with Karkaroff coming here."

"You're a little overprotective don't you think?" Lily asked.

"No," Sirius stated. James and Remus shook their heads.

"He's like that with anyone he cares for, not just Harry," Remus said, "You have to see him the day after the full moon. Remus are you hurt? Moony are you hungry? Moony you should rest more."

"Well that's just being normal," Sirius stated defensively.

Harry couldn't take any more and entered, catching his guardians by surprise. "Perhaps he wouldn't be a target if he were to know of the danger in order to prepare himself," he said as he enfolded his arms across his chest.

Both Sirius and Remus were trapped in a stunned silence from the table they sat at. The two men stared at Harry and Harry stared back, daring them to attempt to cover the mistake they had just made. Remus was the first to dare to speak. "How much did you hear, Harry?" he asked softly.

"I heard that there's going to be a Tournament here with students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang," Harry said evenly then looked directly at Sirius. So far, Sirius had been the only person never to lie to him. Harry was just hoping Sirius wouldn't change that now. "Tell me the truth. What's going on? Why do you really think I'm in danger?"

Sirius let out a sigh and shook his head slowly. "Have a seat, Harry," he said and waited for Harry to sit down at the table, next to Sirius and across from Remus. "We have been helping Dumbledore arrange a Triwizard Tournament to take place throughout the year.

"WHAT?" Remus asked.

"COOL!" Sirius and James said.

"What's that?" Lily asked confused.

"It's a tournament that was banned a hundred years ago," James explained.

It is a friendly competition between Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. *One* champion is selected from each school to compete in three magical tasks. Hogwarts is going to host it. We have been doing everything to make sure the tasks will be difficult enough but still safe."

"Yeah, because before the champions used to die on the tasks," James explained.

"That's horrible!" Lily exclaimed.

"There are also restrictions being put on who are allowed to enter," Remus added. "*Only* students who are seventeen or older are even considered. This is to make sure everyone competing will have enough experience to complete the tasks safely."

Harry blinked a few times as he took in the information. "So only students in their seventh year can enter?" he asked, making certain he heard right. Seeing Sirius and Remus nod, Harry couldn't help but smile. He wouldn't be able to compete. He wouldn't have to compete. "This is great!" Harry said happily. "Finally! A relaxing school year!"

"Harry is going to be the only student happy with the underage rule," Sirius chuckled.

Remus covered his mouth to hide a smile while Sirius stared at Harry in amazement. "Well," said Sirius. "That certainly wasn't what I was expecting. You wouldn't want to compete, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "No way," he said firmly. "I doubt I would enter even if I could. Now no one will be expecting me to. Can you imagine? Having the entire school watch you like that?" Harry shuddered at the thought.

Remus barely held in a laugh. "Well, I think we know your weakness now," he said candidly then turned serious. "You know you can't say anything about this to your friends, right Harry? We can explain to Dumbledore how you found out—"

"—are you two going to get in trouble?" Harry interrupted nervously. "Because I can just pretend I don't know. We don't have to tell."

"Don't worry about it, Harry," Sirius said offhandedly. "The only person who will probably give us a hard time is Snape and if he says anything I'll turn him into a fluffy rabbit." Sirius couldn't help but smile at the thought

James and Sirius were also smiling dreamily.

then returned to the subject at hand. "Dumbledore was planning on telling everyone at the welcoming feast anyways so it's not a big deal."

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He had no intention on telling Ron but it just seemed that there was something else to all of this. A simple tournament that he wouldn't be able to compete in certainly couldn't be why Sirius was so worried. "So why would I become a target?" he asked. "Does this have to do with my dream?"

Remus and Sirius looked at each other nervously. "Yes and no," Remus answered evasively. "You did say that Voldemort was going to have someone at Hogwarts. We know we can count on the new Defense teacher to help Dumbledore keep an eye on everything but we can't help worrying, Harry. You do have a knack of finding trouble."

"I don't find trouble, trouble usually finds me," Harry corrected then smiled at his guardians. Perhaps he could find out more than one secret tonight. "So, who's the new Defense teacher?"

"Oh, nicely done. Catch them off guard," Sirius nodded approvingly.

Sirius reached over and ruffled Harry's messy hair. "Nice try, kiddo," he said with an amused grin. "You can find out at the welcoming feast with everyone else. You'll like him. He's a retired Auror but certainly not out of practice. Just don't do anything I would do in class and he'll like you too."

"Well, that's a sure way for any teacher to like you," Lily said evenly. Sirius glared at her.

Harry stared at Sirius intently with a straight face despite how much he wanted to break out in a smile. "No one in their right mind would do anything you would do, Midnight," he said in an even tone earning a laugh from Remus.

Remus, James and Lily roared in laughter. Sirius' glare intensified.

Sirius glared at Remus then looked at Harry and scowled. "You two are too much alike," he said as he enfolded his arms across his chest and started to pout. "This is just not fair. You've turned my godson against me, Moony."

Remus glanced over at Harry and winked before returning his gaze to Sirius. "Consider it payback, Padfoot," he said innocently. "I was usually the odd man out with you and James. You two never seemed to listen to reason."

"So true," Remus mumbled. Sirius and James were unfazed.

Now you have two of us beating it into your thick head."

"Lovely," Sirius muttered then glanced over at Harry as he slowly rose to his feet. "You are going to get it tomorrow—" he added then grinned mischievously "—or should perhaps now."

"Uh, oh," James said.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm. He knew that look. He knew it all too well. Sirius was going to have his revenge and was going to take it out on Harry. Before his godfather could attack, Harry ran from the kitchens as fast as possible. He didn't make it far before he was tackled from behind by the large black animal known to Harry as Midnight.

He hit the floor hard and quickly rolled onto his back. Midnight instantly started to 'attack'. The dog licked Harry's face, smearing up his glasses then playfully tugged on Harry's shirt,

making Harry laugh when Midnight's paws moved over Harry's ticklish sides. Knowing that Harry was ticklish, Midnight continued to tickle the teen without any signs of mercy.

Suddenly with a *pop*, Midnight changed into Sirius who was smiling at his godson. "Do you yield, Pronglet?" he asked, his hands hovering just above Harry's upper body as a silent challenge. If Harry said no, another round would begin.

Harry nodded quickly then sat up as Sirius sat back on his knees. Breathing heavily, Harry looked over at his godfather and smiled. "So Sirius, when do I get to become an Animagus?" he asked curiously.

"Yes, when?" James asked exited.

Sirius was clearly caught off guard by the question, appearing to do some really fast thinking. "Er—when you get parental approval," he answered evasively.

"Chicken!" Remus said, "How did you get into Gryffindor?"

Harry let out a huff. "You mean when Moony agrees to it," he corrected. "You know, I wouldn't hate you if you said no. In some cultures, children actually respect those who take the responsibility in making decisions instead of pushing it off on someone else."

Sirius stared at Harry in disbelief. "You know, Pronglet, that was downright profound," he said in amazement then looked at Harry with all of the seriousness he could muster. "Don't do it again. You're really starting to sound like Moony and one of him is more than enough and I *really* mean that."

"Dunno, I think you would benefit of another me," Remus said with a straight face. Sirius and James got up and started running away and screaming.

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After a while Sirius and James came back laughing while Remus glared at them.

Chapter 5

Homesick?

Professor Dumbledore had certainly taken Harry's knowledge of the TriWizard tournament better than Harry had expected the following morning. The Headmaster even started asking Harry what he thought of it all in front of the other teachers. Knowing there was no way he was going to get out of this, Harry did the only thing he could think of at the time.

He was completely honest.

"See, that's the problem with Harry," Sirius said shaking his head, "He hasn't mastered the art of fooling teachers." James and Remus nodded in agreement and Lily rolled her eyes and contemplated banging her head on the floor.

He told Professor Dumbledore that it was a good idea, especially the age restriction. His summer with the Marauders had taught him many things but then it came to his sessions (the dueling sessions more than anything), Harry found that he learned just as much by observing than doing it himself. He told Dumbledore that this would probably benefit the younger students to see what they *could* be capable of. This seemed to take many of the staff by surprise. They were clearly thinking Harry would complain about not being able to compete.

"Tsk,tsk, teachers and parents always assume the worst from us. It's like they don't trust us!" James exclaimed.

"Who in their right mind would trust you Potter?" Lily asked.

After the adults recovered from their shock conversations continued normally. Everyone was still hesitant to talk about the Tournament around Harry. Harry took the hint and didn't bring the topic up again. For the rest of the week, Harry spent as much time with his guardians as possible. It was the final week of the summer meaning soon Sirius and Remus would be at the Noble House of Black after dropping Harry off at Platform 9 ¾.

"Excuse me! Have we gone mental or something? Going where?" Sirius cried horrified.

"The Noble House of Black," Lily read again, "I am assuming that must be your house. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" he cried. Remus started rubbing his back to calm him down.

"Sirius ran away from his family," James explained, "they are dark wizards."

Determined to prove he had learned something over the summer, Harry worked harder than he ever had during his training sessions with Sirius. He still had trouble defeating his godfather but Harry did at least put up quite a fight. Sirius was certainly impressed and decided to give Harry a gift. The day before they were to leave, Sirius gave Harry a small square mirror. Sirius explained how the mirror worked. All Harry had to do was to say Sirius' name and they could talk whenever Harry needed to.

"Yeah, the two way mirror, way to go Padfoot!" James cried and high fived Sirius.

"What's that?" Lily asked.

"It's a mirror we use to talk when we are in different detentions," James explained.

"That defeats the purpose of detention," she said.

They nodded proudly.

The arrival of September 1st seemed to come too soon for Harry and his guardians. Despite how draining the summer had been, Harry had actually enjoyed his time with Sirius and Remus. He had grown to know his godfather as well as he knew Remus and was afraid to lose that. Harry didn't think he would ever be the prankster that his father and godfather had been but perhaps that was a good thing. He received plenty of detentions from Professor Snape as it was.

"Stupid...git....greasy....Snivellus" James mumbled.

Once again Harry's mode of transportation to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ was a portkey. It had been the method he had used with Remus last year which had been Harry's first time with the strange way of travel. He still wasn't used to it and would have probably fallen down if Sirius and Remus hadn't been holding on to his shoulders. The platform was full of people allowing the family of three to blend in with the crowd.

The sight of the shiny scarlet steam engine of the Hogwarts Express seemed to bring both happiness and sadness to Harry. Turning around to face his guardians, Harry tried to think of something to say but any resemblance to a vocabulary seemed to have left him. He wanted to say thank you for everything they had done for him. He wanted say something to let them know how much he would miss them.

"Aw, we'll miss you too Pronglet," Sirius cooed.

Fortunately Sirius seemed to understand and pulled Harry into a fierce embrace. "Be careful, Pronglet," he said softly. "Remember, we are only an owl or *mirror* away if you need anything or if *anything* happens. Try to have some fun and enjoy *everything* happening around you for once."

Harry looked up at Sirius and smiled. He knew what Sirius wasn't saying. *If you need me use the mirror especially if you have another episode and enjoy watching the Tournament.* "I will, Sirius," he said with a nod. "Thanks for everything." Pulling away from his godfather, Harry turned to Remus who pulled him into another embrace.

"Study hard," Remus said earning a groan from Sirius,

James and Sirius echoed the groans and Lily and Remus had no alternative but roll their eyes.

"but not so much that you miss out on everything." He pulled away and held Harry at arm's length so their eyes met. "You're a smart one, cub. We know you'll make the right choices. Just remember that sometimes it helps if you don't have to face everything alone."

"YES! TELL RON AND HERMIONE!" Remus shouted.

"Ouch," Sirius rubbed his ear.

Harry also knew what Remus wasn't saying. *It's not too late to tell Ron and Hermione the truth. They can help you.* Harry knew why Remus was so persistent on telling someone. Both Sirius and Remus had told Harry about when the Marauders discovered Remus was a werewolf. Remus had admitted that it had been a relief when his friends had discovered the truth because it meant no more worrying and no more lying.

The problem was this was something entirely different, at least in Harry's mind.

"No it's not," Remus insisted.

Remus would never hurt any of his friends.

"Neither will you," Remus continued his argument with the book.

They all turned into animals during the full moon. They were protected from the werewolf's craving of human flesh. Harry wasn't so fortunate. There was no form of protection when these episodes came and there was no way to control it. It was like a faucet that was suddenly turned on full until the water ran out.

"Oh, well, that is different," Remus conceded, "But still, they could help."

The whistle blew, alerting everyone it was time to leave. Harry quickly hugged Remus and Sirius again before waving goodbye as he hurried to the train. He was already dressed in his school robes, like last year, since all of his belongings were already at Hogwarts. The moment he stepped on the train, Harry looked back at his guardians, waved one last time before searching for his friends.

"Why didn't he just wait at the castle?" Sirius asked.

"Because the best part of Hogwarts is the ride. All the prank planning, scaring the wits out of the first years telling them they have to fight dragons and trolls," James said and was smacked by Lilly.

"No, you twit. Because no one is supposed to know he was at Hogwarts, remember?" she scolded.

"And the fun," Sirius told Remus with a very serious face.

It didn't take long for Harry to find the overabundance of red hair entering the train. All of them had frustrated looks on their faces which struck Harry as odd. Normally the Weasleys were such a fun-loving bunch. He started to wonder if something else had happened since the World Cup that Ron hadn't told him.

Hermione came in after the Weasleys holding Crookshanks and immediately noticed someone was watching them. "Harry!" she cried happily as she hurried over to him. "Where have you been? Mrs. Weasley was hoping to see you before the train left."

The four Weasley siblings instantly turned around and noticed the dark haired, bespectacled fourteen-year-old Hermione was talking to. Ron instantly was at Harry's side, pulling him to a nearby compartment as the train moved out of the platform. Rain started to hit the windows

making Harry aware of the actual weather outside. He had been in the Marauder Quarters all morning packing up his things so he hadn't even known it was anything less than sunny.

Hermione was the last to enter the compartment and collapsed in her seat as Ron collapsed in the seat across from her. Sitting down beside Ron, Harry looked at his friends curiously. It was a rare occasion to find both Ron and Hermione silent. "So what's going on?" Harry asked. "I don't think I've ever seen Fred and George so...so quiet."

Ron let out a huff. "Mum, Dad, Bill, Charlie and Percy know something," he said irritably. "They've been teasing us all summer. Something big is supposed to happen at Hogwarts this year. I just wish they would have told us what."

"That's so annoying, it should be illegal to let something slip if you're not going to tell the whole thing," Lily huffed.

"Little extreme aren't we," James teased.

"I HATE WHEN PEOPLE DO THAT!" she yelled.

Hermione looked at Harry hopefully. "You were at Hogwarts, Harry," she said. "Do you know what's going on?"

"Uh,oh," Sirius mumbled.

Yes I do but I can't tell you. "Sirius and Remus wouldn't say anything," Harry lied. "All I know was that Remus was gone half of the summer on assignments for Dumbledore. He wouldn't tell me where he went only that it wasn't dangerous. Sirius said something about finding out during the welcoming feast so we'll probably find out tonight."

"Our Pronglet is learning," Remus said proudly, "Always blame the parents."

"Remus! Not you too," Lily cried.

"You shouldn't forget that he *is* a Marauder," James said knowingly.

"So what did you do all summer, Harry?" Hermione asked curiously. "You were really vague in your letters."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "A little of this, a little of that and a lot of learning," he said nonchalantly. "Sirius thought it was best that I know how to protect myself better with

everything that happened last year." He noticed the intrigued looks on the faces of his friends. "He only taught me the basics in Magical and Muggle defense." Harry looked at the window and watched the rain streaming across it. He really didn't know what else to say. If he went into detail they would probably be jealous and that was the last thing Harry wanted.

"Well that's good, Harry," Hermione said with a smile. "You should know how to protect yourself."

"Maybe we can get Sirius to teach us sometime," Ron proposed. "What do you say, Hermione?"

"It would be beneficial," Hermione answered as she pulled out The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4. "Most witches and wizards probably overlook the Muggle types of self defense because they have a wand." She opened the book and looked up at Harry again. "I'm really happy for you, Harry. Living with Sirius and Mr. Lupin has obviously done you some good."

"Happy Sirius? You're not Mr. Black anymore?" James asked.

Sirius nodded but Remus scowled.

"Why am I still Mr. Lupin?"

"'Cause you're old," Sirius replied. He received another roll on the head.

I don't know why so many people have a problem with it."

Harry looked at Hermione in confusion. "What are you talking about?" he asked. "Why should anyone have a problem with it? Sirius was found innocent and Remus is harmless during the full moons as long as he takes his potion which Sirius never lets him forget. They treat me better than the Dursleys ever would." Harry suddenly grew nervous. Why hadn't he heard about this? Did Sirius and Remus know? "They—they can't take me away, right?" he asked Hermione.

"NO!" they all cried.

"I'll kick them if they try!" James said

"Um, James," Sirius started but was cut by James:

"Shuddup Padfoot, I'll come from the beyond to kick them!"

"I mean—Sirius did adopt me—"

"You did? Is he Harry Black now?" James asked.

"I doubt it. Harry Potter is too famous for the courts to allow that, besides, I don't think Harry or Sirius would want that," at the boys glare she amended, "Not that he doesn't love you like a father, just that you both would want to respect James' memory," Lily said. They nodded pleased and a little sad.

"Harry, calm down," Hermione said gently. "You're right. Mr. Black did adopt you so no one can legally take you away from him. I guess people were just taken by surprise that one moment Mr. Black was a servant to Voldemort and the next he's found innocent and your guardian. What Mr. Black did was smart. He adopted you before anyone could even try to object."

Lily gave Sirius an approving smile.

"I don't think anyone's trying to do anything, Harry," Ron added. "There were just a few articles by Rita Skeeter criticizing Fudge for letting 'the-boy-who-lived' live with an ex-convict and a werewolf. She trashes everyone. She lives to gossip...especially about 'the-boy-who-lived' or the 'Azkaban Escapee'."

Harry could only groan in annoyance. **"So in other words, if you see her, run the other way,"** he summarized as he leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. **"I can't believe this. Why does everyone feel that my life is any of their business?"**

"Get a life people!" Sirius cried.

Hermione put her book down and moved so she was on her knees in front of Harry. **"I know we can't begin to understand what this is like for you, Harry," she said gently. "Just remember that no matter what anyone says you have a family now; one that no one can take away from you. People are going to say what they want but that doesn't make them right. We know Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin are great guardians for you. We saw them at the World Cup when you collapsed and afterwards."**

"One step forward two steps backwards. Mr. Black attacks again," Sirius mumbled. The others laughed.

Harry slowly shook his head. He should have known Hermione would have brought that up. She had been incredibly lenient so far in Harry not answering any of her questions. *Typical Hermione. She needs an answer for everything.*

"So did Professor Dumbledore find out why you collapsed?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Use this opportunity Harry, tell them!" Remus urged.

Harry shook his head. As a matter of fact, nothing had really been said about the incident since the talk Remus and Sirius tried to have with Harry the day after. Remus had of course dropped hints and snippets of advice but that was all. Both Remus and Sirius had backed off from the topic when Harry had walked away that day. No explanations were given because none were needed. This was all a part of his magic maturing too rapidly. The problem was how was he supposed to make Hermione back off without telling her the truth?

Remus dropped backwards on the ground and put a suffering hand to his forehead. Sirius patted his distraught friend.

The rainfall increased in intensity as the train ride continued. The compartments were lit by lanterns making the atmosphere feel a little eerie. By mid-afternoon, Harry had retreated to the floor of the compartment and was sound asleep...at least everyone thought he was. After evading the majority of Hermione's questions, Harry found that this was the best way to avoid any more that may arise. He had heard the lunch trolley come and go and had 'slept' through visits by countless students who had wanted to ask Harry if Krum had really given Harry the Snitch at the World Cup or how the summer had been with Sirius Black.

"PEOPLE: GET A LIFE!" Sirius yelled.

Lily looked at him and smiled. "I am glad to see you annoyed, usually you bask on the attention."

"I do, but Harry doesn't," he said defensively.

After the compartment door had opened the tenth time, it had taken every last ounce of restraint for Harry not to jump to his feet and lock it with a flick of his wand. It was a good thing Harry hadn't. The moment he heard Ron and Hermione groan in annoyance, Harry knew it wasn't a friend who had entered. Only one person could get *that* reaction out of Hermione.

"Well, well," drawled the voice of Draco Malfoy. "What do we have here? Potty, Weasel and the Mudblood without a *teacher* to protect you this time." The sound of his loud footsteps

approaching pushed Harry to full alertness. He was lying on his right side which he could use to his advantage. He could hear the shuffling of robes followed by Ron and Hermione jumping out of their seats.

"Get out Malfoy!" Ron hissed.

"Or what, Weasel?" Malfoy shot back. "You're going to curse me? That's a laugh. When did Potter hire you as his bodyguard?"

"I wouldn't get so cocky," James warned.

Hearing Malfoy's voice allowed Harry to know that Malfoy was standing near his feet. In one fluid motion, Harry kicked Malfoy's wand out of his hand then flipped to his feet while flicking his wrist, disengaging his wand from his wrist holster. "*Accio* Malfoy's wand," he hissed, gripping Malfoy's wand a moment later.

"Smooth," Sirius said proudly.

Malfoy was staring at Harry with his eyes wide and he slowly stepped back. "H—how did you do that?" he asked nervously.

"Simple, he used all his Potter wits while you used your Malfoy dumbness," James said. Lily was so proud of Harry that she forgot to berate James.

Harry re-holstered his wand as he slowly walked towards Malfoy who was in turn walking backwards to keep the distance between them. "You're not wanted here, Malfoy," he said evenly as he continued to take slow steps towards the blond haired boy. The moment Malfoy stepped out of the compartment Harry tossed his wand at him before gripping the compartment door. "A word of advice, don't come back." He then closed the door.

Turning around, Harry noticed that Hermione and Ron were staring at him with their mouths hanging open. Shaking his head, Harry straightened his robes before moving back to his original seat and stared out the window. Hermione was either the first to recover from the shock or the first to lose her footing when she sat down. Ron just stood there, gaping like a fish.

"W—what was that?" Ron asked in disbelief. He looked at Hermione for help but received none so he returned his attention to Harry. "You just...you...how did you do that? What was that spell?"

"It was just a Summoning Charm, Ron," Harry answered with a shrug. He continued staring at the window, not wanting to see the looks on the faces of his friends. He knew he had startled them since Malfoy didn't scare easily. Harry closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the window. He could only hope they weren't afraid of him. "I told you Sirius taught me how to defend myself this summer."

"Er—Harry?" Hermione asked softly. "We're supposed to be learning the Summoning Charm *this* year. How much did Mr. Black teach you?"

"Everything he needed to be a true Marauder," Sirius said puffing his chest.

"Not even we knew summoning charms before fourth year Padfoot. You taught him a little more than what we know now," Remus said.

"But it wasn't just Sirius," Lily said, "Harry was tutored the previous year too by you and all the teachers."

Harry shrugged and remained silent. This was not really the start of the year he had hoped for. He had never been one to talk about his summers before. It had always been something that had been 'forgotten' then moment he stepped on the train. No one asked so he never told. No one cared about the Dursleys so why was it so different with Sirius and Remus?

"Because people are curious little beings," Remus mumbled. "They know things are different and they want to know how."

There was an uncomfortable silence in the compartment that stretched for the remainder of the journey. When they finally arrived at the Hogsmeade station, Harry couldn't wait to jump off of the train. He had been so used to the fresh air and outdoors this summer that being confined for so long was starting to make him feel a little claustrophobic.

The harsh and heavy rain forced everyone above their first year to hurry to the horseless carriages. Harry jumped in followed by Ron, Hermione and Neville Longbottom, a fellow Gryffindor in their year. They waited for the door to close then waited as the carriage moved up the track to the large castle known as Hogwarts. Harry could hardly wait. Once Dumbledore had made his announcement, Ron and Hermione would forget everything that happened on the train...at least that was what Harry hoped.

"Oh, Harry. You underestimate teenage curiosity," Remus shook his head.

"You would know," James said.

Entering the castle had been more of a challenge than normal. It seemed that Peeves the poltergeist was having some fun on the already wet students. He was throwing red water balloons at unsuspecting students. Ron was one of his victims forcing everyone to hurry into the Great Hall as fast as possible. Harry followed Ron and Hermione to the far side of the hall to the Gryffindor table and sat down. The golden plates and goblets made Harry aware of how hungry he really was. Chatter filled the hall as more and more students took their seats at their house tables. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Ron glancing at him periodically along with Hermione who was sitting across from him. *Please hurry up. I need the distraction.*

Glancing up at the Head Table, Harry noticed that there were several vacant spots. Hagrid and Professor McGonagall were missing along with the spot Remus had occupied one year ago as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. It was becoming a pattern for a Defense teacher to only last one year. Harry let out a sigh as he stared at his plate. This year was going to be so different. Remus had helped him so much last year it was hard for Harry to think of an entire school year without his advice.

"Ouch, what was that for?" Remus protested. James had just cuffed his head.

"For quitting and leaving my baby *alone!*" he said annoyed.

"Harry?" Hermione asked quietly. "Harry, are you all right?"

Harry looked up at Hermione and immediately looked away. He knew he was being selfish. Remus and Sirius deserved some time off from worrying. "I'm fine," Harry said softly. "I just hope the new Defense teacher is as nice as Remus."

Hermione reached out and grabbed Harry's hand while Ron gripped Harry's shoulder. "Don't worry, Harry," Ron said confidently. "You still have us and it's not like you can't send them an owl. "

Harry nodded as he stared at his plate. He didn't know why he felt this way. He really didn't know what he was feeling. He had never felt like he was missing something before when the school year started. He never felt like he wanted to be some place other than here, at school. What was going on? Why was this happening? Why was he feeling this way?

"Oh, Harry its normal. You get used to being away. First year I cried every day of the first month," Lily said and looked at the boys.

"I didn't cry, I shed manly tears," James said and Remus echoed.

"Me too," Lily rolled her eyes and looked at Sirius:

"What? I definitely didn't cry, I celebrated!"

"Harry," Hermione said softly as she leaned closer so that no one could overhear her. "It's normal to miss them, you know. Everyone misses their family from time to time when they're away at school. Last year you had Mr. Lupin here to help you with everything. This summer you had Mr. Black. We know you care about them. You don't have to hide that from us."

Slowly looking up at Hermione, Harry bit his lower lip nervously. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "This is...new to me...having a family that actually cares." Thinking about it, Harry found his lips breaking into a half-smile. "So this is what it's like to feel normal?"

Hermione smiled back as Ron grinned. "Welcome to reality, Harry," Ron said happily. "Soon you'll experience the joys of expectations, being grounded, and Howlers. Every teenager's dream."

"Oh, yes. The fond memories I have," James said fondly. "I remember my first Howler." Lily rolled her eyes.

Harry couldn't hide his smile at the thought of it as the doors of the Great Hall opened. "I can't wait," he said as he watched Professor McGonagall enter followed by the line of completely soaked first years. Deep down Harry knew Sirius and Remus would never do anything like that if Harry caused any trouble. Sirius would probably congratulate him. Remus would attempt to scold while trying to keep Sirius in check.

"Probably," Remus muttered.

The moment Professor McGonagall placed the stool with an old and frayed wizard's hat in front of the first years, silence filled the Hall. The sorting was about to begin and although it was long, it was something Harry hadn't seen since his own sorting. Slowly, the brim of the old hat opened widely as if it were a mouth and the hat started to sing:

'A thousand years or more ago,

*When I was newly sewn,

There lived four wizards of renown,

Whose names are still well known:

Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,

Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,

Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,

Shrewd Slytherin, from fen.

They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,

They hatched a daring plan

To educate young sorcerers

Thus Hogwarts School began.

Now each of these four founders

Formed their own house, for each

Did value different virtues

In the ones they had to teach.

By Gryffindor, the bravest were

Prized far beyond the rest;

For Ravenclaw, the cleverest

Would always be the best;

For Hufflepuff, hard workers were

Most worthy of admission;*

And power-hungry Slytherin

Loved those of great ambition.

While still alive they did divide

Their favourites from the throng,

Yet how to pick the worthy ones

When they were dead and gone?

'Twas Gryffindor who found the way,

He whipped me off his head

The founders put some brains in me

So I could choose instead!

Now slip me snug about your ears,

I've never yet been wrong,

I'll have a look inside your mind

And tell where you belong!'

Applause broke throughout the hall but something struck Harry as odd. "Does the song change every year or something?" he asked over the noise.

"What do you think the hat does all year long?" Ron asked rhetorically.

"Must be quite boring a life," Lily said.

The sorting progressed with Professor McGonagall calling names. There was a Dennis Creevey who joined Gryffindor, a younger brother of a third year, Colin Creevey who seemed to idolize Harry for some strange reason. It annoyed Harry to no end. He hated it when people treated like him like a celebrity when he wasn't one. Colin seemed to make it his mission to always have his camera in hand to get pictures of Harry whenever he could.

Harry tuned out the rest of the sorting. In fact, it wasn't until Ron started grabbing for food that Harry realized the sorting was over. Hermione started up a conversation with the Gryffindor House Ghost, Nearly Headless Nick, about house elves working at Hogwarts. Harry had to hide a smirk at her outrage when she started ranting about slave labor and refused to eat.

As soon as dinner was over, Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet, silencing the hall with just the movement. "A few start of the term announcements," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Filch would like me to remind you that use of any of the four hundred and thirty-seven items on his list is forbidden. A copy of the list is posted outside his office. The Forest is once again out-of-bounds along with the Hogsmeade village to anyone below their third year. Also, I regret to inform everyone that there will be no Quidditch this year for the reason that starting in October and continuing throughout the school year we will be having—"

The doors swung open to reveal a man who was wearing a black cloak and leaning on a staff. This man pulled back his hood to reveal his long dark grey hair. Everyone stared at the man as he slowly walked towards the Head Table. A soft cluck could be heard during every other step as he limped. A flash of lightning lit up the hall, illuminating his face that was deeply scarred. There was a large piece of his nose gone and his eyes were just...scary. One was normal while the other was rather large and an intense deep blue. The eye seemed to move around unnaturally: left, right, up and down.

"Who is that?" Sirius asked creeped out.

As the man reached the Head Table, he shook hands with Professor Dumbledore then took a seat in Remus' old chair. Harry closed his eyes as the words of his godfather echoed in his mind. Harry had no intention of misbehaving in the new teacher's class. The man looked even scarier than Professor Snape and that was saying a lot.

"Please welcome your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Moody," Professor Dumbledore announced.

"ALASTOR MOODY?" James asked.

"Must be. Who is he?" Lily asked.

"He works with dad. He's a legend. Dad says he's the best Auror ever! Quite paranoid though but dad says that's what makes him good."

"Oh yeah, he's the one with the weird eye in the other book," Sirius said and James nodded.

"Now, back to what I was saying. This year Hogwarts will serve as a host to a Triwizard Tournament."

"WHAT!?!" shouted Fred Weasley. **"Are you joking?"**

The entire hall busted out in laughter. **"Not at all, Mr. Weasley,"** Professor Dumbledore answered pleasantly. He went on explaining about the Tournament. All of the students were captivated to hear about the event that was held between the schools of Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang to strengthen international ties between students. Everyone seemed to be eager enter until Professor Dumbledore announced that only students of the age of seventeen and older would be able enter. Several students under the age barrier groaned in frustration. Dumbledore then mentioned that measures were also being taken so anyone underage couldn't enter.

With no further announcements, everyone was sent to bed. Many of the students under seventeen were discussing how unfair the age restriction was and that they would find a way to enter regardless.

"Told you Harry was going to be the only underage student happy," Sirius said nodding.

Harry just remained silent on his way to the Gryffindor Tower. The three Weasley brothers thought that the prize money of a thousand galleons was too much not to try. The Weasleys never had much money and the mere thought of a thousand galleons was awfully tempting.

Harry was the first to venture up to his dorm room. Searching in his trunk, Harry found the small square mirror Sirius had given him. For a long moment, Harry contemplated on talking to his godfather but then decided not to and put the mirror away. Yes, Harry missed them but he knew he couldn't bother them like this.

"Of course you can," Sirius urged.

He was fourteen-years-old after all and they needed time to be Moony and Padfoot again.

"No we don't. I must already be tired of Padfoot's whining," Remus said.

"Hey, I don't whine," Sirius cried.

He could make it though the year just like everyone else. He had done it before he had met Sirius and Remus, he could do it again.

Everyone groaned.

"Harry, we all send letters home all the time. It's normal to want to talk to your family," Lily explained.

"Yes, especially when you have such a cool parent like me," Sirius said. "And there is also Moony, not so cool but we can't all be awesome." And the flying rolls attacked Sirius' head again.

Chapter 6

The Unforgivable Curses

"No, thank you," James said evenly.

"Pardon me?" Remus asked.

"I don't want Harry to see any Unforgivables," he said.

"I don't want either but that's the chapter's title," Lily said annoyed.

By the time dawn arrived, the heavy rain had subsided which was good news for Harry. Having just received his timetable for the year, Harry noticed that he had Herbology first followed by Care of Magical Creatures that morning and Double Divination in the afternoon. Harry could only groan at the sight of how his afternoon would be spent. Divination was his least favorite class which considering Potions with Professor Snape that was saying a lot. Professor Trelawney seemed to enjoy predicting Harry's death during every class. The only difference was this year there wasn't an Azkaban escapee 'out to get him'.

"Hey no one was out to get Harry!" Sirius cried.

"We know Padfoot, the author is just telling us how awful Trelawney is," Remus explained, "This is in no way a direct insult to you." Sirius still huffed.

Hermione had been the smart one and dropped the class last year. Harry wished he could do the same but he needed to take two electives and hadn't overloaded on classes like Hermione did last year. Hermione had taken every class available to third years, needing a Time Turner to attend them all. The stress, however, made Hermione extremely irritable from time to time so when she dropped Divination and Muggle Studies, Harry and Ron were extremely relieved.

There was a rush of owls entering the hall. Harry didn't bother looking up which proved to be a mistake when a small package hit him on the head before landing beside his plate. For a long moment Harry stared at the package completely bewildered by its arrival. He rarely got mail and when he did it was usually from Hagrid, the Care of Magical Creatures teacher and good friend to Harry.

"Poor Harry. He's going to take a while getting used to having a family," Lily said sadly.

Some of his confusion lifted when he noticed his name written in the handwriting of his godfather. Well, sure Sirius would write him but so soon? Still trapped in his confusion, Harry didn't notice his friends watching him as he carefully pried away the letter attached to the package. Harry bit his lower lip in anticipation as he slowly opened the letter and began to read.

Pronglet,

Moony informed me that he forgot to give this back to you so I sent it as quickly as I could.

"What? What didn't you give him back?" James asked.

"Well, the only thing of Harry I remember taking was the Map," Remus said.

"WHAT? MOONY! HOW COULD YOU FORGET TO GIVE HIM BACK SUCH AN ESSENTIAL ITEM FOR SURVIVAL?" James and Sirius cried in perfect unison. Lily was torn between being amused or rolling her eyes.

I don't understand him some times but he's Moony.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Remus growled.

"That you're special," Sirius teased. Remus just glared.

Just so you know we're already working hard on cleaning up old Black Manor for you. I am honestly contemplating on asking Dumbledore to let us switch house elves. Kreacher for Dobby.

"WHAT? I am not only mental enough to go back there but Kreacher is there as well? GIVE HIM CLOTHES!" Sirius cried.

You remember what I told you about Kreacher, right? The Black family house elf? Well, he's worse now than what I ever remember which is pretty bad.

Anyways, just remember what I told you at the platform. Don't forget to have fun this year. I know you're not one for pranks but there's more than one way to have fun at good ol' Hogwarts. Just be sure to tell me all about it when you can! Oh, and Moony is shouting at me that if I don't tell you hello from him he'll skin me alive...and people are worried about the wolf...if only they knew...

James and Sirius nodded their agreement. Remus glared at them.

Take care of yourself, kiddo. Remember we're here if you need us.

Padfoot and Moony

"Why does your name come first?"

"I wrote the letter."

"So?"

"Your name comes first on the map!"

"Children, no fighting," James teased. For this he received two rolls on the head and two death glares.

Harry bit back a smile as he folded up the letter. He doubted he could handle Dobby being the 'Black family elf' but perhaps it would be better than Kreacher. Sirius had informed Harry all about the Black family history this summer. Evidently, Sirius was one of the few Blacks to stand against Voldemort. The Blacks were a proud pureblood family just like the Malfoys.

Actually, Sirius had revealed that he was related to the Malfoys by marriage (Narcissa Malfoy was a member of the Black family)

"Unfortunately," Sirius muttered.

making Harry somewhat related to Draco Malfoy now that Sirius had adopted him but Harry didn't agree.

"Me neither!" James said horrified.

The simple thought of him being related to anyone like Draco Malfoy was enough to make his stomach churn. Harry hadn't taken the Black name but he was a Black heir.

"See, I was right," Lily said triumphantly. The boys rolled their eyes.

This fact was probably what had so many people up in arms about the adoption because of the 'dark' reputation the Black family had.

"People just can't let go of their self established truths," Lily snorted annoyed, "Just because the family has a 'dark' reputation doesn't make every Black automatically dark."

Glancing down at the package, Harry already knew what was inside so didn't take the risk of opening it in front of anyone. There was only one thing he had given Remus that Sirius would want Harry to have since it was only useful at Hogwarts. The Marauder's Map. Remus had confiscated it last year and with everything that had happened must have forgotten about it.

"Honestly Moony, that's like forgetting to breathe!" Sirius said annoyed.

Harry could no longer hide the smile on his face as he placed the letter and package in his school bag. Suddenly, his day was looking up.

"Of course Harry, the day always looks up when you have means for mischief," James said happy.

"I think he meant he was happy because he heard from Sirius not because he has means for mischief, James!" Lily said rolling her eyes.

"Ah," James sighed happily, "As long as you keep calling me James you can scold me all you want, sweet Lily." She smacked the top of his head.

By the time lunch had arrived though the day was back to where it had begun. He didn't even what to think about what they had to do in Herbology. It had been disgusting along with the Blast-Ended Skrewts he had to deal with in Care of Magical Creatures. Harry dreaded having to deal with them for however many weeks Hagrid had in mind.

Hermione hadn't stayed long during lunch, insisting she had something important to do in the library. Harry just shook his head, trying not to think of his upcoming class. Even though the class was a complete waste of time, Harry had done quite a bit of reading on the subject over the summer. It was all interpretation. He understood about star charts and palm reading now and some other aspects of Divination. He may not believe it but he could understand enough to make a logical interpretation.

Divination started off slow with Professor Trelawney in her large glasses once again foretelling upcoming doom to Harry. Apparently she hadn't learned her lesson from last Christmas when Harry had turned her superstitions against her. Harry could only roll his eyes and saw Ron doing the same thing. Ron had been very vocal about how he felt Trelawney was a few pieces short of a full chess set.

"Yeah, 32 pieces short," James snorted.

The class started on star charts which was a relief to Harry. Finally, something he would understand. "Mr. Potter," Professor Trelawney said dreamily. "From your appearance, one could assume you were born under the malignant influence of Saturn. You were born in mid-winter, am I correct?"

"Er—sorry," Harry said uncomfortable with everyone staring at him. "I have a summer birthday."

They all laughed hard.

Professor Trelawney looked at Harry suspiciously for a moment then continued teaching the class before letting the students work on completing their own circular chart to outline where the planets had been at the moment of their birth. Having already attempted this during the summer, Harry finished his quickly before helping Ron on his. Ron looked horrified that Harry actually knew what he was doing but kept his mouth shut...that is of course until Lavender let out an excited squeal.

"Professor!" Lavender cried out. "Please look! Which planet is this?"

Professor Trelawney strolled over to Lavender and looked down. "That would be Uranus, Miss Brown," she said.

Ron couldn't help himself. "Can I have a look at Ur—*Oomph!*"

Everyone quickly looked at Ron to see Harry covering his mouth. Harry looked over at Lavender and Professor Trelawney and bit his lower lip nervously. "Er—sorry," said Harry as he slowly looked over at Ron, giving him a silent warning to shut up. "Some times his brain just stops working."

"Just like Paddy," James patted Sirius' head fondly. Sirius gave him a death glare.

Professor Trelawney blinked a few times in surprise. "I must say, Mr. Potter," she said sounding impressed. "Perhaps there is some Seer blood in you after all. I have never seen anyone act so fast."

"Oh, when you've known someone for years you just learn to expect their idiocy," Remus patted Sirius' shoulder fondly. James was openly laughing and Sirius was huffing and glaring.

Harry pulled his hand away from Ron's mouth as he slowly shook his head. No, he didn't have Seer blood. He just knew Ron too well to know what he had intended on saying. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil looked completely envious at Harry since they seemed to idolize the Divination teacher so much while Ron and Seamus were desperately trying not to laugh.

Ron's good mood ended at dinner time when Malfoy managed to point out an article in the 'Daily Prophet' about Ron's father in the Entrance Hall. It was all a bunch of rubbish written by Rita Skeeter but Malfoy was having his fun nevertheless. Harry and Hermione managed to hold Ron back and get him to turn and walk away without a confrontation when Harry's head screamed in warning.

"WHAT?" James cried.

In the blink of an eye, Harry had his wand in hand as he quickly turned around and created a defensive shield that absorbed whatever curse Malfoy had shot at them.

"GIT!"

"COWARD!"

"SLIMY SLITHERIN!"

The boys cried together. Lily looked disgusted, "Attacking from behind is just the ultimate cowardice."

He was suddenly thankful for the research he had done last year on the topic. Harry lowered the shield and re-holstered his wand as he slowly shook his head. Why did Malfoy have to start a fight here in front of everyone?

"Because he is the result of too much inbreeding," Sirius said, "His brain doesn't work properly."

"Sirius! That is not a nice thing to say," Lily scolded.

"It's true though. All the pureblood families have a lot of inbreeding. My parents for instance are second cousins," he answered.

"That explains a lot," Lily said to James who coughed to disguise a laugh at Sirius' glare.

Remus ruffled his hair and said, "We're just teasing you Padfoot."

Perhaps because he feels that he has something to prove.

"Is there a problem here, lads?" a curious Professor Moody asked as he descended down the stairs. Malfoy instantly froze as Moody slowly approached, his magical eye seeming to shift from Harry and back to Malfoy. "I see a wand pointed on a classmate, Mr. Malfoy. Explain yourself."

Malfoy paled when he realized that he still had his wand pointing at Harry. The was the first time that Harry could see Malfoy actually acting frightened in front of a teacher instead of arrogant. "Nothing, sir," Malfoy said as he pocketed his wand. "Nothing at all."

"Why is he scared?" James asked.

"Probably because his dad must have had a few nasty encounters with Moody," Sirius said and Remus and Lily nodded grimly.

Moody took a step towards Malfoy. "Then be on your way," he growled, his magical eye rotating around as if it were looking all around the Entrance Hall, even through the back of his head. "That goes for every last one of you."

Harry moved to follow the group but was stopped when Professor Moody quickly grabbed his arm. Reflexes of the past kicking in, Harry immediately tensed and flinched as if expecting to be hit. This reaction didn't go unnoticed by Professor Moody who instantly relaxed his hold but didn't let go. Looking up at the Defense teacher Harry noticed both of his eyes looking at him critically, almost like he suspected him of something.

"That was impressive, Mr. Potter," growled Professor Moody. "You had every opportunity to retaliate but you chose to walk away; a rather difficult thing to do with everyone watching."

"That's my baby. Mummy is so proud of you!"

Harry didn't know what to say. He couldn't bring himself to say anything. He felt like he was trapped and that magical eye only increased Harry's nervousness. At that moment Harry felt like he was the one in deep trouble for some reason. He didn't like that feeling at all. Pain usually accompanied that feeling. Hours of solitary confinement usually accompanied that feeling.

"Constant Vigilance, Potter," Moody growled as he released Harry's arm. "Remember that."

"Yes, sir," Harry said softly then watched as Professor Moody walked away. He couldn't bring himself to move. He didn't even realize Ron and Hermione were ushering him to the Great Hall with very little resistance. He seemed to be trapped in his own mind. What in the world did Professor Moody mean by that?

"Yes, what?" Remus asked.

"I don't think he meant anything. According to dad Moody is just paranoid," James said.

"I think Harry was talking about Moody's previous comment," Lily said.

"Still the same. Moody would have knocked Malfoy out and shipped him to Azkaban so he couldn't do it again," James said calmly.

For the next few days Harry did what he could to stay clear of Professor Moody. He didn't know what it was but he just felt uneasy around the new teacher. The treatment Harry had sustained while in the care of the Dursley family had been published at the end of last term but since it was also at the same time of the infamous Black trial, no one really paid much attention to it. It had been fortunately overlooked.

Harry had worked hard on putting his life with the Dursleys behind him and really didn't want a teacher, especially Professor Moody bringing it up now. He didn't need anyone assuming that Sirius and Remus were anything less than perfect.

"Well Harry maybe Padfoot is but I surely am perfect," Remus said.

"So modest," Lily snorted and the other two laughed.

He couldn't afford to have anyone take him away from the only people who truly cared about him.

"No one is taking you away Harry," James said firmly, "or they'll find themselves being haunted by a very, very angry spirit."

In addition to Professor Moody, Harry also tried to keep his distance from Professor Snape which was difficult in Potions class. Malfoy was muttering comments all through class that earned several snickers from his fellow Slytherins. The sallow-faced Potions master with a

hooknose and greasy hair did nothing about it of course since the comments were about the one student he didn't bother hiding how he truly felt: Harry.

Harry knew why Professor Snape acted this way. Remus had told him last year how Harry's father, James, had bullied Professor Snape when they had both been students at Hogwarts.

Lily glared at James.

Harry understood that Professor Snape loathed James Potter but he hated that since James Potter was dead Snape decided to take his resentment out on the last remaining Potter who hadn't even been alive when the incidents happened. It wasn't fair. Sirius and Remus had even had a few choice words with Snape about it but all it did was infuriate the teacher more.

"Snape is being quite childish," Lily huffed.

When it came time for Defense Against the Dark Arts class, Harry was starting to wonder if his mind was just overworking itself. Everyone else seemed eager to learn from Professor Moody and no one seemed to have as much trouble with Professor Snape as he did...well, except perhaps Neville Longbottom but the boy had always had a problem with Professor Snape's *demanding* presence. Harry knew it was unfair to compare Professor Moody to Professor Snape. He had only one run-in with the man. How can you judge someone on that?

"Sometimes you just have to go with your gut feeling. That hasn't failed you yet. Like when *someone*, I won't mention names *cough* Moony *cough*, was telling you lies about me you let me prove my innocence anyway," Sirius explained.

"I wasn't the only one," Remus said defensively.

Entering the Defense classroom, Harry followed Ron and Hermione who decided to take seats in the front row. He pulled out his book, *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection*, and flipped open to where he had stopped reading. He was just over halfway through the book much to Ron's horror. Due to Harry's summer, it had become a habit to turn to a book at the first sign of boredom since there was no one else around. In reality, Harry needed something to focus on and right now this was the only distraction available.

The classroom filled quickly yet everyone remained silent. It was almost like an excited tension was radiating off of everyone. You could feel it. Eventually, the silence was filled with a clunk and then another followed by another as Professor Moody entered the room. Harry kept his eyes on his book, not wanting to look at that frightening magical eye.

"No books today," Moody growled as he sat down behind his desk and waited for everyone to comply. He then checked the register, calling out everyone's name. His head never moved but everyone could see his magical eye shifting to see each student that went with the name. "Very well. I went over Professor Lupin's class notes which were the only class notes available from the last three years. Although Professor Lupin covered quite a bit of material you all are still extremely behind in curses.

"That's not Moony's fault," James protested.

"He didn't accuse me James. Actually he said I was the only one that left notes."

"Well, I expect having Voldemort on the back of ones head and having your memory erased got in the way of taking notes," Sirius said chuckling.

"Black! That's not funny," Lily said but you could see her lips twitching.

Since I only have a year to get you all up to speed we should get cracking."

Ron and Hermione leaned forward, eager for the lesson to begin.

"The Ministry of Magic would prefer I only teach you counter-curses but Professor Dumbledore says otherwise," Professor Moody continued. "The sooner you all know what is out there the sooner you can defend yourself. This includes the illegal Dark curses. Does anyone know the curses that are the most heavily punished in the wizarding world?"

Out of the corner of his eyes Harry could see both Ron and Hermione slowly raising their hand up in the air. That was something new. Ron rarely volunteered in class. Professor Moody chose Ron to answer first.

"My dad told me about the Imperius curse," Ron said nervously.

"Yes, that one is difficult," Moody said with a nod as he stood up, opened a desk drawer and pulled out a glass jar that had three rather large black spiders inside it.

"He's not going to perform them? They're illegal!" Lily cried.

"I am afraid he is," Remus said biting his lips.

The class watched as Professor Moody pulled one of the spiders out of the jar and kept it in the palm of his hand. He pointed his wand to it. "*Imperio!*"

Everyone watched as the spider started to move in ways that spiders weren't supposed to move naturally. Out of nowhere Harry started to feel strange. It was almost like something was taking away his freewill. Harry quickly closed his eyes and shook his head. He could vaguely hear people laughing but Harry was too busy regaining his thoughts to notice.

"What happened? That wasn't supposed to happen. Moody performed the spell on the spider not Harry right?" James asked nervous. The others nodded but they were clearly confused.

"I suppose this is funny," Professor Moody growled, "until it is done to you." Silence filled the room again. "This curse makes the recipient a complete slave to whatever the caster may think of. It can be fought but it is extremely difficult. Not everyone has the strength to do it. The best chance you have is to avoid being hit with it to begin with. You must practice **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**"

Everyone jumped at the sudden change in volume. Moody then demonstrated the Cruciatus curse that causes unimaginable pain. Once again Harry had to look away when Moody had cast the spell on a spider. As impossible as it may have seemed, Harry could have sworn he had actually felt pain but only for a moment.

"Why?" James cried.

When it came time for the Killing curse, Harry was barely able to hold in his dread. Why was this happening? *What* was happening?

"Exactly, what?" James yelled.

Harry closed his eyes and gripped the sides of his chair as he listened to Professor Moody shout 'Avada Kedavra'. Even with his eyes closed, Harry could see green. He could almost hear Voldemort's high-pitched voice and his mother's pleas for mercy. He could almost feel a sharp spark of pain on his forehead right where his scar was but it only lasted a second before it was gone.

Lily stopped reading, her voice had started breaking at the start of the paragraph and now she was sobbing. James hugged her and rubbed her back. Remus caught the book and when Lily calmed down he started reading.

"There is no counter-curse or way to block it," Professor Moody's voice broke into Harry's thoughts. "There is only one person to have ever survived who I believe you all know quite well." There was an uncomfortable silence that filled the room. "Mr. Potter, are you all right?"

Harry nodded numbly but kept his eyes closed and his head bowed. Truthfully, he wasn't all right. He was terrified out of his mind. Was that what his parents went through? Did they feel any pain? The Dementors from last year had allowed Harry to hear the voices of what happened but he didn't remember pain. Was this curse an extremely painful way to die?

"Actually, it's supposed to be quick and painless," Sirius said trying to bring some type of comfort to the distressed group.

"Then why is Harry in pain?" Lily asked through sobs.

"Dunno," he answered.

Professor Moody walked around his desk and stood directly in front of Harry for a moment before returning his attention to the rest of the class. "Not everyone can cast such a powerful spell," he growled, "but there are enough who can. I'm showing you this because you have to know. You have to be prepared. **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**"

Once again the class jumped at the sudden change of volume.

"Using any of the Unforgivable Curses—the Avada Kedavra, Cruciatus and the Imperius—will earn you a life sentence in Azkaban," Moody continued. "Now, everyone pull out your quills and copy this down..."

For the remainder of the lesson notes were taken about the Unforgivable Curses. It was a struggle for Harry to keep his mind on what Professor Moody was saying. Questions kept entering his head. Why had he felt pain? Why had he felt anything at all? It hadn't been strong but it had been there, almost like a memory but you don't actually *feel* your memories....right?

"What's going on?" James asked.

"Harry, go see Dumbledore," Lily ordered.

Sirius was about to tell her he couldn't hear but one look at her teary face shut him up.

Harry was pulled out of his thoughts once again by the sound of the bell ringing to signal the end of class. Wanting to leave more than anything, Harry quickly packed up to leave when he noticed Professor Moody standing in front of him again. Slowly, Harry looked up to see both of Moody's eyes looking at him curiously. Harry's stomach suddenly tightened. This wasn't good.

"Mr. Potter, a word?" growled Professor Moody.

Biting back the urge to say no, Harry glanced over at Hermione who was looking at him nervously. "Go ahead," Harry said softly. "Go talk to Neville. He's hurting." Harry had no idea why he just said that but he somehow he knew it was true. Neville *was* hurting just like he was.

"How come?" Sirius asked.

"No idea," James answered. They looked at Remus.

"I already said: I do not have all the answers in the world!"

When Ron and Hermione left, Harry returned his attention to Professor Moody who was still eyeing him curiously making Harry feel extremely self conscious. He couldn't help but feel like he had done something wrong and was about to be punished for it. He hated this. He could stand up to Voldemort but not to any authoritative adult.

"Mr. Potter, I noticed your reaction to the Killing curse," Professor Moody growled. "Am I correct to assume that you actually remember what happened that night?" There was no answer, only a nod as Harry looked away. "I see. I apologize if I made you uncomfortable but you need to know. You need to be prepared. There is a chance you will see that curse again—"

"I surely hope not!" Lily cried and the boys nodded fervently.

"—I know," Harry interrupted softly as he looked directly at Professor Moody. "Don't worry, sir. You have nothing to apologize for. You're right. We need to know what's out there waiting for us."

Professor Moody was still eyeing Harry like he didn't completely believe him but let Harry go anyways. Leaving the room, Harry realized the last place he wanted to go was to the Great Hall for a crowded dinner. He needed to be alone. Knowing the exact place to 'hide out', Harry ventured to the Owlery and was immediately greeted by Hedwig. He didn't know how much

time he spent there just petting his owl but it was certainly calming. Hedwig was his first pet and first present he had been given.

Stroking her feathers, Harry looked into Hedwig's eyes and smiled. Sometimes he could swear she knew just what to do to make him feel better. "Care to make a delivery?" he asked and received a hoot as an answer. "Let me quickly write it, okay?"

Hedwig hopped off of Harry's arm, allowing Harry to pull out a piece of parchment, quill and ink. Sitting down on the floor, Harry pondered what he could possibly say for a moment before starting to write. He knew he needed to keep it upbeat or else he would be having two visitors overacting...well, one overacting and the other trying to calm him down.

Midnight and Moony,

"Yes, he's going to tell you," Lily cried happily.

Thanks for the map. I had actually forgotten about it so don't pick on Moony too much, Sirius. I was the one to give it to him in the first place, you know. Also, if Kreacher is so bad, why don't you just give him clothes? I know I don't know that much about house elves but it seems silly to keep someone there if they make your life miserable.

"Yes! Please do!" Sirius exclaimed.

Just a thought.

The first week of school has been interesting. Everyone was shocked to find out and a lot of people want to enter regardless of their age. Does it make me weird if I don't? I remember how everyone looked at me after we told Professor Dumbledore I knew. They didn't expect me to act the way I did and neither did the two of you. Why? I just don't understand why anyone would even try to enter in something like that when they are not ready for it.

"For the glory, the money. It's easy to forget what the cost is," Remus said.

You were right about Professor Moody, Sirius. He is intimidating. I had class with him today and we covered the Unforgivable curses. Please don't be mad but I think something happened. He cast the curses on spiders but it was like I actually felt the curse. It was strange. I don't know if this was an 'episode' or not. Nothing happened really but you said you wanted to know when anything odd happened and I thought this was odd.

I hope both of you are having fun and I can't wait to see you at Christmas. It's really different without you two here. Don't worry, Moony. I'm staying out of trouble and completing all of my schoolwork on time...even Divination. I hope the full moon goes well.

Miss you both.

Harry

"He's such a sweet kid. Worried about the full moon and all, but I still don't get why Padfoot's name comes first!" Remus whined. Sirius was about to reply but Lily cut him:

"ENOUGH WITH THE NAMES!"

The letter wasn't as upbeat as Harry had hoped but it was what he needed to say. Folding up the letter, Harry stood up and called Hedwig over. He carefully attached the letter to her leg and sent her off to see his guardians. He watched her fly until he couldn't see her anymore. With nothing else to do, Harry packed up his supplies and retired to the Gryffindor Tower for a long night of Divination homework. He had every intention of completing it correctly but deep down Harry had a feeling that he would probably have to make a few things up.

"Hey, I just thought of something," Lily said, "Midnight and Moony are M&M," she chuckled. The boys just stared. Lily explained what "M&M's"® were and James laughed.

"Very appropriate. The chocoholic and the big kid." Sirius and Remus tried glaring but nothing made the other two stop laughing.

Chapter 7

Hogwarts Speaks

"With whom?" Sirius asked.

"No Idea," James answered, "I've never chatted with Hogwarts. Have you?" he looked at Lily, she just rolled her eyes.

The reply from Sirius and Remus had come a few days later. Sirius was demanding to know what exactly happened while Remus calmly instructed Harry to inform Professor Dumbledore about the occurrence. Neither of them knew if this had been an 'episode' or not but they clearly didn't want to take any chances.

"You bet ya! No chances, go straight to Dumbledore!" Sirius demanded.

Harry was reluctant to bring the Headmaster in on this but knew if he didn't, Sirius and Remus would bring the old man in anyways. Knowing Sirius, Harry knew he had a few days before Sirius sent an owl to Dumbledore asking if Harry had talked to him yet.

"I think Harry underestimates Sirius' obsessions," James said grinning.

"I am not obsessed!"

"I have to agree with Prongs on this one. You are quite driven!" Remus said pleasantly as if discussing the weather. Sirius eyes narrowed.

"Keep reading and stop the witty remarks!" James and Remus laughed.

Harry underestimated his godfather.

"See!" James said triumphantly. Sirius' scowl deepened.

Professor Dumbledore had sought out Harry the same day Harry had received his reply. He hadn't given any explanation to the occurrence but requested Harry to inform him if it happens again. Harry reluctantly agreed. Fortunately, it didn't happen again. Weeks passed and everything seemed to be normal.

At least until Professor Moody announced that each student would be put under the Imperius curse to see who could resist and who could not.

"HE CANNOT DO THAT!" James and Lily cried at the same time.

"That's illegal!" Remus said outraged.

"Apparently he's gonna!" Sirius cried. "They have to learn someday," he reasoned.

"They do, in *Auror* training, not *fourth* year," James said angry. "The Moody my dad knows wouldn't submit kids to that."

"Well, this is the future. Maybe he changed," Lily winced at the look on James face.

"No, there's something wrong here," James insisted.

Hermione had objected of course, claiming that it was illegal but Moody silenced her with a look and informed the class if anyone didn't want to know what it was like, they could leave. No one left.

"Yeah right. Why didn't you just tell them to sign their names under a list to be teased for cowards? Would be easier," Sirius mumbled.

Students were chosen one by one and put under the curse. Once again Harry could feel something in the back of his head, almost like an annoying presence. He immediately fought against it and watched as his classmates did whatever Professor Moody wanted them to do. No one seemed to be able to fight back. No one seemed to even try.

"You're next Potter," Professor Moody growled.

Lily was gripping James robes. He was so nervous he didn't even notice that they were hugging.

Fighting back his nervousness, Harry took his place in the middle of the classroom like everyone else had before him. He kept his gaze straight ahead at Professor Moody hoping against hope that he *could* fight the curse.

"Imperio."

Once again Harry could feel his freewill leaving and replaced with a floating sensation. There were no worries but something felt wrong. This felt wrong. Harry had worries. He knew it. He had secrets. Closing his eyes, Harry vaguely felt his head bowing as he fought to regain control. He fought against the feeling that he so desperately wanted to fall into.

"Yes! He's fighting the curse!" Remus cried excited.

Professor Moody's voice filled his head telling him to do something but he couldn't make out what. Whatever it was, Harry knew he didn't want to do it. *He* was in control and no one else.

"YES! *YOU* ARE IN CONTROL!" James yelled.

His eyes opened as his head slowly rose. He looked directly at Professor Moody and fought to break the curse. He felt something else rise in him as he pushed, snapping the connection.

And sending Harry and Moody flying in opposite directions. Harry landed hard on the floor, his right hip making the first contact.

"Oops, I don't think that was supposed to happen," Sirius winced.

"Did he have an outburst?" Lily asked.

"I hope not. He's in front of everyone," Remus said.

Suppressing a groan, Harry slowly sat up unable to suppress a wince as a bolt of pain shot through his body. Hands immediately grabbed Harry, helping him to his feet. Looking over at Professor Moody, Harry noticed the teacher was in the same state he was.

"Now that was something I wasn't expecting," Professor Moody said in amazement. "Potter fought and won with a vengeance. Let's try again, Potter. This time try not to throw me across the room."

"That wasn't his fault. He can't control his outbursts," Lily cried angry.

"That's ok Lily. He praised Harry. He said he did well," James tried to calm her.

Once everyone else backed away, Harry was put under the curse once again. This time his eyes remained open as he fought against the presence that was taking away his worries and fears. He fought against the voice he heard telling him to do something with a desk. He once again felt something rise in him and surround him, cutting himself off Moody's influence completely.

This time, Professor Moody and Harry were not thrown across the room although they did take a few steps back as if someone had pushed them.

"Very good Potter!" Professor Moody exclaimed. "Control and determination! That's what it takes! With a little more practice, Potter, they will have quite of bit of trouble trying to control you."

They all clapped proudly.

Harry had been the only one who could throw off the curse by the end of class. Although Professor Moody didn't say anything, Harry could have sworn that he felt the man watching him as he left the classroom. He figured it had something to do with being thrown across the classroom but Harry was just as clueless as Moody. He didn't know what happened but this time, Harry was just going to keep it to himself. After all, no one was hurt so there was no point in worrying everyone about it.

Sirius slapped his own face and shook his head.

With the increase in schoolwork, there was very little time to do much else. All of the teachers insisted that it was to prepare the students for their O.W.L.s (Ordinary Wizarding Level exams) to be taken next year which only caused everyone to moan in annoyance. If this year was this bad, next year was going to be horrible.

James and Sirius groaned.

"Honestly, why do they do this? First they start worrying you on fourth year about O.W.L.s then when you haven't even received the results yet they start pressuring you about N.E.W.T.s" James groaned.

As the end of October arrived, notices were posted reminding students that students and teachers from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang would be arriving on the 30th at 6 o'clock. The entire school could hardly wait. It was the distraction from their schoolwork that they so desperately needed, especially since they would be able to get out of class early that day. Harry, Ron and Hermione could barely hold back their excitement. The less time they had to spend in Potions the better.

"Well, that's a given," Lily snorted.

"Knew you'd come around to our way of thinking," James chuckled.

"That I think Snape is a git doesn't mean I agree with your ways of dealing with him James!"

"Can you believe it?!" exclaimed Ernie MacMillin who was in Hufflepuff from behind Harry. "It's only a week until they get here. I hope Cedric knows."

"Who's Cedric?" James asked.

Harry looked over his shoulder at Ernie with a smile on his face. Cedric Diggory was the captain of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team and fellow Seeker.

"Ah! Him," James growled. Lily rolled her eyes.

"People get hurt during Quidditch James." He glared at her.

When Harry had been injured during the game last year, Cedric had been the first to apologize after Harry had been released from the hospital wing. "Cedric's entering?" Harry asked and received a nod from Ernie. "Good for him. He's a great choice for Hogwarts."

"WHAT? Harry no! He's the one responsible for your hospitalization!" James cried.

"People get hurt during Quidditch James! You said so yourself! Cedric didn't get the beaters to go after Harry for evil purposes. A quidditch nut as yourself should know that!" Lily exclaimed. He kept glaring.

Ernie was in such a shock that he nearly tripped. "Y—you mean that Harry?" he asked as he hurried around Ron so he was walking backwards and facing Harry. "I—I thought you wouldn't since...well...what happened in the game last year..."

"It was just a game," Harry said simply. "People get hurt. Seekers get hurt."

"Good for you Harry. Mummy is very proud to know that unlike your father you are a reasonable person!" James growls and mumbled comments about what should be done to the Hufflepuff players involving beater's bats and gruesome torture didn't stop.

He couldn't believe people thought he would hold a grudge for what happened during a game. It wasn't like in they were trying to kill him or anything. That realization was all the proof Harry needed to know no one really knew who he was. They knew the-boy-who-lived, not Harry.

"To be fair, you can't expect everyone to know you personally," Remus said, "I mean to most people I am a quiet bookworm, James is the popular athlete and Sirius the prankster aristocrat. Few people know that I am a prankster too or that when they *want* James and Sirius can be deep. The problem with Harry is that he just has more visibility than others."

"Yes, but with normal people you don't usually assume stuff before meeting them at least a little. With Harry everyone assumes they know him because he is famous," Lily said, "Even people he never met."

Ernie grinned. "That's great, Harry!" he said happily. "I'll let Cedric know." He hurried off into the Great Hall towards the Hufflepuff table before anyone could even try to object.

"I can't believe you did that, Harry," Ron said sounding completely stunned. "How could you give your support to that idiot?"

"Yes, thank you Ron. Finally someone with some sense," James cried.

"Actually, I agree with Harry," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "Cedric Diggory is a good student and a Prefect. He's certainly better than any Slytherin who might want to enter."

Lily eyed James with a raised eyebrow.

Ron sighed in defeat. "Well if you're going to use logic..."

"I second him," James mumbled. The other three laughed.

For the next week, the Tournament was all anyone could talk about. The list of who was entering changed from day to day. By the time Tuesday was over Harry couldn't take it anymore and ended up spending the majority of his nights in the library with Hermione. Ron was caught up in all of the hype towards the Tournament so Harry and Hermione just let him be.

It was during their time in the library that Hermione had revealed various happenings at the Burrow over the summer, including the Fred and George's latest idea: Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, a joke shop for all of the items they have been inventing.

"I like Fred and George more and more each day," Sirius said happily.

"We've been reading only since yesterday," Lily pointed out.

"It's an expression!" Sirius cried annoyed.

Harry had to hold back his laughter because he could certainly see that Hermione didn't approve of what they were doing. She kept saying it was too dangerous and they should be more focused on their studies. Harry didn't have the courage to tell her there was more to life than schoolwork.

When Friday finally arrived, there was so much excitement that no one wanted to pay attention in classes. Harry was in the same boat but for a completely different reason. From the moment he woke up, Harry had an intense pain at his temples which only worsened throughout the day.

"What's going on?" Sirius asked.

"My baby's sick. Go see a healer!" James cried.

"Yes, do what your father says. Go see Madam Pomfrey," Lily said.

"I said a healer not a torturer!" James cried.

It was almost like there was excessive chatter that only Harry could hear but couldn't make out what was being said. He didn't notice the change in decorations that had taken place in the Great Hall or how much cleaner Hogwarts had become over the last week. All Harry wanted was for the commotion in his head to stop.

Harry didn't know how he made it through his classes that day, especially Potions. It was impossible to concentrate on anything around him. By the time classes were dismissed, Harry's head was throbbing so bad he couldn't stand it any more. When everyone dropped off their school materials in their respective towers, Harry collapsed on his bed, finally able to let out a sigh of relief as he closed his eyes. He didn't know how or why. He just knew he needed to sleep until the madness in his head stopped.

"Then sleep," Lily said, "But first get that mirror Sirius gave you and let him know you're not feeling well so he can get Madam Pomfrey-" she faltered at James death glare, "I mean any healer there. Not Madam Pomfrey. Your dad doesn't want her."

"Er—Harry?" Ron asked uncertainly. "What are you doing? We need to hurry to the Entrance Hall."

Harry didn't move. He needed to tell Ron something other than the truth and something that Hermione would believe. He couldn't have the entire Hogwarts staff running up here with two schools coming. He didn't want to ruin everyone's night because he wasn't feeling well.

"Yes you should!" Sirius cried, "Ok, haven't we had this conversation already. About not putting other's needs before yours!" he scolded.

"Headache," Harry muttered. "Go ahead. Tell me about it later."

Ron was quickly at Harry's bedside. "Is it your scar Harry?" he asked quietly so no one would here. "Is it You-Know-Who?"

"Good Ron! Don't let him fool you," Remus cheered.

"No," Harry groaned. "It's just a normal headache. Need sleep." He figured Ron must have believed him because the next thing Harry knew he was alone in the room.

Everyone groaned.

Grabbing his head, Harry fought the urge to cry out in pain. Why did this have to happen now of all times? He had wanted to see the arrival of the two visiting schools. Remus had told him it would be quite a sight to see.

It became too painful to think or do anything other than lay there and wait for the pain to pass. Minutes seemed like hours. Even his scar headaches had never been this bad.

"Someone help my baby!" Lily cried.

"Calm down. One of the teachers will notice he is missing," Remus tried to assure them but his shacking hands maimed his credibility.

He rolled onto his side and partially opened his eyes, instantly knowing that had been a mistake. The room was too bright for anyone to stand. He quickly closed his eyes again, silently pleading for the pain to stop.

"Unmask...we never unmask...visitors...never allow such visitors...we must strengthen...we must protect our children..."

"Who's talking? Stop talking and help my son!" James cried.

It took too much effort to be confused by the distant voices and Harry had no strength left to fight. He had been fighting all day long. He felt his arms go limp as his hands released his head. He was barely aware of his right arm falling off the edge of the bed. His eyes seemed to open against his will as he lay on his right side and stared at the bright white wall. Something wet started coming out of his nose but Harry couldn't do anything about it. He couldn't even move. It was almost like he was trapped in his own body.

He didn't even hear the door opening or two individuals entering and hurrying to his four poster bed.

"Oh, thank God. Help!" Lily cried relieved.

All he registered was the blinding brightness dimming as he was rolled onto his back. Someone started shaking his shoulder while someone else checked for a pulse. Harry couldn't see faces. He couldn't make out whatever they may be saying.

Hands touched the side of his face and turned his head to the left. "*Legilimens*," a voice whispered

"What's that?" Sirius asked.

"They are trying to see his in mind, to know what's happening," Lily explained.

"Ah!"

as the individual purged into the chaos that was Harry's mind. It quickly became too much forcing the individual to end the spell.

"Severus?"

"I think this is the first time I am glad to see Snape," James cried.

"It is absolute madness in there, Minerva," Professor Snape said softly. "Look at his eyes. They're glowing. I believe this is another one of the *episodes* the Headmaster warned us about." He moved one arm under Harry's shoulders, another under Harry's knees and lifted the teenager off of the bed. "Hospital wing Minerva. We must hurry before someone sees us."

Harry felt his head rest against the Potions Master's chest as they left the Gryffindor Tower. Professor Snape's black robes provided a shield from the brightness of the castle, giving him some relief.

"I am never going to make fun of Snivellus clothing again," James said.

"Not calling him Snivellus could help too," Lily said and James stared at her then shook his head.

"Nah, never happening." She rolled her eyes.

Harry didn't know if he passed out or had just lost track of the time because before he knew it he was placed on a bed and the brightness was back.

The blinding whiteness vanished as a soft cloth was put over his eyes while another slowly brushed against the bottom half of his face. Now trapped in darkness, Harry could feel the presence of something approaching Hogwarts, finally landing before the awaiting students. One of the visiting schools had just arrived by a large horse drawn carriage with twelve large winged horses. The school crest was on the carriage, six stars coming out of two crossed wands. Somehow Harry knew that Beauxbatons had just arrived.

"He's seeing magic again!" Lily said, "Like at the cup."

"He is more like feeling magic," Remus said uncertain.

It wasn't long before Harry felt the arrival of Durmstrang by means of a rather large boat appearing out of the lake. With the two schools present, Harry finally felt the all of the chaos in his head slowly drift away. His eyes closed tiredly. His body relaxed as he let out a groan before succumbing to the darkness. The pain finally stopped.

"Good," Sirius said.

Muffled voices slowly pulled Harry out of his slumber. Groaning in annoyance, Harry buried his face into his pillow and tried to ignore it. His head ached and he felt completely exhausted. At first he was confused but slowly the events of the day before came back to

Harry, reminding him of the reason why his head was still hurting. He didn't know why it had happened or what it had been. He was just grateful that it was over.

Now if only those who were talking near his bed could be quiet he could fall back to the peaceful oblivion he had just left. Unfortunately the voices just seemed to clarify rather than fade away. Harry groaned again. He didn't want to wake up. He just wanted to sleep. Sleep meant the absence of pain...well, at least most of the time it did.

Unable to fight it anymore, Harry slowly opened his eyes to see three semi-blurry faces looking at him. He slowly blinked a few times as he tried to figure out whom each face belonged to. His brain seemed to be working a tad on the slow side. His glasses were carefully slid on allowing Harry to see the faces of Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape come into focus. Harry couldn't help but be confused. What were they doing in his dorm room?

"Good afternoon, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "You gave us quite a scare last night. Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape found you in your room in some sort of trance and bleeding from the nose. Do you remember anything?"

"Bleeding from the nose? That's not good. I don't like that," Lily said.

"Well I don't like the pain he was in either," James said.

Harry groaned as he rubbed his right temple. "Pain," he said in a raspy voice. "Too many voices. I couldn't make it out what they were saying. I think someone was unhappy about unmasking or something like that."

"I see," Professor Dumbledore said pensively as he glanced over at Professor McGonagall. "Harry, it seems that you somehow heard Hogwarts speaking last night."

"Excuse me. What now? Hogwarts speaks? To Harry?" Sirius asked.

I can't explain how that happened but it seems that Hogwarts wasn't too happy for lowering her wards to allow the arrivals last night. I'm afraid that we are forced to take matters into our own hands so this doesn't happen again. These outbursts are simply too powerful for you to control."

"Finally! Someone is doing something!" Remus cried.

Dumbledore reached out and touched what felt like a necklace. Unaware of it's presence until now, Harry touched it also. It wasn't a chain. It felt like small smooth squares wrapped around his neck. He looked up at Professor Dumbledore in confusion. What was this for?

"This necklace is tuned into your magical signature, Harry," Dumbledore explained. "It will absorb any bursts in magic you may feel and will hopefully prevent something like this from happening again, at least until you are able to control them on your own. I have to be honest with you, Harry. I have never seen anyone with outbursts this severe before. I apologize for not doing something to prevent this sooner."

"That's all good and all but wouldn't it be better to teach him how to control the outbursts?" Lily asked.

"Yes, this isn't quite solving the problem as postponing," James mumbled.

"They are in the middle of the school year, it's not like they have a lot of time to train him. This way they can prevent the outburst until a more permanent solution can be found," Remus said.

"You know, he is quite annoying when we are trying to rant and he comes and rationalize things," Lily mumbled and James and Sirius nodded. Remus just shook his head.

Harry let out a sigh and closed his eyes. Questions entered his head. What did that mean? Did this make him dangerous?

"NO!" they all cried.

Did this make him a freak?

"NO!"

Knowing he wouldn't be finding any answers, Harry opened his eyes again and looked at Professor Dumbledore. "It's not your fault, sir," he said then looked away. "You didn't know."

"And neither did you, Harry," Dumbledore said gently. "I must insist that you refrain from blaming yourself or consider yourself to be too dangerous for you classmates. That couldn't be more wrong. Your past few occurrences have only caused *you* harm which is why we are taking this precaution. We can't take the risk of what happened last night happening again. The human mind can only take so much before it succumbs to madness, Harry."

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. He knew Professor Dumbledore was right. After last night Harry didn't know how much more he could take. His audience left him to rest so he would be able to attend dinner that night to see who would be chosen in the tournament. Unfortunately, the Triwizard Tournament was currently the last thing on Harry's mind.

Staring at the ceiling, Harry fingered the necklace he now had to wear. He really didn't know what to think. Deep down Harry knew this wasn't a fix to the problem. It was merely a way of delaying the issue. Suddenly, the Triwizard Tournament didn't matter anymore. Harry could care less who was chosen to compete for one thousand galleons. Professor Dumbledore's words were all Harry could think about. What if these outbursts were slowly driving Harry insane?

"No, no, no. Do something Padfoot! Reassure him!" James cried.

"Calm down James, we're doing our best."

A/N: Coming next: Chapter 8 - Unbreakable Precautions. The Champions for the Tournament are announced and a little Harry and Snape time.

"Excuse me, who would want Snape time?" James said sporting the same disgusted look Sirius had.

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Chapter 8

Unbreakable Precautions?

Ron and Hermione had ended up resorting to pulling Harry out of the hospital wing for dinner. They hadn't asked any questions about what happened which meant they were waiting for Harry to bring up the topic or had already talked to Professor Dumbledore about it. Knowing Ron and Hermione's curiosity and persistence better than most, Harry chose the latter.

"They are worried about you. I know it's annoying but it's also endearing," Remus said knowingly.

Sirius stared at him and said, "Paraphrasing my future self, sometimes I don't understand you Moony," he finished shaking his head. Remus shoved Sirius to the ground and in a very mature gesture, pouted.

Throughout the journey to the Great Hall, Harry heard Ron and Hermione go on and on about the arrival of the two schools last night, the Goblet of Fire which was going to be selecting the champions, those who had put their names in the Goblet, along with those who had attempted but failed such as Fred Weasley, George Weasley and their friend Lee Jordan. Apparently an age line had been placed around the Goblet and all of those who weren't seventeen yet found themselves wearing exceptionally long white beards. Harry could barely hold back his laughter when he heard that. Fred and George had been so certain they could have fooled Professor Dumbledore on entering.

"What do you think they tried?" Sirius asked interested.

"Aging potion, so they would make age line think they are seventeen," James said.

"Dumbledore's spell wouldn't be fooled by an aging potion," Lily scoffed, "They should have asked an older student to put their names in."

"Lily! You impress me! Such a devious mind!" Sirius teased.

"Just because I don't cause trouble, Black, doesn't mean I don't know how to!" she answered cheekily.

"Well, I guess that means Angelina Johnson is the best chance for Gryffindor," Ron said as they entered the Great Hall. It was still fairly empty since dinner wasn't for another hour yet. Angelina was a Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. "Better her than that Diggory bloke.

I still can't believe you think him entering is a good idea, Harry. He nearly killed you last year."

"Yes he did!" James cried in agreement. Lily rolled her eyes.

Harry bit back his annoyance as he sat down at the Gryffindor table with Ron to his right and Hermione to his left. "No he didn't," he said desperately trying to hang on to his patience. "What would you have done, Ron, if you had been in his shoes? I had a Firebolt. I was the largest threat to their team. It would make sense that they would try to take me out of the game.

Lily looked triumphantly at James with a raised eyebrow. He chose to ignore that.

Besides, they didn't try to kill me. Cedric Diggory plays fair. Angelina plays fair. Either of them would be a good choice for Hogwarts."

"I have to agree with Harry," Remus said and James glared, "Better them than some Slytherin."

Now James was the one pouting.

"Harry's right, Ron," Hermione added matter-of-factly as she pulled out a book from her bag and appeared to start reading. "It *is* just a game. This is just supposed to be a friendly competition between schools. Diggory did apologize for what happened anyways. Why are you still upset about it?"

"Because Harry almost *died*! Because they persecuted my baby boy! What more do you need?" James cried.

"James, I think you and Ron need to reread "Quidditch through the ages,"" Sirius said.

Ron scowled as he enfolded his arms across his chest like a stubborn child. "You know it was a lot more fun before you became sensible Harry," he said in frustration. "Here I thought Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin would have turned you into a Marauder not another Hermione."

"Moony's fault", James and Sirius mumbled annoyed. Lily and Remus tried to stifle their laughter.

Harry smiled at the comment. "Sirius wanted to turn me into a Marauder, Ron," he said in amusement. "Unfortunately, Remus got to me first. He was the sensible one of the Marauders

when they were in school. I guess he was the one who kept Sirius and my dad in line from time to time.

"Not nearly enough Harry, not nearly enough," Remus said shaking his head and James and Sirius smiled proudly.

You didn't tell Fred and George about Moony, Padfoot and Prongs, right?"

Ron shook his head. "Are you kidding?" he asked. "Do you have any idea what they would do if they found out you were the son of a Marauder? Do you have any idea what they would do if they found out Mr. Lupin and Mr. Black are Marauders? They would demand to know every prank they ever pulled and guess who they would test them on: 'M'-'E'—me! No way! I am *not* going to be their test dummy!"

James turned to Sirius and in the most serious voice he could muster he said, "Mr. Prongs thinks that Mr. Padfoot and Mr. Moony should instruct the honorary Marauders Mr. Gred and Mr. Forge in the ways of mischief and mayhem."

"Mr. Padfoot agrees and is highly disappointed at his future self for not thinking that. Mr. Padfoot shall leave a note somewhere to remember himself to achieve such an important goal."

Lily couldn't resist rolling her eyes and groaning.

Looking over at Hermione, Harry could see a smile on her face. At least he wasn't the only one finding this amusing. "You do have a point, Ron," Harry said thoughtfully. "Maybe I *should* tell them. Hermione told me about their plans for a joke shop and if Sirius and Remus can help them—"

Sirius and James rubbed their hands in anticipation.

"Don't you dare Harry," Ron warned but there was no denying the presence of fear in his voice.

Students slowly filtered into the Great Hall. Ron provided a distraction by telling Harry that Viktor Krum was one of the Durmstrang students trying to enter the Tournament. Harry could hardly believe Krum was still in school as he listened to Ron go on and on about wanting Krum's autograph and trying to build up the courage talk to the international Quidditch star.

Silence for Harry was becoming difficult to keep. He couldn't believe the way Ron was talking about Krum. It sounded almost like the way the Creevey brothers treated him. He honestly thought Ron wouldn't get caught up in the whole celebrity craze since Ron had seen the actual affects of it first hand.

"He may know how that is for Harry, but he is only fourteen. You can't expect him to be all mature and think, "Oh, yeah, that is my idol but I am going to act naturally because I don't want him to feel uncomfortable."" Remus explained.

"Krum is Harry's idol too and he doesn't fawn over him," James said.

"Yes, but Harry isn't a normal fourteen year old," at the death glares of the other three Remus hastened to explain, "What I mean is you can't deny that he is more mature than other fourteen year olds. I think he is more mature than we are and we are sixteen. Two years older. We may not like that, but that is the result of his upbringing."

They growled and grass was ripped from the floor.

Thankfully their dorm mates Seamus Finnegan, Dean Thomas and Neville Longbottom arrived allowing Ron to start talking about his obsession with them. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown arrived shortly after them, taking seats across from Harry and Hermione. With all of the conversations around him, Harry fell back into his own thoughts and no one was the wiser.

"He does that a lot," Lily said.

"Harry is an observer," Remus stated.

"Like you," she pointed out. He just shrugged.

Looking around, Harry finally noticed the Goblet of Fire was placed in front of Dumbledore's spot on the Head Table. A large woman that could rival Hagrid in size sat in the seat to the right of Dumbledore's. She wore black satin and had her long hair pulled back tightly. Her black eyes didn't look anywhere as friendly as Hagrid's as she seemed to scan the crowd of students.

Sitting to the left of Professor Dumbledore's chair was a man wearing furs with short, grayish-white hair that was slicked back. He seemed small when compared to the woman but a little taller than Professor Snape who sat at his right. The man also had a goatee that hid

most of his chin. He was periodically glancing at Professor Snape who seemed to want nothing more than to ignore the man completely.

"Hum, interesting, why is that Snivellus?" James asked narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

Noticing Harry's confusion at the Head Table, Hermione informed Harry that the large woman was Madame Maxime from Beauxbatons and the man was Professor Karkaroff from Durmstrang.

"That's the one I was worried about," Sirius remembered, "Wonder why?"

In addition to the two visiting teachers, Ludo Bagman was present at the Head Table along with Mr. Crouch. Harry couldn't help but feel relieved that Sirius wasn't here since he had a serious problem with Mr. Crouch.

"Who wouldn't?" Sirius growled.

Professor Dumbledore finally arrived and the feast began. Having missed out on nearly an entire day of meals, Harry thought he would have been famished but his mind was still preoccupied with what had happened last night and this afternoon. He mindlessly fiddled with his necklace that was around his neck as he ate slowly. It was hidden from view underneath his collared shirt which was where Harry wanted it to stay. He had no idea how he was going to explain this to Sirius and Remus, let alone Ron and Hermione.

"You just explain, they are not going to be angry about something you can't control and is not your fault," James said evenly looking at Remus. Remus, who got the hidden message, continued reading hiding his face behind the book. Sirius lowered the book with his finger and shook his head. Even after all this years Remus was still scared his friends would leave him.

Eventually the plates cleared as silence filled the Hall. Everyone looked up at the Head Table and watched as Professor Dumbledore stood to address his audience. "Now that everyone is fed and watered, the Goblet will make its decision momentarily," he said. "For those who are chosen, please come forward and proceed on to the chamber behind us to receive instructions."

All four of them perked up at this and tensed in anticipation.

Suddenly all of the candles went out except those inside the carved pumpkins. The Goblet seemed to illuminate with bluish-white flames. The tension in the Hall thickened as everyone

waited. Several people gasped as the flames changed to red followed by sparks flying out almost like firecrackers. A second later a large flame erupted into the air with a piece of parchment. Dumbledore snatched it out of the flame but held it close to the light to be able to read the name as the flame returned to its bluish-white state.

"The first champion selected is from Durmstrang," announced Professor Dumbledore. "Viktor Krum!"

"Knew he'd be chosen," Lily said.

"Lily, I never pegged you for thinking that just because he is a great Quidditch player he'd be good in anything else," James said amused.

"It's logical thinking James, this book may be from the future but it's still a book. If Krum was introduced while none of the other Durmstrang students were introduced it's logical to think that he'll play a major roll," she said rolling her eyes. James was put out. He's reasoning for Krum being chosen had been exactly what he said.

Applause filled the Hall. Harry noticed Viktor Krum stand from where he was sitting at the Slytherin table and proceed to the designated area. Professor Karkaroff congratulated his student as he passed, clapping louder than anyone else. It appeared that everyone had been rooting for Krum to be the Durmstrang champion.

As the noised faded, everyone once again stared at the Goblet and waited. They didn't have to wait long for the flames to turn red again as another parchment flew out along with flames. Once again Professor Dumbledore grabbed the parchment and held it close to the flames to read the next champion chosen.

"For Beauxbatons," said Dumbledore. "The champion will be Fleur Delacour!"

The applause for the second champion was certainly more polite than the first. Several of the champion's fellow classmates were in tears as the tall, blondish-silver haired young woman entered the chamber, joining Krum.

"Not very good losers are they?" Remus said.

Harry couldn't help but notice the second champion slightly resembled a Veela but kept his mouth shut. His experience with Remus told him that not all people were receptive to half-breeds if that was what Fleur Delacour was.

Sirius and James growled angrily. Remus had to hide behind the book again so his friends didn't see him smiling.

For the third time silence filled the hall as everyone focused on the Goblet. There was only one champion left to be chosen, the Hogwarts champion. Each house waited in suspense, wanting someone from their own house to be chosen. What seemed like an eternity but in reality was probably a few moments, the Goblet again turned red followed by sparks flying out. A large flame shot out along with a piece of parchment containing the name of the final champion.

Professor Dumbledore took the parchment and glanced at the name before addressing the awaiting staff and students. "And from Hogwarts," he said pleasantly. "Cedric Diggory!"

Lily, Sirius and Remus clapped and cheered. James had a pout on.

The entire Hufflepuff table roared in applause as they all rose to their feet with the entire Ravenclaw table following suit. A large amount of Gryffindors also stood and applauded, Harry being one of them. Cedric appeared to be overwhelmed as he retreated to the chamber where the other two champions were waiting. Slowly, the applause died down allowing Professor Dumbledore to speak again.

"Now that our champions are chosen," Dumbledore began, "We hope that all of you will give your champion the support they need. Sometimes a little encouragement is all someone requires to go the extra—"

"Why did Dumbledore stop talking? Who managed to silence the Supreme Mumguwmp?" James asked.

The Goblet shocked everyone by turning red once again. Murmurs broke out as sparks flew. For the fourth time that night a flame shot out along with a piece of parchment. Professor Dumbledore carefully pulled the parchment out of the fire and read the name on it. Silence filled the hall as Dumbledore slowly blinked and inhaled deeply. He cleared his throat then looked up at the students who were all waiting in a mixture of confusion and suspense.

"I don't like this, I don't like this at all," Lily mumbled nervously. The boys weren't in a better state.

"Harry Potter," Professor Dumbledore announced.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" four cries were heard.

"This is not happening, no, no, no, no, no," Sirius kept shaking his head.

At first Harry thought his ears were playing tricks on him. He had heard wrong. He must have. Professor Dumbledore had not just called his name. This was all a dream...a very bad dream which he would soon wake up from. That was the only explanation. Unfortunately when everyone turned their attention to him Harry knew he hadn't heard wrong. He knew his nightmare was a reality.

Harry closed his eyes as he finally began to process what he had just heard. "Please tell me this isn't happening," he quietly pleaded but received no answer as he knew he wouldn't. Opening his eyes, Harry didn't dare look at those around him. He didn't want to see their shocked, suspicious or evil looks that he was probably receiving.

"Don't give my baby evil looks!" James cried, **"He doesn't want to be in this stupid tournament! He didn't put his name in!"**

"Yeah, but I bet most people will think he did," Remus said grimly.

"Harry Potter," Professor Dumbledore called again. "Please come forward."

Reluctantly, Harry stood and approached the Head Table as he shook his head slowly. He was trapped between feelings of disbelief and anger. Why couldn't he have just one normal year? Why did he always have to be singled out? Looking directly at Professor Dumbledore, Harry knew the old man noticed Harry's range of emotions and motioned for him to join the champions in the chamber behind the Head Table. There was no smile on the Headmaster's face. Neither were pleased with this happening.

"Dumbledore doesn't think Harry put his name in the Goblet, does he?" Lily asked appalled.

"I sure hope not!" Sirius exclaimed.

Harry didn't look at anyone else as he followed the same path the other three students had taken into the chamber. Entering, Harry didn't pay attention to any details of the room or the three teenagers who currently occupied it. He simply walked over to the corner of the room

and sat down on the floor, pulling his knees to his chest. He ignored the confused gazes he received from the three champions who were standing by the fireplace.

Cedric Diggory was the first to say something. "Harry?" he asked curiously. "Harry, are you all right?"

"Of course he's not!" James cried angry, "Someone just entered him in a tournament where people die! What did you think? That he was going to be fine and dandy?"

"James! He is trying to help!" Remus said. But James was too nervous to pay attention.

Harry just shook his head and buried his face in his knees. He had never wanted to disappear as badly as he did right now. How in the world was he supposed to be a part of something catered for seventh year students? He heard someone approach and crouch down in front of him but couldn't bring himself to look up to find out who it was.

The door opened once again followed by a group of people hurrying into the room. Harry remained completely still, hoping against hope that he wouldn't be noticed. Everyone started talking at once. Harry quickly put his hands over his ears hoping to shut it out. He knew they were talking about him. He knew they were complaining about him. He knew no one would defend him.

"Dumbledore better defend you or he'll have to answer to me!" Sirius growled angrily.

"And remembering the Howler, we know you'll have no problem to speak your mind to him," Remus said, "I may have something to say too," he finished narrowing his eyes towards the book.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Professor Dumbledore said loudly, silencing the arguments. "I can not explain how Harry's name was chosen or why we have four champions instead of three. And before you start Professor Karkaroff, I assure you Harry did *not* find a way past the Age Line or convince someone to put his name in for him. He has been in the hospital wing since before dinner last night."

"Well done. Knew we could count on Dumbledore," Remus said pleased, "Now get Harry out of the tournament!" he ordered.

"So how do you explain this then?" asked Professor Karkaroff. "There can't be two Hogwarts champions and only one from the others."

"Unfortunately there is nothing we can do," Mr. Crouch said curtly. "The rules clearly state that all of those chosen by the Goblet of Fire must compete in the Tournament. Since the fire has gone out, no more champions can be chosen until the next Tournament."

"What do you mean *must compete*? My son is not competing!" Lily cried.

"So we have to accept this?" Karkaroff shouted. "Unacceptable! I knew this would never work! I should take my students and leave!"

"Then go! No one will miss you!" Sirius cried.

"Maybe if he goes they have to cancel the tournament and then Harry will be okay," James said hopefully.

"But you can't, Karkaroff," growled Professor Moody. "Your champion must compete along with the rest of them. This is a binding magical contract. Quite convenient, wouldn't you say?"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!" they all cried.

"Whatever are you talking about, Moody?" asked Karkaroff.

"Well it's quite obvious if you think about it," Moody growled. "Since we have ruled Potter out of putting his own name in, the only possible explanation is someone put Potter's name in the Goblet, knowing he like everyone else chosen would be forced to compete. He would have to face the dangers that had been set up based on a seventh year's knowledge. If you look over at Potter you can see that this is clearly the last place he wants to be."

"Someone's trying to kill him!" James cried, "And there's no way out!" he finished desperately.

As if on cue, everyone looked around the room until they noticed someone huddled in the corner behind Cedric. Professor McGonagall hurried over to Harry's side, knowing she could simply say she was responsible for Harry because he was in her house and no one would be the wiser since the majority of the adults weren't aware of how close Harry was with the majority of the teaching staff. "Mr. Potter, are you all right?" she asked.

Harry slowly looked up at her then glanced around the room, noticing everyone was staring at him. Rubbing his eyes underneath his glasses, Harry knew now wasn't the time to be entirely

truthful and nodded. He met Dumbledore's stare though and both of them knew he was far from all right.

"Back to the topic at hand," Bagman announced trying to change the topic. "Barty, the champions need their instructions."

"No, what the champions need is for *you* to get *my* son out of this tournament," Lily said in a tone that the Marauders would never have dared disobey.

Mr. Crouch seemed to snap out of a deep thought and clear his throat. "Yes, the first task will test your courage," he said. "You will not be told of what it will be until the day of the task, November twenty-fourth. None of you are allowed to ask for or accept help from your teachers on the tasks in this Tournament. You will face this first challenge armed with only your wand. Once this task is completed, you will receive information on the second task. Since this Tournament is extremely demanding, all of you are excused from your end-of-year-tests. That is all, right Albus?"

"What? You expect him to face some unknown danger with only his wand and no prior knowledge?" Remus cried appalled. The others were too shocked to comment.

"I believe so," Professor Dumbledore said with a nod. "You do know you are welcomed to stay at Hogwarts, Barty—"

"No, I need to return to the Ministry," Crouch interrupted. "Young Weatherby was left in charge and is probably overwhelmed by now."

Everyone took that as their cue to leave. Madam Maxime ushered Fleur out of the room with Professor Karkaroff following her with Viktor. Harry noticed Fleur and Viktor glance at him with what appeared to be a mixture of suspicion and confusion on their faces...well, more on Fleur's than Viktor's. Viktor seemed to have only one expression, a brooding one.

"Hey you, you, French girl! Don't look suspiciously at my son," Lily growled.

"Oh, Lily, you do need to learn name calling. French girl? What's that supposed to achieve," Sirius said. Lily glared at him.

"Cedric, I suggest you retreat to the Hufflepuff Tower," advised Professor Dumbledore in a pleasant but firm tone. "I imagine your housemates are eagerly awaiting your return to celebrate."

Diggory nodded as he stood up. He glanced back at Harry before leaving. Once the door closed, Harry knew he was in trouble. Being surrounded by Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Professor Moody and Professor Snape was certainly not a good thing no matter who you may be.

"Excuse me? Trouble? He did nothing!" Remus cried, "Padfoot get your Howler paper!" he ordered.

Closing his eyes, Harry tilted his head back until it hit the wall. He stared up at the ceiling, not really seeing anything at all. He knew that none of the other champions believed that he had nothing to do with this meaning the entire school would be the same. Would they stand by him? Hate him? Ridicule him? Harry could only shudder at the thought. This was exactly why he didn't want to compete in the first place.

"Harry, I know there is nothing I can say that would ease your worries but I must insist that you try to keep a level head," Professor Dumbledore said patiently, trying to bring Harry out of his silence.

"And how exactly is he supposed to do that?" Sirius asked.

"Easy for you to say! You're not the one facing unknown danger!" James cried annoyed.

"We *will* find out who put your name in the Goblet."

Harry sat up straight and looked directly at Dumbledore. "What's the point?" he asked simply. "I still have to compete in this thing." He let out a sigh and stood up. He needed to get out of here. He needed to be alone to think. "I'm going to go wake up now," Harry added softly then left everyone in silence. It was clear that Harry had far from a level head at the moment.

"Do you think this has to do with that dream he had at the beginning?" Lily asked worriedly. The boys looked grim.

Walking through the now empty Great Hall, Harry tried to think of some place to go. The last place he wanted to go was the Gryffindor Tower. He didn't want to face his housemates yet. They would all either be offended that he accomplished what they could not or congratulate him for being able to represent the Gryffindor House. Harry didn't want to hear either.

Before Harry knew it, he found himself up in the Owlery with Hedwig perched on his shoulder. He looked out into the darkness of the night and silently prayed that this was all just a joke

despite what he knew deep down to be true. Panic had begun to set in. What was he going to tell Sirius and Remus? Would they believe him?

"Of course we will," Sirius cried. Remus nodded.

Would anyone? Harry hardly believed it so how could he expect anyone else? His only defense was that he had been in the hospital wing the entire time. That was why the teachers believed him.

At least that was what they said.

"I don't think that," Remus said, "I think Dumbledore knows someone is trying to hurt Harry. He would have believed even if he didn't have an alibi."

Harry let out a sigh as he leaned forward against the railing, still staring out into the darkness. He didn't know when he had become so skeptical of everyone. Perhaps it was when he discovered his innocent godfather had been imprisoned for twelve years without a trial. Maybe it was when he found out how the wizarding world mistreated werewolves. Maybe it was the training Sirius had given him this summer. It was hard to say. All Harry knew was that his view of this world had changed. The problem was he really didn't know what it had changed into yet.

"That's called growing up and realizing the world is not perfect. Happens to all of us, you are just a little on the more traumatized side then the others and that's why you are more skeptical," Remus reasoned.

"You do realize you are out past curfew, Potter," a voice from behind said snidely making Harry jump in alarm and turn around to see Professor Snape. "Afraid to meet your adoring public?"

"Shut up Snivellus!" Lily cried.

Harry's gaze fell as he turned back around and once again stared out into the darkness. "You don't know anything about me, sir," he said softly. "If you did, you would know that would be the last thing I want." He heard Professor Snape taking a few steps closer and was surprised the man hadn't started taking points from Gryffindor yet.

"You're not the only one," Sirius mumbled.

"Is that so?" Snape asked coldly, leaving no sign that he actually cared at all. "So what do you want?"

Closing his eyes and silently counting to a quick ten to keep his temper in tact, Harry held out his arm and waiting for Hedwig to move from his shoulder to his arm. Once she settled on her new perch, Harry looked into her eyes and glanced up at the other owls. Hedwig let out a hoot before flying up and landing besides a sleeping brown owl. Turning around again, Harry met Professor Snape's cold stare with his own pleading eyes. "I want to disappear," Harry said sincerely. "I want to be like everyone else...a nobody."

"The problem is the majority wants exactly the opposite, want recognition. They won't understand that Harry doesn't like the attention. And that's why they'll think he put his name in," James said.

Lily looked shocked, "James! I am impressed!"

"I can be deep when I want to."

"Unfortunately, those are rare occasions," Remus mumbled. Sirius stifled a laugh and James glared at him.

Professor Snape narrowed his gaze for a long moment. It was almost like he was trying to figure out if Harry was being truthful by looking into the teen's eyes. Not feeling comfortable with the Potion Master's stare, Harry had to look away then walked around his teacher, wanting to leave as soon as possible. What was the use? No one would believe him anyways.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said as Harry reached the door. "We all have wants and desires. The problem is very few of us will ever be able to fulfill them. It is better to accept the life fate has handed to you than to waste your time on dreams that will never come true."

"I know," Harry said softly. "I just hate wanting what everyone takes for granted." He left the Professor Snape in a stunned silence. He knew Snape had always assumed he had loved the publicity that came with being the-boy-who-lived. He knew everyone probably assumed that. Harry was abruptly pulled out of his thoughts when he reached the Fat Lady. He muttered the password then entered into silence. From the looks of things everyone had given up waiting for him.

Harry couldn't help but feel relieved.

As quietly as possible, Harry dragged himself up to his dorm room, hoping against hope that his roommates were all asleep. He entered the room slowly and was instantly overwhelmed by darkness along with Neville and Ron's snoring. *Well, at least they're asleep*, Harry noted.

The problem was Harry was wide awake since he had slept most of the day. He pulled his shoes off and retreated to the windowsill and stared out into the cloudy darkness. He could finally feel his frustration coming to the surface and wanted nothing more than to punch the wall but knew that would most likely wake up everyone in the Tower...well, maybe everyone but Ron.

"And James," Sirius said.

"Excuse me, what is that supposed to mean?" James asked affronted.

"That you could sleep through a bombing James," Remus said patiently.

"You're just jealous," James snorted.

"You know, the worst part is he is right," Sirius told Remus who nodded grimly.

Harry spent the remainder of the night trying not to think of anything at all which was easier said than done. By the time dawn arrived Harry had mentally run through every possible reaction Ron, Hermione, Sirius and Remus could possibly have and none of them ended on a good note. With each scenario, Harry's imagination grew and the reactions of his friends and family grew worse.

"That is as far from what is going to happen as possible Harry," Remus tried to soothe Harry.

Staring out at the lake, Harry watched the sun slowly rise, lighting up the Durmstrang ship. It seemed impossible to believe how out of control everything could become in the time frame of two days. Two days ago Harry just had his schoolwork to worry about. Well, two days ago he also worried about magical outbursts but that was now taken care of. One step forward, two steps back.

Resting his head against the cool window, Harry once again tried not to think. He knew there would be people who didn't believe him. He knew he was going to be singled out just like he had been while living with the Dursleys. He would be the one everyone made fun of. It was amazing how similar his life was no matter what world he was in.

Unable to wait anymore, Harry jumped off the windowsill and went to his trunk. It didn't take him long to find the small mirror Sirius had given him for emergencies and this was definitely an emergency. He needed to talk to his guardians. He needed their help.

"Yes, go to Moony and Padfoot. They'll get you out of the tournament and have a few choice words with Dumbledore," Lily said. Sirius smirked and she glared at him.

"You called me Padfoot, next thing you know you'll be calling James Prongs and dating him."

Lily huffed. James beamed.

Harry put on his shoes and grabbed a cloak to wear then left the dorm room as quietly as he came leaving no sign that he had even been there last night. He continued down the stairs, through the Common Room, out of the Gryffindor Tower, and out of the castle as he put his cloak on. He needed some place where no one could find him for a while. He needed some place where no one would hear Sirius yell.

"And he's gonna!" James said and Sirius nodded.

Sitting down by the lake, Harry looked at the mirror in his hand and called for his godfather, silently praying that the man would have his own mirror on hand. When he received no answer, Harry called again only louder this time. After another long silence, Harry was ready to give up when the sleepy face of Sirius Black appeared in the mirror.

"Harry?" Sirius asked in confusion. "Harry, you really need to stop channeling Moony. No one in their right mind is awake this early on a Sunday."

"Are you saying I am not in my right mind?" Remus asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Moony, that is common knowledge," Sirius said evenly.

Sirius was silent for a moment as his grogginess slowly passed. He took a good look at Harry and frowned. "Did you sleep at all last night?"

"No," Harry answered honestly. "Sirius, something happened and I don't know what to do."

Sirius rubbed his eyes, now completely awake. "Did you have another episode?" he asked instantly.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "No—yes, I had one but that's not what I need to talk to you about," he said quickly. "Sirius, someone entered me in the Tournament. I swear it wasn't me. I don't know who did it but Crouch, Bagman and Dumbledore all say I have to compete in this thing. You helped arrange it. Please tell me there is a way I can get out of it."

"Yes! That's right! I forgot about that! We'll be able to get Harry out," Sirius said confidently. Remus bit his lower lip skeptically.

Sirius looked absolutely confused. "Slow down there, Pronglet," he said. "Start from the beginning and don't leave anything out."

So Harry did. He told Sirius as much as he could remember about his headache and what Professor Dumbledore had done to correct the problem. He then went on and explained how it would have been impossible for him to enter himself in the Tournament and everything that happened after his name had been called. To say Sirius was furious would have been an understatement. Fortunately, Sirius wasn't angry at Harry.

"I can't believe Dumbledore didn't contact us," Sirius ranted. "I honestly don't know what we can do about the Tournament but trust me when I say Moony and I will certainly have a few words with Dumbledore. He had no right to put that thing on you without consulting us first."

Sirius and Remus were nodding fervently. "A lot of words," Sirius mumbled.

Sirius held his tongue as he calmed down. "As hard as this may be, Harry, try not to worry about this. I believe you. I know you would never put your name in the Goblet. Explain what happened to your friends. When they see how distraught you are over this they will have no choice but to believe you. If they don't and start to give you a hard time then they weren't really your friends to begin with."

"That's nice in theory but practically. Fourteen year olds being rational?" Lily asked.

"Sirius, what am I going to do?" Harry asked fearfully. "How can I not think about it?"

"Listen Harry, Moony and I will be there as soon as we can," Sirius said reassuringly. "We'll figure something out. I promise."

Now Harry felt bad for telling Sirius the truth. He hadn't intended on Sirius dropping everything and coming. He had just wanted someone to talk to. "Sirius, I'll be fine," he said quickly. "Really. You don't have to come. I'm sure you and Moony have more important things to do—"

James smacked his forehead.

"Nice try, Harry," Sirius interrupted. "Nothing is more important than you. Remus and I will be there before you know it. We need to straighten a few things out with Dumbledore anyways. Hang in there, kiddo."

"Good Sirius, don't let Harry fool you," Lily said approvingly.

Harry watched as Sirius vanished from the mirror. The cold morning breeze caused Harry to shiver, forcing him to pull his cloak around him tightly. He knew he couldn't stay out here long but he really didn't want to go back to the castle. Sirius believed him which was the good news. The bad news was that Sirius and Remus were coming to Hogwarts and probably wouldn't be in the best of moods when they did. The question now was whether Ron and Hermione would believe him too.

He had no idea how long he stayed by the lake, just staring at nothing in particular. He had cast a heating charm on his cloak and no longer felt the cold morning air but knew he wouldn't stay out here forever. Sirius was right. He needed to get his mind off of this. Diving into his schoolwork would do that but it would also require returning to the Gryffindor Tower.

And that is completely out of the question.

Moving so he was resting against a large rock, Harry closed his eyes and listened. He could hear the water hitting the shore and the Durmstrang ship, the tree branches blowing in the wind and the distant noises from various creatures in the forest. Focusing on that, Harry could feel himself relaxing. He could feel his exhaustion from being up all night catching up to him.

"That is not a good idea Harry, you'll wake up all sore," James said.

"Better than going back to the tower," Sirius said grimly.

Chapter 9

Rita Skeeter

"Isn't she the one that needs to get a life?" Sirius asked. Lily nodded.

"I found him!"

"Didn't know you were looking," James said and Lily cuffed the back of his head.

Harry heard someone hurry to his side but he really didn't want to open his eyes yet. He felt warm and relaxed; something he hadn't felt all night. A cold hand touched his face making him shiver. Reluctantly, Harry slowly opened his eyes to see Hermione's concerned face as four redheads came into sight. Harry was suddenly confused. Why did everyone look so relieved? It was still an hour before breakfast started, wasn't it?

They all were wearing cloaks along with scarves and gloves. Wrapped in his cloak that still had the heating spell on it, Harry could only feel the cold breeze against his face. It was still cold out but certainly not as cold as before when he had been talking with his godfather. How long had he been out here? It didn't seem like that long to have everyone so worried.

"Since you fell asleep, who knows? Could be hours or minutes," Lily said.

"Yeah, but he doesn't know. And he's sleepy. I can't think straight when I am sleepy," Sirius said.

"Can you ever think straight?" Lily asked with such a straight face that it took Sirius a few moments to get offended.

"We've been looking everywhere for you, Harry," Hermione said quickly. "Professor Dumbledore was about to start a search for you. What are you doing out here in the cold? Have you been out here all night?"

"What?" Harry asked in confusion. "Why would Dumbledore start a search? The majority of the school is still sleeping."

The four Weasley siblings looked at each other nervously. "Er—Harry, it's nearly time for lunch," George said. "You must have fallen asleep out here or something. You've been 'missing' for a few hours."

"Still, overreacting much!" James said rolling his eyes.

"Considering Harry's history and what happened the previews night, Professor Dumbledore must be keeping an extra careful eye on Harry," Remus reasoned.

Harry let out a groan and he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He could already feel stiffness in his neck and knew he would probably be paying for falling asleep out here for the remainder of the day. "Sorry," he said softly as he put his glasses back on his face. "I guess I was more tired than I thought. Are Sirius and Remus here yet?"

"They're coming?" asked Ron.

"Well, yeah, of course we're coming," Sirius said annoyed, "Someone puts my godsons name in a Tournament where people die and you think I think I am going to stay at home twirling my fingers!"

Harry nodded as he looked out at the lake. The sun was nearly above them directly. He had been sleeping for a few hours. "Sirius wasn't happy when he found out someone entered me in the Tournament," Harry said in the same quite voice.

"Wasn't happy is a mild way to put it," Remus snorted, "Sirius wasn't happy when James decided to wake him up with and *aguamenti* charm. This is more like Sirius was ready to kill Dumbledore and anyone involved in organizing the Tournament."

"Hum, Moony," James started cautiously, "You two were involved in the organization too."

Remus blanched, looked at Sirius then inched away from him cautiously.

"It didn't help that I wasn't exactly thinking clearly when I told him. I was hoping there was some way to get out of it."

"How were you able to talk to Sirius?" Hermione asked in confusion. "There aren't exactly any fireplaces out here."

Harry pulled out his mirror and handed it over to Hermione. "Sirius has the other," he said. "I just have to say his name and we can talk. Apparently Sirius and my dad used them quite a bit when they were in separate detentions."

Lily huffed and glared at the offending Marauders.

Fred and George looked at the mirror eagerly. "Brilliant," said Fred in amazement. He then looked at Harry with a baffled look on his face. "Er—don't take this the wrong way, Harry, but why would you want to find a way out of the Tournament?" he asked.

"See, told you, people won't understand!" James said exasperated.

Harry looked over at Fred in disbelief. "Are you kidding me?" he asked. "This Tournament was created for *seventh* year students, not fourth. I'm not ready for anything like this and even if I was, I wouldn't do it. I don't need the attention that comes with this. I don't *want* the attention that comes with this." He returned his eyes to the lake. "I think I'll just stay out here."

"Not very practical," Lily said grimly, "People will go out eventually and they'll see you. Besides, you shouldn't hide, they are the ones that should learn to let you be!" she finished on a lecturing tone.

"You have to face everyone sooner or later, Harry," Hermione said gently as she handed the small mirror back to Harry. "We know you didn't put your name in the Goblet. You had no time. You were in the hospital wing. We believe you. That's all that matters."

"Yeah, but would they believe him if he hadn't been in the Hospital Wing?" Remus asked.

"Probably not," James answered grimly, "Maybe Ron and Hermione, but not the rest of the school. I bet they don't believe now. Even though he has an alibi."

Fred and George approached Harry and helped him to his feet. "Now, dear brother," George said with a smile and a wink. "It is our duty and privilege to prank anyone who gives you a hard time."

"Think of it as a trial run for our joke shop," Fred added. "You will be providing us test subjects—"

"—who need to be taught a lesson," George finished for his brother.

"Oh, I so love them!" James said.

"At least you aren't testing your experiments on me anymore, I'm all for it," Ron said with a grin. "Let's go to lunch. I'm starving."

"Ron!" Hermione scolded. "I can't believe you can think of food at a time like this."

"Food is important!" Sirius stated. Lily huffed and mumbled something that sounded like "boys" and "endless pits".

Receiving only a helpless shrug from Ron, Hermione rolled her eyes and turned back to Harry. "So what happened last night? Diggory said you were pretty shaken up when we talked to him this morning. Does Dumbledore know who put your name in the Goblet?"

"Snape!"

"James, Snape is a teacher, he has no reason to do that," Lily said annoyed.

"He's evil," James stated.

"And he hates Harry," Sirius added.

"Dumbledore trusts him enough to hire him," Remus said in a no nonsense tone, "therefore he wouldn't do that."

"Then who?" James asked.

"No idea," Remus answered.

Harry shook his head as the group started walking back to the castle. He removed the heating charm from his cloak and shivered when the cold finally reached his body. Entering the castle, Harry couldn't help but feel relieved. Hermione and Ron believed him along with Fred, George and Ginny. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

They entered the Great Hall and sat down at the end of the Gryffindor table. Ron and Hermione tried to start several conversations but it was clear that the only thing that really was on everyone's minds was the Tournament. There was a large crowd at the Hufflepuff table around Cedric Diggory mostly consisting of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students. Everyone seemed to be hanging on Cedric's every word. Harry had to smile when Hermione let out a huff in annoyance. At least they were focusing on Cedric and not on him.

"That's not going to last," Lily said with a grimace.

"Yep, I bet Malfoy is just waiting to torment Harry," James agreed.

"Honestly, I can't believe some people," Hermione said. "How can they just fawn over him like this?"

"Fame is a fickle thing, Miss Granger," Fred said seriously earning snickers from George, Ginny and Ron. Even Hermione smiled slightly at the comment. After all, who knew better about how fickle fame was than the friends of the-boy-who-lived?

After lunch, Harry, Hermione and the Weasley siblings retreated to the Gryffindor Tower. Knowing that Harry wanted peace and quiet more than anything, Hermione and the Weasley siblings surrounded Harry at a table in the Gryffindor Common Room as they worked on their schoolwork. Several people tried to approach Harry and ask about the Tournament but the four Weasley siblings sent everyone away with a look while Hermione kept Harry focused on anything but those who tried to talk to Harry about being the fourth Champion.

"You know, Hermione is kind of like Moony," Sirius said.

"What's that supposed to mean," Remus asked offended.

"That she's the one that makes them do their homework and study when there are more interesting things to do like pranking and-"

"Pranking," James added.

"Sirius already said that," Lily said.

"Pranking is very important," he said back.

By late afternoon, everyone knew to keep their distance from the table in the far corner of the Common Room. When Gryffindors had been denied the chance to question Harry most simply found a spot in the Common Room and worked on schoolwork while stealing glances at Harry hoping against hope for a chance to speak to him. Conversations were kept to whispers except for the occasional outcry in annoyance.

"From Harry?" Sirius asked in an annoyed tone.

"No from the students that want to bother him," Lily answered in the same tone.

"Well," he started calmly, "YOU HAVE NOTHING TO BE ANNOYED ABOUT!" he suddenly yelled making the other three jump.

This was extremely irritating but Harry bit his tongue and tried to ignore it. He hated that people were treating him just like they had in his first year. He had thought those in his own

house knew him well enough to know he hated attention. He didn't think he needed to resort to having the Weasley family serve as his bodyguards although it seemed to amuse Fred and George to no end.

Everyone was paying too much attention to Harry or their own schoolwork to notice the portrait entrance opening and two individuals entering the Common Room. No one saw how they scanned the room trying to find one individual out of the mass. They did notice a mass of red hair near the far corner and figured that was the best place to start.

"This is just sad," the voice of Sirius Black proclaimed loudly, getting everyone's attention. "It's Sunday afternoon and everyone is inside—in here, studying. Life at Hogwarts has certainly changed."

"I have to agree," Sirius said sadly then he shouted: "SACRILEGE!"

The other three winced and James rubbed his ears, "Sirius! I am too young to go deaf!"

Everyone stared in shock. Sirius Black, the only man to escape Azkaban, godfather and guardian to Harry Potter was in their Common Room along with their former Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Remus Lupin. "Yes, it's amazing how much can change in a year," Remus observed. "I can't seem to remember ever seeing such a sight."

"I think there may be a Dementor around or something," Sirius said thoughtfully, "because this has to be my worst fear: children studying willingly on the weekends. Next thing we know Snape is going to be running around the halls with a smile on his face...laughing...singing...dancing—"

"ARGH! SIRIUS!" Remus cried.

"I think I'll never sleep again," James said horrified.

"Aargh!" Remus shouted in disgust. "Sirius, stop that! You're going to give everyone nightmares." He shivered visibly. "Including me."

Sirius grinned as he enfolded his fingers and stretched out his arms in front of him. "Then my work is done," he said proudly then looked at the students who were watching them in amazement. "Now, do any of you know where my godson may be hiding?"

Harry closed his books and stood up. "I'm right here, Sirius," he said then carefully maneuvered around everyone to reach his guardians, desperately trying to hold back a smile. "You two really know how to make an entrance." Harry looked at Sirius with a raised eyebrow. "Snape singing and dancing? Could you think of anything less likely to happen or more traumatizing?"

"I bet I could," Sirius said.

"We know you can, that's what worries us," Remus said rolling his eyes.

Sirius shrugged. "I don't know stranger things have happened," he said then thought for a moment. "I can't think of anything right now but give me some time." Sirius looked at Harry closely, his recent good mood now gone from his face. "Are you free for a walk around the grounds?"

Harry nodded then left with his guardians, completely forgetting about the entire Common Room full of people had been watching them. The moment they stepped out of the Gryffindor Tower Harry found himself pulled into a fierce embrace by Sirius followed by another from Remus. Looking up at his guardians, Harry could see it on their faces. He still had to compete in the Tournament.

"What, no! Do something!" James shouted.

"Hum, James, we kind of knew that," Lily said carefully.

"No we didn't," he said.

"The book's title is "Trial of a *champion*" and Harry is the main character. I doubt they'd be talking about Diggory," she explained. James looked crestfallen.

"What did Professor Dumbledore say?" Harry asked softly.

Remus let out a sigh as he put an arm around Harry's shoulders and started to walk down the hallway, silently implying for Harry and Sirius to keep up with him. "He apologized for not informing us about your outburst on Friday," he said softly. "Even though we don't agree with the way it was handled both Sirius and I agree that this is the best solution especially with you now in this Tournament. You are going to need to keep your head in these tasks and having your Magic acting up could be disastrous for you."

"We tried to get you out of the Tournament, Harry," Sirius added. "We really did but the binding magical contract is irreversible. Believe me when I tell you that Dumbledore knows he messed up. He knows there's someone here that is trying to hurt you. He's rechecking everyone that has arrived to find out who is the threat."

"Can't they just cancel the Tournament. If there is no Tournament to play in there's no problem," James reasoned.

"James-" Lily started.

"I don't care about the title," he shouted.

"Ok! You don't," Remus said calmly, "Let's look at this logically. This is an international Tournament that took a lot of diplomacy and deals with the other countries to happen. They can't just tell the others 'Oh, well, we're going to cancel this because of one student'. That would be disastrous for International Magical Cooperation." James huffed but accepted.

"What do you think of all this?" Harry asked softly. He couldn't help but wonder if something else had happened in Professor Dumbledore's office. Sirius was being a little too diplomatic. Sirius was never diplomatic.

"Understating a little," Lily snickered. James and Remus chuckled. Sirius wasn't denying anything.

Remus was the diplomat. Remus was the calm one. Looking from one guardian to the other, Harry started to feel nervous. "What's going on?"

Sirius and Remus shared a quick glance. "Let's just say we're not exactly seeing eye to eye with Dumbledore right now," Remus said carefully. "We don't agree with Dumbledore forcing you to compete since you didn't enter your own name in the Goblet." Harry moved to object in Dumbledore's defense but Remus stopped him. "Yes, we know about the contract, Harry, but that doesn't mean we have to like it. Dumbledore assured us no one would be able to get past the protection he had put on the Goblet."

"Yes he did! Very shoddy protection if you ask me," James huffed.

"And from what I've heard no one did," Harry assured Remus as they reached the moving staircases. "No one under the age of seventeen passed the age barrier. *That* was the restriction."

"Meaning anyone over the age of seventeen could have somehow confused the Goblet into accepting your name somehow," Sirius concluded. "That seems a rather complicated task for a seventh year to manage which leaves the adults. My key suspect is Karkaroff."

"Why? I'd think you would suspect Snape," Lily asked.

"Maybe he grew up," Remus said.

"I highly doubt that," Sirius said.

"Hum, Sirius, that should have been Lily's phrase," James laughed.

"There's no bigger fool than the one that fools himself," Sirius said wisely.

Harry shook his head as they descended down the stairs. "I don't think so," he countered. "Professor Karkaroff and Madam Maxime weren't happy about me competing in the slightest. Karkaroff even threatened to take Krum out of the Tournament. The only other adults that I saw were Crouch and Bagman but why would they enter me? It doesn't make sense."

"But Karkaroff would have to appear unhappy right? Or he'd be as good as confessing," Lily reasoned.

"But don't you think that would be a bit obvious. I mean, Sirius was worried about him during the summer and Dumbledore brought an ex- Auror probably because of him. They must be keeping him in constant supervision," James said, "Nah, I think we're missing something."

"No, it doesn't," Remus agreed. "Bagman doesn't have the brains to even try to pull something like this off and Crouch wouldn't even dare do something like this especially with everything that's happened lately." Both Harry and Remus glanced at Sirius who was now being oddly quiet. It had been a large blow to the Ministry when Sirius had been declared innocent. Since he hadn't been given a trial, many questions had been raised to the treatment of those punished for Death Eater activities all those years ago. Questions that the Ministry really didn't want being asked which was why they had been so eager to give Sirius anything he wanted, included guardianship of Harry Potter.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and continued walking to the Entrance Hall. Students passing by gasped at the sight of Sirius Black walking by with Harry Potter. Sirius Black was almost as much of a celebrity as Harry. Many were curious how someone who had spent so much time in Azkaban could be a suitable guardian for a teenager, let alone Harry Potter.

Walking in silence until they stepped onto the grounds, Harry didn't like the tension he could almost feel from his guardians. It pained him to know that he was the reason they were like this. "I'm really sorry about this," Harry said softly. "I didn't mean to make you angry—"

"There he goes again. I want to throttle those Dursleys," Remus said angry.

Lily grimaced then grinned dangerously, "James, may I have a word with you later, in private."

"Why, you wanna declare your undying love to me," he asked.

"No, something much better," she answered. The other three looked curiously to her but she didn't offer any more explanations.

Sirius suddenly stopped walking and pulled Harry into a one armed embrace. "Don't you even start," he warned. "This is *not* your fault Harry. We're not angry at you, not in the slightest. We both know this is a lot to take on, especially with you being three years younger than the other competitors. All of this pressure is the last thing you need right now."

They spent the remaining time until dinner just talking about nothing in particular. Sirius and Remus had even admitted disinfecting the Black House was more of an obstacle than they had originally thought. Apparently Kreacher had done everything except clean for the past twelve years. Harry just listened, relieved for the distraction they provided. For a short while, everything felt normal.

Sirius and Remus had bid goodbye just as dinner was starting but not before overloading Harry with advice. They promised to be there for the first task at the end of November to support him and also warned him about the press. Having the-boy-who-lived in the Tournament was bound to be big news, worrying the two Marauders that Harry would be used as a ploy to sell papers. Harry promised that he wouldn't talk to any reporters without them there which eased the worries of the two men. They knew Harry wasn't ready for how cruel the press could actually be.

The next few days were certainly uncomfortable for Harry. He was rarely left alone which prevented many from approaching but didn't stop everyone from staring. It seemed like the Gryffindors could care less whether Harry entered himself or not. They were just overjoyed someone from Gryffindor was in the Tournament. The Hufflepuffs were clearly divided. Cedric Diggory was a part of the Hufflepuffs who were sympathetic to Harry's situation, bringing a

lot of his house with him. There were some, however, that thought Cedric was being too forgiving since this had been a chance for the Hufflepuff house to bask in the lime-light that was usually given to the Gryffindor or Slytherin houses.

"Well, it's not Harry's fault and if Cedric doesn't think so they shouldn't either," Lily huffed.

"Yeah, but I understand where they are coming from. Hufflepuff is seen as the pushover house that never achieves anything. This was their chance to prove that they do, that they are just as good as the others," James explained.

The Ravenclaw house was also split but weren't as visible about it. The only house that was extremely vocal about Harry being in the Tournament was the Slytherin house. Draco Malfoy wasted no time before he started taunting Harry about how dangerous the tasks would be.

"Knew he'd start sooner or later," Sirius mumbled annoyed.

Harry didn't say anything since he knew it was the truth. That was the entire reason the age restriction had been established in the first place.

Unable to handle the stares and whispers any more than he absolutely had to, Harry ended up spending the majority of his free time in the library. He worked through his homework only to then dive into other books on charms, spells, hexes...anything that could possibly help him with this Tournament. He knew he would need all the help he could get.

"You know James, I am starting to think that all Harry got from you is his looks and talent for flying, he clearly takes after his mother on the book department," Sirius said nonchalantly. Lily glared at him.

"I am not a bookworm Black! I am a responsible and interested student!"

"That's what they all say," he said calmly, "Don't worry, we'll bring you back to the light side." James snickered, even Remus had trouble biting his laugh.

By the time double Potions arrived on Friday afternoon, Harry was desperate for a weekend in solitary. Malfoy had to add to the aggravation by promptly displaying his new invention along with his housemates. All of the Slytherins wore large badges on their robes that lit up with the phrase: *Support Cedric Diggory, the REAL Hogwarts Champion*. Harry immediately turned away and stared out the window. He needed a vacation.

The next thing Harry knew Ron attacked Malfoy. Returning his attention to the situation, Harry noticed everyone's badges were now lit up with 'Potter Stinks' instead of their original phrase.

"How mature," Lily rolled her eyes. "Couldn't he think of something more original?"

Harry quickly helped Hermione pull Ron away from Malfoy and held him tightly, waiting for Ron to calm down. Without warning a shot of light flew past Harry and Ron, hitting Hermione.

"Hey, that's cowardice. They weren't expecting that!" James yelled.

Harry and Ron quickly turned to Hermione who was clutching her mouth. Without thinking, Harry pulled out his wand and quickly disabled the jinx. Moving Hermione away from the crowd, Harry slowly pried Hermione's hands away from her mouth and took a look. He could only bite his lip when he saw Hermione's front teeth had grown to look more like a beaver's than a human's. Hermione reached up and felt her new teeth as tears filled her eyes.

"Aw, poor Hermione," Lily said sorrowfully.

"We should take her to Madam Pomfrey," Ron muttered from where he was standing behind Harry.

Looking over his shoulder, Harry could see that Ron felt guilty for starting the fight and knew it was partially his fault too since Ron had been defending him. "You're right," Harry said then returned his attention to Hermione. "Do you want us to go with you Hermione? All you have to do is nod and we'll stay by your side no matter how long it takes for Madam Pomfrey to fix it."

Hermione stopped crying as she looked from Harry to Ron. Even with covering her mouth, Harry and Ron could see that she was smiling at the gesture. She shook her head and moved to leave but stopped at looked at her friends again.

"We know," Ron said tiredly. "Take notes and tell Snape where you went. We'll take care of it, Hermione."

They all chuckled.

Hermione left quickly as Professor Snape arrived. Harry stayed back as everyone entered the classroom so he was the last one. The moment he reached Professor Snape, Harry took a

deep breath and faced the Potions Master. "Professor, Hermione was hit with a jinx and needed to go to the hospital wing," he said as brave as he could muster. "If she could make up the work—"

"—I'm certain she will find me," Professor Snape interrupted. "Now move along, Potter."

"There's no need to be rude," Lily scolded.

"Lily, this is Snivellus we're talking about. He was born rude," Sirius explained.

Knowing better than to argue, Harry did as he was told and sat down next to Ron. They began their work on antidotes, Harry and Ron taking as many notes as possible for Hermione. They both knew she would be extremely upset if they didn't document everything no matter how small the detail may be. Everyone had just started gathering their supplies to brew when there was a knock on the dungeon door. Harry was too focused on making his potion correctly to notice.

Professor Snape did notice and wasn't too happy about it. "Yes, Mr. Creevey?" he said coolly.

"Er—Harry's needed upstairs," Colin said nervously. "Mr. Bagman wants to see him and the rest of the champions."

Harry bit back a groan of annoyance as he heard this. Couldn't he get away from the blasted Tournament for just one hour? Was that too much to ask? He gripped the table tightly, causing his hands to shake. Everyone took a step back in alarm as their cauldrons started to shake uncontrollably. Closing his eyes, Harry tried to push away his anger. Getting angry wasn't going to help anything. Destroying everyone's antidote wasn't going to help anything either.

"Wait a minute, wasn't that necklace supposed to stop this," Remus asked.

"Yeah," Lily answered worried.

The cauldrons stopped moving causing the entire room glanced at Professor Snape nervously. No one knew what to do now...at least until Snape glared at everyone and they immediately got back to work. It wasn't like Snape would answer any questions they had about what just happened anyways.

Slowly opening his eyes, Harry noticed Professor Snape was now standing to his right and looking at him out of the corner of his eye before returning his attention to Colin. Harry let out a sigh as he subconsciously reached up and felt his necklace that was hidden underneath his collared shirt. He had thought Dumbledore had taken care of this. That was why he had to wear this necklace all the time.

"We thought so too!" Sirius exclaimed.

"Potter, pack up your things," Professor Snape said coldly. "I will see you and Miss Granger later to make up the time you both have missed."

"Hey! It's not their fault they're missing time!" James cried indignantly.

"Yeah, but to acknowledge that would take a reasonable person," Remus answered.

Harry nodded then packed up his things, muttered an apology to Ron and left the dungeon. He followed Colin into the Entrance Hall and down the hallway to a small classroom. Colin had tried to start a few conversations but Harry was too deep in his own thoughts to reply. He needed to talk to Professor Dumbledore. He needed to find out what in the world was going on.

"And I do hope that this time he actually has an answer," Remus huffed annoyed.

"Moony, it's not Dumbledore's fault he doesn't know," James said calmly.

"He's supposed to know *everything*," Remus exclaimed exasperated.

"Well, you don't like when we assume *you* know everything, aren't you doing the same?" Sirius asked. Remus stared at him and opened and closed his mouth a few times trying to retort until he just closed it and sulked. Sirius looked quite pleased with himself for finally getting one over Remus.

Inhaling deeply, Harry knocked on the closed door then slowly opened it. He poked his head inside to see that there was a large open space in the middle of the room with five chairs placed neatly in a row. Ludo Bagman sat in one as he talked to a woman in deep red robes that Harry didn't recognize. Viktor Krum was leaning against one of the desks by himself while Cedric and Fleur talked quietly to each other.

Bagman was the first to notice Harry and quickly stood up. "Come in, Harry," he said cheerfully. "Once the rest of the judges arrive we'll begin the Wand Weighing ceremony. Your

wand is checked to make sure there are no problems since you'll need it in the upcoming tasks. Dumbledore is upstairs with the expert. We will then have a small photo shoot." Bagman then looked over at the witch he had been taking to before. "This is Rita Skeeter, a reporter for the Daily Prophet. She will be writing a small piece on the Tournament."

"Oh, great. Couldn't they have chosen someone else?" Sirius complained.

Rita Skeeter looked directly at Harry. Her complex curly hair didn't seem to suit her face or the shiny eyeglasses she wore. "The size hasn't been determined yet, Ludo," said Rita. "Perhaps I could have a small interview with Harry."

"Why do I have the feeling she must be looking at Harry like a starved man looking at a banquet?" Lily asked.

"Because she probably is," James answered with a grimace.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Harry said politely suddenly glad that Sirius and Remus had warned him about reporters. "I'm not allowed to talk to the press without one of my guardians present."

Rita Skeeter frowned for a moment but quickly recovered. "I won't mention it if you won't," she offered.

"She's insistent. What does she think? That Sirius and Remus won't read the paper and take action?" Lily asked.

"She thinks that by then the damage will be already done," Sirius answered.

"Miss Skeeter," Cedric said as he walked over to Harry's side. "Harry said no. If you want to interview him so badly then maybe you should ask his guardians for permission." He glanced over at Harry and winked before returning his gaze to Rita Skeeter. "That is, of course, unless you're afraid of Sirius Black. You're not afraid of him, are you?"

"If she's smart she is!" Sirius growled.

Evidently Rita Skeeter was afraid of Sirius because she backed off immediately. Cedric pulled Harry over so they both were standing by Fleur. They didn't have to wait long for Professor Dumbledore to arrive followed by Professor Karkaroff, Madam Maxime, Mr. Crouch and Mr. Ollivander. Harry had to assume that Mr. Ollivander was doing the actual Wand Weighing since he had bought his wand from him in Diagon Alley just over three years ago. Rita Skeeter

took a seat as she pulled a roll of parchment and a quill that immediately started to write on its own.

Professor Dumbledore motioned for the champions to sit down. Once they complied, Dumbledore looked over his shoulder at Mr. Ollivander and nodded. "Lady and gentlemen, this is Mr. Ollivander," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "He will be the one checking your wands. If you could pull your wands out, we shall begin."

Fleur's wand was first, rosewood, nine and a half inches with a hair from a Veela as the core. Harry fought to keep his mouth from dropping. So Fleur was part Veela. Cedric was next, ash, twelve and a quarter inches with a unicorn hair as the core. Viktor followed. His wand was ten and a quarter inches with hornbeam and dragon heartstring as the core. Which left Harry for last.

With a flick of his right wrist, Harry had his wand in hand. Ever since Remus had given him a wand wrist holster for last Christmas, Harry never had in wand any place else. Sirius had also taught Harry proper wand care this summer which was a good thing or his wand would not look presentable at all. Harry handed over his wand and jumped back when Mr. Ollivander gasped in shock and dropped it quickly.

"Excuse me! Why?" James asked.

"How are we supposed to know," Remus asked.

Everyone crowded around to see what had happened as Mr. Ollivander looked at Harry with an impressed look on his face. "You have begun to personalize your wand, Mr. Potter," the wand maker said. "Quite remarkable. Most don't even begin such a task until they are out of school. Eventually, only you will be allowed to even touch your wand without feeling any pain."

"That's useful," Sirius said looking at his wand, "How do we do that?" he asked Remus.

"OK! I am going to put a big sign over my head saying 'I DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS IN THE WORLD!'" Remus said annoyed.

"See, you don't like it yet you do it," Sirius smirked.

Harry looked nervously at Professor Dumbledore for help. He wasn't aware of doing anything like that. He had just been using it a lot during the past two summers. "I'm sorry, sir," Harry said to Mr. Ollivander. "I—er—I didn't know."

Professor Dumbledore knelt down and picked up the wand with ease. "There's nothing to apologize for, Harry," he said pleasantly. He waved his free hand over the wand then handed it to Mr. Ollivander.

Harry couldn't help but remember the day he had first entered Mr. Ollivander's shop and had been given the eleven inches long, holly wand with a phoenix feather as the core, the same core that was in Lord Voldemort's wand.

"Excuse me! What now?" James asked.

"That makes absolute sense," Lily said and Remus nodded.

"Are you two nuts? No it doesn't," Sirius said.

"Voldemort transferred powers to Harry when he failed to kill him," Lily sighed, "They already explained that. Like parseltongue. It makes sense that his wand core would be similar to Voldemort's because of the powers they have in common."

Harry held back a shiver at the thought. He really didn't want to share anything with Voldemort. He could only imagine what people would say if Rita Skeeter published that little piece of information.

They all shivered with Harry.

With the Wand Weighing ceremony over, everyone lined up for a few photographs then were dismissed. Harry declined the offer for individual shots and left as soon as he could. The moment he stepped out of the room Harry couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief. He had survived but he had hated every minute of it. He had hated Rita Skeeter trying to signal him out and somehow Harry knew this was only the beginning.

"At least she's not stupid enough to try and anger Padfoot," Remus said satisfied.

Chapter 10

Jealousy

Apparently the threat of Sirius Black was all that it took.

Sirius puffed his chest and looked menacingly at the others. They burst out laughing and he pouted.

The day that Rita Skeeter had published her article on the Tournament Harry was certain something was going to be taken out of context but surprisingly nothing was. There were equal amounts of information about all four champions although Harry was clearly made out as the underdog prepared to fight bravely throughout the tasks. Harry could only roll his eyes at the comment. Why did everyone have to make him out to be some sort of hero? He was far from it.

"Because people love a good gossip, and there's no fun in gossiping about some normal bloke, so they make a hero image up," Lily said tiredly.

That was all the motivation Malfoy needed to bring his taunting up a notch. It almost felt like Malfoy was following him, waiting for the first chance to strike.

"Which he probably is," Sirius said grimacing.

Every time Harry went to the library with Ron and Hermione, Malfoy was there watching. Every time Harry left a meal, Malfoy left shortly after. Fortunately Ron and Hermione recognized what was going on and passed the word around among the Gryffindors. Now the entire house was looking out for Harry but they couldn't be at his side all of the time.

Since none of the students were aware of Harry's magical outbursts Harry had to find time alone to talk to Professor Dumbledore about it which had to be after dinner when everyone was already in their Common Rooms. As it turned out, Dumbledore had known the moment it happened because of some charms that had been placed on the necklace. Unfortunately the necklace had done what it was designed to do and absorbed the majority of the overload which made Harry extremely nervous. If what had happened was only a fraction of what could have actually happened he dreaded to think of what the overload would have caused at full power.

"You'd break everything like in Moony's office when you confronted him about lying," Sirius said.

"And that would be disastrous," James said, "Imagine what Malfoy's dad or Rita Sketter would do with that information. They'd say Harry wasn't safe to be around the other students and call for expelling him or something."

"But no one would listen," Lily said alarmed.

"Yes, they would. You'd be surprised what people can do because of fear," Sirius said grimly.

There was only one solution to make certain nothing like that ever happened again.

Harry couldn't let his emotions get the better of him...ever. He didn't know how he was going to accomplish something like that but he knew he had to try. He couldn't take the risk of someone being put in harm's way because he was angry.

Remus nodded grimly. He knew well how hard it was to have to control your emotions all the time.

Leaving Professor Dumbledore's office, Harry was too deep in thought to realize he was being followed.

"Harry stop thinking!" James cried.

"Hum, James, I don't think one can stop thinking," Remus looked worried for his friend.

"But someone is following him," James said desperately.

"More the reason to *not* stop thinking," Lily said calmly. She patted his leg and said kindly, "What you mean is pay attention." James nodded desperately.

He needed to think of a way to keep the powerful emotions at bay. He had read about emotion suppression spells but knew they were risky and the aftereffects once they were taken off weren't pleasant. Everything you hadn't felt came to the surface at once. *Oh yeah, why don't I just destroy Hogwarts while I'm at it.*

It wasn't until something hit him hard on the back of the head that Harry realized he wasn't alone.

"Who did that? Expel them!" Lily cried.

"Before we think of punishment Lily, we need action," James said, and then he shouted, "HELP HARRY SOMEONE!"

He stumbled forward a few steps before regaining his balance. Turning around, Harry saw Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle walking towards him with evil smiles on their faces.

"Surprise, surprise. Who would have thought!" Remus said bitterly.

"Honestly! I think Malfoy has a hidden crush on Harry," Sirius said, "He's too obsessed with him."

He started to panic. What was he supposed to do? He couldn't take the risk of fighting back and losing control but he couldn't just stand there and do nothing either.

"Fight back! Who cares if Malfoy gets hurt when you lose control!" James urged Harry.

"No, James! Harry's right!" Lily said, "If Malfoy gets hurt his dad is going to have a field day! He'll get Harry expelled or worst; arrested!" James looked miserable.

"What's the matter, Potter?" Malfoy asked snidely. "No one's around to protect you now. No guardians, no friends and none of your adoring public. You think you're better than everyone else, that everyone should worship the ground you walk on just because of some stupid scar you got in a freak accident. You have all of the teachers wrapped around your finger because you lost your parents and your uncle decided to slap some sense into you."

"WHAT?" four cries were heard.

"He, he," James sputtered, "Vernon had no right to hurt my son!" he shouted.

"How can he be so dense," Remus said, "Harry doesn't like the attention he gets. Anyone that spares two seconds to see Harry knows that."

"The problem is that Malfoy is just like Snape," Lily said disgusted, "He made up his mind even before he met Harry and never bothered to really see Harry."

Harry froze. Was that what people thought? What had he done to make people believe that? He didn't think he was better than everyone else. If anything, he was jealous of everyone else. He didn't have the teachers wrapped around his finger. He was close to them because

they helped him through a difficult time but that was as far as it went. They had told him his uncle had been wrong to take his anger out on a teenager so why was Malfoy saying he deserved it?

"Because he is a dense, stupid, idiotic git!" Sirius cried.

"Hum, Sirius, dense, stupid and idiotic kind of mean the same thing," Remus said with a raised eyebrow. Sirius just glared at him.

Who are you going to believe? Your teachers, guardians and friends or Draco Malfoy?

The realization snapped Harry back to reality as Crabbe and Goyle grabbed Harry by the arms to hold him in place.

"Oh! How brave of him!" Lily spat, "Can't you take Harry on your own you slimy *Malfoy*?" and the way she said Malfoy clearly meant it was an insult and not a name.

That was it. Malfoy was jealous of everything Harry had been given. Harry had everything that Malfoy wanted: fame, popularity and adults that looked out for him. It didn't matter that Harry's life was constantly in danger. It didn't matter that Voldemort wanted him dead. All Malfoy was seeing was the upside of being the-boy-who-lived. He wasn't even considering the bad that came with it.

"No one ever does, Harry," Lily said wisely.

"But, it's no secret," James said.

"Yes, but it's like," Lily tried to explain, "Like how people envy Dumbledore, because he is all powerful and famous. They don't think that with that comes a lot of responsibility, and having everyone think he has to have the answers. And having to always fight the bad guys, and not being able to make mistakes because people think he is infallible."

"People don't think that," Remus protested.

"Yes, they do," Lily said, "Like the reactions people had for Dumbledore placing Harry with the Dursleys. That was a big mistake," he tried to smoothe things at James and Sirius's glare, "But he couldn't have known how they would turn out. People blame him like he should have known."

"He still should have checked on Harry," James growled.

"Yes he should," Lily said, "So should the Ministry seeing as Harry was an orphan placed in a foster home. Even if this foster home were his relatives. But no one did and everyone just blamed Dumbledore. Because they think he is all knowing. Harry is the only one that doesn't and I kind of think that is because he kind of know how Dumbledore must feel because people do the same to him. Just like Malfoy."

"Do you have any idea what that werewolf did the day of the World Cup?" Malfoy continued as he pulled out his wand and pointed it at Harry. "He completely embarrassed the Ministry. The Bulgarian Minister has been asking Fudge why there weren't more people like Lupin in the Ministry. He didn't even care when Fudge told him Lupin was a werewolf--a half-breed. Do you know what a slap in the face that is to my father for someone to prefer a half-breed to a pureblood?"

"STOP CALLING HIM THAT!" Sirius cried.

"HE'S WORTH A HUNDRED OF YOUR FATHERS!" James yelled.

"YOU'RE JUST BITTER BECAUSE THE BULGARIAN MINISTER CAN SMELL A DEATH EATER FROM A MILE AWAY AND KNOWS MOONY IS A DECENT GUY!" Lily shouted.

Remus tried very hard to contain his grin as he kept reading.

"Don't call Remus that," Harry said defensively. Malfoy had gone too far. Harry could handle the insults but no one badmouthed Remus and Sirius. "He's a better person than your father will ever be."

"I am so proud of Harry," Sirius said fondly, "He's very loyal."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed in anger as he walked up to Harry and pointed his wand at Harry's head, his hands shaking in anger. "Is that so?" he hissed. "What do you know, Potter? You were raised by Muggles. You're nothing better than a Mudblood and a half-breed. You're just a waste of space."

"YOU'RE THE WASTE OF SPACE MALFOY!" Sirius cried.

"I rather be a werewolf than a Death Eater," Remus said disgusted.

Harry glared back at Malfoy. "Well you're certainly spending a lot of time on 'a waste of space'," he shot back.

"Exactly!" Sirius cried, "Just like I said before. You have quite the obsession. Very fishy."

"Sirius, stop that," James said, "I don't want my son involved with Malfoy. There are far better prospects."

Lily looked at him and asked, "You wouldn't mind?"

"Of course I would, Malfoy is a git!" he answered.

"Not that. If Harry was gay," she said.

"As long as he was happy, no," he shrugged, "But I don't think he is. He was developing a crush on the Chang girl."

"Still, I like to know that you are open minded. Many people would mind," she said approvingly.

He needed to stall. Sooner or later someone would be coming by...hopefully. "You couldn't face me when my friends were around so you took the coward's way out and needed your lackeys to hold me still while you curse me. Where's the honor in that?"

WHACK!

A fist connected with Harry's face sending it to the left with the force of the impact. His glasses went flying off of his face as he saw white.

"COWARDS!" Sirius shouted.

Blinking a few times, Harry tried to regain his bearings but his now blurry vision made that difficult. He closed his eyes and tried to shake out the confusion but couldn't seem to do it. Laughing filled his ears but died quickly when a distinct clunking sound filled the hallway.

"Yes! Help!" James cried relieved.

"I DON'T THINK SO, LADDIES!"

The grips on Harry's arms disappeared causing Harry to lose his balance for a moment. With a flick of the wrist, Harry had his wand in hand and summoned his glasses. Putting them back on, Harry's eyes widened in shock to see one white and two black ferrets where Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle had been standing. He took a shaky step backwards only to bump into something and quickly turned around to see Professor Moody looking down at him with the normal eye while the magical one was looking at the three ferrets.

"OH! Good! Moody hates cowards," James clapped.

Professor Moody grabbed hold of Harry's chin and turned Harry's face to see the bruise that Harry could already feel beginning to take shape. Moody inhaled deeply then let go of Harry's chin. "You all right, Potter?" he growled.

Harry didn't trust his voice to remain steady and nodded. Unable to take the intense gaze of one of Moody's eyes anymore, Harry quickly looked away. The motion sent a spark of pain down Harry's neck causing him to wince. Professor Moody noticed and pulled out a handkerchief and pressed it against the back of Harry's head.

"You'll be fine," Moody growled as Harry reflexively held the handkerchief in place so Professor Moody didn't have to. "Just a small cut. It's a good thing that house elf found me. Am I right to assume that these *fine* individuals are responsible for that too?" Harry didn't answer. "I thought so," Moody said and stepped around Harry. "Now, what to do with three bullies."

Harry turned around and watched as Moody conjured three small cages. The three ferrets started to run but with a flick of his wand, Moody had them bouncing back towards the cages and eventually one inside each cage. He had never seen anything like this.

They all laughed hard at the image.

"Serves them right. Little ferrets," Sirius said.

Although he had to smile at Malfoy getting what was coming to him, Harry couldn't help but wonder if teachers were allowed to do this to students.

"I don't think so," Lily said, "Moody is going to get in trouble."

James was frowning, "It's not like him to do that."

"Well, he was punishing them," Remus said.

"I know. But Moody is one of the fairest persons I know. Dad said that the Ministry has given the Aurors the right to use Unforgivable to catch Death Eaters and that Moody does his best to bring them alive and only uses an Unforgivable as a last resort," James said, "Just doesn't fit."

"People change," Remus said.

"Maybe. Don't know," James said intrigued. "Better keep an eye on him."

With a flick and swish the three cages lifted in the air. "You should probably go to the hospital wing, Potter," said Professor Moody. "Don't worry. I'll make sure these *students* never do something so cowardly again. If this is the sort of behavior Snape allows for his students then I may just have a few words with him too."

Harry didn't need to be told twice and left for the hospital wing where Madam Pomfrey quickly sealed the cut on the back of his head and healed as much of the bruise on his face as she could. She also insisted Harry spend the night in the hospital wing to make certain there were no complications with his head injury. Harry was too tired to object and fell asleep almost instantly. He just hoped Professor Moody didn't hurt Malfoy and his goons...much.

"That's our Pronglet," Sirius said affectionately.

The following morning was probably the longest Harry had ever experienced. Ron had panicked when he saw Harry's bed hadn't been slept in, alerting Dean, Seamus and Neville. The four of them were probably the most protective of the Gryffindors and mounted a search. When they discovered Harry in the hospital wing and the reason he was there, the Gryffindors were furious. They couldn't believe Malfoy would do such a thing. They did roar in laughter though when they heard Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle had been turned into ferrets by Professor Moody.

Once Harry was dismissed from the hospital wing he now had several people refusing to leave his side. Word passed quickly throughout the four houses of Malfoy's attack, reaching the teachers who looked horrified. The only confirmation they needed was the soft bruise on Harry's face. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape hurried out of the Great Hall only to return twenty minutes later with Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle following them and looking like

they had an extremely rough night. None of the teachers looked pleased as they retook their seats. Harry didn't even attempt to look over at Malfoy sitting at the Slytherin table.

"I bet Snape just isn't pleased about Moody's treatment of Malfoy," James said bitterly, "He couldn't care less with what happened to Harry."

"Snape wouldn't condone Malfoy's actions," Lily scolded.

"Lily is right," Sirius said and James looked disbelievily towards his friend, "Snape must be furious that Malfoy and his goons got caught. Not very Slytherin of them." Lily rolled her eyes at him but Remus argued Sirius's case:

"As much as it pains me to say this; he's right. Snape lets Malfoy get away with murder as long as he doesn't get caught."

"He was better towards Harry after Sirius saved him from my sister's house. He even scolded Malfoy remember," Lily argued.

"I feel like he does that more because Dumbledore makes him then anything else. Besides, Malfoy attacked Harry in front of everyone in class that time. I doubt he would have done anything if Malfoy had done it without any witnesses," Remus said back but Lily still wanted to believe that Snape would have disciplined Malfoy anyway.

After breakfast, Harry left as quickly as he could with Ron and Hermione for Hogsmeade, a village that students in their third year and above were allowed to visit. After last night and the first task just around the corner, Harry needed the distraction. He wore a hat over his hair and scar so he wouldn't be recognized but people still figured out who he was. People constantly wished him good luck in the Tournament making Harry feel incredibly uncomfortable. People should be giving their wishes to Cedric, Fleur and Viktor.

"He should have taken the cloak," James said.

"I don't think so," Lily said annoyed, "People should leave him alone. He shouldn't have to hide."

"I am just being practical, Lily," James said.

They went to the basic shops: Honeydukes and Zonko's before entering Three Broomsticks where they sat down far away from everyone else so not to draw attention to Harry. Ron volunteered to purchase the Butterbeers leaving Harry and Hermione alone in their silence. The dim lighting hid any discoloration on Harry's face. Staring at the table, Harry tried to ignore the stares Hermione was giving him. She hadn't said much since she found out what happened making Harry wonder how mad she really was.

"Are you going to yell at me now or just continue to stare?" Harry asked softly.

"Why should she yell?" Sirius asked defensively.

"Because Harry knew Malfoy was just waiting for an opportunity and lowered his guard," Lily explained.

"He shouldn't have to be on his guard at school," Sirius said.

"I know, but that's not his reality," she sighed.

Hermione quickly looked away. "Sorry Harry," she said. "You're okay, right? You've been awfully quiet today."

Harry snorted at the comment. "I could say the same for you," he said bluntly. He noticed her smile in embarrassment and noticed something was different. "Madam Pomfrey fixed your teeth." Hermione looked at Harry in surprise then blushed and nodded. "They look good," he added only making Hermione blush more and mutter a thanks.

"Three Butterbeers," Ron said as he returned and handed out the drinks. "You two won't believe what I overheard. Some Slytherins just entered and were talking about Malfoy. They say Malfoy lost Slytherin a hundred points and has detention for two months with Professor McGonagall. He's also on probation. If he does anything else he will be suspended or even expelled. Can you imagine Malfoy's dad getting that post in the morning?"

"Good!" Remus said.

"It's what he deserves," Hermione said simply. "He really could have hurt you, Harry. Why didn't you fight back like you did on the train? Why were you out past curfew to begin with?"

"See, told you," Lily said knowledgeably. Sirius scowled.

Harry looked up at his friends for a moment before lowering his gaze to stare at his Butterbeer. For some reason he couldn't get what happened last night out of his head. "Do you two think I believe I'm better than everyone else?" he asked distantly. "Do you think people worship the ground I walk on? Do you think I deserve what Uncle Vernon did to me?"

"No they don't!" Lily cried.

"And if they do I'll have a few choice words with them," Sirius said annoyed.

Ron and Hermione looked horrified. "Absolutely not!" Hermione cried. "Harry, why are you asking such things? We know you hate people treating you different than everyone else. Is that what Malfoy told you last night?"

"Hermione!" Ron warned. "Quiet!"

Hermione blushed and looked around quickly to make sure no one was listening in. "Sorry," she said softly then leaned in so no one but Harry and Ron could hear her. "Harry, no one deserves what your uncle did to you. Yes, people tend to idolize you but that's not your fault. Malfoy's just jealous. He needs his father to buy what comes to you naturally."

"And jealousy is an ugly, ugly thing," James said shaking his head.

Harry rolled his eyes. "He's welcomed to Voldemort's obsession with me any day," he said bitterly. "Everyone fails to realize price that comes with all of this fame they want so badly. Don't they know I would give it all up in a heartbeat if it meant I could have a normal life and my parents back?"

"No, they just want the fame. They think everything is just perfect and don't see you are just a regular bloke," Remus growled. James and Lily were looking sadly at the book after Harry's last remark about having them back.

Ron and Hermione shared a glance before Hermione reached out and touched Harry's hand. "No Harry," she said gently. "They don't realize that under the-boy-who-lived name is a teenager who's just like the rest of us."

"Just like I said," Remus said.

"Ok, Moony. We know you're smart, no need to rub it in all the time," James said with a straight face. Sirius and Lily chuckled and Remus tried to glare evilly to James. Didn't work as well as Sirius' glare of death.

As more people filled the pub, Harry, Ron and Hermione took that as their cue to leave. They nearly ran into Rita Skeeter who was entering and kept their heads down so she wouldn't notice them. Harry had relayed how Rita had tried to pull an interview out of Harry making both of his friends loath the woman. They knew the further away they were from Rita Skeeter the better.

They started the long journey back to Hogwarts when two figures came into view; actually, one fairly large man and one normal man walking with a limp as he took a drink from his hip-flask.

"Excuse me but Moody is anything *but normal*," James said chuckling.

Hagrid and Professor Moody. Hagrid stood out in any crowd, as large as he was. Before Harry could even say hello Hagrid had Harry pulled into a fierce embrace with no sign of letting go any time soon. It wasn't until Harry became dizzy from the lack of oxygen that Hagrid finally let him go.

"I love Hagrid," Sirius said happily, "But he has *no* idea of his own strength!"

"Yeh all right, Harry?" Hagrid asked then noticed the bruise on Harry's face. "Dumbledore's been lookin' fer yeh." Hagrid then leaned forward so he and Harry were eye to eye as he put a large hand on Harry's shoulder. "I need ter see yeh tonight at midnight, Harry," he whispered. "Come alone and wear yer dad's cloak."

"You know Harry, the cloak loses half it's uses if everybody knows you have it," James said and glared at Sirius and Remus.

"What are you looking at us for?" Sirius asked.

"Well, if *someone* had used their brains before acting rashly, they could have instructed Harry on the proper uses of an Invisibility cloak. And if *someone* hadn't stayed away they could have too. But someone and someone didn't now did they?"

"No," Sirius answered in a small voice while Remus shook his head.

Harry was confused but nodded anyways as Hagrid stood up straight and turned to Ron and Hermione. Why would Hagrid want to see him alone and so late? Hagrid and Moody bid farewell and continued their trip to Hogsmeade, leaving Harry in a stunned silence. Pushing Hagrid's cryptic message to the back of his mind until later, Harry walked with Ron and Hermione to Hogwarts. Now all he needed was to think of an excuse so no one would worry because Hagrid wouldn't want to meet with Harry at such an odd time if it weren't important.

As it turned out Professor Dumbledore just wanted to make sure Harry was okay just like everyone else. He also assured Harry that Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle had been punished for their behavior. After evading a few questions as to why Harry didn't fight back, Harry left Dumbledore's office as quickly as possible. He knew that it was fear that kept him from defending himself. It also didn't help that Crabbe and Goyle held onto him so tightly that he couldn't break free.

Late that night Harry snuck out of the Gryffindor Tower to meet up with Hagrid. Covered by his father's invisibility cloak, Harry was able to move quickly without having to worry of anyone seeing him. The hallways were mostly empty except for the teachers and prefects that were patrolling. Some of the prefects were grumbling about 'stupid Slytherins' alerting Harry that so many people were around because of what happened last night.

"I am glad to see Dumbledore is taking action," Lily said pleased.

He stepped onto the grounds and hurried towards Hagrid's cabin. He knew the way by heart and the lights from inside the cabin aided Harry in maneuvering through the darkness. As he drew close Harry noticed the lights were also still on in the Beauxbatons carriage. It seemed that there were quite a few people staying up late tonight.

"Why don't they stay in the castle? Must be awfully cramped in there," Sirius said.

"I bet the carriage has some charm like the tents we use to camp. Must be like a mini castle inside," Remus said and Sirius nodded then shook his head.

"But then, how can they get out to get into mischief? They're missing out on the best part of Hogwarts!"

Remus slapped his own forehead, Lily rolled her eyes and James looked horrified.

Harry arrived at the cabin quickly and quietly knocked on the front door. He didn't want to announce to everyone that Hagrid had a visitor. The moment the door opened, Harry quickly slipped inside and pulled off his cloak. He took a good look at Hagrid and was surprised to see the Care of Magical Creatures teacher nervous. What was going on?

"What's wrong, Hagrid?" Harry whispered. "Did something happen?"

Hagrid brought a finger to his lips to motion for Harry to be quiet. "C'mon Harry," he said quietly. "I got summat yer should see. Put yer cloak back on."

"What do you think Hagrid is going to show him?" Lily asked.

"Dunno, but knowing Hagrid I bet it's something dangerous," James answered.

"Must be something important to risk getting Harry into trouble," Remus said.

Harry did what he was told and followed Hagrid out of the cabin. He quickly stopped when he saw Hagrid walking to the Beauxbatons carriage. He watched as Hagrid knocked and was greeted by Madame Maxime. Biting his lower lip, Harry followed them, making sure to keep plenty of distance so Madame Maxime would know he was there. He could barely hear Hagrid talking about something worth seeing by not supposed to know about it yet. That got him thinking. What was Hagrid playing at? Could this have something to do with the first task?

"Can't be, he wouldn't be taking Madam Maxime too then," Sirius said.

"I am not that sure. Hagrid seems taken by her. And you know Hagrid. He kind of likes to think the best of people," Lily said frowning.

His questions were answered by an extremely loud roar. Harry nearly stumbled in shock. That roar could only come from something very big and very dangerous; something Harry really didn't want to get too close to. Seeing that Hagrid and Madame Maxime had stopped, Harry cautiously closed the gap between them and took a look at what they were staring at. His eyes widened in alarm. It was definitely something big that he wanted to keep his distance from.

Remus sucked his breath sharply and the other three held theirs at their friend's expression.

Dragons...four of them.

"WHAT?" Sirius cried.

"My baby is going to die!" Lily cried.

"Dragons, Dragons, are they completely mental?" James asked.

Harry watched as wizards surrounded the dragons, trying to keep them under control. Harry couldn't make out much but he could tell that they were at least fifty feet tall with large teeth in their extremely large mouths that also spit fire into the sky. They were chained to the ground but that wasn't too reassuring. The dragons looked strong enough to break free before anyone could blink.

"Then Harry, slowly back away and run to safety, please," Remus advised.

He watched as the wizards trying to calm the dragons by shooting stunning spells at the large animals. Seven powerful spells hit each dragon forcing the animals into a deep slumber except for the thud that rang out when their large bodies hit the ground. Harry made a mental note never to be close to a dragon when trying something like that.

A wizard pulled away from the group and approached Hagrid and Madame Maxime. The instant his red hair came into view Harry recognized the wizard as Ron's brother, Charlie who worked with dragons in Romania. For some reason Harry seriously doubted these animals were for the next Care of Magical Creatures class.

"Nope, they're for the task. Four dragons, one for each champion," Lily said sadly.

"Do you think they have to kill them?" Sirius asked horrified.

"Dunno," James said wide eyed.

"They'll be fine now, Hagrid," Charlie said sounding completely exhausted. "They were given a Sleeping Draught for the journey. They didn't take the change in scenery well at all." Charlie glanced at Madame Maxime before returning his attention to Hagrid. "You know the champions aren't supposed to know about them."

"I thought she'd like seein' 'em," Hagrid said smile.

"Only Hagrid would think that dragons are an ideal date," Lily shook her head.

"Four of 'em. One fer each champion ter do what? Fight 'em?"

"I'm not one hundred percent sure," Charlie said honestly. "I think they just have to get past them. We'll be there if things get out of hand. They asked us for nesting mothers so that's what we brought. A Hungarian Horntail--nasty little bugger, Common Welsh Green, Swedish Short-Snout and a Chinese Fireball."

"So you don't just get *dragons*, you get the most vicious ones," Remus complained.

Charlie paused for a moment before looking at Hagrid curiously. "So how's Harry doing?"

"He's terrified!" Sirius said.

Hagrid looked uncomfortable. "Not ter good, Charlie," he said honestly. "He was attacked las' nigh' by some Slytherins. Dumbledore's furious--"

"--is he all right?" Charlie interrupted with a hint of protectiveness in his voice. "Please tell me something was done about it. Mum's been in an uproar ever since Fred sent her the owl explaining everything. If she found out--"

"Harry is so loved," James said happily.

"--don' worry, Charlie," Hagrid said quickly. "Dumbledore took care of it."

Not wanting to hear anymore, Harry hurried back to the castle. He couldn't believe they were talking about him like that. It then hit Harry what was happening. Everyone saw him, the *boy-who-lived* as a boy. They saw him as nothing more than a child. He had to admit he had been acting like one contacting Sirius like he had and wallowing in his problems but not anymore.

"Now Harry, lets not do anything rash," Sirius said.

"Yes, it's perfectly normal to seek guidance, no matter how old you are," Remus said.

"Yes, and I bet Moony knows how to get past a dragon, right?" James said and all three of them looked at Remus.

"I haven't got the foggiest," Remus answered.

"But you have too!" Lily cried, "How is he going to get past an enormous dragon then?"

The first task was Tuesday giving him a little time to prepare. He could use his free time tomorrow to study up on dragons, nesting mothers in particular to find a weakness. Charlie said he only needed to get past the dragon and Mr. Crouch said he only had his wand. It took seven fully trained wizards to bring a dragon down with a stunning spell so that was out of the question.

Lost in his thoughts, Harry was caught off guard when he ran into something which sent him falling backwards. The sound of someone calling out: 'who's there?' in the darkness was all Harry needed to know he had run into someone. He remained completely still, not daring to make a sound. Squinting in the darkness, Harry could hardly believe when a familiar looking goatee came into sight. He had run into Professor Karkaroff.

"Figures," Remus grimaced, "He'll tell Krum, and Maxime'll tell Fleur. So much for not having help."

After a few minutes, Karkaroff gave up his search and ventured off to where the dragons were. As soon as he was far enough away Harry hurried to his feet and ran back to the castle. There was no question what Karkaroff was up to. He was going to find out about the dragons for Viktor just like Madame Maxime was for Fleur. This meant the only person who was at a disadvantage was Cedric, the one person who had stood up for Harry.

"That's not very fair play," Lily said disgruntled.

He entered the Gryffindor Common Room and pulled off his cloak. It was nearly one in the morning and Harry was too worked up to sleep now. As quietly as possible, Harry entered his dorm room, put away his cloak and grabbed a few books before tiptoeing out. He could spend all day tomorrow researching dragons. He doubted anyone would approve of him going to the library at this time of night anyways.

Sitting on the floor in front of the fire, Harry started with his Care of Magical Creatures book but found very little on dragons. He then moved on to his Charms book but was once again disappointed just like he expected to be. The last time Harry checked facing a dragon wasn't a part of the fourth year curriculum. He then moved on to his Defense Against the Dark Arts book before giving up on his school books and pulling out the book he had bought this summer on defensive charms. If worst came to pass at least he could keep himself from getting killed.

"I don't think they'll let that happen," Remus said.

"People have died before Moony, *died!*" James said worried.

"Yes, I know. But that is why the Tournament had been canceled and they wouldn't start it again if they weren't going to be prepared to intervene," Remus tried to explain.

"But accidents happen. And what if that is just what whoever put Harry's name in that goblet is waiting for; an accident," Sirius said worried. They all looked nervous.

It was a long time before Harry had allowed the concept of sleep to enter his mind.

Chapter 11

Remus was about to start the next chapter when a little house-elf popped next to them.

"The Mistress is wanting me to tell you that lunch is being ready," the little elf said.

"But, Binky! We're busy!" James whined.

The little elf put one hand on her hip and the other had a finger pointing at James.

"Master James is doing what Binky tells him and is going to lunch. Now," and with that the little elf popped away and James started ushering everyone to lunch.

"I thought House elves had to obey their Master?" Lily said.

"They do, but Binky is special. She kind of channels Mrs. Potter," Remus explained, "But then again, being responsible with James, she had too."

"Is she your only house-elf?" she asked.

"No, we have another one," James answered.

"You two go ahead. I need a word with James," Lily shooed Remus and Sirius. They went looking confused. James looked ecstatic.

Remus and Sirius entered the dinning hall and found Mrs. and Mr. Potter at the table where they sat down.

"James and Lily are coming soon," Remus said.

"Good," Mrs. Potter said.

"And what mischief have you been getting into?" Mr. Potter asked grinning.

"Mr. Potter! You wound us. We? Getting into mischief?" Sirius answered theatrically.

"Actually, they have been very good," Mrs. Potter said, "Surprisingly. They have been reading in group all day yesterday and today."

"Reading?" Mr. Potter asked, "You're finally rubbing on them Remus!" he said pleased. Remus blushed. At that moment James and Lily entered with very coy smiles. Sirius and Remus gave them pointed looks but they acted like nothing happened.

When they were at deserts James asked, "Say dad, if you had to get past a dragon what would you do?"

Mr. Potter raised his eyebrows and said, "Please tell me you are not planning to get past a dragon James."

"Oh, no. I have no intention too. I was just curious."

Mr. Potter looked suspicious but answered, "I'd play to my strengths and the dragon's weaknesses."

"How so?" Lily asked.

"Well, I am a good flyer. All Potters are."

"Yes, so I've heard," Lily said giving James a pointed look.

"So I'd probably try to outfly it. But I am not that sure I'd be able too. So I'd try to give myself an advantage. A dragon's weakest point is it's eyes, so I'd probably send a *Conjunctivities Curse* to them and try to blind the dragon."

They all looked pleased with the answer and hoped Harry would think of something like that.

After lunch they went back to their spot in the garden and Sirius crossed his arms.

"Ok, spit it out! What did you two do?"

"Well," Lily said looking very innocently, "See my *dear* sister is a creature of habit. Every afternoon, at five on the spot she serves her boring friends tea. And as they are as boring as my sister, she can count on them being on time. Not a minute too early not a second too late. So she prepares the tea before they arrive and has a cup to check that the tea is perfect," here she gave a feral grin, "And the thing she hate the most is anything she doesn't consider normal."

"So, I asked Twinky to pop at the Evans' house and spike that cup of tea with a little tasteless potion we had that will turn her hair purple. And she won't know until she open's the door because Lily

says that she doesn't look in the mirror between that taste and the door because she's already made herself impeccable."

"And I've heard her and her friends go on and on about how disgusting those people that die their hair abnormal colors and put piercing and tattoos all over are. I just wish we could give her a big tattoo somewhere visible too, but alas, it's not to be." Sirius and Remus couldn't help it. They burst into laughter.

"And the best part is; she won't be able to blame me because I'll be miles away and Twinky has orders to be completely invisible," Lily finished laughing.

Lily started reading.

The Honor of a Gryffindor

The moment dawn broke Harry was out of the Gryffindor Tower, heading straight for the library. He honestly didn't care how upset his roommates would be to find him gone once again. That was the last thing on his mind. With as protective as everyone was, Harry knew he couldn't tell anyone he knew what he would have to face. The entire school would know by lunch time. Hopefully he would find the answers before anyone knew he was gone.

Unlikely but hopefully.

Entering the empty library, Harry went directly for the Magical Creature section and pulled out a rather large book on dragons. Sitting down on the floor with his back against the bookshelf, Harry started paging through the book, reading various passages trying to find anything that would help. He discovered the weakest spot on a dragon was the eyes which could be useful.

"Yes, that's what dad said!" James said happy that his son was finding the answers.

He also learned that nesting mother dragons were extremely protective of their eggs, lashing out on anything that got near.

"That happens with all animals. The mothers are the most protective," Lily explained.

That got Harry thinking. He had to get past a nesting mother for what? Probably for one of the eggs. It made sense.

"I hope not! That's suicide!" Sirius cried.

The question now was what to do. Sirius had taught him quite a bit this summer and Remus had taught him a lot the summer before but none of that training would do any good against a dragon. He could summon the egg but the chances of accomplishing that without the dragon noticing was very unlikely.

Harry let out a sigh in frustration. He wanted to talk to Sirius and Remus but Harry knew he needed to do this on his own.

"Why? I bet Karkaroff and Maxime are telling their champions exactly what to do," James said, "Why does Harry have to figure everything out alone?"

"Because Harry has this noble thing going on for him," Remus explained, "And also, like any teenager, he is annoyed at being seen as a kid."

Cedric, Viktor and Fleur wouldn't be running to their parents for answers and teachers weren't allowed to help.

"But they will! Harry don't be naïve!" Lily urged.

"Lily! Encouraging cheating?" Sirius asked proudly.

"No, encouraging survival!" she retorted.

If they could pull this off than so could he. Harry just needed to figure out how in the world he was going to.

The sound of the library door opening and closing again pulled Harry out of his thoughts. Quickly, Harry put the book back, moved over to the Charms book stack and pulled out a book. Sitting back down and leaning against the book case, Harry quickly opened the book to a page in the middle of the book and pretended to read.

Footsteps echoed through the hall as the person approached. Harry could hear them coming closer and closer but he kept his eyes on the book. He ignored every instinct that was telling him to attack the stranger. He suppressed the urge to draw his wand to defend himself. After all, Malfoy wouldn't be caught dead in the library this early in the morning.

"Harry Potter?" a familiar voice asked in accented English.

Harry looked up to see Viktor Krum looking at him in surprise. "Er—good morning," he said nervously. Harry knew he should have expected this. It was only natural that Viktor and Fleur would want to research dragons too. "Um—I can leave if you need to study or something—"

"Hey! You have as much right to be there as he has!" Remus said indignantly.

"Yes, but if he stays Krum will know that he is researching dragons and therefore knows what the first task is," Sirius explained, "That could get Harry and Hagrid in trouble. Moony, where is that Marauder head of yours. That is "Avoiding capture 101"! " Sirius finished ruffling Remus hair.

"No, that's fine," Viktor said quickly. "I am just surprised to see you of all people here so early. I remember ven I vas fourteen. The last place you would find me vas the library. Of course I didn't have your reputation..."

Harry paled as his eyes widened. He hated to think of half of the rumors the Slytherins, Ravensclaws and even Hufflepuffs had spread about him by now. Hermione, Ron and the rest of the Weasleys had done what they could to shield Harry from it but there was no denying it was happening. "Whatever you heard is a lie," Harry said quickly.

Viktor barely held back a laugh as he sat down beside Harry. "Is that so?" he asked candidly. "You didn't stop You-Know-Who again ven you were only eleven here in this very school? I also heard all about what you did for Sirius Black last year, some people said you faced the Dementors for him. No one has revealed all the details but I know you have left quite an impression."

"Oh no, he's not going to be another adoring fan is he?" James whined.

"I doubt that, I bet he knows how these things are and will get Harry better even then his friends," Lily said.

Rubbing the back of his neck nervously, Harry tried to think of something to say but his mind wasn't coming up with anything believable. He couldn't believe he was having this conversation with Viktor Krum. "Well, you know people like to gossip," Harry said softly. "They really don't care about the truth just as long as they have something to talk about."

"True," Viktor said thoughtfully. "I should tell you, Harry Potter, that I was intimidated ven I met you. You stopped He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named ven you vere a baby. You are a legend. Then I come here and see that you are a normal teenager. You have friends, enemies and

challenges just like the rest of us...vell, maybe not like the rest of us. I heard what happened."

Harry let out a groan. "Everyone heard what happened," he grumbled. "Malfoy always acts like this. It's only because he was caught by Professor Moody instead of Professor Snape that something's being done about it." Harry shook his head slowly.

"You know, Snape isn't doing Malfoy a favor by letting anything slide," Lily said, "If he gets used that he never gets punished he'll think he can do anything and when he gets into the real world he'll get a nasty surprise."

"I don't think Snape's point is to teach Malfoy but to get revenge on Harry and any Gryffindor," James said.

"And why is that?" she asked annoyed.

"Because he's childish," Sirius said. At her look he continued, "Look, I know we do a lot of things to him but he isn't innocent either. He doesn't wait an opportunity to attack us and not always in retaliation and almost never the harmless fun we have. Yes we do humiliating things, but never things that injure. And unlike Malfoy we always get punished." She looked a little convinced.

He knew this was probably the last thing Viktor wanted to listen to. "I'm sorry," he said softly as he closed his book. "You probably have more important things to do than listen to me rant. I'll leave you to your studying."

Pulling himself to his feet, Harry put his book away and turned to leave. He couldn't imagine that someone like Viktor Krum was intimidated by him. Why would anyone be intimidated by him? He was just a short, skinny kid with glasses. He had grown and put on some muscle since he had been taken from the Dursleys but he still wasn't anywhere near as tall as Ron or the other champions.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again; Harry needs an injection of self-esteem urgently," Remus said.

"Harry," Viktor said quickly, making Harry turn around and look at the Bulgarian Quidditch player. He looked uncomfortable, almost like he was internally trying to make an important decision. "Vell, good luck on Tuesday."

Harry let a soft smile break on his face and nodded. He knew that Viktor was debating whether to reveal what the first task was or not.

"Aw, how cute," Lily cooed.

"Thanks," Harry said gratefully. "Good luck to you too, Viktor. I just hope it isn't too dangerous."

Viktor winced but Harry had already left before anything else could be said. Harry didn't blame Viktor for keeping quiet. Hogwarts already had the advantage by having two champions. If Harry had been in Viktor's shoes he didn't know what he would have done. He had heard enough around the school to know that Viktor was the favorite. Everyone was expecting him to do well just as they were expecting Harry to fail. The pressure to live up to those expectations must be weighing heavily by now.

It had been lucky that Harry had left the library when he did. Returning to the Gryffindor Tower, Harry noticed that everyone was just starting to rise. For the remainder of the day Harry tried think of some way to get past a dragon. Ron and Hermione had noticed Harry's subdued mood and tried to help but Harry just couldn't take his mind off of what was coming. It wasn't until Ron asked Harry if he wanted to go flying to relax that Harry started thinking. Flying? He could only have his wand with him when the task started so why couldn't he summon his Firebolt to fly past the dragon? Would that be considered cheating?

"YES!" James cried.

"No!" Sirius said appalled, "James that wouldn't be cheating!" and his glare was joined by Remus' and Lily's.

"No, I mean, YES, he thought of flying!"

"AH!" the other three said.

Harry suddenly remembered something Sirius had told him. *"What can't be broken can always be bent."* Sirius always used that as a defense after telling a story about the days the Marauders roamed the halls of Hogwarts. It seemed strange that Harry would be turning to Sirius for words of wisdom but he had to admit the phrase had merit.

"No, Harry it's not strange at all, we always turn to great minds for advice," Sirius said.

"Then he looked in the wrong place," James sniggered and received a glare in return.

He wouldn't be breaking the rules if he arrived at the first task without his broom only to summon it later. It could work.

Monday morning arrived quickly. Harry was in the Great Hall eating breakfast before the majority of the school had awoken. There was still one thing he had to do without anyone knowing about it. He needed to warn Cedric. He just didn't know how to do it yet. Cedric was always surrounded by friends, most of which weren't too happy about Harry's involvement in the Tournament.

"That's very noble Harry. Mummy is proud of you," Lily said pleased.

"I am proud too, but I ain't saying daddy is proud," James said and Lily glared at him.

Deep in his own thoughts Harry didn't even realize someone had sat down across from him until they cleared their throat which made Harry jump in surprise to see the very person he wanted to talk to looking at him curiously. Harry rubbed his tired eyes underneath his glasses. Once the task was over Harry knew he was well overdue for some rest.

"Are you all right Harry?" Cedric asked softly. "Don't take this the wrong way but you look terrible."

Harry had to smile at the blunt statement. It sounded like something Ron would say. "I've just had a lot on my mind," he said with a shrug. "I sort of found out something I never should have..." He noticed Cedric leaning in. *There's no point in beating around the bush.* "Cedric, the first task is dragons," Harry whispered. "I've seen them. They are four of them. We have to get past them somehow."

That was clearly the last thing Cedric expected Harry to say. "Er—what?" he asked, his eyes wide. "Are you sure Harry?"

"No, he's having you on," Remus said annoyed, "Of course he's sure. He just told you he saw them!"

"Ok, Moony. Calm down. Cedric is just in shock. No need to bite his head off," James tried to calm his friend.

Harry nodded. "I think Fleur and Viktor already know because Madam Maxime and Professor Karkaroff saw them," he whispered. He noticed Cedric's face changing from panic to skeptical. Cedric didn't believe him. "Look, I know you have no reason to trust me. I just thought...well...you deserve to know. No one has an advantage now."

Cedric looked at Harry for a few moments before he leaned back so he was sitting up straightly. "You're too noble for your own good, do you know that?" he asked. "I appreciate the warning, Harry." He looked over his shoulder at his friends who were waiting for him at the Hufflepuff table then bid farewell before he left.

Harry couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief. Now all he had to worry about was his classes and facing a dragon but it seemed that simply going through the motions was the only way to go for Harry. Most of his teachers were lenient on him since they all figured he was simply nervous. All Harry knew was that one moment he was heading to Herbology class and the next thing he knew it was the following morning...the day of the first task.

Sirius was biting his nails, James was twisting a napkin from breakfast, Remus was rubbing his hands and Lily was shaking her leg.

Once again Harry was simply going through the motions as he mentally went over the summoning charm repeatedly. Before Harry knew it the morning was over and Professor McGonagall ushered him to where the champions were supposed to meet on the grounds. She gave him some words of advice but Harry didn't even hear it. He noticed they were walking to where Hagrid had taken him only a few nights ago. This was it. Hopefully his plan would work. Hopefully he would survive.

They stopped in front of a tent. Professor McGonagall reached out and touched Harry's shoulder gently but too trapped in his thoughts to notice. Professor McGonagall seemed to notice this and gently tilted Harry's face so their eyes met. "Harry, you know we would never let anything happen to you," McGonagall said gently. "There are wizards monitoring the task in case it gets out of control. Just do your best."

"Yes, see. I told you. Nothing will happen," Remus said.

"Then why are you nervous?" Sirius asked.

Harry nodded in response before entering the tent. That was really all he could do. He just wished he knew if it would be enough. Stepping into the tent, he noticed Fleur was sitting in

the far corner looking more nervous than he had ever seen her which hadn't been much. Viktor was just staring forward at nothing in particular. Cedric was the only one moving, pacing back and forth until he noticed Harry which he nodded a hello then resumed pacing.

At least Harry wasn't the only one who was nervous.

"Well, who wouldn't be nervous at the prospect of facing a dragon?" James asked.

Ludo Bagman also noticed Harry's arrival. "Oh good," he said happily

"What's he happy about? They're all about to face a gigantic lizard that spits fire and he's all chirpy about it!" Sirius cried annoyed.

as he pulled a small purple sack into view. "Everyone's here. Once everyone arrives, all of you will select a model of what you will be facing out of this bag. Each one is numbered to signify the order you will compete in. Your task is to collect the golden egg as quickly and as safely as possible."

Harry closed his eyes as he let out a sigh as Bagman left. He tried to force his nervousness out of his mind and focus but found it difficult. *What was it that Sirius taught me on calming the mind?* Moving away from everyone in the tent, Harry knelt down on the ground and bowed his head. Sirius had told him never to face danger if you didn't have your wits about you. Sirius had said so many things, most of which Harry couldn't remember at the moment. Closing his eyes, Harry let out deep calming breaths as he tried to concentrate on the summer and his lessons with his godfather. He now understood why he always failed. He had no confidence. He had known he stood no chance against Sirius just like he stood no chance in winning this.

"He does have a point," Remus said, "Overconfidence is a fault because you get sloppy but under confidence hinders you too. If you convince yourself you'll fail, chances are you will."

"That's deep," Sirius mocked. Remus glared at him.

"Winning the battle in your mind is half the fight. You can do this, Pronglet. I know you can. You just have to realize it too."

"That's deep Padfoot," Remus mocked back and this time Sirius was the one glaring at the laughing trio.

Harry remembered that day. It had been after a long dueling lesson when they started learning new curses. Harry just couldn't seem to get it right and became overly frustrated. Sirius had sat Harry down and gave an important lesson on confidence and keeping a level head. After the talk Harry had managed to successfully cast all of the curses. Sirius had been right then and was right now.

"A rare occasion Harry. You should cherish them," James said with a straight face. Mud came flying out of Sirius vicinity and James ducked right in time.

"How can he just sleep?" Fleur asked in annoyance.

"He's meditating!" Lily cried annoyed.

"She doesn't know that," James said calmly.

"Oh, defending the Veela are you? Bet you love her accent," Lily snapped.

"I am not defending her and are you jealous?"

"You wish!"

"I am not sleeping," Harry said in a distant and calm voice, his eyes still closed and his head still bowed. "I am clearing my mind of unnecessary noise to focus on what lies ahead. *'Only with a clear mind can one face the dangers and succeed without causing danger to themselves and others.'* I can't bother myself in worrying about matters I can not control."

The three older teenagers stared at Harry in amazement. Cedric was the first to move over to Harry and kneel down beside him, a move that startled both Fleur and Viktor. "Can you teach me?" he asked softly.

Harry nodded. "Close your eyes," he said softly. "Take in deep breaths and let them out. The noise around you doesn't matter. Whatever you pull out of that sack doesn't matter. The crowd that will be watching you doesn't matter. You can't control them. Focus on what you know and only what you know. For me it is memories of lessons my godfather gave me this summer. Think of something pleasant or calming. Your body will do the rest."

"See, I am pleasant and calming," Sirius said pleased.

"I'll give you pleasant, Padfoot, but *calming*?" James asked.

Silence filled the tent. Harry could hear Cedric's deep breathing and knew that Cedric was relaxed. Returning to his own calming thoughts, Harry barely recognized the noise of students passing the tent to take their seats. It almost felt like there was a large sheet of glass separating them from everything else. It was surprising how much Harry had dreaded his lessons with Sirius during the summer only to find them a comfort now.

The next thing he knew Bagman had returned and opened the sack. "And now, ladies first," Bagman said cheerfully.

Harry opened his eyes and looked up to see Fleur pulling out a model of a Welsh Green dragon with a number 'two' tied around its neck. Viktor was next and pulled out a red Chinese Fireball labeled with a 'three'. Cedric was third, pulling out a bluish-grey Swedish Short-Snout with a number 'one' around the neck. Harry was last but it didn't take a genius to know what it would be. Reaching in, Harry pulled out the remaining dragon model: the Hungarian Horntail with a number 'four' tied around the neck.

"Of course!" James said annoyed, "He just had to get the most vicious one!"

"There now," said Bagman. His happiness was really starting to get annoying. "Mr. Diggory, you are first. Just go out when you hear the whistle. I will be commentating so good luck to you all. Harry, may I have a word outside?"

"What does he want with Harry?" Lily asked.

"No idea," Remus answered.

Harry looked up at Bagman. He really didn't like that look on Bagman's face. It was the same look Fudge had given him at the World Cup. Why did everyone feel the need to treat him like their son when he barely knew them? "Perhaps later, sir," Harry said politely, allowing a little fear to enter his voice. "I really can't afford to be distracted right now."

"Brilliant Harry, very sneaky," Sirius said pleased.

Bagman looked a little disappointed but covered it quickly. "I understand," he said then left.

Once again, Harry closed his eyes and let out calming breaths and could hear Cedric doing the same. A loud whistle broke the silence and Harry's concentration. He heard Cedric slowly stand and move to leave the tent. "Good luck," Harry said quietly.

"Thanks Harry," Cedric replied in a shaky voice then left.

"It's so nice of Harry to be making friends with the other champions instead of being all competitive," Lily said pleased.

Sirius rolled his eyes and mouthed 'girls'.

All to do now is wait. A moment later there was a loud roar from the crowd. Cedric's task had begun. They could hear everything but without being able to see, all they could do was imagine what was happening. The screams, yells and gasps from the crowd certainly affected Fleur. She was now pacing back and forth as she nervously fidgeted. Harry was determined to keep his eyes closed so he wasn't affected by her pacing. Her uneven breathing was aggravating enough as it was.

"I wouldn't be affected by her pacing," James said. Remus raised an eyebrow toward him and he elaborated, "I'd be too busy being affected by the screams, yells and gasps from the crowd." The other three nodded sympathetically.

Bagman's commentary didn't help either. No matter how hard Harry tried he couldn't block out the comments that kept the audience in suspense. From the sounds of it Cedric was having a tough time which only added to nerves of those who yet needed to go. After fifteen minutes, there was another roar of the crowd then silence. There was only one possible conclusion: Cedric had reached his goal.

"Or the dragon ate him," Sirius said worried.

"SIRIUS! The dragon did not eat him. McGonagall said they wouldn't let anything bad happen," Lily said but by the way she kept turning the tip of her hair with her fingers her statement wasn't all that believable.

"And now the judges marks!" Bagman shouted. Nothing was said meaning they were being announced some other way. A moment later Bagman's voice echoed once again. "Well done, Mr. Diggory!" he yelled. A whistle sounded signaling for the second champion to come out. "And now, our second champion, Miss Delacour!"

Harry kept his eyes closed but could feel her anxiety coming off in waves.

"How can he feel her anxiety if his eyes are closed," Lily asked.

"Don't know," Remus asked frowning, "Weird."

She left the tent quickly to face her dragon. Once again Harry and Viktor had to listen to Bagman's commentary and the noises the crowd made. It was only ten minutes before the crowd broke into applause meaning Fleur must have reached her egg too. Her marks were shown followed by a whistle for the third time. Viktor took that as his sign and left the tent.

"And now, Mr. Krum!" Bagman yelled.

Now alone in the tent, Harry tried to remain calm but the anticipation was getting to him. In a way, Cedric had gotten off easy. He didn't have to hear this. He didn't have to wait.

"I know what he means, he didn't have to keep imagining what was going to happen," Sirius said, "It's weird, when you know something bad is going to happen at the same time you want it to wait as long as possible and get it over with."

"Quite the dilemma, but I understand. Like the last Quidditch game with Slytherin last year when they were threatening to do horrible things to us on the field," James said knowledgeably.

"James! You did not just compare a dragon with Quidditch!" Lily scolded him.

Summoning Charm, Harry! Focus!

Bagman's voice once again broke into his concentration. "I don't believe it!" he yelled. There was a loud shriek coming from the Chinese Fireball. "Mr. Krum certainly has some nerve...aaand...yes! He's got the egg!"

Applause silenced Bagman's voice. Harry slowly opened his eyes. It would be his turn soon. Letting out a calming breath, Harry stood and suddenly noticed how tight his stomach felt. A loud whistle filled his ears. It was time. *I can do this. I just have to believe.* Leaving the tent, Harry focused on what he knew and what he had to do. He walked past the trees and continued until he saw the stands. He saw the Horntail at the opposite end huddled over her eggs. She looked directly at him with her yellow eyes. Her spiked tail caught Harry's attention. He would have to make an effort to avoid that.

They were all silent. Lily was now chewing her hair, James kept running a hand through his. Sirius was practically taking off in flight from how much he was shaking his crossed legs and Remus kept rubbing his own cheeks.

Kneeling down, Harry grabbed a handful of cold dirt and stood back up. He slowly opened his hand and let the dirt fall. There was just the smallest of wind. He could use that. Closing his eyes, Harry focused as he flicked his right wrist and felt his wand in his hand. He slowly raised his wand. "*Accio* Firebolt!" he shouted.

For a few moments there was nothing than the sound of something approaching at high speed got everyone's attention. Opening his eyes, Harry re-holstered his wand and looked over his shoulder to see his Firebolt flying towards him. The entire crowd was silent as it stopped at his side, hovering and waiting for him to mount it. The crowd erupted in cheers as Harry mounted the broom and took off.

All noise faded away as he flew upwards at an unbelievable speed. His fear and nervousness left him. This was where he belonged. He was in his element. Looking down at the dragon, Harry quickly ran through some diversionary tactics in his head. He remembered what he read about dragons and the only way to get the golden egg would be to pull the dragon away from her nest.

Without warning he dived sharply, picking up speed. The Horntail was watching his every move. He saw her opening her mouth and veered right to avoid the flash of fire that would have burned him to a crisp.

They all closed their eyes. After a moment of silence Lily opened her eyes and gave a sheepish smile and kept reading.

He flew around the dragon pulling up just out of her reach. He needed to annoy her. He needed to be a pest.

"I think Harry never heard the expression don't tickle a sleeping dragon," Sirius said worried.

"Harry has a plan," James stated firmly, or at least he hoped.

He needed to distract her from what she was trying to protect.

At first he flew slowly, gradually picking up speed and height. The Horntail let out a roar as she rose up with him. He was certainly annoying her. As soon as he was too high for her to reach with her neck stretched out, he increased his altitude just a bit more before lowering it again. He was teasing her. She bared her fangs at him in anger as he flew just a tad higher.

The Horntail took the bait and spread her wings to take off giving Harry the opening he needed. In the blink of an eye he dived, falling to the ground faster than he ever had before. He was fifty feet from hitting...twenty-five...ten...

No one dared to breathe.

As abruptly as he dived, he pulled out just before he hit the ground and shot towards the eggs that were now unprotected. Repositioning his body, Harry held on to his broom with one arm and both legs as he turned his body in order to snatch the golden egg firmly before taking off at full speed again. He pulled himself back up so he was sitting comfortably on his broom and landed in the exact same spot as he had mounted with a relieved sigh. It was over.

"YES!"

"HE DID IT!"

"GO HARRY!"

"THANK GOD!"

They were all said at the same time while the four were jumping up and down and you couldn't tell who said what.

It was then that Harry finally realized the noise coming from all around him. It was loud and deafening. Harry had to smile. He had pulled it off. He had learned something this summer after all.

"A stunning display of flying from Mr. Potter!" Bagman yelled. "The youngest of the champions is the quickest to retrieve their egg!"

"That's my son," James cried happily.

Harry was immediately encircled by Professor McGonagall, Hagrid and Professor Moody congratulating him on a job well done. He suddenly felt exhausted, not entirely hearing what his teachers were saying. Professor McGonagall seemed to notice this and ushered Harry to the first-aid tent. Entering, Harry allowed Professor McGonagall to pry his Firebolt and egg out of his hands and set them down in a nearby cubicle. Madam Pomfrey soon came into sight and ran a quick checkup.

"Mr. Potter, when was the last time you ate something?" Madam Pomfrey asked sternly. "I'm surprised you're still awake let alone standing."

"Good for you Madam Pomfrey. Let Harry know he should take better care of himself," Lily said in a motherly tone. The three boys tried, they really did, but they lost the fight and started laughing.

The question caught Harry completely off guard and had to think. This was all the information Madam Pomfrey needed and handed Harry a replenishing potion. Harry took the potion obediently and instantly felt his focus coming back. Satisfied in Harry's reaction to the potion, Madam Pomfrey hurried back over to Cedric. Harry took that as his cue and walked out of the tent only to be pulled into a group hug by Hermione and Ron.

Pulling out of the embrace, Harry couldn't help but notice that both of them looked rather pale. "Er—are you two all right?" he asked with a laugh.

"Aw, they were worried," Lily cooed.

Ron and Hermione smiled back although tentatively. "Harry, that...that was amazing," Hermione said breathlessly. "When you dived...everyone thought you were going to crash. You should have seen Mr. Lupin and Mr. Black. They were nervous wrecks."

"Yes they were," James said.

"Like you were any better," Remus said back.

Harry instantly looked out into the crowd for his guardians and found them after a few minutes waving at him. He waved back with a grin on his face. He knew he needed to talk to them and hoped they would stay around afterwards. Returning his attention to his friends, Harry noticed they had had calmed down a little, especially Ron.

Ron started talking quickly about what the other champions tried. Cedric had tried to distract the dragon by turning a rock into a dog that worked to an extent since he got some pretty bad burns when the dragon turned away from the dog and focused on him. Fleur tried to put her dragon in a trance which worked but had some problems with her skirt catching on fire when flames came out of the snoring animal. Viktor apparently read the same book Harry did because he attacked the dragon's eyes.

"That's what dad said!" James exclaimed apparently happy that this book was confirming his beliefs of his father knowing everything.

The only problem was the dragon crushed half of the real eggs in the process so he lost points for that.

They all winced.

They returned to the open field to see that the Horntail had been taken away. Harry could now see the five judges sitting on the opposite end in their seats, raised above everyone else's. They had obviously been waiting for him.

"Ten's the highest you can score from each judge," Ron noted.

Madam Maxime was first. She raised her wand up in the air and shot out a long silver ribbon that took the shape of the number nine. The crowd applauded.

Followed by their extra audience.

Mr. Crouch was next and shot out another number nine. Professor Dumbledore followed with Harry's third nine. The cheering increased. Bagman shot out a ten and the crowd roared even louder. Karkaroff was last and shot out a six.

"BOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"I bet he gave his champion a ten even with the crushed eggs!" Remus said annoyed.

The crowd let out several protests in the final score but Harry didn't care. He had done better than he had ever hoped.

Charlie Weasley hurried to Harry's side. "You're in first place Harry!" he shouted happily as he shook Harry's hand. "Mum will never believe this! I can barely believe it and I watched it happen! Oh! You're needed in the champions' tent for some final instructions." As fast as he came he was gone.

Harry bid farewell to Ron and Hermione before hurrying back to the tent, stopping by the first-aid tent to grab his Firebolt and egg on the way. Entering the champions' tent, Harry saw that Fleur, Cedric and Viktor were already waiting. Cedric's face looked horrible, covered with an orange past but he smiled the moment he saw Harry and hurried over to him.

"That was excellent, Harry," Cedric said happily.

"Thanks," Harry responded with a smile. "Congratulations." He looked at Cedric's burned face, his smile faltering. He really didn't know what else to "Er—are you all right? That burn looks pretty bad."

Cedric reflexively reached up to touch the portion of his face covered in orange. "It's better than what it was," he said honestly. "Madam Pomfrey said it should be healed by tomorrow."

"Congratulations everyone!" Ludo Bagman said happily as he entered the tent. "The second task will take place on the twenty-fourth of February at half past nine in the morning. In the meantime, your golden egg you rescued is the key to the next task. If you all take a look you'll see it opens to reveal the clue. Good luck, everyone. Off you go!"

"Well at least this time they'll know what they'll be facing," Lily said.

"Hum, Lily, they knew with the dragon," Sirius said.

"But they weren't *supposed* to!" she exclaimed.

As he left the tent, Harry couldn't help but smile when he saw two more people waiting in addition to Ron and Hermione. Standing behind his friends were Remus and Sirius. His godfather was the first to move, pulling Harry into a fierce hug followed by Remus a moment later. None of them cared of the looks the other champions were giving them as they passed. Cedric's eyes widened at seeing his former teacher and Sirius Black so caring towards Harry. Viktor just glanced at the scene before moving on. Fleur, on the other hand, caught sight of Sirius and smiled. He, however, was too wrapped up in his godson to notice.

"That's a first," Remus sniggered.

"I can't help it if I am extremely handsome," Sirius said calmly.

"And soooo modest," Lily said. James, her and Remus where laughing freely.

"That was remarkable flying, Pronglet," Sirius said with a grin and a wink in Harry's direction. "But did you really have to scare us like that? I honestly thought old Moony here was going to have a stroke."

Remus glared at Sirius who was grinning.

Remus glared at Sirius. "You did *not* just call me old," he shot back. "I was not the one clinging onto my seat like my life depended on it. The Padfoot I remember always took on stress with a laugh. Now, I think I may even see wrinkles. If anything it is *you* who is old."

"Yes," Remus said, "Oldy!"

"I don't have grey hair," Sirius retorted.

"You have wrinkles!" Remus said back. James and Lily just watched the display as if watching an interesting movie.

Sirius' eyes narrowed at his friend. "Mr. Padfoot would like to remind Mr. Moony that questioning his age in front of his godson is considered an act of war," he said thought his teeth then grinned evilly as he turned his attention to Harry. "Perhaps we should leave the final decision up to Mr. Pronglet. Who do you think is old, Harry?"

"A tricky question if I ever heard one," James said.

Harry glanced from Sirius to Remus nervously. No matter what he answered he was bound to be 'attacked'. He suddenly remembered Sirius' answer to becoming an Animagus and smiled. Perhaps there was a way out of this. "Mr. Pronglet feels it would be smart to decline from answering since he values his sanity and his life," Harry said confidently.

James, Remus and Lily laughed.

"Bitten with your own venom," Lily said.

Remus started chuckling. "Outsmarted by a fourteen-year-old Padfoot," he commented. "Smart move, Harry. Now, I believe I heard something about a party in the Gryffindor Common Room that you are currently missing. We just wanted to say congratulations. We're proud of you, Harry. I don't think either of us even considered flying as a way to get past the dragon."

Harry smiled at the comment. "Thanks Remus," he said then looked at Sirius. "I wouldn't have been able to pull it off if it hadn't been for what you taught me this summer, Sirius. Those calming techniques really helped. I probably would have been a nervous wreck waiting in the tent like I had to—"

Sirius once again pulled Harry into an embrace. "You're welcome, kiddo," he said sincerely. "Just remember if you ever need anything—anything at all, you know how to contact us. We are never too busy for you and I mean that, Harry. We know we can't walk you through the Tournament but that doesn't mean you can't turn to us for advice."

Harry looked up at Sirius and nodded. He knew what Sirius was saying. They couldn't do everything for him but they had no problem in advising Harry on the right path to take. The offer was tempting but Harry knew he needed to do this on his own. Hagrid had helped him with the first task and Harry was determined to make it through the second task without cheating. Perhaps Cedric was right. Perhaps he was too noble.

"Yes you are," James said rolling his eyes. Do you really think the other Champions aren't getting any help? Cheating is part of the tournament!" For once, instead of scolding Lily was nodding with the other two.

XXXXX

A/N- "Avoiding capture 101!" - Ok! I have no idea if in England they use this kind of terms for classes, I know here we don't, but I know that everyone understands the meaning.

About Sirius declaration of not doing things that injure I am taking two things in consideration. One; that the Whomping Willow prank hasn't happened yet. Two, that, I've never seen Sirius as capable of turning his best friend into a murderer for fun. Or that he wanted Snape dead. I always thought that he thought Snape wouldn't do something a known enemy told him to do, I know I wouldn't.

I know I didn't put a lot of reactions to the dragon scene but there's just so many times you can say they were scared for Harry without getting too boring and repetitive, I still hope you liked what I did.

Chapter 12

The Color of Friendship

"What's the color of friendship?" James asked.

"Blue," Sirius answered.

"Maybe Pink," James said back.

"Fuxia," Sirius added.

"IT'S AN EXPRESSION!" Remus and Lily yelled together.

Harry bid goodbye to his guardians, assuring them that he would send Hedwig if he needed anything. Sirius once again warned Harry to look out for Professor Karkaroff. Harry could tell it was more than just a friendly warning but knew he couldn't press the matter with Ron and Hermione standing there. This would just have to be another discussion that waited until Christmas break.

"I'm so exited about Christmas break," Sirius said clapping his hand.

"We're still in summer break," James explained.

"I meant *Harry's* Christmas break, duh," Sirius rolled his eyes, "It's going to be his first Marauder Christmas!"

James eyes lit up and he sported a mischievous grin that mirrored Sirius'. Lily and Remus rolled their eyes but they too were smiling.

Returning to the Gryffindor Tower, Harry found that Remus had heard correctly. The entire Common Room had been decorated with banners drawn by Dean Thomas. Platters of food were everywhere along with mugs of pumpkin juice and Butterbeer. The moment everyone noticed their guest of honor had arrived cheers and yells filled the air. Ron took Harry's Firebolt upstairs to their dorm room as Harry was bombarded with handshakes and pats on the back. So many people were talking at the same time that it was impossible to understand what they were saying.

"We Gryffindors know how to party," Sirius said proudly.

Once Harry had made his way through the crowd he collapsed in a chair, Ron and Hermione sitting down at his sides. Setting his golden egg down, Harry mindlessly grabbed a pumpkin pastry and slowly ate. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten more than a few bites before feeling sick to his stomach. He couldn't remember the last time he had a decent night's sleep either.

"Then eat and go sleep honey," Lily said patting the book. The boys looked at her weirdly.

Harry was so out of it that he didn't even realize Lee Jordan had picked up the golden egg until he spoke. "This thing is heavy, Harry," he said in amazement. "Have you opened it up yet?"

Harry shook his head and smiled. "I start working on it tomorrow," he said. "I think I've earned a day's vacation."

"A DAY!" James cried, "Harry, you've earned a week's vacation at least!"

"Yes, the second task is not until February. You have almost three months to prepare!" Sirius said

"Normally, I wouldn't condone slacking off, or agree with James and Sirius for that matter," Lily said, "But you have been pushing yourself too hard Harry. Take a break."

"True but that doesn't mean we can't just look inside," Lee said with a grin in a loud enough voice that others would hear them. "C'mon Harry. Open it up." Several people echoed Lee's enthusiasm as Lee passed the egg back to Harry.

"He's supposed to figure it out on his own," Hermione protested. "That's the rule of the Tournament."

"Oh, yeah," Sirius snorted, "'Cause all the other champions are having *no* help at all!"

"Hermione does seem very strung up on rules," Remus commented.

"We're not going to solve it for him," Fred interjected as he moved to Lee's side. "We just want to know what's inside the egg. Besides, we can keep a secret, Hermione, especially

when it comes to Harry and the Tournament. He's in first place. We wouldn't want to jeopardize that by doing something thick. That's the Slytherins' forte."

They all laughed.

Harry looked over at Hermione and shrugged helplessly before prying his egg open only to nearly drop it when a loud piercing wail filled the room. As quickly as possible Harry closed the egg as students covered their ears. Silence filled the Common Room. Everyone was staring at the egg in horror. No one had imagined something so horrible had been inside. Harry on the other hand smiled and looked up at Fred and Lee innocently. "Well, you can't say Hermione didn't warn you," he said candidly.

Ron covered his mouth as he snorted in laughter. Several others laughed too. Fred and Lee soon joined in the laughter and returned to the party. Looking down at the egg, Harry started thinking. So that was the clue. Now Harry knew why they had three months until the next task. It would probably take him that long to figure out what in the world that voice was.

"What do you think it is?" James asked the rest.

"No idea. What has a piercing wail?" Remus asked.

"Lots of things, banshees," Lily answered.

"People have too, when tortured," Sirius, "Some don't even need to be tortured," he finished nodding his head in Lily's direction.

She glared at him and hissed, "I doubt they'll be torturing the champions, Black!"

For the next few weeks the library became a second home for Harry. In addition to his homework, Harry was going through every language book he could find to try and figure out what that voice coming from the egg could possibly be. Hermione and Ron had taken it upon themselves to help Harry in any way they could.

"I thought Hermione said the champions weren't supposed to have help," Sirius interjected.

"Really, Sirius. Did you think they wouldn't help him," Remus said.

"No," Sirius grinned, "I am merely pointing out that Hermione is breaking the rules."

There had even been a few times when they looked up from their books to see Harry passed out due to exhaustion. They were half tempted to send an owl to Harry's guardians but knew it wouldn't change anything. When Harry was determined, there was no stopping him.

Harry wasn't the only champion spending an overabundance of time in the library. Viktor Krum was also surrounded by books and fans that came to the library just to spy on him. The noise the giggling girls made annoyed Hermione to no end. There were even times when Hermione's frustrations got the better of her and she slammed her books down on the table, waking Harry with a start.

"What's going on?" Harry asked quickly.

Hermione let a long breath. "Sorry Harry," she said sincerely as she looked past Harry's left shoulder at Viktor Krum. "I just can't take it anymore. Can they really think he likes them acting like this?"

"I don't think *thinking* is their forte," Lily rolled her eyes.

Harry rubbed the remaining tiredness out of his eyes before looking over his shoulder to see Viktor who looked as annoyed as Hermione. Gathering all the courage he could muster, Harry stood from his seat and approached Durmstrang champion. He really didn't know what he was doing but he figured anything was better than hearing Hermione complain for the next few hours.

Taking a deep breath, Harry pulled out a chair and sat down across from Viktor. He could only hope that Viktor felt the same way as he did about the *adoring* public. "Er—please don't take this the wrong way but do you like—er—*them*," he said in reference to Viktor's fans who were watching the scene in deep interest, "acting like this? They can be a little distracting."

Viktor rolled his eyes. "Tell me about it," he said bluntly. "I wish they would understand I am not something to be stared at. If it is really a bother to you and your friends I could leave..."

"Krum is like Harry. He's just trying to get by with his normal life," James said.

"Yes, but the difference is Harry never asked to be famous while Krum chose to play Quidditch," Sirius said.

"That doesn't mean they should bother him constantly," Lily snapped.

"I agree with you," Sirius tried to calm her; "I am just saying that I sympathize more with Harry because he never asked for it. Krum knew what came with being a famous Quidditch player, and I bet that before he actually became one he, like everyone else, dreamed of fame."

Lily looked pensively and conceded defeat, "Ok, maybe you're right," Sirius grinned, "Don't get so cocky, there's a first time for everything."

"But that's really not helping you," Harry said thoughtfully. *Well, here goes nothing.* "Would you like to join me and my friends? I promise we're not as scary as we look. We can also cast a few silencing charms on those who don't take the hint..."

"Aw, how nice of Harry," Lily cooed.

Viktor appeared to be skeptical at first then started gathering his books. "I would appreciate that very much," he said gratefully as he stood up and followed Harry back to where Ron and Hermione were sitting.

Silence filled the library. No one could believe it. As Harry reached the table, both Hermione and Ron were staring at Harry in shock. This was clearly the last thing they had been expecting. "Viktor, these are my best friends," Harry said with a look that signaled 'deal with it'. "Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Ron, Hermione, I believe you know Viktor."

"Nice to meet you," Hermione said softly as she extended her hand to Viktor who shook it. Ron followed suit. Harry sat down across from Hermione while Viktor sat down across from Ron. Hermione glanced at Viktor's books. "Magical Creatures?" she asked curiously. "You should probably talk to Hagrid. He knows a lot about that sort of thing."

"Oh, do you think the second task is a Magical Creature?" James asked.

"Probably, with the wailing and all," Remus said, "I sure hope Harry thinks of this too."

"He has to since most of his pets fit in that category," Ron added under his breath. "Fluffy...Aragog...Buckbeak...Norbert...need I say more?"

"Actually Ron, yes you do, because Krum can't know which creature those are," Lily said.

"We know Buckbeak is a Hippogriff, but what about the rest?" Remus asked.

"Knowing Hagrid, the most vicious must be Fluffy," James said knowledgeably.

Viktor glanced at Harry with a confused look on his face. "Well, Fluffy is a large three headed dog that we sort of met our first year here," Harry clarified. "Aragog is an Acromantula that

we met in our second year, Buckbeak is a Hippogriff we met last year and Norbert was Hagrid's pet dragon...er...what was it again?"

"Told you," James said.

"I think the dragon is worst," Sirius told James as if they were discussing the weather.

"Harry, what are you doing meeting those dangerous creatures?" Lily scolded.

"A Norwegian Ridgeback," Ron said instantly. "I hated that thing. It nearly bit my finger off. It was a good thing we convinced Hagrid to let Charlie take him to Romania when it was still young. At least it didn't try to eat us like Aragog's children. I still have nightmares about that."

"As soon as we get to Hogwarts I'll be having a chat with Hagrid about appropriate creatures to show my son," Lily said.

"What are you going to say; 'Hey Hagrid, I got this book from the future and didn't like the creatures you introduced to my son'," Sirius said shaking his head.

"Wouldn't work anyway, Hagrid would say they were harmless," Remus chuckled.

Viktor looked at the three fourteen-year-olds with wide eyes. "You three have faced all of that already?" he asked. "But you're only fourteen. How did you manage to survive?"

"A lot of luck," Harry muttered as he looked around to see that people were still watching them. "We really shouldn't be having this conversation here of all places. It's not a big deal. With Hagrid as our Care of Magical Creatures teacher meeting strange creatures is normal."

"Normal Harry? Since when is fighting a Basilisk—ow!" Hermione winced as Harry stomped on her foot to silence her.

"There we have the Basilisk again, and no one is explaining why he fought a Basilisk," James said annoyed.

"Maybe they'll explain now," Sirius said hopefully.

Viktor looked directly at Harry. "You said it was all just rumors," he said softly as a grin broke on his face. "I agree this isn't the place but I expect to hear all about your adventures later."

"No, not later! Now," Sirius whined.

From then on Viktor sat with Harry, Ron and Hermione in the library. Ron and Hermione were hesitant at first about the arrangement but they kept their comments to themselves since nothing was said about the upcoming task. Viktor occasionally gave in input when they were working on schoolwork that helped them along. Even Hermione had been grateful to the help Viktor provided.

Word had gotten around that Rita Skeeter was roaming the grounds looking for an interview. All staff had been warned not to talk to her since her main topic was Harry Potter. The threat of Sirius Black worked on keeping her away from Harry but other students weren't so lucky. By now Rita knew who Harry's close friends were and who to corner whenever they stepped onto the grounds. Care of Magical Creatures class was her opportune time to corner any Gryffindor she could. Those she talked to though would only say 'no comment'.

"Good," James said, "The last thing we need is her making things up in the paper."

As if the school didn't have enough to talk about already, Professor McGonagall announced the Yule Ball would be held at eight o'clock on Christmas Day and end around midnight in the Great Hall. It was open to fourth-year students and older but younger years could be invited. Dress robes were required attire. Harry let it all go in one ear and out the other. He already had plans for Christmas holidays, plans that he had been looking forward to ever since the school year began. Harry had never had a home to go where he wasn't hated. Sirius and Remus had told him the Black House was far from being completely up-to-date but Harry couldn't help wanting to see where he would be staying for the summer holidays...evil house elf or not.

When class ended, Harry moved to leave with everyone else but a stern voice made him stop. "Mr. Potter, if I could have a word please," said Professor McGonagall. Harry turned around and waited for everyone to leave. Professor McGonagall closed the distance between them. "Harry, I noticed your name wasn't on the list of students staying over the holidays."

"Of course not. He's going home to a marauder Christmas," James said happy.

Harry was confused by the comment. Why would his name be on the list? "Because I'm not staying," Harry said carefully. "I'm going home. This is my first Christmas with Sirius and Remus. Why would I stay here?"

"Yeah, why?" Sirius asked, "She's nutty." He finished fondly.

Professor McGonagall nervously cleared her throat. "Harry, please sit down," she said and sat down herself. When Harry complied, McGonagall enfolded her fingers and appeared to be struggling to find the right words to say. "Harry, I can understand you want to spend Christmas with your godfather and Mr. Lupin. I know how important family is to you...however, you are a champion and have certain obligations—"

"Excuse me now, obligations?" Lily asked annoyed.

"—obligations?" Harry asked uncomfortably. He really didn't like the sound of this. "What obligations could I possibly have? I've done everything you wanted. I put up with all of the harassment and stress that being a part of the Tournament has given me. I don't think a break away from these walls is too much to ask."

"Certainly not," Remus said firmly.

McGonagall reached out and touched his hand. "Harry, we have asked so much of you this year, I know," she said patiently. "You have risen to the challenge magnificently. I know this seems unfair but it is tradition for the champions to open the ball with their partners. You are one of the champions. If you want I can contact Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin for you. I know they'll understand..."

"NOOOOOO!" four cries were heard.

"Nope, he's not doing it," Sirius said firmly, "He's going home for his Marauder Christmas. I am putting my foot down."

Harry could only stare at her. He was at a loss for words. This wasn't happening. Why did he always have to pay for the actions of others? It wasn't fair. He had been looking forward to this ever since Sirius had adopted him. Closing his eyes, Harry bit back a few selective words Professor McGonagall wouldn't approve of and forced himself calm down. This wasn't Professor McGonagall's fault. She was just the messenger.

Opening his eyes again, Harry looked directly at Professor McGonagall who was staring at him with what appeared to be a mixture of sympathy and pity. "I don't have a choice in the matter, do I?" Harry asked softly.

Professor McGonagall gently squeezed Harry's hand, providing all of the confirmation he needed. "Do you want me to send word to your guardians?" she asked again.

Harry shook his head. "No, I'll do it," he said as he stood up. "I have a few other things to talk to them about anyways." Picking up his school bag, Harry could feel his mind already trying to come up with a way to break the news to Sirius and Remus. "Thanks for the offer, Professor," he said softly then left the classroom for the Gryffindor Tower.

"But we want our Marauder Christmas!" Remus cried.

"This isn't fair," Lily huffed.

He walked through the halls in a daze, not even realizing he had reached the Gryffindor Tower until the Fat Lady pulled him out of his thoughts. Harry mindlessly muttered the password then hurried through the Common Room and up the stairs. Entering his dorm room, Harry closed the door and locked it before hurrying over to his trunk and pulling out the small mirror he needed to contact Sirius. Sitting down on his bed, Harry took a deep breath, called for Sirius and braced himself for a very uncomfortable conversation.

It only took a few moments for Sirius' face to appear in the mirror. "Hey Pronglet!" Sirius said happily. "How's my favorite godson?"

Harry snorted at the comment. "Sirius, I'm your only godson,"

"That doesn't matter, still my favorite," Sirius said happy.

he said then remembered the reason he had contacted his godfather in the first place. Harry bit his lower lip nervously. This was harder than he had thought. "Is Remus there with you?"

"He's downstairs attacking a Boggart," Sirius said cautiously.

"And *why* am I attacking a Boggart all by myself? Hum?" Remus asked, hands on his hips, glaring at Sirius.

"Because you're the best at it," Sirius suggested sheepishly.

"Harry, what's going on?"

Inhaling deeply, Harry figured he should just get it over with. "I can't come home for Christmas," he began. "Professor McGonagall told me today that I have to attend this Yule

Ball that's being held on Christmas since I'm one of the champions. I don't even want to go and I have to open the ball. What in the world does that mean?"

Sirius grinned. "Harry, that means you and your date have to dance the opening dance," he said in an amused tone. Harry looked horrified at the thought which made Sirius laugh. "I'm sorry. I completely forgot about the Yule Ball. It's a tradition for the Triwizard Tournament. That was why dress robes were required this year. I knew there was something we forgot to tell you."

"Excuse me Sirius?" Lily asked, "What about the whole putting your foot down? The Marauder Christmas? I don't see any foot down here." Remus and James crossed their arms and narrowed their eyes at Sirius. Sirius looked lost.

Harry let out a groan as he ran a hand through his hair. "So you're not mad?" he asked.

Sirius let out a sigh and rubbed his eyes. "Harry, I know this is something you need to do," he said. "Of course I'm not mad. I'll talk to Dumbledore and see if he'll pull some strings."

"See, I'll find a way to have our Marauder Christmas," Sirius said happily and the others relented a little.

Now, this ball you have to go to. Any idea of who you'll be taking as your date?"

Harry shifted nervously on his bed. "No," he said honestly. "Any advice you could give would be greatly appreciated."

"Well, in my school days I would have gone for the most attractive girl that would go with me," Sirius said honestly.

Sirius grinned and Lily mumbled "shallow".

"Now, I would probably take someone who I knew and would feel comfortable with. If you're uncomfortable with your date, Harry, it's only going to add to your nerves. Ask someone you know fairly well so you at least know what to talk about."

"Quick Harry, run! That's not Sirius it's someone on Polyjuice!" Remus cried. James and Lily roared in laughter while Sirius glared.

"I'll let you know that I am a very deep person," he snapped at them. The laughter only increased.

"But I don't know a lot of girls," Harry said honestly. "The only thing most of them do around me is stare and giggle."

Sirius started to chuckle much to Harry's annoyance. "The mystery of women is a longer discussion that will have to wait until later," he said candidly. "I'll warn you, though. Those girls that stare and giggle probably wouldn't be someone I'd choose. It's a possibility that they would be more interested in going with the-boy-who-lived than with Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Just great," he muttered. "I don't even know how to dance. This is a complete nightmare."

"Not many do at your age Harry," Sirius said honestly. "Ask around. Maybe someone can teach you. I thought Moony mentioned something about the Chasers on your Quidditch team being girls. You've known them for years. If they don't know how, they'll probably know someone who does."

Harry had to admit the suggestion made sense. Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet were three girls that didn't treat him any different than anyone else on the team. He just hoped they would help. "Thanks Sirius," Harry said appreciatively. "Will you be around later...just in case?"

"If I'm not Moony will be," Sirius said in an assuring tone. "Don't get so worked up about this, Harry. You faced a dragon. This is nothing when compared to that."

For some reason Harry didn't agree. Getting passed the dragon relied on instinct. Harry had plenty of experience in that area. The female side of the human race, on the other hand, was an area that Harry was at a complete loss on trying to figure out.

"You're not the only one Harry. Not the only one," James said looking longingly to Lily.

That night after dinner Harry did manage to meet up with Angelina and Katie alone. Remembering that Angelina had entered her name in the Tournament, Harry tried to be as careful as possible on wording his questions. In the end it didn't matter. Both of the Gryffindor Chasers were extremely understanding to Harry's dilemma and jumped at the offer

to teach him how to dance. The lessons would be one hour each night for as long as Harry needed it.

Deciding on whom to ask to the ball was a little more difficult. Harry had every intention on following Sirius' advice. It would make the evening more bearable if Harry was comfortable with his date. The problem was there were very few girls Harry knew well enough to be comfortable with. Most of them were more of an acquaintance than a friend.

The obvious choice was Hermione. She was one of his best friends. The problem was that Harry hadn't been fast enough. The very day he was going to talk to Hermione in the library he overheard someone else asking her to the Yule Ball in accented English. Harry could hear the excitement in Hermione's voice when she accepted and couldn't help but be happy for his friend. He had rarely heard that tone in Hermione's voice in anything other than schoolwork.

"Uh, oh, Ron's not going to like that," Remus said.

"Then he should have asked her," Lily snapped.

It seemed that having a champion as your date was the goal of the majority of the female population at Hogwarts. Harry had been asked by girls he had never met before and had to politely turn them down. The more Harry thought about it he figured the sooner he had a date the better. At least it would get all of those giggling girls off of his back.

"People are so shallow," Lily huffed, "I bet none of those girls even gave Harry a second glance before he became champion. I bet they were among the ones that turned against him on his second year."

"Probably," Remus said sadly, "They don't care about going with Harry as much as going with a champion."

Deep down Harry knew who he wanted to ask but he was afraid of what some people may say. Working on his homework with Ron and Hermione, Harry figured he just needed to get it over with. "Er—Ron?" he asked quietly.

"He's asking Ron out?" Sirius asked.

"No, you dolt," Remus said smacking his head.

"Then why is he talking to Ron?" Sirius asked.

"I think I know," Lily said and Remus grinned with her.

"Care to share your theories?" James asked.

"No," she answered. James and Sirius rolled their eyes at the grinning duo.

"I was wondering if you had a problem with someone taking Ginny to the ball...as a friend of course."

Ron stared at Harry with a raised eyebrow. "What have you heard?" he asked protectively. "Who's been eyeing my sister?"

"Oh, my God! Ron is even thicker than Sirius," Remus cried. The other three nodded until Sirius stopped nodding and cried.

"Hey!"

"Ron!" Hermione scolded then lowered her voice so no one other than Ron and Harry could hear her. "That wasn't what Harry said. He's asking if you would have a problem with him asking Ginny to the ball."

To say that Ron's brain was acting slowly would have been an understatement. **"Why would you ask her?" he asked thickly. "She's my sister. There are plenty of other girls in this school—"**

"—who are more interested in going with the-boy-who-lived than me," Harry interrupted. "Sirius said that I should go with someone I'm comfortable with. Ginny is like a sister to me. Other than Hermione, Ginny is the only girl that believed me about not entering myself in the Tournament from the beginning. She already knows everything we've been through so she wouldn't want to hear about it all night long to feed the rumor mill."

"That makes sense," Hermione said thoughtfully. "You've obviously put a lot of thought into this, Harry. I'm proud of you."

"Why don't you ask Hermione?" Ron asked curiously.

"Uh,oh!" James whispered.

Harry glanced at Hermione nervously before looking away. "Er—I believe Hermione is already taken," he said hesitantly making Hermione's eyes widen in surprise. He hadn't said a word to her about the incident in the library yet.

Ron looked from Hermione to Harry and back to Hermione. "Who are you going with?" he asked her suspiciously.

"Told you he wasn't going to be happy," Sirius said grimacing.

"And as I've said; If he didn't want her going with someone else he should have asked her first," Lily said annoyed.

"A friend who asked me," Hermione said evasively. "I really think you have a point, Harry. Besides, you're practically family to the Weasleys already. It would be better if you took Ginny instead of someone who would take advantage of her. Don't you agree, Ron?"

"Hermione! How very Slytherin of you!" James cried impressed.

That worked. Ron immediately dropped his stubbornness and gave Harry his consent to ask Ginny to the Yule Ball. Once Ron returned to his homework, Harry mouthed a 'thank you' to Hermione who mouthed 'we'll talk later' back. They both knew they would have a lot of explaining to do.

Hermione had been shocked to find out Harry had heard her date ask her in the library. She had also been surprised that Harry had considered asking her and insisted that her date was only a friend which struck Harry as odd behavior. Why would he care? As long as she had a good time, what did it matter?

"Well, I guess Hermione knows Ron fancies her and thought Harry would think she would be betraying his best friend," James said in Ron's defense.

"I don't think she should care, if Ron isn't making any moves she has the right to be happy," Lily said plainly.

Hermione never mentioned her date's name hinting to Harry that she didn't want anyone to know yet. He had recognized the voice immediately when he heard it but decided to respect Hermione's wishes.

] "Who do you think she is going with?" James asked.

"Well it's rather obvious," Remus said.

"No," Sirius shook his head.

"Then you'll just have to wait and see," Lily said smugly.

With Hermione's help, Harry was able to catch Ginny when she had been alone the following morning. Asking Ron for permission had been a walk in the park when compared to trying to phrase everything right so Ginny wouldn't take it the wrong way. The only problem is everything that entered his mind seemed to be unable to come out of his mouth. Why was this so difficult? This was Ginny.

"Because son women are mysterious, terrifying and charming creatures," James said wisely.

"Terrifying and charming James, they are conflicting adjectives!" Remus said.

"And yet they are both," James said. Lily laughed.

Harry looked at Ginny directly in the eyes and silently prayed that he wouldn't mess this up. "Ginny, I think you know what is expected of me at the Yule Ball," he began and let out a sigh of relief when she nodded. "I don't like being in the spotlight and having a date that I hardly know will only make it worse. I know we don't know each other as well as we should but I do consider you one of my closest friends, just like the rest of your family. You stood by me in October when the majority of the school turned away. You have no idea how much that meant to me. I guess what I'm trying to say is would you like to go to the Yule Ball with me...as friends?"

"Now see, that wasn't hard," Lily said.

"Excuse me, I beg to differ. As a person who has been on Harry's shoes many times that is the hardest thing to do," James said.

"You do it so often that I was convinced it came naturally to you," Lily said.

"Nope, I just won't give up in what I want," he said boldly.

"You mean you won't give up because I am difficult," she said with a raised eyebrow.

"No, I decided a long time ago we were going to be married," he said confidently.

"Yeah, first time he saw you in our first train ride when you scolded him for making fun of Snivellus he said: "I am going to marry her,"" Sirius said. James nodded. Lily looked pleased but didn't say anything. Just kept reading.

Ginny stared at Harry for a long moment before allowing a large smile appear on her face and wrapping her arms around Harry's neck. "I would love to go to the ball with you, Harry," she said happily then stepped back with a calculating smile on her face. "Do you want to tell my brothers or should we surprise them?"

Harry bit his lower lip. "Well, Ron already knows," he said hoping Ginny wouldn't get upset. "I just wanted to make sure he was okay with it. He's my best friend and I know how protective he is of you..."

Ginny now looked at Harry in amazement. "How did you ever manage to convince him?" she asked.

"You can thank Hermione on that one," Harry answered honestly then relayed how Hermione had convinced Ron that Harry was the best choice for Ron's baby sister. "Sometimes I wonder if she should have been in Slytherin," he added thoughtfully. "Can you imagine if Hermione and Malfoy—"

"Uugh! Harry don't do this to us!" Sirius begged.

"Don't do this to Hermione!" Lily cried.

"Eww!" Ginny cried in disgust. "Bad mental image!"

They both started laughing. Harry couldn't help but be relieved. Now all he needed to do was to finish the lessons Angelina and Katie were giving him, figure out the clue for the second task and finish his homework before the end of the term. Angelina and Katie had assured Harry that he was learning quickly and would be fine by the time the Yule Ball took place. It was difficult learning to dance with two girls who were taller than you but they made due. Harry could now make through the lesson without stepping on someone's toes and losing step which was a vast improvement. All in all, Harry was overjoyed. He wouldn't make a fool out of himself after all.

By the time the last week of the term arrived the Yule Ball was the only thing everyone talked about. Several teachers had given up trying to teach while others continued through material despite the distractions. Professor McGonagall, Professor Moody and Professor Snape were the worst. Professor McGonagall was always stern, no one dared to question Professor Moody and fun in Potions class was almost as likely as a Professor Snape not hating every Gryffindor that crossed his path.

"In other words; Never gonna happen!" James mumbled.

Harry and Ginny had agreed not to broadcast they would be going to the ball together. Actually Ginny begged Harry so she could have some fun with her brothers, Fred and George. Ron and Hermione had promised not to say anything although it was a little more difficult for Ron to keep quiet than Hermione. Ron was a little resentful that both Harry and Hermione had dates where he hadn't asked anyone yet. It also bothered Ron that his little sister had a date before he did.

"And whose fault is that?" Lily asked annoyed.

"Give the kid a break Lily, its tuff asking girls out," Sirius defended Ron.

"I agree with you Sirius," Remus said, "But I also agree with Lily. There's no reason for him to take it out on Harry and Hermione."

Sitting in front of the fire, Harry was once again flipping through a book on magical languages. Classes were over for the holidays giving him time to focus completely on the second task. Hermione and Ginny were sitting nearby talking excitedly about the group that would be performing at the ball called the Weird Sisters. Harry had never heard of them before and from the sounds of it Hermione hadn't either.

"Do you really have to do that now, Harry?" Ron asked in a bored voice from the chair across from Harry. "You have over two months to figure out that silly egg. Why don't we play a game of chess or even Exploding Snap?"

Harry looked up at his friend suddenly feeling horrible for being too caught up in his own problems to see that Ron was having problems on his own. The problem was Ron was creating his problems by procrastinating. "I would rather figure it out early and be prepared than look like an idiot, Ron," he said honestly. "I was lucky I already knew the Summoning Charm for the first task. You understand that, don't you?" He let out a sigh when Ron scowled and looked away. "Okay, how about the ball? Have you asked anyone yet? We could help you find someone..."

"What's the point?" Ron asked stubbornly as he stared into the fire. The self pity in his voice was suffocating. "I'm not like you, Harry. I'm not a champion. Girls aren't lining up for me like they were for you."

"Uh, oh, I think someone is jealous," James said grimly.

Harry closed his book and put it aside. It almost sounded like Ron was jealous but he had always complained about how much time Harry put into studying for the Tournament. It didn't make sense. "But I still needed to ask my date," Harry pointed out. "I even had to ask her brother for permission so I technically had to ask twice. Also, being a champion is not all it's cracked up to be. If anything it made me feel like piece of meat on display."

"At least you get noticed," Ron muttered bitterly.

"Yep, definitely jealous," Sirius grimaced.

That was the final straw. With his book still in hand, Harry stood up and turned to leave. "Oh yeah, I get noticed," he said as he glanced over his shoulder at Ron. "The only reason I am noticed was because someone always wants me dead; usually the same person who murdered my parents and cursed my life. If you want my life so bad, Ron, you're welcome to have it...all of it."

Everybody winced.

Not wanting to hear some feeble apology, Harry left the Gryffindor Tower for the library. He really didn't want to talk to anyone right now. Ron's jealousy hurt him deeply. Harry had believed that Ron looked past the 'fame' when they found him asleep by the lake the morning after he had been announced as a champion. The truth was Ron hadn't looked past it. He just didn't say anything about it.

Harry wasn't surprised in the slightest to find the library empty. Who would be studying at the beginning of the holidays anyway? He found a table deep in the library and forced himself to focus on the material he was trying to read. He was almost halfway through the book, just starting on the creatures that began with 'M'. This was most likely the wrong way to go about finding out the language the egg spoke but Harry was running out of ideas.

Luckily it finally paid off when Harry reached 'Merfolk'. The description of their language, mermish, was the closest of a match to the screeching he heard from his golden egg that he had found so far. Hoping against hope, Harry hurried to the Magical Creatures section and searched for a book on merfolk. He picked out a few and brought them back to his table only to see that he had company of the red haired variety.

The Weasley Twins, both of whom appeared to be extremely upset. Harry could only assume they had heard what had happened between him and Ron. "Is there something I can help you two with?" he asked as he sat back down and opened one of the books.

"Ginny told us what happened," said George. "We just want to say—"

"—sorry that our brother is acting like a prat," Fred said for George. "We have come to ask for permission—"

"—to prank his thick arse," both of the twins finished at the same time.

"That's not a great idea," Lily said frowning.

"Not a great idea? He deserves it," James said annoyed and the other two Marauders nodded fervently.

"He's jealous of Harry remember, that's only going to get worse if his own family sides with Harry against him." She explained Remus nodded pensively but James and Sirius weren't that easy.

"They are always saying Harry is like a brother to them. They are just siding with one brother against the other," Sirius said.

"That's very good in theory but practically it won't work all that good," she said.

Harry shook his head slowly as he rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. "As much as I appreciate the thought you both know you can't do that," he said softly. "Ron's your brother, not me. If you two keep taking my side it will only fuel his jealousy."

Lily raised an eyebrow triumphantly.

The looks on the faces of the twins was downright comical. Both of them seemed to be at a state between confused and outraged. "But he's being a prat!" Fred cried in disbelief. "Just because he's too afraid to ask a girl doesn't give him the right to—"

"—to what?" Harry interrupted. "Be jealous? That seems to be a common theme this year. Malfoy's jealous of me so he attacks me...Ron's jealous..." Harry let the sentence hang. He really didn't need this now. He didn't need his best friend turning his back on him. He didn't want the Weasley family at odds because of him. "Don't worry about me," he said as he returned his attention to the book in front of him. "I'll be fine."

Luckily Fred and George took that as their cue to leave. Harry remained in the library until his lesson with Angelina and Katie only to return there afterwards. The holidays had barely started and already Harry was dreading them. Alone in the drafty library, Harry could only think of how becoming one of the Hogwarts champions had really messed up his life.

"A lot," Sirius grumbled, "Especially messed our Marauder Christmas," then he continued in a pompous tone, "Don't fret young Harry I shall think of something."

Chapter 13

Just a Ball

For the week until Christmas Harry avoided the Gryffindor Tower as much as possible. He had determined from the books on merfolk that he needed something to absorb the screeching. He had tried pillows, blankets and other objects that could be formed around the golden egg but nothing seemed to work. After about two days Harry decided that a break was necessary and started on his homework. The teachers had seemed to go out of their way to assign plenty of it anyways.

"Yeah, it's like they thrive on sucking all the fun out of the holidays," Sirius said grimly and he and James gave Remus dirty looks.

"WHAT?"

"Don't think we forgot about your treachery *Professor Moony*," James said through narrowed eyes, "Joining the enemy."

"So horrible," Sirius put his fist to his mouth and continued in a strained voice, "We tried to help. We saw the signs," he faked sobbed.

"The reading, the tutoring sessions," James said also in a strained voice shaking his head, "Now his only hope is the T.A."

"Teacher assistant?" Lily asked.

"No," James answered, "Teachers Anonymous. Come on Moony say it. After me, my name is Remus Lupin and I am a teacher."

Remus just groaned and put his head on his hand.

"Come on Moony, acknowledging you have a problem is the first step towards recovery. We will save you," Sirius said hugging Remus who rolled his eyes. Lily's lips were twitching.

Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George would come into the library to check on Harry from time to time but they seemed to be at a loss at what to say or do. All of them agreed that Ron had been out of line but had respected Harry's wishes and stayed out of it. Harry figured it would only add fuel to the fire if Ron saw his family on Harry's side and not their own brother. It

touched Harry that Fred, George and Ginny were standing by him but that didn't erase the hurt he felt by his best friend sharing the same feelings as Draco Malfoy.

Speaking of Malfoy, Harry's seclusion in the library had given the Slytherin student the opportunity he needed to once again start up his taunting but this time he aimed it towards the Weasleys and Hermione. One night during dinner, Harry was returning to the library from the kitchens when he overheard voices around the corner. Slowly and quietly, Harry checked around the corner to see who it was only to see Malfoy standing with Crabbe and Goyle at his sides in front of Hermione and Ginny.

"Malfoy hasn't got a clue of how to treat two ladies," James said.

"More like Malfoy is a scared little ferret that couldn't talk to a toddler without backup," Lily snorted.

"Don't deny it, Mudblood," Malfoy said snidely. "Potter couldn't find anyone to take to the ball so he had to settle for you."

Harry took a step back so he was still out of sight. He didn't want Malfoy to know he had heard the comment. "I'm sorry, Professor Moody," he said innocently. "I haven't seen Malfoy. Should I let him know you're looking for him?"

They all laughed.

The sound of fast footsteps filled the hallway. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were running the other way as fast as they could to avoid another encounter. Leaning against the wall, Harry waited patiently until he saw Hermione and Ginny come into sight. Both of them saw Harry and only Harry realizing that it was just a ruse to scare Malfoy. Smiles broke on their faces before they fell into uncontrollable laughter.

When the laughter diminished, Harry looked at them closely as they approached. The fact that Malfoy had cornered them in a deserted hallway brought back unpleasant memories. "Are you two all right?" Harry asked seriously.

Hermione and Ginny nodded. "We can handle Malfoy," Hermione said confidently as she moved to Harry's left side and wrapped an arm around his. "Your method was better though. He's a jumpy little ferret isn't he?" She flashed him a smile which Harry didn't return.

"I think Malfoy is never going to live the ferret thing down," Lily said chuckling.

"Nope," Sirius shook his head, "And he deserves it."

"I'm sorry for not being there for you two," Harry said softly as his gaze fell to the floor. "I just can't bring myself to face Ron. I have enough on my plate with the Tournament, schoolwork and the ball without constantly proving that his life is better than mine. I thought the first task would be enough to show that being a champion isn't all fun and games. I guess I was wrong."

"I don't think Ron's problem is just about the championship, I think he is jealous of the whole Boy Who Lived thing," Lily said grimly.

"I don't see why," James said.

"He's used to being overlooked at home and then he gets overlooked at school too," Sirius said and at James' lost look he elaborated, "He has a bunch of brothers that are successful so he doesn't stand out then at school, where he could finally stand out, he has a famous friend."

"You don't know what's like to compete with siblings James and at school you are popular so you can't relate," Lily said.

Ginny shook her head as she moved to Harry's right side and leaned against the wall. "I hate to break it to you, Harry, but Ron has always been the jealous type," she said honestly. "He has five brothers who are all successful in their own way. Bill was Head Boy, Charlie was Quidditch Captain, Percy was Head Boy and the twins are trying to start this joke shop. To be honest with you Ron was jealous the night your name came out of the goblet. His worry for you the following morning was stronger pushing the jealousy aside."

Harry let out a sigh and tilted his head back until it hit the wall. "Why didn't anyone tell me?" he asked.

"And make you feel worse for something you had no control over?" asked Hermione. "You had enough to worry about. I don't think Ron's jealous of you *being* a champion anymore. I think it has more to do with everything that's happened since then." At Harry's confused look Hermione continued. "You spend all your time studying now which isn't a bad thing...it's just different. Then you befriend Viktor Krum, an international Quidditch player and celebrity just like you." Harry moved to defend himself but Hermione silenced him by placing her free hand over his lips. "Hear me out. It was the right thing to do, Harry. Those girls were really annoying and Viktor appreciated someone treating him normally for once. You have other

people in your life now. I think Ron's worried that he will be left behind, that you won't need him anymore."

"That's stupid," James cried.

"No it's not James," Remus said, "He is insecure. He is afraid of losing his best friend."

"So he treats him like rubbish in an attempt not to lose him? Doesn't make sense," James said back.

"No one said human behavior made sense," Lily said.

Harry stared at Hermione in complete confusion. "That's ridiculous," he said bluntly. "Ron's my best friend. Nothing could possibly change that."

"We know that, Harry," Hermione said patiently, "and, in time, Ron will realize that too." She glanced over at Ginny before returning her attention to Harry. "Listen Harry, why don't you spend some time in the Gryffindor Tower tonight? You look exhausted. When was the last time you had a decent night's rest?"

"He can't even remember that!" Sirius cried.

"Good Hermione," Lily said approvingly, "She'll get Harry to rest."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. Truthfully, he couldn't remember the last time he had slept through the night. He just had too much on his mind. Taking his silence as acceptance, Hermione and Ginny pulled Harry into the library where he gathered his things then was ushered to the Gryffindor Tower. The Common Room was empty which wasn't surprising considering everyone was still at dinner.

Not wanting to go to bed yet, Harry walked over to the sofa and sat down. He opened his Transfiguration book and resumed reading. Hermione and Ginny hurried up to their dorm rooms and brought back some of their own schoolwork. Hermione sat down on the opposite end of the sofa while Ginny sat down in a chair next to Harry's side of the couch. This wasn't what they had in mind but at least Harry wasn't secluding himself anymore.

Everyone was surprised to see Harry when they returned from dinner. Several asked how Harry was doing on the second task while others tried to press Harry for who his date was to the Yule Ball. Harry carefully evaded these questions and returned his attention to his book.

Eventually the commotion died down and everyone retreated to their respected rooms. Harry was one of the first to go. After so many days alone the noise had become too much. Throughout all of the commotion Harry couldn't help but notice how Ron steered clear of him in the Common Room. The tall redhead sat alone with a resentful look on his face. That was all Harry needed to know Ron hadn't moved past his jealousy yet.

James huffed and scowled.

The feeling of something wet against his face quickly pulled Harry out of his slumber. Opening his eyes, Harry saw a bunch of blurry fur and had to laugh. He didn't need his glasses to recognize the big ball of fur that had just licked his face. Wrapping his arms around the dog's neck, Harry held on tightly, not wanting to let go for a long time. He had really missed Midnight. He didn't realize how much until now.

"Sirius! Can't you wake him up like a normal person?" Lily asked. James and Remus stared at her and James said.

"But he isn't normal!"

Sirius shook his head.

"Hey Midnight," Harry said softly into Midnight's fur. He could feel his body shaking but didn't know why. All he knew that his godfather was here and that everything from the past few weeks was hitting him full force. He heard a pop and felt arms wrap around him hold him. No words were said between them until Harry stopped shaking.

"What's going on?" James asked.

"Everything is hitting him now because he feels safe," Remus said. James and Sirius looked lost so he expanded, "It's like when you are in a dangerous situation. You act on necessity. You put your fears in second plan so you can react and save your self. But once you're safe again and you relax they come to the front and you feel the effects. Harry was so overwhelmed with work and everything that he put his feelings in second plan to function. But now that his parents are there to take care of things for him he can allow himself to feel."

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

"Happy Christmas, Pronglet," Sirius whispered as he gently rubbed his godson's back. "Moony's downstairs waiting for us. It appears that we have a lot to talk about. Why don't

you change into something warmer and meet us downstairs? We'll have an early breakfast and talk about whatever you want."

"Yes, please do," Lily pleaded.

Harry nodded and released his hold around his godfather's neck. Sirius let go of Harry, slid backwards and smiled at Harry as he ruffled the teenager's hair. The simple action only made Harry grin. It felt like for one moment everything was normal again, just like the past summer. Harry waited until Sirius left the room then jumped out of bed and changed into a pair of jeans and a jumper. Once he had put on a pair of socks and his shoes, Harry left the dorm room in a hurry. He ran down the stairs to see Sirius and Remus talking quietly in front of the fire.

Both of the Marauders had concerned looks on their faces that were immediately hid by smiles when they noticed Harry hurrying towards them.

"Like he isn't going to notice," Remus snorted.

"I hope you guys make him feel better," Lily said.

"Yeah, and give Ron a good smack on the head," James said. Lily smacked his head.

Remus pulled Harry into an embrace but not before noticing the shadows under Harry's eyes. "Happy Christmas, cub," he said while smoothing out Harry's messy hair. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"You do know that's a lost cause right Moony?" James asked ruffling his own hair.

Harry looked up at Remus and nodded, unable to stop smiling. "Happy Christmas," he said happily. "I can't believe you came." His smile suddenly vanished. In his four Christmases at Hogwarts Harry couldn't remember ever seeing a parent here. "Are you two going to get in trouble for being here?" he asked nervously.

"Us?" Sirius asked in mock shock. "Never. You, Pronglet, are looking at two of the chaperones for the Yule Ball tonight."

"Excuse me, WHAT?" Lily said appalled, "Was Dumbledore high?"

"You mean like on one of the towers," Sirius asked, "What's that got to do with anything."

Remus and Lily couldn't help it. They burst in laughter.

"She means on drugs Padfoot," Remus chuckled.

"Ah," he said and turned to James, "What's drugs?"

"No idea," James shrugged. The other two just laughed harder.

Harry blinked a few times as he tried to process what Sirius had just said. He could see Remus as a chaperone. Remus had been a teacher last year and had a tendency to act like an adult. Sirius, on the other hand, had a tendency to act more like Fred and George Weasley than an adult. He couldn't imagine what Sirius would do surrounded by those who would just encourage his love for pranks.

"Chaos, Harry. That's what would happen," Lily said knowingly.

"Professor Dumbledore approved this?" Harry asked skeptically.

Remus held back a laugh. **"That was my initial reaction,"** he admitted with a wink then gently pushed Harry towards the portrait entrance.

"So little faith," Sirius said in mock offense.

"Now, come on. You know how cranky Padfoot gets when he isn't fed on time. We can talk on the way."

"So cranky Moony, so cranky," James shook his head and Sirius narrowed his eyes at him.

"Hey!" Sirius said as he followed. "I do *not* get cranky! Stop poisoning my godson with lies Moony!"

Sirius glared at Remus who was biting back a smile.

"Oh, Moony, you know Padfoot so well," James said smiling. Sirius glared turned back to him.

They left the Gryffindor Tower, stepping into an empty hallway. Looking out the window, Harry saw that the sun was only just beginning to rise. It was still early enough for them to walk to the Great Hall without seeing anyone else in the hallways. Harry listened to the

banter between Sirius and Remus concerning eating habits. It was only when they entered the vacant Great Hall that Sirius and Remus realized how quiet Harry was being.

Sirius wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders and pulled the fourteen-year-old into a one armed embrace. Harry looked up at Sirius and smiled, trying to assure the man nothing was wrong. He was just so accustomed to the quiet and being alone to realize that this wasn't normal behavior. Sirius smiled back before glancing over at Remus as if he were silently confirming his beliefs.

"Yes, please and now DO SOMETHING!" Lily yelled.

"Ouch, Lily I am sitting just next to you," James said rubbing his ear.

Sitting down at the Gryffindor table, Sirius and Remus slowly started loading their plates with food, stealing glances at Harry the entire time. Eventually the silence became too much. "All right, Harry," Sirius said at last. "What's going on? You seem like a completely different person than you were a month ago. Did something happen that we should know about?"

"YES! Ron is being an idiot, and Malfoy cornered Harry, and Ron is being an idiot, and he has to compete in this tournament, and Ron is being an idiot, and everyone keeps treating Harry like he put his name in the goblet and Ron is being an idiot!" James cried.

"Ok James, we get it: Ron is being an idiot," Lily patted him.

Harry bit his lower lip nervously. He didn't know what to do. If he told Sirius and Remus everything they would probably be upset since they took his participation in the Tournament so personally. *They take everything with me personally.*

"You bet we do!" Remus said nodding his head and crossing his arms.

"It's just been a long term," Harry said with a shrug. "I've been working a lot on the clue for the second task so..."

"So you just decided to run yourself down?" Remus asked gently. "Harry, as much as we admire your determination, you can't ignore your body's need to sleep and eat. What else is weighing down on you? You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders."

Harry hesitated. Was it really that obvious? Did he really look *that* bad? Letting out a tired sigh, Harry let his frustration get the better of him. "Ron and I had a small row," Harry

admitted then explained what happened. Once he finished Harry buried his face in his hands to avoid the looks Sirius and Remus were bound to give him.

"Excuse me, what look?" James asked his friends with an annoyed raised eyebrow.

"No look, Harry is just being his usual doubtful self," Lily tried to calm James.

"Better be," he huffed.

Sirius rested a hand on Harry's shoulder while Remus touched Harry's arm. "We know this has to be difficult for you, Harry," Remus said softly. "It's hard to remember the bad when the good is so appealing. I have a feeling Ron knows your life isn't all it's cracked up to be but figures it's easier to blame his problems on something he can't control rather than something he can. He can't get a date to the ball because he's not popular is a more self satisfying excuse than he's too uncomfortable to ask someone. Don't worry. Ron will come around."

"We can always count on Moony for the logical explanation," Sirius said fondly. Remus blushed.

"You both come from completely different backgrounds," Sirius added. "You have lived your life as someone who was different than everyone else and tried to fit in. Ron has always been one of the group; trying to stand out like the majority of the students here. None of them have any idea what you went through before you received your Hogwarts letter, what you've had to go through since then and what you are up against because of it all. People like to look at the rewards and not the struggles made to receive them."

"PADFOOT! That was so, so," James struggled to find a word, "profound!"

"I can be deep," Sirius said the other three burst in laughter.

"So what do I do?" Harry asked his guardians. "He wouldn't come near me last night in the Common Room. I hate that his brothers and sister are taking my side. I hate that Hermione is on my side. It feels like I'm forcing them to choose between us."

Remus leaned closer to Harry. "You're not forcing them to do anything, cub," he said sincerely. "They are making a choice and they *choose* to agree that Ron has no right to blame his problems on what has been done to you. Don't worry. Ron will come to his senses soon enough." He gently nudged Harry and smiled. "Eat up then we'll go back to the Gryffindor Tower and open presents."

"Yey, presents!" Sirius cried clapping his hands.

"Such a big baby," Remus said shaking his head.

Harry nodded and started eating his breakfast. They had just finished their meal when students started entering the Great Hall. Ignoring the curious glances cast their way, Harry left with Sirius and Remus for the Gryffindor Tower. Entering the Common Room, Harry noticed that there were a few people coming down the stairs on their way to breakfast. He led the way up to his dorm room, noticing his dorm mates were still asleep by the snores coming from Neville and Ron. Their coverings were pulled shut to block out the sunlight that now filled the room.

They entered the room quietly. Sirius and Remus sat down at the head of Harry's bed while Harry took position at the foot by the pile of presents. Harry had sent theirs to Black Manor and according to Remus had been opened the moment they arrived. Sirius was never one for patience. Harry had given them framed pictures from their time at Hogwarts this summer along with a few items from Zonko's for Sirius and a few enchanted golden bookmarks for Remus that could keep track up to the very word that had been read last.

"Harry knows you two so well," Lily said pleased.

Harry opened his presents from his friends and Mrs. Weasley quickly, surprised to find one from Ron. Glancing over at Ron's four-poster bed, Harry could only wonder what was going on with his best friend. Sirius and Remus noticed Harry's confusion but stayed quiet. He picked up Remus' gift and opened it to find a black leather photo album with golden letters that read: *The Potter Family*. Harry opened the album with shaky hands. In the first picture was a bespectacled boy who looked exactly like him holding the hands of a man tall and thin black haired man and a thin woman who had dark brown hair and glasses. They were smiling and laughing. Harry ran his fingers over the picture. It couldn't be, could it?

"Hey, that's me and my parents!" James said excitedly.

"Are these my...my grandparents?" Harry asked in a wavering voice.

"This album has pictures of you parents, your grandparents and even your great-grandparents," Remus said gently. "It is charmed to add pages when needed so we can add pictures of you to it. I tried to do the same for the Evans' side of your family but your Aunt wasn't too cooperative."

"How petty of her!" Lily said angry.

Harry looked up at Remus as he closed the album and held it against his chest as if he were afraid that it would somehow vanish from sight if he let go. "Thank you," he said gratefully. "I never knew what they looked like before. Did you two know them?"

Sirius and Remus nodded with reminiscing looks on their faces. "Your grandparents were wonderful people Harry," Sirius said with a smile. "They took me in after I ran away from my own family. We'll tell you more about them later. Finish opening your presents!"

Harry rolled his eyes at his godfather's childish antics. There were times it seemed impossible that Sirius was older than him. Of course it wasn't until Hogwarts that Harry actually received a Christmas present so Harry's lack of Christmas excitement probably had something to do with that. Picking up the final package, Harry bit back a smile and opened it. He found two items inside. The first was a penknife with attachments that could undo any knot and unlock any lock. The second a red leather-bound book with gold curvy lettering. Harry had to laugh when he saw what the lettering said: *The Most Successful Pranks of the Marauders*.

"Yes! Thank you Padfoot!" James cried. Lily huffed.

"Is this supposed to be a hint?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow referring to the book.

Sirius grinned proudly while Remus groaned in annoyance. "I can't believe you gave him that of all things," Remus said to Sirius. "What happened to agreeing on everything we gave him first? That was *your* rule!"

"Excuse me Moony! What do you have against such a wonderful gift?" James asked hands on his hips. Remus just shrugged.

"And since when does Sirius make rules instead of break them?" Lily asked.

"Now see, that wounds me. Deeply, deeply wounds me," Sirius said with a long suffering sigh and a dramatic hand on his forehead.

"What?" Sirius asked innocently. "I'm only passing on our legacy to our only heir. What's wrong with that? Besides, Harry's not like us...well, he's not like James and me. He'll use the book responsibly...well, within reason of course. Come on, Moony. Harry of all people deserves to have a little fun now and then. I'm just giving him a little nudge in the right direction."

Remus rubbed his eyes in frustration. "A nudge?" he asked. "That book is the biggest nudge I've ever seen."

"Yes, and you are supposed to be a responsible adult," Lily said. The boys couldn't help themselves. They burst in laughter.

"Sirius a responsible adult, that's so funny," James said chuckling.

Harry didn't bother admitting that he had no intention of using the prank book any time soon. It was another link to his father and the rest of the Marauders when they had been his age. It would also look extremely suspicious if pranks that hadn't been seen since the days of the Marauders started appearing again. All of the teachers would immediately suspect him unless he let the twins borrow the book...

"Oh, no! The school wouldn't survive," Lily dreaded. James and Sirius eyes were sparkling with mischief.

After Harry thanked his guardians repeatedly for the presents, Sirius pulled out Harry's winter coat and tossed it at him. Taking the hint, Harry bundled up and walked with Sirius and Remus for a stroll on the grounds. Sirius and Remus grabbed their cloaks on the way out of the Gryffindor Tower. They had left them on the chairs in front of the fire.

The moment Harry stepped onto the snow covered grounds he found himself being tackled from the left by a large four legged creature otherwise called Midnight by Harry and Padfoot by Remus. Remus had quickly moved out of the way to avoid being taken down also. Harry couldn't help laughing as he tried to fight off the large black dog. Remus eventually came to Harry's aid and pulled the animal off allowing Harry to scramble to his feet. That was all the time he had before Midnight broke free and started charging at Harry again. In order to defend himself, Harry started throwing snowballs at Midnight who tried to catch them in his mouth.

Lily laughed, "That's just so, so, *Sirius!*"

They eventually tired and resumed to walking around the grounds. That was when Hermione and Ginny joined them. Hermione nearly tripped over her own feet in shock when she heard Sirius and Remus would be chaperoning tonight. Sirius and Remus also managed to convince Hermione and Ginny to stop calling them by their formal names. Hermione had more trouble with Remus than with Sirius

"Excuse me, why is that Moony gets more respect than me?"

"Probably because he is more isn't an overgrown child," Lily said casually, "Besides, I thought you didn't like being called Mr. Black."

"That's beside the point," Sirius huffed.

since he had been her teacher but by the time lunch arrived both girls were on a first name basis with the Marauders.

After a large lunch in the Great Hall (Sirius and Remus once again sat at the Gryffindor table with Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George), Sirius loudly proposed a snowball fight. The majority of the Gryffindors quickly agreed at the idea with students from other houses joining in a little more slowly. Gryffindor and Hufflepuff had the biggest turnout and immediately formed Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff match. There were plenty of Ravenclaw students who mixed between the two teams and a few Slytherins from the younger years. There were also a few Durmstrang students, including Viktor Krum who joined Harry's team.

A cease fire was called around five o'clock. Everyone was covered in snow and soaked to the bone. The girls who participated were the first to leave, claiming that they needed the time to get ready. The boys followed reluctantly, wanting to warm up more than anything else. As he entered the Gryffindor Tower, Harry was suddenly pulled aside by Angelina and Katie. From the looks on their faces Harry could only assume he had done something wrong.

"You have some explaining to do Harry Potter," Angelina said sternly as she held up a gold chain with a charm of a broomstick on it.

"Why? What's that?" James asked.

"Oh, he bought them gifts," Lily cooed.

"Then why are they angry?" James cried lost.

Harry looked at Angelina and Katie nervously. He knew about the gift. He had gotten one for each of them. "You don't like it?" he asked. "The clerk said it was perfect for a female Quidditch player."

Katie Bell's gaze softened instantly. "Of course we like them Harry," she said. "We were just surprised to find them this morning. We just wanted you to know that we didn't teach you because we expected you to give us something. We helped you because we wanted to."

"That's why they are angry?" James cried, "Women." He muttered shaking his head

It suddenly made sense. They were afraid that Harry felt obligated to buy them something. "I know that," Harry said softly. "And I wanted to do this. Both of you gave up a lot of time to help me. I just wanted to thank you for it."

Angelina and Katie smiled and kissed Harry on the cheek before hurrying up the stairs. Harry just watched them go before joining Fred, George and Neville by the fire. He hadn't seen Ron all day and couldn't help wondering where he was. Everyone was telling Harry to be patient and wait for Ron to come to him but Harry missed his best friend. He never realized how much he depended on Ron to lighten the mood until now.

The fourth year boys changed into their dress robes quietly. Harry wore emerald green robes that Sirius had insisted on buying, making sure his necklace consisting of small black glass-like squares was hidden underneath his black collared long sleeve shirt that he wore underneath his robes. He didn't need anyone noticing it tonight. Harry still wore his wand holster around his wrist out of habit. It was almost like the piece of dragon hide that held his wand felt like a part of him. He felt naked without it.

Walking down the stairs to the Common Room, Harry noticed that Ginny was waiting for him. Her red hair was pulled back into a fancy twist with small beads inserted all over it. The navy blue dress robes she wore were slightly form-fitting, revealing her slender frame. She looked up at Harry smiling, a gesture he returned. Now all he had to do was hide how nervous he actually was.

Reaching her, Harry offered his arm which she quickly accepted. "You look very nice Ginny," he said. "Are you ready to go?"

"A perfect gentleman," Lily said approvingly.

Ginny blushed at the comment and nodded. They left the Gryffindor Tower and proceeded to the Entrance Hall. Neither of them said a word. Harry noticed that Ginny was fidgeting a little bit and figured that she was just as nervous as he was. The Entrance Hall was packed with

students, all waiting for the doors to the Great Hall to open at eight o'clock. They didn't have to wait long before Professor McGonagall called for the Champions to join her. Harry and Ginny were the last to join the group.

Cedric's date was Cho Chang, a pretty Ravenclaw who was a Seeker for their team. Fleur Delacour had arrived with Roger Davies, also a Ravenclaw along with being the house team captain. He seemed more infatuated with his date than listening to anything anyone was saying. That left Viktor Krum and his date that Harry couldn't help but bite back a laugh at. It was Hermione looking extremely nervous and extremely different. Her hair was pulled back similar to Ginny's and her dress robes were light blue in color.

"Krum! That was Hermione's date?" Sirius cried.

"Quite obvious actually," Lily said at James and Sirius looks she added, "Harry heard someone with an accent ask her out."

"Could have been any of the exchange students," James said.

"Except he said he recognized the voice," she said back triumphantly.

Deciding to have a little fun, Harry nudged Viktor who looked at Harry in confusion. Harry motioned for Viktor to lean closer and waited until the Bulgarian Quidditch player complied. "You better take good care of her or I might just have to kill you," he said playfully earning a laugh from Viktor.

"Don't worry, Harry," Viktor said. "I promise to treat her vell."

They waited as everyone entered the Great Hall before lining up and following Professor McGonagall. As the champions entered, applause filled the air. Harry was concentrating so much on not tripping that he didn't notice anything until they reached the large circular table at the far end of the Hall where the judges were already seated. Professor Dumbledore was seated at the center with Professor Karkaroff on his left and Madame Maxine on his right. Sitting next to Madame Maxine was Ludo Bagman who seemed to be having the time of his life. Seated next to Professor Karkaroff was the last person Harry expected to see: Percy Weasley.

"What's Percy doing there?" Remus asked.

"No idea, but Crouch isn't there so maybe he is filling in for him," Lily said.

"But why wouldn't he be there if he is one of the organizers?" Sirius asked, "Not that I am complaining after what he did to me." He finished with a growl.

Judging from the gasp he heard escape Ginny's lips she hadn't expected it either. This wasn't good. The last thing Harry needed tonight was Percy threatening Harry on how to treat his baby sister. Ginny had mentioned that she had sent an owl to Mrs. Weasley to let her know but ordered her mother not to tell any of her brothers...for Harry's sake.

The champions and their dates filled the remaining seats of the table, Harry and Ginny unfortunately sitting by Percy. The moment they sat down Percy started in on how he had been promoted to Mr. Crouch's personal assistant and would be covering for Crouch. Harry had to admit that it was probably better this way since Sirius was chaperoning. He didn't want to think what Sirius would do with coming face to face with the very person who was responsible for your false imprisonment again.

"I would punch him!"

"Hum, Sirius, that wouldn't go overly well," James said.

"Whose side are you on James?" Sirius yelled.

"Yours, I'll help you punch him," he placated his friend.

"Good!"

Dinner passed by quickly. It seemed that Percy was more focused on looking important than worrying about who Harry's date was which was a relief to Harry and Ginny. Glancing around, Harry noticed the entire Hall seemed to be sparkling with silver. Countless streams of garland crossed the ceiling. Small tables filled the Hall with a lantern placed in the middle of each table as a source of light.

In no time Professor Dumbledore stood and requested for everyone to follow suit. When they did Dumbledore waved his wand and all of the tables moved to the walls which left the floor open. A raised platform appeared with several instruments on it. Applause broke out as the Weird Sisters took the stage wearing black robes that looked to be purposely ripped in various places. As the group picked up the instruments Harry followed the other champions' lead and led Ginny to the dance floor.

Inhaling deeply, Harry purposely avoided looking around and kept his focus on what Angelina and Katie had taught him. A slow song began and instinct took over. Harry took Ginny by the hand and slowly spun her around before placing one hand around her waist and holding her hand in the other. Ginny reflexively placed her free hand on Harry's shoulder and let Harry lead.

Eventually others joined the champions and their dates on the dance floor. When the song ended everyone applauded until the next song began. This was a faster one which must have been a popular one by the cheers that erupted. Ginny seemed to be more relaxed with more people on the floor and allowed Harry to put his lessons with Angelina and Katie to use. They danced for a few songs before taking a break and sitting down at a nearby table. Seeing Ginny's flushed cheeks, Harry offered to get her something to drink and left when she accepted.

Reaching the table of refreshments, Harry picked up two Butterbeers and went back to where Ginny was sitting to see that she wasn't alone anymore. It seemed that two of the chaperones felt the need to keep Ginny company. As Harry reached the table and handed Ginny her drink, Sirius and Remus suddenly stopped talking making Harry instantly suspicious but he didn't say anything.

Lily and James eyed the other two with crossed arms.

"Yes?" Remus asked politely.

"What are you two up to?" Lily asked.

"Us Lily? We would never be up to anything," Sirius said in a mock offended tone.

"For someone who couldn't dance you seemed to be doing rather well out there Harry," Remus said with a grin as Harry sat down. "Care to let us in on your secret."

Harry shrugged his shoulders as he took a sip of his drink. He glanced over at Sirius and smiled. He knew he forgot to tell them something. "I took some advice," he said innocently, "from someone very wise in their own way."

They all laughed.

Sirius chuckled at the comment. "Very well put," he said proudly. "Not all of us are book smart like good old Remus here. Some of us have to rely on a more trial and error form of learning."

"In Paddy's and Prongs' cases it's a lot of errors," Remus chuckled.

"Well, what can we say?" James said with a straight face, "We strive to learn so we have to try a lot. Try turning Snivellus hair blue. Try charming his underpants to sing."

"Try turning the fifth floor corridor into a swamp," Sirius said.

"Yes, that idea is growing on me," James answered and Lily and Remus groaned.

He stood up, moved over to Harry and rested a hand on the teen's shoulder. "You two have fun tonight. We'll see you later, all right?"

Harry nodded and watched his guardians vanish in the crowd of people. The song soon ended and Harry was pulled back on the dance floor by Ginny. They quickly formed a pattern along with Hermione and Viktor: dancing a few songs then taking a short rest. Hermione and Ginny would talk during the periods of rest while Harry and Viktor just shared a glance before smiling. It seemed that both of them were thinking the same thing: girls! Harry made a mental note to take Sirius up on having that discussion about the female mind because he certainly didn't understand how they could just talk and talk and talk about nothing in particular.

The three boys looked at Lily.

"Yes?"

"How can you talk and talk and talk about nothing in particular?" Sirius asked.

"Well, that's for me to know and you to wonder," she answered with a cheeky smile.

Probably the most embarrassing moment of the night was when Angelina and Katie came by and demanded a dance like one of the *special* ones they had taught him. Before Harry could decline Katie had pulled Harry to his feet. Ginny, Hermione and Viktor watched in confusion as Katie and Angelina pulled Harry to the dance floor. The action seemed to catch attention

from others as they passed. The song was a rather fast one and Harry immediately knew what dance they were referring to. It had been one of those sessions that Angelina and Katie were trying to make Harry have some fun and take his mind off of everything.

Knowing that he owed them for helping him not look like a total idiot tonight, Harry went along with it. They reached the middle of the dance floor, Harry facing Angelina and Katie. With a nod from Angelina, the three of them slid to their right so Harry moved in the opposite direction of the girls. Step after step was made from memory. Harry kept his eyes on Angelina and Katie, not wanting to see if anyone was watching.

When the song finally ended the crowd applauded and a slow song began. Harry felt a hand on his arm and looked to see Hermione standing there with a smile on her face. Looking over her shoulder, Harry saw Ginny was dancing with Viktor so he offered his hand to his friend. He put his hand on her waist and immediately felt how tense she was. Something wasn't right.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" Harry asked into her ear. "Did Viktor do something—"

"I'm gonna punch Viktor," Sirius cried.

"I don't think he is the problem," Lily said.

"—no!" Hermione said quickly. "It's not Viktor. It's Ron. I guess I'm just worried about him. Look at what he's missing out on just because he's too stubborn to apologize and admit he's wrong. Things could have happened so differently..."

"I'm gonna punch Ron," Sirius corrected.

"I don't think his parents are going to appreciate that," Remus said, "Don't forget you are an adult there."

"Ok, then, I'm gonna get the twins to punch him," Sirius said with a smirk.

"...if I wasn't a champion," Harry finished for her. He had been thinking the same thing. "I know. I want to fix things with him but he won't come anywhere near me. He didn't even participate in the snowball fight this afternoon. Does he really hate me that much?"

Hermione tightened her grip on Harry's hand slightly. "He doesn't hate you, Harry," she said sincerely. "He hates that he can't be more like you. It took a lot of courage to ask Ron for permission and to ask Ginny to be your date." Harry moved to object. "I know she's just a friend but you were nervous about it, right?" Harry nodded. "Ron isn't any different. He just wasn't required to have a date like you were. He didn't turn to his guardians for advice like you did." She paused for a moment before grinning. "He didn't get dancing lessons like you did," she added candidly.

"Well, that's his fault isn't it? I bet he could have," Lily said annoyed.

"Would you rather I step on your feet?" Harry asked seriously. "I didn't want to look like a fool in front of everyone. Angelina and Katie were willing to help me. Is there something wrong with that?"

"NO!" the four cried.

Hermione shook her head as she looked into his emerald green eyes. "I'm just surprised," she said innocently. "You have really changed, Harry. I didn't realize how much until tonight. Remus and Sirius are definitely doing something right."

James patted his friends and Lily beamed.

Harry couldn't help but smile. He really didn't know what he would have done this year if Sirius and Remus hadn't been there to help. They had only entered his life last year and he was already so dependent on them. He honestly didn't know what he would do without them. They made his life more normal that he could ever remember it being.

"Who would have thought the day would come when Sirius made someone's life normal," Lily chuckled.

Near the end of the night Harry was cornered by Fred and George who were already planning on when Harry would become their official brother. It took a lot of convincing for Fred and George to accept that Harry was only friends with Ginny and as they walked away he still had a feeling that they still didn't want to believe it. That certainly wasn't the reaction he was expecting but at least they didn't try to kill him.

The Ball finally came to an end and everyone was sent to bed. Harry stayed behind and thanked Sirius and Remus for making this Christmas the best he could remember. The comment was meant as a compliment but it served as a reminder of the mistakes made that

Harry had paid the price for. Sirius pulled Harry into a fierce embrace and reminded him to send Hedwig or use the mirror to keep the Marauders up to date. Once Sirius let go of the Harry Remus took his turn and hugged Harry just as tightly while reminding the teen to take better care of himself.

With a final farewell, Harry left the Great Hall for the Gryffindor Tower. The hallways were empty, leaving an eerie silence. The sooner he reached the Gryffindor Tower the better. He reached the moving staircases to see that someone was waiting for him. Cedric Diggory.

"Hey Harry," Cedric said with a smile. "I don't think I've ever thanked you for the dragons." Harry opened his mouth to say it wasn't necessary but Cedric held up his hand to silence him. "I mean it. Not many would do what you did. How are you coming on your egg?"

Harry knew he could lie but he didn't have the energy to. Besides, he doubted that Cedric was fishing for hints this late at night. "Slowly," Harry said honestly. "I can't seem to shut it up."

Cedric laughed at the comment. "I had the same problem," he said then leaned closer to Harry. "Until I took a bath," he whispered. "Put the egg under water. On the fifth floor, the fourth door on the left of the Boris the Bewildered statue is the Prefects' bathroom. The password is Pine-fresh. Trust me."

"That's nice of him," Lily beamed.

Harry blinked at Cedric a few times as he tried to think of something to say. "Er—okay," he said at last. "Thanks for the hint."

Cedric smiled. "No problem," he said. "Just so you know, everyone in Hufflepuff has been talking about the snowball fight. We had a lot of fun. We'll have to have a rematch some day. Good night."

Harry bid goodnight and traveled up the stairs torn between thoughts. He had to admit water made sense. Merfolk lived in the seas. It would make sense to hold the egg under water. *I must be really thick not to figure that out.* Another thought entered Harry's head. Cedric had already figured it out. Harry suddenly felt extremely stupid. He felt like he really didn't belong in this competition. None of the other champions were spending every waking hour trying to figure out the clue. Only him. This only served as a reminder that he was out of his league.

It hit Harry that it was only a matter of time before everyone else figured that out too if they didn't already know it.

"No, Harry," Remus scolded, "you just don't see them working. I bet that they are having trouble too."

Chapter 14

The Giant Truth

Now that Christmas was over the library became a popular place again. Students were working frantically on their schoolwork that they had stubbornly put off. The events of yesterday seemed so far away. The fun the majority of the school had during the snowball fight was forgotten. The events at the Yule Ball suddenly seemed so unimportant although it seemed that there was more whispering and giggling from groups of girls whenever Harry passed.

"I hate that time, when you realize the holidays are almost over, it's so depressing," Lily said.

"Lily, I always thought you *loved* studying," James said.

"I do, but no matter what you may think I am *normal* and love the holidays," she said rolling her eyes.

Harry's table was covered in books and rolls of parchment. He had just finished his Transfiguration essay and was reluctantly moving on to Potions. Hermione was sitting across from him, buried in her Arithmancy book. Ginny was sitting next to her writing her Defense Against the Dark Arts essay while trying to ignore Fred and George who were sitting across from her and talking in hushed voices. From the excitement in their voices there wasn't any doubt schoolwork was the last thing they were discussing.

"Wonder what they are up to," Sirius said eagerly.

"No good, for sure," Lily said skulking.

Glancing around, Harry saw Ron sitting at a nearby table with Dean, Seamus, Neville, Parvati and Lavender. The four boys seemed to be stressed beyond belief while Parvati and Lavender whispered to each other, letting out an occasional giggle every now and then. Harry let out a sigh as he returned his attention to his essay. This was his last piece of homework he needed to complete then he could focus on the second task. He had every intention of trying Cedric's advice. The only problem was he would it have to be done late at night when no one would see him sneaking into the Prefects' Bathroom. Prefects were fifth year or higher so Harry was a year shy of even being considered access to the bathroom.

"But can't a prefect invite someone?" Sirius asked.

"No, or else everyone above fifth year would be using the bathroom. It's supposed to be a reward for those who applied themselves and became prefects. Also for the extra work," Lily said.

James opened his mouth to say that Moony had taken them hundreds of times but he decided to keep that little tidbit to himself.

Once Harry had finished his essay he packed everything up, catching the attention of everyone around him no matter how quiet he was trying to be. That was certainly different from before Christmas when he could even talk to himself without distracting anyone since no one was around. *Okay, I may need to find another secluded place. I won't be able to work on the clue with the entire school around.*

"Oh, Harry. Just ask those two," James said pointing at his friends, "we know loads of secluded places."

"No doubt about that. With the amount of planning your pranks must take you must have a headquarters stashed somewhere," Lily huffed. The three grinned mischievously.

Hermione looked up at Harry curiously as she put down her book. "Harry, what do you think you're doing?" she asked. "We have schoolwork to do. Do you have any idea how long it will take us to complete of Defense Against the Dark Arts essay?"

"Two and a half hours," Harry recited quietly as he stood up, hanging onto his schoolbag tightly so it wouldn't rip open. "Hermione, what do you think I was doing before Christmas? I needed a break from working on the clue from time to time. I'm finished." He handed over a book he was about to return to the stacks. "This should help on the Potions essay," he added with a smile. "Have fun."

"Oh, she isn't going to be happy that someone finished before her," Remus shook his head.

Hermione scowled as Fred and George desperately fought to hold back their laughter. Harry left the library, determined not to look at all of the students who were staring at Harry in disbelief. It was surly the sign of the apocalypse when Hermione Granger needed help on any sort of schoolwork and that was what Harry Potter had just done.

That night with the aid of his invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map, Harry snuck out of the Gryffindor Tower with his school bag containing his golden egg, ink, quill, and a few pieces of parchment then headed directly for the Prefects' Bathroom. He reached the statue of a wizard looking lost with his gloves placed on the wrong hands and continued walking until he

reached the designated door. After double checking to make sure no one was around, Harry whispered the password and stepped back as the door slowly opened.

As quickly and quietly as possible Harry entered the room and closed the door behind him, making sure it was bolted shut. He didn't want to take any chances. Certain that no one could enter, Harry pulled off his invisibility cloak and glanced around the large room. The lighting was dim but Harry could see the enormous swimming pool in the size of a rectangle built into the middle of the floor. Golden taps surrounded the pool, each one having a jewel on the handle that was a different color. There was even a diving board which Harry thought was a little over the top. On the wall there was a portrait of a blonde mermaid who was sleeping. Harry made a mental note to be absolutely quiet so not to wake her.

"We know all that," Sirius rolled his eyes.

"How?" Lily asked suspiciously.

"Hum," Sirius looked at his friends.

"Moony told us!" James said quickly.

"Yeah, yeah, good old Moony!" Sirius said.

"Right," Lily said shortly at the same time that Remus cried "I am not old! Stop with the old thing!"

After setting his schoolbag down, Harry slowly opened it and pulled out his supplies. Feeling a little self conscious, Harry transfigured his pants into a pair of swimming trunks. He grabbed one of the towels and placed it at the edge of the pool before removing his shirt, wand holster, shoes and socks. He turned on a few of the taps and filled the pool with hot water as he put his supplies near his towel. Once he turned off the taps, Harry slowly slid into the pool, grabbing his egg as he did so.

Taking in a deep breath, Harry sunk below the surface and opened the egg. A chorus of voices unlike any Harry had heard before filled his ears. It was almost creepy sounding.

'Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching, ponder this:

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took,

But past an hour – the prospect's black

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.'

"Can I see that," Remus asked and he and Lily went over the poem a few times.

"The voices must be the merpeople. So he has to go where they live," she said.

"He has to go to the sea?" James asked.

"No, I think there are merpeople on the lake. So he has to go in the lake," Sirius said.

"Oh, that's ok then," James said sarcastically, "He just has to go one hour without breathing!"

Harry closed the egg, let out a little of the breath he was holding before opening it again. He listened closely to the poem one more time before breaking the surface and releasing the remainder of the breath he was holding. As quickly as possible Harry set the egg down at the edge of the pool before drying off his hands and arms. He then dipped his quill in his ink and started writing everything he could remember. He had managed to write down half of the poem before he needed to listen to it again.

Once he had the entire poem written down, Harry pulled himself out of the pool and dried himself off. He put his shirt back on and wrapped his towel around his waist then sat down on the floor and took a good look at the poem. It was simple enough to translate: find the merfolk, recover what they took of yours within an hour or you lose. That meant Harry needed to be able to breathe under water for an hour.

This just keeps getting better and better.

"I know what you mean," James said sympathetically.

He cleaned up his mess as quickly as possible, finished redressing then checked the Marauder's Map again before leaving hidden under his invisibility cloak. There was no one around giving Harry the opportunity to hurry back to the Gryffindor Tower unnoticed. He knew he wouldn't be able to get any further tonight and was prepared for another long day in the library. Other than the fact he couldn't swim very well, Harry had to figure out a way to breathe. They hadn't covered that yet in any of his classes.

By the time classes started up again Harry had determined that there were three possible areas for breathing underwater: Charms, Transfiguration and Potions. He had started off with Charms, searching through books for any possibilities. He found a Bubble-Head charm and wrote down everything he could find. Next was Transfiguration. The obvious answer was transfiguring himself into a water animal but his research on that proved that possibility to be a less desired one. It was extremely difficult and could easily have consequences that Harry didn't even want to think about.

"Besides, it's going to take more than the time you have to get it right," Remus said professorly, "I would go either with the Bubble charm or use Gillyweed."

"I think Gillyweed is best since the Bubble Charm is also something Harry would have to learn to perfection in such a short time," Lily agreed with him. Sirius stared at them, then at James. He mouthed "bookworms" and they both burst out laughing much to the other two displeasure.

Harry was still researching for a possible potion to help but hadn't come up with a solution yet. He had lost track of how many books he had looked through and couldn't ask Professor Snape for any help (not like he wanted to).

"Like he'd help," Sirius snorted.

Harry knew there had to be some other option, he just couldn't find it. That was probably what most aggravating, knowing something was out there but unable to find it.

It became more difficult for Harry to research with classes starting up again. The chilly weather made all students dread their outdoor classes, especially Care of Magical Creatures where there was no shelter whatsoever. Harry and Hermione had prepared that morning for another class period with the Skrewts that they had been tending to but were surprised to see someone else waiting for them.

A woman with short grey hair stood in place of Hagrid. She introduced herself as Professor Grubbly-Plank and would be their temporary teacher for Hagrid who was indisposed at the moment. This made both Harry and Hermione nervous. Hagrid loved teaching more than anything. He would never miss a class unless something horrible had happened.

"What happened to Hagrid?" Lily asked desperately shaking James.

"Calm down woman, I don't as much as you do!"

She recomposed herself, blushing and kept reading.

Professor Grubbly-Plank ushered the class to the edge of the Forest where a large unicorn was tied up. Harry's heart immediately went out to the creature. It didn't deserve this treatment so students could stare at it. All of Hagrid's creatures seemed to participate voluntarily in classes. Harry met the creature's gaze and for a long moment neither of them moved. Harry didn't know how but he understood the unicorn. Almost instinctively Harry bowed his head to the animal who returned the gesture.

"Strange, I though unicorns didn't like boys," Remus said.

"Maybe he realizes Harry is different than most," James said hopefully. Remus bit his lip with a suspicious look. Something was going on and Remus, ever the scholar, wanted to know what.

"Now, boys please stay back," Professor Grubbly-Plank ordered. "Unicorns prefer to be touched by women."

The girls in the class grinned and slowly approached. Seeing so many people coming, the unicorn started to thrash about in fear. Professor Grubbly-Plank instantly ordered everyone to step back and wait for the creature to calm down. Knowing that wasn't going to happen soon, Harry stepped forward, ignoring the warnings Hermione and the substitute teacher were giving him. Harry held up his hands, showing the unicorn he meant no harm as he continued to approach.

The unicorn started to calm down but never took its eyes off of Harry but there was no fear, just curiosity. Once again Harry bowed his head respectfully before reaching out and gently touching the face and started rubbing it, soothing the creature. "There now," Harry said softly. "We mean you no harm. We just want to understand your kind."

"See, told you that's strange, a unicorn would never let a male touch it," Remus said, "Harry is doing something unconsciously."

The unicorn let out a noise that could only be characterized as a sarcastic snort. Harry let out a laugh as the unicorn moved closer to him, bowing its head in submission. He wasn't aware that unicorns knew what sarcasm was. Looking back at the class, Harry suddenly grew nervous when he saw that everyone was staring at him in shock. How was he going to explain this?

"Er—I think it should be okay now," Harry said as he continued to stroke the creature. "Just keep it to a few at a time. He isn't too trusting of humans."

Parvati and Lavender were the first group to approach carefully, ready to hurry back if the unicorn started acting up again. Harry kept rubbing the creature's face and talking softly to it while student after student gently pet it. Professor Grubbly-Plank finally recovered from her shock and started informing the class about unicorns. Harry ignored the curious glances he received from her, silently pleading for class to end soon. He knew he would have to make a quick departure to avoid the inevitable questions.

The moment they were dismissed Harry bid farewell to the unicorn then hurried to catch up with Hermione who was standing by Malfoy with an outraged look on her face. That was never a good thing. "You foul, loathsome, miserable little ferret!" Hermione cried as she pulled out her wand and pointed it at Malfoy. "How dare you say something like that!"

"What? What did the little ferret do?" Sirius growled menacingly.

Harry quickly put an arm around Hermione and held her back. "I suggest you run, Malfoy," he said evenly. Malfoy didn't need to be told twice and hurried off with the rest of the Slytherins. As soon as they were far enough away, Harry released Hermione and turned her around so they faced each other. "Hermione, what happened?" he asked.

Hermione handed over an issue of the 'Daily Prophet'. Harry unfolded it and saw the large headline '*DUMBLEDORE'S GIANT MISTAKE*' with a picture of Hagrid underneath it. It was an article by Rita Skeeter badmouthing Hagrid, his history and his teaching methods. It even claimed that Hagrid was part-giant before giving a horrid description of what giants were like.

"Hagrid is not like them!" James cried.

"Yeah, he's just size! He's the gentlest person we know!" Sirius backed his friend and the other two were nodding.

Reaching the end of the article, Harry's eyes widened when he saw his name mentioned.

This reporter has to wonder what Albus Dumbledore is trying to accomplish, having a volatile half-breed teach children including the-boy-who-lived. Sources reveal Dumbledore was the wizard in charge of Harry Potter after that fateful night so many years ago. The Headmaster of Hogwarts had placed young Harry with his abusive aunt and uncle only to remove the child from their care, giving him to an ex-convict and a werewolf.

"So what?" Lily growled, "An innocent ex-convict and one of the best person I know, even if he gets cranky once a month. I do too!" she spat. Remus grinned at this, cranky indeed.

If history is any indicator of the decisions made by Albus Dumbledore, this reporter has no doubt Harry Potter will be removed from the endangering household before something dire occurs.

"No he won't" James yelled.

Harry couldn't move. He couldn't even breathe. Removed? No, that was impossible. Sirius and Remus were his guardians. They treated him better than anyone ever had. They were his family more than the Dursleys ever were. Both of them had given up so much for him and had risked so much more. Sirius risked being kissed by Dementors for escaping Azkaban and Remus has risked his own freedom by helping Harry find out the truth last year.

"Harry?" Hermione asked gently. "Are you all right?"

"Uh,no," Sirius said in "isn't that obvious way". Lily cuffed his head.

"She's being concerned," she huffed.

"Stupid questions should be met with stupid answers," he said evenly. Lily rolled her eyes.

Meeting her gaze was all Harry needed to do to let Hermione know he was far from all right. He couldn't believe this. Hagrid was part-giant. So what? Hagrid wasn't even remotely dangerous. The only part of him that could be considered dangerous was his love of

dangerous creatures. It was just like Remus. Anyone who knew either man would know without a shadow of a doubt that they weren't dangerous.

"We need to see Hagrid tonight after classes," Harry said quietly as they started walking back to the castle. "I would like to know how Rita Skeeter found out. We've known Hagrid for years and he hasn't said anything to us."

"Hagrid might have let it slip," Hermione offered. "He's done it in the past."

"Not about this he wouldn't," Remus said grimly.

"Not like this," Harry said. "I can't believe she dragged me into it. It's not like anyone forced me to take Hagrid's class or live with Sirius and Remus. Just when I think it can't get any worse something like this happens."

Hermione looked at Harry sympathetically. "Don't worry about it, Harry," she said gently. "It will go away in a few days."

"Hardly," James grunted, "Hermione is underestimating the prejudice of the Wizarding World."

Harry couldn't believe Hermione was being so passive about this. "Hermione, it will never go away," he said in a hushed voice. "Do you have any idea how the wizarding world treats half-breeds? Do you know how close I was to returning to the Dursleys last year because Remus couldn't adopt me for the stupid reason that he's a werewolf? Werewolves and giants are considered dark. They have no rights whatsoever. The only reason the Ministry is allowing Remus to be in my life is to shut Sirius and me up. We were lucky Sirius was found innocent and was allowed to become my guardian."

Hermione stared at Harry, horrified as they walked up the steps and into the Entrance Hall. "B—but that's not fair!" she exclaimed, earning several stares for her outburst. She glanced around nervously then leaned closer to Harry. "Remus is harmless," Hermione whispered. "He would never hurt you, Harry. Everyone can see how much he cares for you."

"It's astounding how prejudice can blind people," Lily scowled.

"I know that," Harry said as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Hagrid would never hurt anyone either...not intentionally at least. We just have to make Hagrid believe that we don't care what his blood makeup is. He was the first friend I ever had and I'm not turning my back on him."

"I am very proud of you Harry," James said firmly and the others nodded, "Let Hagrid know that you don't care just like we did."

"You knew?" Lily asked.

"You didn't?" Remus asked dubiously.

"Yes I did. It was the only explanation for his size."

"Me neither," Hermione said with a smile.

It was just after dinner when Harry and Hermione hurried to Hagrid's cabin. Harry knocked a few times but received no answer other than Fang's barking. Worried that something may be wrong Harry pulled out his wand and unlocked the door. He knocked again as he slowly opened the door. Fang's barking increased the moment Harry poked his head in. At least someone was happy to see him.

The cabin was dimly lit but it was easy to see Hagrid hunched over his table with a bottle in his hand. Harry's eyes widened at the sight. This wasn't good. Harry remembered how Uncle Vernon was when he drank and could only hope that Hagrid wasn't an angry drunk.

"No, Hagrid is a mopy drunk," Sirius said, "Don't worry."

"Remember when he got drunk after that Threstal got badly injured last year," James said and Sirius and Remus nodded, "Poor guy, after a while he started telling us everything about how his dad died and Dumbledore helped him, sad story."

"Hagrid?" Harry asked nervously. "Hagrid, are you all right?"

Hagrid looked up at Harry and instantly looked away. Harry entered the cabin and instantly started petting Fang to calm him down. Hermione followed Harry, closing the door the moment she stepped in. Slowly, Harry made his way towards Hagrid and sat down across from him, Fang sitting down right at Harry's side and Hermione sitting down on the chair between Harry and Hagrid. He could see tears escaping Hagrid's eyes and gently pried the bottle out of Hagrid's hand. The last thing Hagrid needed was more alcohol.

"What're yeh doin' here Harry?" Hagrid asked as more tears fell. "Didn' yeh see the article?"

Harry pulled the article out of his pocket and set it down on the table. "You mean this rubbish?" Harry asked as he started to pet Fang. "Hagrid, I live with a werewolf. Why would you ever think that I would care who your parents may be? You are my friend. Do you have any idea what you've done for me? You introduced me to this world. You rescued me from all of the lies the Dursleys fed me for all those years. You and Remus are two of the best people I know. I would rather be in your company than a pureblood like Malfoy any day."

"Yeah, me too!" cried Sirius, James and Lily at the same time making Remus blush seven shades of red.

Hagrid looked up at Harry and smiled. "Yeh really mean that?" he asked hopefully.

Harry smiled back. "I don't say anything I don't mean," he said. "It's a flaw in my personality. Sirius says that's why I'm such a bad liar."

"Sirius! Stop encouraging Harry to lie!" Lily scolded and Sirius smiled sheepishly.

Hagrid snorted at the comment. "Honestly Hagrid. I don't care what anyone says or any reporter writes to sell papers. You will always be my friend. I trust you with my life. Remus told me a lot of how the wizarding world treats werewolves. I know how hard this is going to be for you but we'll do whatever we can to help."

"Harry's right, Hagrid," Hermione added. "Just say the word and we'll do what we can to make that horrible Skeeter woman—"

"—no!" Hagrid interrupted. "I don' need yeh two gettin' in trouble 'cause of this. I don' know how she found out. I only told Ma'ame Maxime the nigh' of the Yule Ball. Rita Skeeter wasn' even on the grounds. I would've seen her. Yeh two mean well but yeh don' know Rita Skeeter. She will make up wha'ever she wants 'bout yeh. Yeh don' need that, especially yeh, Harry. I saw what she wrote 'bout yeh in the article. She's tryin' ter make a fuss right now, questionin' Sirius and Remus like that. Don' worry. Yer godfather is probably already at the 'Daily Prophet' rantin' 'bout the article. Good man, Sirius. Loves yeh more than life itself."

"Yes I do!" Sirius said proudly and then as if he remembered something he added, "And I am!" The other three had to chuckle.

Harry couldn't help but smile. That sounded just like something Sirius would do. He just prayed it wouldn't result in more problems. "Listen Hagrid, we're not going to force you to come out of here," he said. "If you're not ready to face everyone, you're not ready. We can

visit you if you want but you shouldn't lock yourself away from all contact and you certainly shouldn't bury your sorrows in a bottle of—" he glanced at the label on the bottle "—Firewhisky."

Hagrid brushed his tears away and took the bottle from Harry. "Yer right," he admitted. "I'm sorry yeh two had ter see me like this. Yeh have more importan' things then ter come out here. Yeh still workin' on that clue, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "I'm almost there," he said. "I just need to figure out some of the particulars." It was more or less the truth. He had figured out the egg but not how he was going to accomplish what the egg wanted him to do. Hagrid didn't need to know the details, especially now.

Hagrid smiled. "That's great!" he said happily, his depression instantly forgotten. "Yeh were unbelievable against the dragon. I know yeh'll do fine with this. I'm proud of yeh Harry. I know yer parents would be too."

"Immensely," James and Lily said in unison. James looked at her delighted while she looked shocked at agreeing with James.

Harry and Hermione bid farewell, promising to visit every night before hurrying back to the castle. Hagrid's happiness only added to the pressure Harry already felt. Before the first task he was the underdog. Now, everyone was expecting him to live up to his first place standing. He knew he still had time and hoped he could find some answers at Hogsmeade. The next visit was scheduled halfway through January. Instead of stopping at Zonko's and Honeydukes, Harry planned on stopping at the potions shop and book store. Hopefully one of them would have something to help.

Professor Grubbly-Plank taught Hagrid's classes for the remainder of the week. Harry and Hermione kept their word and did visit, usually bringing food from dinner for their friend. Most of the time Harry and Hermione sat at Hagrid's table working on schoolwork while Hagrid ate. According to Hagrid, several of the teachers had stopped by during the week, including Professor Dumbledore. He seemed to be in better spirits but was still reluctant to face the school yet. At least he wasn't drinking anymore.

By the time the Hogsmeade weekend arrived Harry hadn't gained any ground on his research. Harry and Hermione left early that morning to avoid any crowds and visit the stores that

students rarely entered. To sequester her curiosity, Harry had told Hermione the clue from the egg and how far he was for possible ways to complete the task. He couldn't help laughing at how eager Hermione was to help out since none of this had been covered in classes yet.

"When did we cover Gillyweed?" James asked.

"Almost at the end of last year, in Herbology, and Slughorn just mentioned it in passing saying he would get into it better this year," Remus answered pensively.

"And bubble charms we only learned this year too," Lily said grimly, "If Harry hadn't researched he wouldn't have found anything on his curriculum."

The potions shop was their first stop on the cold and wet morning. Sitting on the floor, Harry and Hermione browsed through books looking for anything that could help. After the third book Harry was certain that he wasn't going to find a solution. Perhaps there wasn't a potion to find after all which left the Bubble Head Charm. Glancing over at Hermione, Harry could see she was about ready to give up too.

A soft voice from behind made both of them jump. "Is there something I can help you two with?" asked a middle aged woman. Her dark brown hair was pulled back tightly revealing her high cheekbones and hazel colored eyes. She had a skeptical look on her face. She looked like she was ready to kick them out for just being there.

"We were just hoping we could find a potion to make someone breathe under water for a long period of time," Harry said nervously. "None of the books in the Hogwarts library were any help—"

"—that is because it is a very difficult potion to make," the clerk interrupted. "I'm sure if you ask your Potions teacher—"

"—I'm not allowed to, ma'am," Harry interrupted. He knew he was going to regret it the moment the words came out of his mouth but it was the only way to make the clerk believe him. "I can't ask any teacher for help with the Tournament."

The clerk's eyes immediately stared at Harry's forehead as she gasped in shock. "Harry Potter!" she exclaimed. "I'm so sorry! We never have teenagers in here

"Now, that's not true," James said crossing his arms, "We are there all the time."

"Yes, and if she remembers us she doesn't have fond memories of teenagers in her shop," Remus pointed out.

"If it's the same clerk she's not that much older than us, what is she in her twenties?" Sirius, always the flirter asked.

"Yeah, I think that's her family's shop, so unless she sold the business that's her," James said.

"See, so she must have *very* fond memories of me," Sirius said grinning. Lily rolled her eyes and said:

"Yes, because it's every twenty something woman's dream to have a hormonal sixteen year old coming on to her."

"See, you think so too," Sirius said happily and James and Remus burst in laughter. Sirius was very put out by this.

much less the-boy-who-lived!" She quickly helped Harry and Hermione to their feet. "I know just the thing for you, Mr. Potter!"

The two teenagers watched in startled silence as the clerk hurried over to the potion supplies. If they knew they would have gotten *that* reaction they would have asked for help sooner. "Well," Hermione said as she glanced at Harry, "next place we'll just announce who you are the moment we enter. It makes things so much easier."

Harry glared at Hermione. "Don't even think of it," he warned. "It was the only way to get her off our backs."

The clerk came hurrying back with a bottle half filled with a clear liquid that seemed to be preserving ball of what looked like slimy, grayish green rat tails. "This is Gillyweed, Mr. Potter," the clerk said with a smile. "You need to eat it and it will allow you to breathe underwater. It is much more reliable than any charm or potion and also much simpler."

Lily looked triumphantly at the others. Unfortunately that was completely lost in them.

Harry couldn't help but look at the strange ball in the bottle hopefully. He hadn't even thought of any sort of substance that would do exactly what he wanted. "Seriously?" Harry asked. "All I have to do is eat it?" He smiled when the clerk nodded. "I'll take it!"

With his newly purchased Gillyweed, Harry followed Hermione out of the store feeling a large weight being lifted off of his shoulders. Now all he had to do was figure out how to swim. He knew the concept behind it but that was all. The Dursleys wouldn't let him have lessons and the thought of practicing in the lake in the middle of January was one of the last things he wanted to do.

"It's going to be freezing. Even in February," Lily said and the others shivered.

"What were they thinking?" Sirius asked disbelieving.

"They are testing endurance too, I guess," Remus said, "They have to make it in freezing water for a whole hour. That will be tough."

"He could use a heating charm," James said.

"He could," Remus nodded, "But then he'd risk attracting water creatures with the heat."

"Better than freezing," Sirius said.

"Depends on which creatures he attracts," Lily answered.

Now with plenty of time to spare, Harry and Hermione took their time strolling through Hogsmeade. They decided to take a rest in Three Broomsticks, ordering a Butterbeer and relaxing. In all honesty both Harry and Hermione felt exhausted. They had been doing their best to complete their schoolwork in addition to keeping Hagrid company. Harry couldn't help feeling bitter that they had been the only two students giving Hagrid their support, not even Ron had visited.

"That's not very nice," Lily huffed.

"I think most students don't like Hagrid as a teacher," Remus said and at the glares of death he received he expanded, "He does tend to get them some, er, exquisite creatures to study."

That was probably the final nail in the coffin. Ever since Ron had voiced his jealousy he had completely changed. He didn't talk to his siblings anymore, he ignored Hermione and wouldn't even look at Harry. How could things have gone so wrong? "Hermione, have you heard anything from Ron?" Harry asked softly.

Hermione suddenly tensed. "Actually I have," she admitted. "I was talking to Parvati and Lavender the other day when the topic Ron came up. I guess Ron wants to talk to us but is afraid we're still angry with him about what he said. I talked to Ron about it when you were in the library and he denied ever saying that. I told him we weren't mad anymore and we missed him but he would have to quit being a prat and apologize to you."

"Yeas, like that is going to happen if he doesn't even admit to wanting to talk to them," Sirius snorted.

"Let's wait, he may surprise us," Remus said hopeful.

Harry closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I never meant to involve you in this Hermione," he said softly. "I hate that Ron's siblings have turned against him. If I was in his shoes I don't know what I would do."

"Er—don't look now but Rita Skeeter just arrived with her photographer," Hermione said as she tried to nonchalantly hide her face with her right hand. "We should leave before I do something I'll regret."

Groans were heard and Sirius was making shooing gestures with his hands as if he could get Harry to move faster that way.

Harry glanced over his shoulder and saw Rita Skeeter wearing yellow robes moving towards the bar to purchase drinks with the photographer following her. The moment she reached the bar, Harry took that as his cue and nodded at Hermione that now was the time to leave. As quietly as possible, Harry and Hermione stood and maneuvered around the tables for the door. They weren't fast enough though.

"Harry!" Rita Skeeter called out excitedly as Harry opened the door to leave.

"Keep moving," Hermione muttered from behind him and Harry did just that. He opened the door and walked out with Hermione following. All of a sudden Hogsmeade was the last place Harry wanted to be. His good mood from gaining ground on the second task was now gone. It was amazing how one person could cause such a change and Rita Skeeter was certainly capable of that.

"Harry!" Rita Skeeter called again as she hurried to Harry and Hermione, her quill and parchment already in her hands. "How about an interview? Just a quick one. The public is

dying to know what it is like to live with Sirius Black and a werewolf. Do they treat you well? Have you ever been around when Mr. Lupin transforms?"

"OF COURSE NOT!" Remus cried outraged, "I would never put him in such danger!"

"We know that Moony," Lily said, "Calm down."

"But she-" he said desperately.

"She's a cow and is just trying to stir trouble," Sirius said shortly, "Don't take anything she says into account."

"No comment," Harry said tensely as he continued walking. He couldn't believe Rita Skeeter was talking about Remus like this. Remus wasn't just a werewolf. He was a person just like everyone else. Why didn't anyone see that? Why did everyone only see the wolf and not the man?

"Because people fear what they don't understand and when they fear something they belittle it so that it looks less scary," Remus said.

"Still wrong," James said scowling and crossing his arms.

"It will only take a moment," Rita Skeeter insisted. "What could it hurt?"

With Rita Skeeter as the reporter? Plenty. Harry wasn't about to do anything that would give Rita Skeeter ammunition for another article. He didn't need her depicting Sirius and Remus as unfit guardians, which was what she was probably after. How could she even think Harry would say anything after what she had done to Hagrid?

"I don't think she reasons like normal people do," Lily snorted, "She is always after a scoop and thinks you're obligated to give it to her."

Harry continued walking with Hermione, determined not to say another word. The moment they reached the gates of Hogwarts was when Rita stopped following. They didn't stop walking until they reached the steps of the castle. Only then did Harry and Hermione let out a sigh of relief. They had escaped Rita Skeeter for now but that didn't mean she wouldn't try again. Harry knew Rita Skeeter wouldn't stop until she got her article no matter what she had to do. She couldn't seem to leave him alone.

"Of course not," Remus said bitterly, "The Boy Who Lived sells."

Chapter 15

Acceptance

It was extremely early on Sunday morning when Harry quietly left his dorm room with his small mirror in hand. He remembered Sirius talking about a room in the castle that was hidden, providing someone what they needed when it was accessed the correct way.

"I never heard of such room," Lily said narrowing her eyes at the offending Marauders who tried very hard to look innocent.

Harry wished now he had paid better attention to the stories involving this room with the pranks the Marauders set. It had just seemed too impossible to be true but should have known better. Sirius never lied about anything. If he couldn't tell Harry something, he admitted as much.

"Yes Harry, I never lie," Sirius said. Lily snorted. He continued "Well I am not counting teachers or any authority figures."

Sitting down in front of the fire in the Common Room, Harry looked at the mirror and called for Sirius. He waited for a few moments but received no answer. It was still early so Harry figured Sirius must still be asleep. He remembered the last time he woke his godfather early and was seriously contemplating on waiting until noon at least to try again. Sirius always loved to sleep in although rarely got the chance to, something he blamed Remus for since the man was such an early riser.

"Yes Harry, you don't know how much I suffer!" Sirius whined, "Not just with Moony waking us early to study of all things but with James too. They don't understand the sacred need for sleep!"

"I let you sleep this morning," James said defensively.

"Yes, today, there's a first for everything!"

"Harry?"

Pulled out of his thoughts, Harry looked down at the mirror to see not Sirius but Remus. It wasn't that he was disappointed to see Remus but surprised. Sirius had always said he would have the mirror on hand in case Harry needed anything. "Moony, is Sirius okay?" he asked instantly.

"Harry is such a worrywart," Sirius said fondly.

Remus smiled. "He's fine," he said. "You know how Padfoot is in the mornings, dead to the world. Since I rise at the crack of dawn, I have the mirror in the mornings and Sirius has it attached to his hip for the rest of the day. Do you want me to wake him?"

Harry shook his head. He knew Sirius would probably overreact the moment Remus woke the canine Animagus up. "I just wanted to ask him about something he mentioned in the stories he told me about the Marauders," Harry said. "Sirius told me about a room here that could provide whatever you needed. I don't remember what he called it or where it was."

"The Room of Requirement," Remus answered with a grin. "If my memory serves me correctly I believe it is on the seventh floor opposite that tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. You have to walk past it three times, focusing on what you need. A door will appear. Open it and enter."

And while Lily read that the three Marauders mouthed those same words gesturing with their hands what Harry had to do.

He gave Harry a moment to take in everything he said before continuing. "So what do you need that only the Room of Requirement can provide?"

"Er—well—I sort of need to learn to swim before the second task," Harry said uncomfortably.

Remus let out a sigh as he smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Of course," he said softly. "I'm sorry, Harry. It never occurred to me that you didn't know how although I can't say I'm surprised. I take it the Dursleys never thought of arranging lessons for you."

"As if they would," Lily growled and James mumbled "purple hair" as a mantra to keep him calm.

Harry nearly laughed at the comment. The thought of the Dursleys willingly spending money on him was too ridiculous. "Remus do you remember the clothes they gave me?" he asked. "Those were Dudley's. I wasn't worth the time or money to them." Seeing Remus' face harden at the comment made Harry regret even saying anything. Even though Vernon Dursley was in jail, Sirius and Remus still considered cursing them every time Harry let something about his life with them slip. "Am I doing the right thing?" Harry asked, changing the topic.

"Of course you are, you don't want to drown," Remus said confused.

"What do you mean?" Remus asked in confusion.

"Should I even be trying to win?" Harry clarified. These thoughts had plagued his mind ever since he had become the fourth champion, brought to the surface again by the article about Hagrid. Somehow Harry was always receiving attention then others deserved it more. "I wasn't supposed to be in the Tournament and I'm in first place. I feel like I'm taking something away from those who earned their spot in this. Cedric should be winning...not me."

"There's nothing wrong with doing your best," James scolded.

Remus stared at Harry sympathetically. "I understand, cub, I really do," he said. "Tell me something...before, during and after the first task did the thought of winning the Tournament ever enter your mind?"

"Again, nothing wrong if he had wanted to. He's name was put in the tournament, why should he let the others win? If they didn't want him there they should have found a way out for him like he asked," James said scowling.

"James there was that binding magical contract thing going on," Lily tried to reason.

"I bet Dumbledore could have gotten him out," James argued angry, "And whose side are you in? This is our son we're talking about!"

"I know! I am just trying to be reasonable here," she spat back.

Sirius mouthed to Remus "Ron and Hermione," and Remus had to bite his cheeks hard to keep from laughing.

Harry shook his head. "I was more concerned about surviving," he admitted. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"It has a lot to do with it," Remus said. "It's not your fault that you are leading in the Tournament, Harry, You just happened to think of the best solution for the task. There are still two tasks to complete. There are plenty of opportunities for one of your fellow champions to pull ahead of you, especially if you can't swim."

"I do have to agree with James, Harry," Lily said, "Let the other champions worry about pulling ahead and don't feel guilty for doing your best."

"I thought you didn't agree with me!"

"I never said that!"

"I know the basics," Harry said defensively. "You move your arms and kick your legs. I just don't know if I can do that efficiently."

They all laughed.

"Oh, poor Harry. You'll need a bit more than that," Sirius chuckled.

Remus tried to hold back a laugh but eventually failed. "It's a little more complicated than that," he said candidly. "Don't worry. I'm sure you can find someone to help you. Just be careful who you show the Room of Requirement to. I don't think your teachers need another set of troublemakers causing as much trouble as your father and Padfoot caused, especially with two schools visiting."

"Moony! You're pulling away from your Marauder ways," James cried.

"Yes and what's this about me and James. Little case of amnesia? Did you forget you're always right there with us?" Sirius raised an eyebrow and Remus whistled innocently.

Harry had to admit Remus did have a point. If the Room of Requirement could provide whatever the person wanted, Fred and George Weasley could have an endless supply of materials for their pranks. Although they had been rather quiet on the pranks lately, Harry knew Professor Dumbledore wouldn't be too pleased at the start of a prank war.

"Don't worry Moony," Harry said sincerely. "I won't say anything to them. I promise."

"And I'll hold you to that promise no matter what Padfoot may tell you," Remus said with a smile then turned serious. "So how are you doing, cub? Don't take this the wrong way but you look exhausted. Are you even sleeping?"

"No, he's exhausting himself and refusing to get help!" Lily cried.

"I've been trying to figure out the clue," Harry said with a shrug. "Once I figured out how to understand what the voices in the egg were saying. I wanted to cover all the areas in trying to breathe underwater: Transfiguration, Charms, Potions...I should have known the easy answer was one I overlooked. I never thought to look in Herbology."

"Ah," Remus said thoughtfully. "You found out about Gillyweed. Congratulations Harry. How did you figure it out?"

Harry explained what happened in the potions store to Remus. He suddenly remembered his encounter with Rita Skeeter and stopped talking. He remembered what had been said in the article in the 'Daily Prophet' and mentally cursed himself for not contacting Remus and Sirius sooner. The article had been more damaging to them than to him. How could he have been so selfish?

"Poof, Moony and I know how to handle people like Skeeter," Sirius said waving a hand offhandedly.

"Harry?" Remus asked gently. "Are you all right?"

Pulled out of his thoughts, Harry looked at the mirror to see Remus' concerned face. "Something happened yesterday," he said as his gaze fell. "Rita Skeeter cornered Hermione and me. She kept asking about what it was like for me to live with a werewolf. I didn't tell her anything but it still made me so mad. How can people be so mean? Do they really think Sirius and Professor Dumbledore would let you anywhere near me if you were dangerous? You would never hurt me...I just know you wouldn't."

"No I wouldn't," Remus said firmly and then added sadly, "But people have a lot of trouble letting go of their prejudices."

"Yeah, and they love to gossip," Sirius growled, "Like it's any of their business."

"Harry, listen to me," Remus said calmly. "You can't take everything Rita Skeeter writes to heart. She doesn't care that we have taken precautions to make sure I am harmless during the full moon. She's just trying to cause problems. I have a feeling she's also trying to make you angry and say a few things to her so she can twist your words around in her next article."

"And if he was anything like his father she would have succeeded," Lily snorted, "Thank God he takes after me."

"Hum, Lily," Sirius said clearing his throat, "I think Harry's level head was more conditioning than genes or else he would have double lost his temper." She glared at him furiously.

"Meaning?"

"Nothing," he said quickly, "Nothing whatsoever."

You did the right thing yesterday. Don't give her the satisfaction in knowing that she got to you. There will always be people who fear me, cub. I know this. I've accepted it. Rita Skeeter is just playing on that fear. Don't worry. No one is going to take you away from us."

Harry let out tired sigh. Remus was of course right. Despite what Rita Skeeter or anyone else said, Harry was legally Sirius' charge giving Sirius the right to allow or deny access to Harry to whomever he wanted. "I know," Harry said softly. "It's just...all my life I've wanted a family and now I have one. I can't explain it—"

"—you feel that it's only a matter of time before someone takes your family away again," Remus concluded. "I wish I knew what to say to convince you that Padfoot and I aren't going anywhere, cub. If we have to take up residence in the Marauder Quarters again we will just to prove it to you. You're finally with us, where you belong...where you've always belonged."

"Yes! Marauder cub forever!" James cried. Sirius and Remus were nodding fervently. Lily was torn between laughing at their antics and cooing at how cute they were being.

Harry couldn't help but smile at the comment. He had to admit that something just felt right about having Sirius and Remus as his guardians. He didn't know why he just felt like they knew and understood a part of him that few ever saw. There was no easy way to put that into words. "Thanks Moony," Harry said gratefully. "For everything. Can you say hello to Sirius when he wakes up?"

"So, around midnight?" James chuckled. Sirius threw grass at him since the house-elves had cleared the rolls from earlier.

"Will do," Remus said with a nod. "It sounds like you have everything for the second task taken care of. You still have quite a few weeks to learn how to swim. Try and get some rest. Try to have some fun."

"I'll try," Harry said even though he doubted he would be able to with all of the homework his teachers were giving him. He didn't know a single fourth year student who wasn't stressed out. After bidding farewell to Remus, Harry relaxed in front of the fire, enjoying the peace and quiet. It was a rare occurrence these days. It was strange that something that annoyed him this summer was so soothing now.

Leaning back against a chair, Harry stared into the fire but not really seeing anything. Was it really that obvious that he wasn't sleeping? Was it obvious that he had so much on his mind

that he felt like he was going to explode? Remus had always been observant but he was rarely as blunt as he had just been. That was usually Sirius' forte.

"Oh, Harry, you are being too nice. Sirius is like one of those muggle cowdoser things. Nothing like Moony. *What?*" James cried indignant at a laughing Lily.

"The name is bulldozer James," she gasped through laughs.

Deep in thought, Harry didn't realize he wasn't alone until a hand grabbed his shoulder causing him to jump in shock. He turned and looked up to see Ron looking down at him with a concerned look on his face. Harry instantly let out a sigh of relief and relaxed. He didn't know why he had been so jumpy. No one in the Gryffindor Tower would ever harm him.

"Oh, so now he is concerned," James huffed and crossed his arms.

"At least he's coming around," Remus said calmly.

"Are you okay Harry?" Ron asked. "I've been trying to get your attention for the past five minutes."

Harry rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. "What?" he asked in confusion. Why would Ron be trying to get his attention? Wasn't Ron still mad at him? "I—I'm fine," he said softly. "Sorry if I woke you."

Ron let out a sigh as he sat down next to Harry on the floor. "I know I've been a real git,"

"Yes, you have," James said crossed.

he admitted. "I had no right to be jealous.

"No, you hadn't," James huffed.

I know there's nothing I can do to make things right but I want to try."

"See," Remus pointed out. James just glared.

Harry looked at Ron for a long moment before returning his gaze to the fire. "Do you have any idea what it feels like to have nothing, to have no one that even remotely cares about you?"

he asked. "Before Hogwarts I actually believed I was a freak. I believed the Dursleys—who made their hatred of me quite clear—were the only family I would ever have. I believed I wasn't worth someone's love."

A sob escaped Lily and James went to comfort her, "He knows better now Lils," he patted her and she didn't complain at the nickname.

"But that's—"

"Let me finish," Harry interrupted Ron. "When Hagrid rescued me and told me the truth I couldn't believe it. There was a place I could belong, a place where I could be myself with others who were just like me." Harry paused as he pulled his legs to his chest. "But that quickly turned out to be a lie. Even here I was different. Even here I was a freak but it wasn't so bad because at least I had friends here that didn't see me the way everyone else did. My friends didn't care what the scar on my forehead gave me but sympathized with what having it took from me."

Closing his eyes, Harry forced himself to remain calm. It wouldn't help to have a shouting match right now. "I don't think I need to remind you of the events that happened before the previous school year began," Harry continued. "You have no idea what it's like to be in constant fear, never knowing when the very man who is supposed to keep you safe starts taking his anger out on you. I can still hear him yelling, telling me that I should have died with my worthless parents."

Out of the corner of his eye Harry could see Ron staring at him with wide eyes. Apparently Ron hadn't bothered to think of what Vernon Dursley had done besides what Harry had told him.

"Nope, people never do," Remus said grimly, "People never want to imagine that things aren't perfect and unless you tell exactly how imperfect they are they just ignore the signs. So *sometimes* you have to tell them so they can help," he finished giving Sirius a pointed look.

Sirius looked to the side, to the skies and was quite determined to ignore them.

"I then met Moony who was willing to give me everything I ever wanted...but it couldn't happen because of the prejudice the wizarding world has on werewolves," Harry said evenly. "I did everything I could think of to make us a family. I desperately wanted the one thing you've had since the day you were born: an actual family that kept you safe and loved you no

matter what. When Sirius and Remus became my guardians, I could hardly believe it. Sometimes I still have to remind myself that home isn't a place to fear anymore. I thought all of my problems would go away but they didn't. I can't go anywhere without people wanting to know about my life, wanting to know what it's like to live with an ex-convict and a werewolf."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Ron asked quietly.

"What could you do?" Harry countered. "*This* is the price of all the fame I never wanted. I have no privacy. I am under constant scrutiny. I have to be perfect because everyone expects it from the-boy-who-lived. It doesn't help that the entire school knows everything we've done in the past. They expect me to pull off the impossible when I'm just trying to do what I can to survive. Is that what you really want?"

Ron's shoulders slumped forward as he bowed his head in shame. "What do you want me to say?"

"Well, sorry for being a complete idiot git could be a good start," James huffed.

"You could do that in front of the whole school. Wearing just your underwear," Sirius added.

"Good," James cried.

"McGonagall would kill him," Lily said.

"Well, he kind of deserves it," Remus said nodding.

he asked. "I'm an idiot. I should have known better than to think you would get caught up in the excitement of the Tournament. I was scared. I thought once you became friends with Krum and Diggory you wouldn't want to spend any time with me."

"WHAT? Oh, come on! Harry would never do that!" Sirius cried disbelieving.

Harry stared at Ron in disbelief. Hermione had warned him but it was still a shock to hear Ron admit it. "Is that what you thought?" asked Harry. "Ron, this isn't a competition. I'm being friendly with Viktor because I understand what he's going through. Cedric helped me out of a bind with Rita Skeeter at the Wand Weighing. They don't know me like you do and probably never will. You were the first friend I ever had who was my age. You sacrificed yourself for

me in a giant game of chess, Ron. I don't turn my back on people because others enter my life."

"He did? Oh, Uau. Thanks Ron!" James said in awe.

Ron let a relieved smile appear on his face. "I'm really sorry Harry," he said. "What can I do to prove it to you?"

"We already told you," Sirius said and Lily gave him a scolding glare.

Harry thought for a moment then smiled. Truthfully, he missed Ron so much that he was ready to accept the fact that Ron may always be jealous of the-boy-who-lived's celebrity status just like the majority of the students at Hogwarts. He didn't agree with it but knew there was nothing he could do to change it. "Do you know how to swim?" Harry asked his friend curiously.

They all chuckled

"Good idea Harry!" Lily said smiling.

Over the next few days Harry filled Ron in on what he had discovered for the second task. Hermione was ecstatic that Harry and Ron had reconciled and jumped at the chance to teach Harry how to swim with Ron. The three of them agreed to sneak off to the Room of Requirement every other night after their schoolwork was finished until Harry could swim well enough for the task.

Following Remus' instructions, they found the Room of Requirement and could hardly believe their eyes when they entered. The room was large with a swimming pool in the center, larger than the one in the Prefects' Bathroom. Piles of towels were folded neatly at one end of the pool just waiting to be used. The walls were decorated with various Muggle and magical inflatable objects to be used in the water. In the back of the room there were three doors labeled 'Harry', 'Ron' and 'Hermione'. These doors opened to reveal changing quarters with a swimsuit for each of them to change into.

It was during their time in the water that Ron and Hermione noticed the shiny black necklace that Harry had been wearing since Halloween. Since it had been around his neck for so long Harry had completely forgotten about it. Not wanting to tell them about his out of control magic, Harry was forced to lie and say it was a gift from Sirius and Remus. He hated lying but

he had just made up with Ron. He wasn't about to do anything that would frighten him or Hermione away.

"Oh, Harry. I already told you. They won't be frightened you can tell them," Remus pleaded.

Most of the time in the Room of Requirement was spent helping Harry but certainly not all of it. Ron and Hermione's bickering matches turned into full water fights which Harry made a point to stay out of. Whatever end of the pool they were splashing water at each other was they end Harry stayed away from. Harry had found that whenever Ron and Hermione had an argument he was brought in to settle it which meant choosing one side over the other...something Harry hated doing. It always left one person angry with him.

As the second task drew closer, the entire school was bursting with excitement again. Endless theories of what the task may be were the main topic of conversation. Countless students approached Harry for a hint of what he would have to do, wondering if it would be anything like the first task. Harry declined to comment, stating that if the students were supposed to know they would have been told. Ron and Hermione made it their duty to talk about anything and everything but the Tournament when in Harry's presence to get his mind off of the pressure people were putting on him.

The night before the second task seemed to be one that was trapped in time. Although Harry was prepared he couldn't help feeling nervous. He was continuously going over everything in his head over and over again just to make sure he was ready. He could swim just as well as Ron and Hermione and he had his Gillyweed ready. The only problem he could possibly think of was that he didn't know where the merfolk would be in the lake. That thought made Harry even more nervous. How was he supposed to find them?

"YES! HOW?" James shook Remus.

Remus pried him from James and calmly said, "I suppose that at the bottom of the lake since they could build villages there."

"Oh, Ok," James said calmer.

Desperate for something to do than just wait, Harry started glancing through his charms book again. He was forced to take a break after an hour by Ron who dragged him to a nearby table with a waiting chess set. After a long game in which he of course lost to Ron, Harry was about

to return to his Charms book when he noticed Professor McGonagall standing in the portrait entrance looking at the three of them.

"Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley, please come with me," Professor McGonagall said sternly.

"What? What did they do to incite Minnie's wrath?" Sirius said.

"Sirius, they are not you," Lily said then she frowned and looked at James worried, "You don't think they are in trouble for helping Harry do you?" James looked worried too.

Harry, Ron and Hermione instantly looked nervous. What could they have possibly done? Ron and Hermione had rarely left Harry's side for the past few weeks. They only thing they had done was the swimming lessons in the Room of Requirement and Harry had been there so wouldn't Harry be in trouble with them?

Seeing the looks on their faces, Professor McGonagall tried a different approach. "You are not in trouble," McGonagall assured them. "I promise Mr. Potter will be fine with out you two for a while."

"Well, you can't blame them for thinking that. Minnie has a way to make everyone think they are in trouble," James said knowingly.

"And as I've said countless times before; she does not appreciate being called Minnie," Remus said slowly.

Hermione touched Harry's arm and waited for her friend to meet her eyes. "Try to get some sleep, Harry," she said gently. "You've been working on the task for months. I don't think you could be any more prepared than what you are now."

"She has a point, Harry," Ron added. "We can't have you falling asleep in the middle of the task."

"I'll try," Harry said although he had a feeling he wouldn't be able to sleep tonight. He was just too nervous to even consider it right now. Once Ron and Hermione had left with Professor McGonagall, Harry sat down in front of the fire and returned to breezing through his Charms book. He figured his friends wouldn't be gone for long and knew they would explain everything when they returned.

The problem was they didn't return.

By the time dawn broke Harry was now extremely nervous but for a completely different reason. Ron and Hermione should have come back hours ago. Professor McGonagall said they weren't in trouble so what could have possibly kept them for so long. He had been up the entire night so he knew they hadn't come in without him knowing about it.

"He didn't sleep?" James cried worried, "What if he falls asleep in the lake?"

Fearing that something had happened to them, Harry hurried up to his dorm room and pulled the Marauder's Map out of his trunk. After activating it, Harry scanned through the map to see Ron, Hermione, Cho Chang and someone called Gabrielle Delacour in Professor Dumbledore's office with Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Ludo Bagman, and Percy Weasley. Harry wanted nothing more than to barge into Professor Dumbledore's office and find out what was going on. Why were so many people there? What was going on?

"I have a bad feeling about this," Lily said grimly and Remus nodded with a grimace.

"What?" Sirius asked.

"They'll take what he will sorely miss Padfoot," Remus explained, "Gabrielle Delacour must be related to Fleur Delacour. Cho Chang is Cedric's girlfriend and Hermione is seeing Krum. Ron is Harry's best friend."

"WHAT?" James and Sirius cried.

"*They can't do that!*" James said horrified.

After putting the map away, Harry sat on his bed and rubbed the tiredness out of his eyes. He knew he would be paying for staying up all night later. His stomach felt tight with nerves, reminding him what would be happening in a few hours. Not wanting to sit around and dwell on it, Harry changed clothes, grabbed his wand and set off for the Room of Requirement. There was no way he was going to eat anything this morning so going to the Great Hall was completely pointless.

He spent an hour in the Room of Requirement attempting to cast the *Lumos* spell without words since he wouldn't be able to speak under water. He had managed a small light about the size of a tennis ball but at least it was something. He had also practiced the heating charm he had used last year and refreshed on the lessons he had received from Professor McGonagall from the summer before his third year on how to transfigure clothes. He didn't think it would be smart to go into the lake with pants and a jumper on.

"Nope, you would be weighed down," Sirius said.

Although Harry really didn't want to see anyone right now another hour and a half in seclusion was even less appealing. The last thing he needed was to dwell on the many ways he could possibly mess this task up. Strolling through the halls, Harry tried to focus on anything but the second task but found it impossible. Where were Ron and Hermione when you needed them?

"If Moony and Lily are right, down in the bottom of the lake," James said grimly.

That thought made Harry stop abruptly. Where were Ron and Hermione? Why had they been gone all night? Were they looking for him? Surely Professor Dumbledore wouldn't keep them so they missed the second task, right?

Harry suddenly remembered what the egg had said: *'We've taken what you'll sorely miss'*. What if it wasn't referring to an object but a person? There had been three students in Dumbledore's office and one person he didn't recognize the name of totaling to four...one for each champion. Fear instantly flooded Harry. Was Professor Dumbledore completely out of his mind? *Probably*.

"Certainly!" Sirius cried.

Desperate to prove his train of thought false, Harry took off running for Professor Dumbledore's office. He ran past students on their way to the Great Hall, ignoring the calls from those who wanted to wish him luck. He had accepted that he had to participate in this Tournament but that didn't mean Ron and Hermione had to. The thought of either of them being put in harms way because of him wasn't something Harry could handle.

"But they wouldn't would they? Dumbledore would make sure they were safe, right?" Lily said.

The others nodded though they didn't seem all that convinced.

Turning the corner, Harry skidded to a halt, nearly running into Professor McGonagall in the process. "Har—Mr. Potter!" she exclaimed, catching herself before anyone heard her calling Harry his first name. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" Harry asked instantly. "They never came back last night."

Professor McGonagall's stern face melted as she let out a sigh. "Follow me," she said softly then turned and walked into a nearby classroom. Once Harry entered, she closed the door and turned to him. "Harry, I shouldn't be saying anything but I know unless I do you won't concentrate on the task. Your friends will be participating in the task today." Harry moved to protest. "They are perfectly safe," McGonagall assured him. "Professor Dumbledore would never allow anything happening to those participating. He has taken measures to assure that."

"Oh, thank god!" Sirius said sighing and dropping on the ground.

Harry couldn't help but stare at Professor McGonagall with a raised eyebrow. From the tone of her voice it sounded almost like she was trying to tell him something without actually saying the words. Knowing that nothing he could say would sway the teacher in talking to the Headmaster, Harry bid farewell and hurried back to the Gryffindor Tower. He didn't stop until he reached his trunk in his dorm room, opened it and pulled out the penknife he had received for Christmas from Sirius. He had a feeling it would come in handy. Harry also pulled the Gillyweed out of the jar and placed it in his pocket. He surely didn't want to forget that.

As the time for the second task drew near, Harry alternated between nervousness towards the task and nervousness towards Ron and Hermione's part in the task. He went down to the lake early, sitting on his heels with his head bowed and his eyes closed. The message had said something, not some things. Did that mean he had to choose between Ron and Hermione? *No, Dumbledore wouldn't do that.*

There had been four people in Professor Dumbledore's office. It was obvious that Cedric had to rescue Cho Chang. If Harry remembered correctly Gabrielle Delacour had the same last name as Fleur. He had to assume that Gabrielle was Fleur's sister. Viktor Krum, on the other hand, had rarely been seen in the company of others except during the Yule Ball and the times he sat with the Gryffindor threesome in the library. The Bulgarian's date had been Hermione. She must be the one Viktor had to rescue meaning Harry had to save Ron.

"Harry is so smart," Lily cooed.

Sirius and Remus looked at each other biting their laughs but when they saw James nodding with a dreamy expression they lost it and burst out laughing.

The cold gentle breeze brought Harry out of his thoughts. Opening his eyes, Harry looked up to see Cedric Diggory standing in front of him and nearly jumped back in shock. He hadn't

heard anything at all let alone someone approaching. "Er—morning Cedric," Harry said unsure of what else to say as he rose to his feet. "Are you ready for this?"

Cedric was wearing his cloak but was still shivering. Harry could only assume whatever Cedric was wearing underneath wasn't exactly suited for February weather. "As ready as I'll ever be," Cedric said honestly. "What were they thinking scheduling something like this in February?"

Harry could only shrug his shoulders since he wondered the same thing. *Professor Dumbledore probably wanted to start the Tournament off with a bang*, he mused.

"No, it's just like I said. They are testing endurance," Remus said.

After glancing around to make sure no one was listening in, Harry took a step closer so no one could hear. "Thanks for the tip by the way," he said gratefully. "I can't believe I was so thick not to think of submersing it in water in order to understand mermish."

"Harry James Potter you were not thick!" Lily scolded, "It's not your fault that you are three years younger than the rest of the champions!"

Cedric waved it off. "I owed you one anyways," he said. "So what have you planned for this task?"

"Why Cedric? Need tips?" Sirius scorned.

"Sirius!" Remus said shoving Sirius, "He is just making conversation."

Harry reached in his pocket, pulled out the Gillyweed and showed it to Cedric. "I figured this was more dependable than a Bubble-Head Charm or self Transfiguration," he said. "It took me forever to find it though."

"What is it?" Cedric asked hesitantly, not even attempting to hide his distaste of the small object in Harry's hand.

It was extremely difficult for Harry to keep a straight face with Cedric acting like he was. To an observer it almost appeared that Cedric was frightened of what was in Harry's hand. "It's Gillyweed," Harry said as he put it back in his pocket. "You eat it and you can breathe under water. I got it during the last Hogsmeade trip."

Cedric let out a frustrated groan as he hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. "I completely forgot about it," he said. "We learned about Gillyweed last year in Herbology. And here I thought you would be struggling through the Tournament." Cedric reached out and ruffled Harry's hair earning a scowl of annoyance from the fourteen-year-old. "Good luck today, Harry, although I doubt you'll need it."

"I personally rather Harry had all the luck he can get," James said worried.

Harry tried to smooth out his hair but knew it would be a battle he wouldn't win. Why did everyone feel the need to mess his already messy hair up more? "Good luck to you too," Harry said sincerely. "Are you using the Bubble-Head Charm?"

Cedric nodded but the sound of others approaching prevented him from saying anything. Looking over his shoulder, Harry saw Viktor Krum come into view and nodded as a sign of greeting, receiving a nod from him in return. The judges arrived next and took their designated spots at the judge's table. Harry couldn't help but notice Percy Wesley's attendance and Mr. Crouch's absence. This was the second event of the Triwizard Tournament Crouch was missing, the first being the Yule Ball.

"You know, that's very weird," Sirius said, "I mean, Crouch seems like the kind of person that wouldn't miss a day of work even if he was in his death bed. Why miss two big events?" The others frowned at this.

Fleur arrived shortly after the judges followed by the students who filled the seats that had been used during the first task that were set up along the opposite bank. Harry did his best to ignore the echoing chatter. His nerves were back at full force, having decreased slightly while he had been talking to Cedric. He wasn't too concerned about how he would do, just finding Ron in time. *"Professor Dumbledore would never allow anything happening to those participating. He has taken measures to assure that."*

"I sure hope so," James growled.

"James, Dumbledore would never do anything to hurt them. Besides he can't just stuff underage wizards and witches in the bottom of the lake without parental permission. The parents wouldn't have let him unless he had precautions in place," Lily reasoned. James nodded somewhat reluctant.

Professor McGonagall's words replayed in his head over and over again, silencing the chatter from the crowd. Realization finally hit Harry like a blast of wind. McGonagall had been trying

to reassure him that those needing to be rescued will be fine no matter what. If he didn't succeed in his task, Ron would be safe. If one of the other champions didn't succeed, their hostage would be safe too. Hermione would be safe.

"Good to see he gets his brains from his mother," Remus said evenly. James nodded happily and Lily and Sirius tried to muffle their laughter at James' obliviousness to the insult.

Noticing Cedric pulling off his cloak, Harry pulled off his shoes and socks before transfiguring his clothes into a pair of swimming trunks and a formfitting long-sleeved shirt specifically made for swimmers. He then cast a heating charm before returning his wand to his wand holster. Warmth instantly surrounded him, pushing away any coldness the air could possibly give.

Ludo Bagman's loud voice broke into his thoughts. "Welcome to the second task," he announced. "Once the whistle sounds, the champions will have one hour to recover what has been taken. Ready champions? Three...two...one..."

The loud whistle sounded. Harry quickly pulled out the Gillyweed from his pocket and put it in his mouth as he walked into the lake. The water felt a little cool, alerting Harry that it must be in reality freezing since his heating charm was working. He continued walking deeper into the lake as he started chewing the Gillyweed. To put it bluntly, it tasted absolutely gross and felt even worse as it slid down his throat.

"BLARGH!" the four cried and made faces.

With a leap of faith, Harry dived into the lake hoping that the Gillyweed would work. As he started to swim, Harry suddenly felt a sharp pain on the sides of his neck followed by relief. He could breathe. He had gills now underneath his ears. Knowing that he had little time, Harry continued swimming, amazed how much easier it was now than all his time in the Room of Requirement. He figured the Gillyweed must have something to do with that and kept swimming.

Darkness surrounded him. Instinctively, Harry flicked his wrist as he continued to swim and had his wand in his hand. Concentrating with all of his might, Harry focused on the *Lumos* spell and smiled when a small light appeared at the end of his wand, allowing him to see what lay ahead. He saw long black weeds, mud and shiny rocks. Fish noticed the light and quickly swam away.

He entered a section where weeds of a light-green color covered everything below him. He started to move on when something in his head screamed. Quickly, Harry turned around and held out his left hand as if to force away whatever may be attacking. A flash of light appeared from where his outstretched hand was, hitting a Grindylow, a water demon with horns that he had learned about when Remus had been the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

"Hum, James!" Remus said patting James who had just hugged him.

"Thank you for teaching him Moony. You saved his life!" James cried.

"Let's not exaggerate," Remus said calmly prying his friend off of him.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm. How had he done that?

"Do you think he had an outburst?" Sirius asked.

"He shouldn't have," Lily said frowning. "That's the second time that happens with the necklace on. I don't like this," she finished grimly.

Focus on the task!

Not wanting to run into any other creatures, Harry turned back around and continued on his path. He noticed his source of light was gone again and focused once more on the right spell. Another light appeared at the end of his wand. Looking around, Harry noticed a faint light in the distance to his right and decided to follow it. He swam as fast as he could in case he was wrong. His muscles screamed in protest but Harry ignored it. He had no idea how much time was left in the allotted time but knew it was at least half gone.

The green weeds underneath him were replaced with blackish mud. The dim light slowly brightened as eerie voices filled his ears. Harry knew those voices. It had been the same voices that had been in his egg. He continued to push his body as he re-holstered his wand. Suddenly a large rock appeared from the murky water in front of him. There were paintings of the merpeople all over it.

Swimming past it, Harry followed the voices and the light to find himself surrounded by stone sculptures that had green stains all over them. It was then that Harry noticed moving figures that didn't look anything remotely like what the myths depicted merfolk to be like. Their skin was grey, their hair was long and green, their eyes and teeth were yellow, and their tails were of the silver color. He continued swimming, ignoring the pointing the merpeople were

doing. Turning the corner, Harry saw a large group of merpeople who were hovering in front of houses on the outskirts of what could only be their 'village'. A smaller group of merpeople were singing in the center of it all, telling the champions where to go...directly behind them to a large statue of a huge merperson where four people had been bound to the stone figure's tail.

If it would have been possible Harry's breath would have been caught in his throat at the sight. Hermione, Ron, Cho and a girl who had to be only eight year's old looking exactly like Fleur appeared to be in a deep sleep. Bubbles floated out of their mouths reassuring Harry that they were still alive. He had no ideahow they were able to breathe but decided not to waste time in worrying about that now.

"See. They couldn't have taken an eight year old without asking the parents. It's not like she goes to Hogwarts," Lily said superiorly.

"Ok, Lils. No need to rub it in," James said.

Pushing his already sore body, Harry hurried to the hostages. Reaching in his pocket, Harry pulled out the knife Sirius had given him and pulled out the blade. As quickly and carefully as possible, Harry cut Ron free, catching his sleeping friend with his free arm while closing his knife and placing it back in his pocket with the other. He glanced over at Hermione, let out a breath of regret before swimming upwards, holding Ron under the arms as he kicked his legs, forcing them to work harder and faster. It felt like he was moving so slowly and Ron was so heavy.

A sudden warmth filled his body followed by a surge of energy, pushing away any exhaustion or aches he may have felt. It didn't take a genius to know what was happening. Harry knew he was having another outburst. He could feel something uncontrollable rise in him but vanished just as quickly, absorbed into his necklace. *Not now! Please not now!*

"Ok, that's three times," James said forcefully pointing at the book, "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Dunno," Remus tried answering raising his hands, palms up in a defeated gesture.

The dark waters above Harry slowly started to lighten. He kept kicking while he held on tightly to Ron like his life depended on it. He was almost there. He knew it. He could feel it. He could hear it. *Wait a minute...hear it?*

Voices suddenly filled his ears speaking some language (if it could be called that) Harry had never heard before. Nevertheless, Harry knew what they wanted. They didn't want him to break the surface. He could feel it. They were following him, waiting for the right moment to do whatever they wanted to which couldn't be good.

"WHAT?" Sirius cried, "The merepeople are following him. DUMBLEDORE DO SOMETHING!"

"Dumbledore isn't there," Remus said grimly.

"But you said he wouldn't let anything happen," James cried desperately.

This was all the incentive Harry needed to kick harder than he thought possible. In no time Harry reached the surface, Ron appearing through the water a moment later. Cheers filled his ears but that was the last thing on his mind now. Breathing had become difficult until Harry remembered he still had gills from the Gillyweed. Resting on his back so that the gills were underwater, Harry swam to shore while holding onto Ron with one arm. He didn't get far before he heard Ron groan.

"Harry?" Ron asked groggily as he looked around and noticed where they were. After a moment, Ron pried himself out of Harry's arm, signaling that he could swim the rest of the way himself. "What are you waiting for?" he asked with a grin. "Let's go!"

"Easy for you to say. You were sleeping!" James said annoyed.

Harry would have laughed if something hadn't grabbed his right ankle. Fear suddenly flooded him as something grabbed onto his left ankle. "Ron!" he shouted as he was pulled underwater at an unbelievable speed. Something latched on to each of his wrists, pulling him down even faster. Harry flicked his wrist and grabbed his wand. He needed to get free. He needed to concentrate.

"WAS' HAPPENING?" Sirius cried.

Closing his eyes, Harry tried to focus but found it difficult with the biting pain flaring up his body from his ankles. Ignoring it the best he could, Harry focused on anything but the pain. Once again Harry felt a wave of power flood his body and started to panic. He couldn't lose control now, not with the other three champions and their hostages still in the water. He couldn't risk hurting anyone but he couldn't just do nothing either.

"HARRY FOR ONCE IN YOUR LIFE; LET GO!" Lily yelled.

Pointing his wand at his right ankle, Harry focused on the stunning spell. His eyes were closed tightly as he forced the power he was feeling through his wand. A moment later the grip on his right ankle vanished and Harry wasted no time before doing the same to his left ankle and left wrist. Once those limbs were free, Harry switched hands then did the same to the mysterious creature that was still pulling him down by his right wrist. Now completely free, Harry re-holstered his wand and quickly swam to the surface. His breathing was starting to become difficult as a familiar pain shot through his neck. Harry knew the Gillyweed was wearing off. He suddenly felt exhausted, making his swimming more and more difficult but continued to push himself towards the surface. He needed air. He needed his muscles to stop screaming at him. He needed to pass out.

Breaking the surface, Harry took in a deep breath of air never feeling as relieved as he did right now. His arms and legs felt like they were about to fall off but Harry desperately wanted to reach the shore and get out of these waters as soon as possible. It seemed to take forever for him to reach the shore where he was quickly pulled out of the water by Professor Dumbledore and Professor Karkaroff. Harry winced in pain as his right foot hit a rock. He looked down and saw both of his ankles were bleeding freely.

"He's ok. He's ok," James murmured as he stroke Lily's hair. She had her head on his shoulder.

Professor Dumbledore seemed to notice this too, quickly picking the small fourteen-year-old up and carrying him over to where Madam Pomfrey was stationed under a tent that had been set up near the shore. Too tired to do anything, Harry felt his head fall against Dumbledore's chest as his eyes closed. A soft voice was telling him it would be all right as he felt himself lowered onto something soft. The pain from his ankles vanished before he was covered with a warm blanket. He felt his mouth being pried open as something cool and bitter was poured down his throat.

Slowly, Harry opened his eyes to see Ron, wrapped in a blanket, looking down at him nervously. "You okay, Harry?" he asked. "I tried to go after you but I couldn't find you and Dumbledore pulled me out of the water before I could go deeper. What happened?"

"I don't know," Harry answered truthfully as he tried to sit up but his arms wouldn't cooperate. Ron noticed this and helped. "Thanks," Harry said as he swayed a little. "I didn't see what it was but I have a feeling it was Grindylows.

"Grindylows," Sirius said, "I thought maybe the merepeople had decided to keep him."

"I think I know what happened," Remus grimaced and Lily nodded.

One tried to attack me before I found you..." The memory of how he dealt with that particular Grindylow made Harry stop in his explanation. Looking out at the lake, Harry had to wonder what had happened out there. The necklace had worked for the first burst but not the second. Harry had to wonder if he had been wrong in putting all of his faith in a piece of jewelry. It wasn't like Harry was upset that the necklace had failed. He had fought off whatever was pulling him under because of it. He just didn't like the fact that he didn't know that could happen.

Harry was pulled out of his thoughts by the return of Cedric and Cho who were immediately wrapped in blankets. The moment they entered the tent they both saw Harry sitting on a bed with his ankles bandaged heavily. Madam Pomfrey followed them in and also noticed Harry. "Mr. Potter," she scolded. "Lie back down this instant. Your reaction to the Pepper-Up Potion was enough to know you need rest."

"When did you give me the Pepper-Up Potion?" Harry asked in confusion.

"My point exactly," Madam Pomfrey said as she moved to Harry's bedside and pushed him back down on the bed. "You lost quite a bit of blood and with these conditions you are bound to catch something. Now stay there or you will spend a week in the hospital wing."

"Poppy does tend to exaggerate," James grimaced.

"The fact that you are on a first name basis with her James shows you've been under her care enough to know that maybe she knows what's she's doing," Lily said and Sirius sniggered. James shot him a glare and he promptly shut up.

That was all Harry needed to do whatever Madam Pomfrey said. The last thing he wanted was to spend a week in the hospital wing. His blanket was once again pulled up to his chin. He felt another blanket placed over his feet before he saw Madam Pomfrey moving on to check over Cedric and Cho. Ron pulled up a chair and sat down at Harry's bedside, unable to keep his worry off of his face.

"Madam Pomfrey, is Harry okay?" Cedric asked quietly but Harry heard him anyways.

"Oh, how nice of him. He's worried," Lily cooed. Sirius made a gagging motion.

"Once his ankles heal and he rests Mr. Potter will be just fine, Mr. Diggory," Pomfrey assured the Hufflepuff student. "I think it was the sight that scared us more than anything. Professor Dumbledore wants to make certain there are no other injuries."

"Sight?" Cho asked in confusion.

"We started swimming to shore when something pulled Harry under," Ron answered with a hint of annoyance in his voice. It was clear that he didn't like Cedric and Cho talking to Madam Pomfrey when Harry was right there. "He vanished for ten minutes. The judges were about ready to call off the task when Harry came back to the surface gasping for breath with deep cuts on his ankles and bruises on his wrists."

Cedric moved over to Harry's bedside and sat down by Harry's feet. "How *are* you feeling, Harry?" he asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. His muscles still felt like they were on fire but he wasn't about to start complaining about it. "I can't move my arms and legs but that's probably a good thing since Madam Pomfrey doesn't want me to move," he said candidly.

"That's because of the outburst," Remus said knowingly, "He always feels like that after an outburst."

Madam Pomfrey rushing out of the tent with two blankets in her arms caught everyone's attention. A moment later they heard Madam Pomfrey ushering a soaked Viktor and Hermione into the tent. Hermione took one look at the scene and hurried to Harry's side. Ron quickly explained to Hermione why Harry was in a bed. Despite Harry trying to reassure Hermione that he was fine and everyone was just overreacting she still felt it was necessary to pull Harry into a fierce embrace which Ron and Cedric had to jump in to pry them apart.

Viktor decided to step in and keep Hermione away from Harry's bedside while Ron and Cedric covered Harry back up. They were all saved from starting a conversation when they heard Fleur ranting loudly Cedric and Cho stepped out of the tent to find out what the commotion was only to come back and tell everyone that Fleur didn't find her hostage in time and wants to go back looking for her sister. A few minutes later Fleur had ended her ranting and entered the tent, holding on to her sister tightly. Everyone just let the sisters be and stayed by Harry. It seemed odd that three of the Champions had become friends and one had not. Harry couldn't help but feel slightly guilty since he had been the one to make the effort with Cedric and Viktor. *Perhaps I should make the effort with Fleur.*

"She could make the effort too," Lily huffed.

Ludo Bagman's magnified voice pulled Harry out of his thoughts. "Ladies and gentlemen, our champions have returned and now for their marks out of fifty," he announced. "Miss Fleur Delacour used the Bubble-Head Charm and was attacked by Grindylows preventing her from retrieving her hostage. She is awarded twenty-five points." Applause broke out. When it decreased Bagman continued. "Mr. Harry Potter used Gillyweed and was the first to return with his hostage. Despite also being attacked by Grindylows, he returned within the hour time limit. Mr. Potter is awarded forty-seven points." Loud cheers and applause rang out from the crowd. Once again when the noise decreased Bagman continued. "Mr. Cedric Diggory used the Bubble-Head Charm. He was the second to return with his hostage but returned five minutes outside the time limit. Mr. Diggory is awarded forty-five points." Loud cheers once again broke out. "Mr. Viktor Krum attempted self Transfiguration which was incomplete but effective nonetheless. He also returned with his hostage but was outside the time limit. He is awarded forty points."

There was another round of applause for Viktor but by now the excitement had come and gone. Harry just closed his eyes and let his exhaustion consume him. Once again he had managed to come out on top when all he was trying to do was survive. He was still in first place, the last place he wanted to be.

"Oh, cheer up Harry. You deserve it!" Sirius said happily. The others nodded.

A/N:

Coming up: Some Sirius and Remus time. Harry learns about the Mr. Crouch's past and a teacher finds out about a secret Dumbledore has been keeping. Until next time. :-)

"Oh, I love Sirius and Remus time," Lily clapped.

"Well, Lily," Sirius said cheekily, "That can be arranged."

Lily glared and hissed, "For Harry you dolt."

James laughed.

Chapter 16

The Truth About Mr. Crouch

"Ha! So there's a truth? Knew he was hiding something! Evil little-"

"Sirius, we already know you don't like him and with reason. May I continue reading now," Lily said calmly.

The sensation of someone running their fingers through his messy hair slowly brought Harry out of his slumber. The touch was comforting and oddly familiar. Harry let out a groan as he leaned into the touch. His arms and legs felt weak which confused him. He tried to move his limbs but they just wouldn't obey. Why couldn't he move? Harry groaned again in annoyance. He didn't like this...not one bit. After a moment Harry felt like something was missing. It didn't take him long to realize his necklace had been removed.

"Excuse me, what now? Why did you remove it? He has a bad enough time not having outburst with the bloody necklace and you go and remove it!" James cried irritated.

"Maybe they found another way. Let's just wait and see before you go killing everyone," Remus reasoned. James huffed.

"I think he's finally waking up."

"No, you do?" Sirius rolled his eyes. "Genius!"

Harry groaned again as he slowly opened his eyes. The dim lighting in addition to his poor eyesight made it impossible for him to make out whose face he was looking at. He blinked a few times and saw another blurry face come into view. A cool hand touched his forehead sending a chill down Harry's spine. The bed he was in was firm and unmistakably one belonging in the hospital wing. Harry tried to lift his arm to find his glasses but his arm still refused to move. Whoever was looking down at him seemed to notice his problem because the next thing Harry knew his glasses were slid on his face bringing everything into focus.

Including the faces of Remus and Sirius.

James, Lily and Remus burst out laughing.

Sirius huffed and crossed his arms, "I don't see why you are laughing Moony. No one said I was the one to say he was waking." Remus promptly stopped and glared at the other two.

"Hello Pronglet," Sirius said with a smile as he continued to run his fingers through Harry's hair. "You gave us quite a scare...again. We were ready to jump in after you. Do you want me to go as grey as Moony here?"

Remus glared at Sirius crossing his arms. Sirius was trying hard to hold his sniggers.

"Hey!" Remus cried in offense. "I am not that grey! Take that back!"

"Yeah, take that back!" Remus said poking Sirius with each word.

Sirius looked at Remus and shrugged his shoulders. "What can I say?" he asked innocently then looked at Harry and winked. "The truth hurts."

"So true," Sirius sighed.

Harry closed his eyes and let out a sigh. He knew his guardians were trying to lighten the mood but right now all he wanted was to sleep. "If you two insist on fighting like teenage girls I'll have to ask you to leave," Harry said softly. "I'm really tired."

"Teenage girls," James laughed. He received two glares. The laugh intensified.

The mood instantly changed from playful to serious. Remus gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "We know you're tired, Harry," he said sincerely. "We know the last thing you want is to talk about what happened today but this sort of exhaustion, magical and physical, on your body is impossible to accomplish. Did you have another outburst while underwater?"

Harry nodded. "I had two," he admitted. "The first one was absorbed into the necklace but the other wouldn't go. I somehow used it to fight off those things." Harry opened his eyes and looked at the shocked faces of Remus and Sirius, suddenly feeling extremely worried. "What's happening to me? This was supposed to be under control but it's getting worse."

"YES! WHAT'S HAPPENING?" James and Lily cried together each shaking one of the remaining Marauders who looked quite scared.

"Dunno," Sirius said shakily, "If you want I can read." He said prying the book from Lily and reading.

Sirius pulled Harry up into an embrace and held him tightly. "Try not to worry about it," he said sincerely. "We'll talk to Dumbledore. Maybe he can make a stronger necklace for you."

Once this Tournament is over we'll do everything we can to help you control this more, that's a promise."

"See, we'll do everything," Sirius said pointing at the passage.

Harry tried to pull himself free but could only squirm in Sirius' arms slightly. "But what if it happens again?" he asked in frustration. "What if someone's around when it happens? Don't you understand? I'm a danger to everyone here! I used the outbursts to help me yesterday. I had an unfair advantage! I shouldn't be in this Tournament! It's not fair to everyone else!"

Sirius gently rubbed Harry's back trying to calm Harry down as he sat down on the bed. He looked over his shoulder to Remus for help but only saw a helpless look on his friend's face. Neither of them knew what to do to help their charge. "I know you're scared Harry," Sirius said finally. "These outbursts scare me too but not because of the remote chance of someone else getting hurt but of what all of this is doing to you. Poppy has been giving you potions ever since you were brought up here. You should be bouncing off the walls by now. Remus and I will do everything we can to help you through this."

"Yes, they will," said Lily, "Stop worrying about the others Harry. You're the only one getting hurt here."

"I think Harry has "worrying about others" as a default mode," Remus said grimly.

"Padfoot's right...for once," Remus added as Sirius lowered Harry back to the bed. "Try and get some rest, Harry. We'll talk to Dumbledore and get this straightened out by tomorrow morning. Hopefully you'll be able to move by then." He reached out and gently squeezed Harry's arm. "Try not to be so hard on yourself. We all know you can't control these outbursts yet."

Harry nodded and watched his guardians leave. He knew they were right but he couldn't help but feel he had somehow used these outbursts to help him in the lake and not just during his battle with the underwater creatures. He had somehow managed to push his body beyond its limit and was feeling it now. Harry let out a sigh as he closed his eyes. Yes, he couldn't control when the outbursts had come yet but he had controlled the second outburst once it came. Perhaps Professor Dumbledore had been wrong in using the necklace to suppress the outbursts. Perhaps he needed some time without the necklace to learn how to deal with it properly.

Professor Dumbledore would never allow that.

"Well, he should!" James said angrily.

"Professor Dumbledore can't just think about Harry," Lily reasoned, "He has to worry about the other students too. Worrying about Harry is those two over there jobs," she finished nodding towards Remus and Sirius.

Would Sirius and Remus? They had disagreed with the necklace in the first place. *Focus on getting through the Tournament first.* Sirius had mentioned that he and Remus would help him after the Tournament was over. Now all he needed to do was last until June and he would be fine.

If only it was that easy.

The following morning Harry woke up to Professor Dumbledore, Sirius and Remus talking quietly at his bedside. He had instantly felt the necklace around his neck again and let out a sigh. He was now able to move his arms and reached up to touch it. It was cool and smooth to the touch but felt slightly larger than it originally had. Harry opened his eyes to see three blurry faces looking at him from their chairs to his right. Sunlight filled the room alerting Harry that it was indeed morning. Cautiously he moved his legs a little, relieved that he could in fact move them. It seemed that all his body needed was a night's rest.

"Good morning Harry," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "I trust you are feeling better." Harry nodded in response. "Remus and Sirius have voiced your concerns about your outbursts. I must admit that I never anticipated you to have two in such a short amount of time. The necklace you wore yesterday hadn't been prepared for such an overabundance of magic and overloaded. The necklace you are currently wearing can hold significantly more magic and is also charmed to alert me whenever it pulls magic from you, if that is all right with you of course."

Harry blinked a few times in order to process everything Professor Dumbledore had just told him. "Er—okay," he said hesitantly. "What about learning to control this? I know I have to wait until after the Tournament but do I have to wait until September since I can't work on it at home?"

Squinting, Harry could make out a thoughtful look on Professor Dumbledore's face. "You do have a point, Harry," he admitted. "It would be best for you to work on this during the summer when you are not surrounded by your classmates. Let me see what I can do about

the underage law. After all, considering what you've been doing the last two summers having a summer without magic would feel rather strange."

Lily raised an eyebrow as she eyed James superiorly. James ignored her.

Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet and moved closer so he was leaning over the teen. "You gave Madam Pomfrey quite a scare I'll have you know," he said pleasantly. "She could not understand how you could be radiating heat until Fred Weasley mentioned a heating charm that you had used last year during a Quidditch game. Rather ingenious on your part however, we believe that charm was the reason the Grindylows sought you out. They could feel the heat you were giving off."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Remus said grimly and Lily nodded.

"Typical," Harry muttered.

"Indeed," Professor Dumbledore said in an amused tone. "I should warn you, Harry. Madam Pomfrey insists you spend at least another day here and will not take no for an answer. She has some strange belief that you haven't been taking care of yourself and will collapse the moment you leave the hospital wing. Any idea why that would be, Harry?"

"Because she overreacts about everything?" Harry offered.

"Yes, she does Harry," James said in a suffering voice, "And she keeps muttering about Quidditch being a dangerous sport. Honestly I have no idea how anyone could think that!"

Remus and Lily stared at him and Lily tried to reason, "Hum, the bludgers."

"Nothing wrong with them," James said confused.

"You play it from enormous heights hanging only by a stick," Remus said with an "isn't this obvious tone".

"Perfectly safe," James said evenly.

"I give up," Lily cried, "Quidditch nut!"

"Honestly, sir, I'm fine. There is really nothing to worry about."

"I disagree, Harry," Professor Dumbledore countered. "I'm afraid I can't allow this to continue. I know you have quite a bit on your plate but you can't ignore what your body needs. You need to eat and rest, Harry."

"YES!" the four cried.

You need to take better care of yourself.

"YES!"

Your friends have mentioned you are always the last one to bed and the first one up in the morning. I have noticed you occasionally skipping meals. I understand the Tournament is stressful and I apologize that I couldn't prevent your participation but you can't work yourself into exhaustion because of it. To prevent matters from going out of control again, we—your guardians and I—have agreed that once a week you need to come here and be examined by Madam Pomfrey. If she does not believe you are taking adequate care of yourself, she will do it for you."

"Finally! Someone is taking some action. Though maybe he should have phrased it a little better," Sirius said.

"How so?" Lily asked.

"Well, he sounds like Harry is being a naughty boy and Harry was just trying to be ready to compete. He does have a three year gap with the other champions," James said.

"And if someone would know what a reprimand from being naughty sounds it's those two," Remus said nodding knowingly.

Harry stared at Professor Dumbledore completely horrified. Why was he getting an ultimatum? So what if he didn't sleep as many hours as everyone else or eat as much as Ron! What right did Dumbledore have? He was the one to force this Tournament on Harry in the first place! Harry slowly sat up and stared at Dumbledore angrily. "Let me get this straight," he said through his teeth. "You expect me to participate in this bloody Tournament but not do what I need to do in order to survive it? I am *three years* younger than everyone else! I have *three years* less knowledge! I never wanted to be a part of this!" Harry didn't notice the objects around them start to shake. He was too angry at Dumbledore to notice anything else. "You did! You decided not to fight against my involvement! Now suffer the consequences!"

"Told you he should have phrased it better," Sirius said in a singsong voice.

Windows shattered as Harry rolled over and buried his face in his pillow. His entire body was shaking uncontrollably. Remus and Sirius were immediately on their feet and at Harry's side, pushing Dumbledore out of the way. Remus was gently rubbing Harry's back while Sirius was muttering words into Harry's ear. Neither of them paid any attention to Dumbledore who quickly repaired all of the broken windows.

Remus looked directly at Professor Dumbledore with narrow eyes. He was angry and rightfully so. "I think you've done enough, *Headmaster*," he growled. "We would appreciate it if you would leave."

"Yes, *no one* messes with my cub! Not even the Supreme Mumgump!" Remus said crossed.

James launched himself at Remus hugging him, "I am so proud of you Moony! You finally stopped defending Dumbledore's every move!"

"Well, hum, yeah... er... he's not perfect," Remus said blushing.

Dumbledore let out a sigh and walked out of the hospital wing. Remus pulled out his wand and enlarged the bed Harry was lying in. He then sat down on the bed and returned to rubbing Harry's back. Sirius hurried around the bed and sat down with his back resting against the headboard as he started running his fingers through Harry's hair. Both of them looked up and each other for a moment before returning their gazes to the shaken teenager.

"It's okay Harry," Sirius said softly. "Dumbledore's gone now. It's just us."

Harry slowly pulled his head out of the pillow and turned his head towards Sirius' voice. "I'm sorry," he said in a wavering voice. "I didn't mean to do that. I—I just couldn't take it anymore. I can't be the person he wants me to be. I can't be perfect."

"Oh, Harry. No one expects you to be," Lily said sorrowfully.

Sirius grimace, "Actually, they do," she glared at him, "Not that he should be. But that's a fact. The Wizarding World expects their hero to be perfect. It's sad, but there's nothing we can do other than ignore it," he finished shrugging.

"You know Paddy," Remus said patting Sirius's shoulder, "Sometimes you astound me."

"I know. I am so smart," Sirius said puffing his chest.

"And then you go right back to where you started," Remus shook his head.

Sirius slid down on the bed and wrapped his arms around Harry so the teen was resting his head on Sirius' chest. "No one expects you to be perfect, Pronglet," he said sincerely.

"Contradicting yourself Paddy," James said arching his eyebrow. Sirius shrugged.

"Dumbledore's just worried about you, we all are. I'll admit I wasn't too pleased with the way Dumbledore told you. We just want you to take better care of yourself. Please do this for us, all right?"

"See, even old me knows that Dumbledore should have phrased it better. You okay Moony?" Sirius said turning to Remus who had just smacked his own head.

"When I need a muggle recorder I never have one!" Remus cried.

"Why would you need one?" James asked confused.

"Sirius just said he's old," Lily explained. James nodded then his face lit up in a smile.

"We could use a Pensive!"

Remus smiled, "Yes!"

"NO!" Sirius cried, "No one is going to use a Pensive. We will just forget my lapse in good judgment."

"Nah," James shook his head, "Not a chance. Pensive it is!"

Harry nodded slowly as he closed his eyes. He didn't like it but he would agree to weekly checkups to make Sirius and Remus feel better. "I'm sorry if I scared you," he said quietly. "I didn't think it would happen again."

"Again?" Remus asked instantly. "This has happened before?"

Harry nodded again but kept his eyes closed. He was starting to feel his exhaustion returning. He could only assume it was because of what had happened to the windows. "In Potions," Harry admitted. "Colin Creevey showed up to pull me out of class for the Wand Weighing. I was so frustrated with it all and the cauldrons started shaking. I've tried to keep my emotions under control since then but..."

Sirius tightened his arms around Harry. "Don't worry about it, kiddo," he said softly. "I can understand you being afraid of something like that happening again but keeping everything inside is not the solution. I think that was why this happened today *with* the necklace on. This wasn't a regular outburst, Harry. This was all of the pent up emotions you've been forcing yourself not to feel."

"Yep, never good to hold feelings in," James said knowingly.

"I have to agree," Sirius said, "But there is also no need to broadcast *all* your feelings *all* the time."

"Meaning?"

"That I don't need to know how much you love Lily's eyes, Lily's hair, Lily's toes, Lily's fingers, Lily's breath etc, etc, etc..." Sirius rolled his eyes and Remus continued for him.

"Lily's smile, Lily's frown-"

"Okay. I get it. You people obviously do not know what's good in life!" James said annoyed and didn't notice that Lily had gone as red as her hair.

"It may be easier not to deal with things, Harry, but in the long run suppressing emotions will only hurt more when they are forced to the surface," Remus added. "Is there anything you want to talk about with us? It would probably be better to get it off your chest now."

Harry shook his head. "I'm good," he said and he meant it. He felt more relaxed now than he had felt in a long time. Harry didn't know if it was because he had finally released some of his anger or if it was because he felt safe right now. All he knew was he liked this feeling. "I'm just tired," he added sleepily.

"I can imagine," Sirius said with a smile. "I should tell you, Percy Weasley was here for a while after you were brought up here. He wanted to make sure you were all right but he had to get back to work. Apparently his boss has been rather ill of late. Yeah right. That man has

never taken a day off in his life for something as minor as an illness. Barty Crouch is up to something."

"Now Sirius," Remus warned. "I'll admit Crouch's methods were harsh back in the day but it is possible that he's changed. He lost his wife and son because of it all."

"He did?" Lily asked shocked.

Harry partially opened his eyes and looked at Remus. "What happened to them?" he asked sounding half awake.

"Crouch's own son, Barty Crouch, Jr., was caught with a group of Death Eaters," Sirius answered for Remus. "He did give his son a trial but it was more for show than anything. He basically disowned the boy then sent him to Azkaban." Harry shivered at the thought of the wizarding prison. "The boy ended up dying a year later in prison. Crouch and his wife were allowed to see him before he died then she died a short time later because of her grief. Crouch lost everything. He was a shoe-in for Minister before the entire scandal. People didn't trust him anymore since he couldn't even keep his son on the right path. My being found innocent didn't help matters for him either. The only reason Crouch is still employed is because there's someone in the Ministry who pities him and everything he's lost."

Remus winced, "That must have been a blow. You build your career on catching Dark Wizards and it turns out your own son is one."

"Still, as a father he should have been trying to defend his son not chuck him in Azkaban. Even if the guy was guilty. He should have let someone else do it," James said horrified.

"Crouch was too ambitious," Lily said shaking her head, "Didn't you hear Sirius. He gave him a trial just for show. I bet he wanted to let everyone know he didn't spare even his own son. That's so horrible."

Harry covered his mouth to hide a yawn. "From the sounds of it he's paid for what he did to you, Midnight," he said as he tiredly rubbed his eyes. "He lost his family. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you two."

"You're not gonna!" Sirius cried fiercely.

Remus gently pulled Harry's hand away from his eyes with one hand while he brushed Harry's fringe off to the side with the other. "Back at you, cub," he said softly. "Get some sleep."

Poppy will have our heads if we keep you up any longer. We'll stay until you're feeling a little stronger, all right?"

Harry nodded as he closed his eyes and buried his face in his godfather's chest. He could hear Sirius' calming heartbeat lulling him to sleep. All of his worries from just a day ago seemed to vanish. He knew his guardians would do whatever was necessary to help him work everything out and that was all of the reassurance that Harry needed to know he was exactly where he wanted to be.

"James, what are you doing?" Sirius asked slowly. James had put his ear on Sirius's chest.

"I want to see if your heartbeat is calming!"

Lily and Remus rolled on the floor laughing.

True to their word Sirius and Remus were at Harry's bedside when he awoke in the late afternoon. As Harry sat up, Remus called Madam Pomfrey over for a checkup. Sirius handed over Harry's glasses allowing the teen to see everything in focus. He watched Madam Pomfrey wave her wand around before ordering Harry to drink two awful tasting potions. Harry cringed as they slid down his throat. Why did potions have to taste so bad?

Madam Pomfrey declared that Harry was making a swift recovery but would need to stay in the hospital wing for one more night in order to attend classes tomorrow. Harry tried to protest but Madam Pomfrey wouldn't listen. He felt better and knew staying in the hospital wing any longer was unnecessary but arguing with Pomfrey was just as pointless. The woman was impossibly stubborn.

Sirius and Remus stayed with Harry talking about nothing in particular until Ron and Hermione came to visit after classes. Hermione of course brought all of the schoolwork from the classes Harry missed much to Harry's annoyance. Ron and Hermione ate dinner with Harry in the hospital wing, filling Harry in on everything that had happened since the second task which wasn't much other than rumors to what had happened to him after he had been pulled back under. They ranged from Harry being attacked by the giant squid to fighting for his life against a creature only Hagrid could love.

It was all so ridiculous Harry had to laugh. It was amazing how out of control a simply Gindylow attack could become in only a few days. When Harry was finally released from the

hospital wing many of the teachers had to step in and send the pestering students away. Harry was healthy enough to attend classes but his ankles were still a little sore making walking long distances difficult for the next few days. He made a point to leave early from meals just to arrive on time to classes.

When Friday afternoon arrived, Harry couldn't wait for the weekend. All of the teachers had been extremely lenient with him concerning arriving at class on time and schoolwork giving Harry the feeling that Professor Dumbledore had something to do with it all. Harry knew he had been wrong to take his anger out on Dumbledore. It wasn't the old man's fault someone had gotten past his protections to enter Harry in the Tournament. These outbursts weren't Dumbledore's fault either. He knew he needed to apologize but it seemed that the Headmaster was doing whatever possible to avoid Harry. Harry didn't know whether to be grateful or scared by this. Dumbledore could just be giving Harry time to cool down or he could actually believe that Harry blamed him for everything.

"I think that it may be a mixture of both," Lily said, "Dumbledore must feel responsible for Harry being in this situation since it was his protection that was overridden."

"Shoddy protection," James mumbled.

With only one class remaining for the week, Harry, Ron and Hermione left lunch early for double Potions, walking at the normal slow pace. By the time they reached the classroom they noticed that there was a large crowd huddled by the door laughing and whispering. As they walked past, Harry saw Malfoy handing a magazine over to Pansy Parkinson. Whatever they were reading it wasn't good.

"Oh, great!" Sirius growled, "All we need Snape *and* Malfoy!"

"Serves the old fool right," Malfoy drawled. "My father always said Dumbledore was an idiot. No one ever seemed to believe him."

"That may be because your *father* is an idiot!" James huffed.

Harry bit his tongue and entered the classroom and sat down in his usual seat near the back of the dungeon. He could only assume that Rita Skeeter had published another article criticizing Professor Dumbledore. For some reason Rita Skeeter seemed to have it in for the Headmaster of Hogwarts which only made Harry feel worse. Dumbledore had more to worry about than the messed up life of a fourteen-year-old. Sitting there deep in thought Harry

finally realized that he didn't think of Professor Dumbledore as his Headmaster. He thought of the man as the grandfather he never had, the grandfather who had all the answers and solved all the problems.

The rest of the class filed in as Professor Snape started writing the ingredients for the day's potion on the board. Harry started pulling out the ingredients for the Wit-Sharpener Potion they would be brewing today. After he made certain everything was out, Harry started preparing the potion. Several of the Slytherin students were still whispering and snickering. Professor Snape ignored this of course and started hovering over Gryffindor students, taking points off wherever he could.

"Potter, move to the table in front of my desk," Professor Snape hissed as he passed Harry and Ron and continued walking towards the front of the room. "Merlin forbid you endanger your classmates in your 'fragile condition'."

"How rude," Lily huffed.

Several Slytherins snickered at the comment as Harry packed up his things and slowly walked to the designated table where Snape was waiting for him. He got back to work trying to ignore the whispers he knew were being directed at him. Why did Professor Snape always have to signal him out? What had he ever done to deserve this?

"You may have the sympathy of everyone now, Potter, but if I catch you sneaking into my office one more time—"

"Hey, Harry never sneaked into your office," Sirius cried outraged. "He should have! He should have put some dungbombs in your desk but he *didn't*!"

Harry quickly looked up at Snape in confusion. What in the world was the man talking about?

"I never broke into your office, sir," he said quietly. "I would never do that."

Professor Snape's eyes narrowed. "Don't you dare lie to me, Potter," he hissed. "Where would you get Gillyweed and the other ingredients except from my private stores?"

"Hum, the *store*," Remus said slowly.

Harry desperately tried to keep his anger under control. *This is all just a misunderstanding. It has to be.* "I bought it at Hogsmeade, sir," Harry said as calmly as he could. "I paid twelve sickles for it. I still have the receipt. I can show it to you if you'd like."

Snape looked at Harry for a moment but his eyes seemed different now. They weren't filled with hatred but something else. Harry couldn't figure out what it was. "Very well," Snape said at last. "I will hold punishment until you hand over your receipt. Mark my words, Potter, if you are lying to me I will know."

"Yes sir," Harry said and returned to smashing his scarab beetles. He suddenly stopped as he remembered Snape's entire accusation. "Sir, what were the other ingredients, if I may ask?"

Professor Snape stared at Harry skeptically for a moment before leaning closer so no one would hear. "Powdered horn of a Bicorn, shredded skin of a Boomslang," he said quietly. "Not commonly used items."

Harry knew those ingredients. He remembered when Hermione had stolen them in second year.

"Hermione!" James said impressed, "There is more to you than meets the eye!"

"When added with lacewing flies, leeches, fluxweed, and knotgrass it makes the Polyjuice Potion," he said more to himself than to Professor Snape. Suddenly it all made sense. Voldemort wouldn't send someone here unless they had a way to disguise themselves. What better way than the Polyjuice Potion? "The spy," he whispered in shock. "He's here. He's really here."

Snape grabbed Harry by the arm and pulled him towards his office. "Potter, my office, now," he hissed and pushed Harry towards the door. "If anyone moves you will have detention for a month."

"Oi! Unhand my son!" James cried.

Harry entered the dimly lit office and collapsed in the nearest chair. His ankles were starting to throb in pain. He couldn't believe he didn't think of something like that before. He knew what the Polyjuice Potion could do. All anyone needed was a few strands of hair and they could turn into anyone. They spy could be anyone and Harry would be none the wiser.

"But wouldn't someone notice?" Lily asked, "I mean, to impersonate someone twenty four- seven with people that know this person they are bound to make a mistake."

"Unless it's someone that isn't around all those people all the time," Remus said with a pensive expression.

"Trelawney. She never leaves her tower and all they'd have to do is act nutty," James said.

"Nah," Sirius shook his head, "What good is a spy that never leaves the Tower. I bet it's one of the foreign gerts. No one knows them."

"The people that came with them do," Remus reasoned, "The only other one that is unknown is Moody."

Sirius laughed, "Right, paranoid Moody being caught and impersonated. Yeah, because that would so happen!"

Lily and Remus shrugged but James was looking worried.

The Potions Master noticed Harry seemed to be in a daze and tilted the teen's face upwards so their eyes met. "Talk!" he ordered. "What 'spy' are you talking about? Who's here?"

Harry slowly blinked his fear filled eyes. "This summer I had a dream of Voldemort and Pettigrew," he said in a shaky voice. "Voldemort was telling Pettigrew about a faithful servant at Hogwarts so he could get me. He needs me for something, I think. That's really all I remember. When I woke up my scar hurt like it did during my first year; when he was here for the stone."

Professor Snape sneered at the teen. "Did it ever occur to you to tell someone about this?" he spat.

"Hey, he did tell Moony and Padfoot!" Lily cried outraged.

"I did," Harry said, confused that Professor Snape didn't know. "I told Professor Dumbledore, Sirius and Remus after I woke up. That was why Sirius and Remus were so upset about me being in the Tournament. They thought it had something to do with my dream."

Snape released Harry's chin and walked over to the fireplace. Harry looked up as Snape threw a fistful of glittering powder into the flames. "Headmaster!" Snape called into the fire. "A word is needed...now!"

"Such a polite person," Remus snorted.

Harry bowed his head and suppressed a groan. He really didn't like the tone Professor Snape was using and had a feeling that Professor Dumbledore was about to be on the receiving end of a few things he probably shouldn't be hearing. Snape showed no emotion but by how stiff he was standing Harry could tell he was upset. Harry couldn't help but feel guilty. It hadn't even crossed his mind that Dumbledore hadn't told anyone else about his dream.

Dumbledore clambered out of the fireplace and brushed the ash off of his robes. He took one look at the scene and let out a sigh. "Severus, I thought I made myself clear," Dumbledore said with a hint of warning in his voice.

"You did, Headmaster," Professor Snape said coolly. "What you neglected to mention was the presence of a spy for the Dark Lord here at Hogwarts. I had to have Potter put it together that the spy has been stealing ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion. How are we supposed to protect the boy if you don't tell us what we need to know?"

Professor Dumbledore glanced over at Harry before returning his gaze to Snape. "And have my staff accusing each other of being the spy?" he asked evenly. "Voldemort doesn't know Harry saw him discussing his plans with Peter and I would like to keep it that way. I did what I had to, Severus. We can discuss this more later. I do believe you have a class that is currently lacking supervision. I would like a word with Harry if you don't mind."

"Besides, how does he know Snape isn't the spy uh? He does have access to Polyjuice and all you have to do is act unpleasant towards everyone," James said.

"James," Lily started.

"You can't be a hundred percent sure he isn't," he cut her. She shrugged.

Professor Snape stormed out of the room without another word, his robes billowing behind him.

"How does he do that? It must have taken a lot of practice," Remus mused.

"Maybe he put a charm to have wind blowing up his arse all the time," Sirius suggested.

"Really, Sirius, that would be a waste of charm," Lily huffed, "It's in the stalk he does. You know how models have that weird way of walking that they have to practice. Snape must have stood in front of the mirror walking until he perfected his stalk."

"I like how you think Lily," James grinned.

As soon as the door closed again a tense silence filled the room. Harry bit his lip as he fidgeted in his seat. He knew he was in trouble. He knew he had just made things worse for the Headmaster. Staring at the floor, Harry waited for the inevitable scolding. The only thing was it never came.

Dumbledore pulled up a chair and sat down next to Harry. For a long moment nothing was said although both felt the need to say something, anything to break the silence. Professor Dumbledore finally reached out and rested a hand on Harry's shoulder. "This is not your fault, Harry," he said sincerely. "You had no way of knowing of what I had—or more precisely had not told the staff."

"Yah, exactly. Harry doesn't know how to read minds," James huffed crossing his arms.

"I'm sorry," Harry said; his voice barely above a whisper. "I just keep causing so much trouble."

"That couldn't be further from the truth, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said as he gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze. "I must repeat that none of this is your fault. I will admit I can only sympathize with what you are going through right now and since that is the case I may not handle everything correctly. I know it may have appeared I did nothing to get you out of the Tournament and I know you feel I am the one to force this pressure on you but I do not expect you to be perfect, Harry. No human can be. We all make mistakes, even me."

"They talked to you?" Harry asked nervously.

"You bet we did!" Sirius said forcefully.

"It was more like they talked *at* me," Dumbledore corrected. "Have you ever seen a werewolf when they believe a member of their pack is threatened?"

Lily shook her head.

Harry shook his head. "It can be quite frightening," the Headmaster confessed with a smile.

Remus blushed and duck his head but Sirius lifted it with a finger on Remus chin, "Don't be ashamed of standing up for those you love," he said scowling and James and Lily nodded.

"Both Sirius and Remus think of you as their son and will do what they feel is necessary to protect you, even from me."

Harry looked at Dumbledore in alarm. He never thought Sirius and Remus would go that far and actually threaten the Headmaster of Hogwarts. "I'm sorry sir," he said instantly. "I never should have said anything to them—"

"Yes you should!" James cried, "Harry, listen to me because I will tell you this only once. You will not withhold information from Padfoot and Moony no matter what you may think. You will always tell them when something is bothering you. Do I make myself clear?"

Silence.

"I'm sure he heard you," Sirius said softly patting James crossed arms.

"—nonsense Harry," Professor Dumbledore interrupted calmly. "You can't ignore the way you feel. If you can't talk to your guardians than whom can you talk to? I know you care for them as much as they care for you. I also know you would probably do the same thing if the situation was reversed."

Harry had to look away from the Headmaster's knowing gaze. He had to admit he would do anything if Sirius and Remus were in danger. It seemed strange to feel that way for people he had known for only a short matter of time. He had dreamed of people caring for years and now that his dream had come true Harry couldn't imagine his life any other way.

"I never expected you to push yourself this hard, Harry, although I probably should have," Dumbledore continued. "You have always been determined to figure out a mystery. I can only continue to apologize for the mistakes I have made and hope you will forgive me one day."

Harry rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses as he slowly shook his head. "Professor, I don't blame you," he said honestly. "I've been meaning to apologize for my behavior. I never should have taken my frustration out on you. You were right. I haven't been taking care of myself. I've been so caught up the Tournament, my schoolwork and learning to swim to worry about anything else."

Dumbledore let out a tired sigh. From the looks of it Remus wasn't the only person who had forgotten who Harry had grown up with. "I am so sorry, my boy," he said sounding old all of a sudden. "There are times when it seems impossible for you to have the past you've had with the fine young man you are turning out to be. You face challenges head on, rarely acting

someone your age normally would but years older. I can only assume that is a result of the years you spent with the Dursleys."

Harry nodded. With all of the chores he had and how harsh his relatives had been it was impossible to remotely enjoy his childhood. He had been more worried about receiving the next meal to even ponder on playtime. "When you are treated like a house elf there is little time to enjoy the pleasantries normally given to children," Harry muttered bitterly as his gaze fell to the floor.

Groans and muttered threats were heard from all four teenagers.

"What can I do to help you, Harry?" asked Professor Dumbledore. It was clear that Dumbledore was desperate to repair their once close relationship.

"Nothing," Harry said softly. "I have realized that I don't think of you as my Headmaster; I haven't for some time. Ever since last summer the majority of the staff has treated me differently than everyone else because they finally learned of something I had come to accept as normal: my family's hatred of me. Do you honestly think the Dursleys hid how much they despised me? The entire neighborhood knew. Some of the neighbors even encouraged it since I was such a 'delinquent'. This has happened in other families and is probably happening to other students in this very school." He looked over at Dumbledore blue eyes that were oddly vacant of any twinkle. Harry's face displayed no emotion but there was plenty of pain in his eyes from the memories of everything that happened at Number 4, Privet Drive. "Sirius rescued me from my prison," he said evenly. "Who is there to rescue them? Does anyone care? Would anyone have cared if I hadn't been the-boy-who-lived?"

"Of course they would," Remus said firmly, "It's just that people don't want to see bad things so they have a tendency to overlook the signs. That's why you have to ask for help. Or if you know someone that you suspect is being abused you have to tell someone."

He and James were looking straight at Sirius.

"What?"

James sighed, "That goes for you too Padfoot."

"My situation was never as bad as Harry's. My parents never hit me."

"Verbal abuse can do as much damage as physical. Sometimes even more because people can't see the bruises and therefore it's more difficult to be figured out," Lily explained. "For instance, I never dreamed that you didn't have a perfect life until James told me today."

Sirius just shrugged. He'd always known he was a disappointment to his family. Even before he got that Howler in the Great Hall for being sorted into Gryffindor. He could relate to Harry about not thinking you were worth loving. He vowed to make sure he made Harry feel very much loved.

Dumbledore winced at the comment. "Harry—"

"—forget it," Harry said as he stood up and stepped out of Dumbledore's reach, ignoring the stinging pain from his ankles. His hands were clenched into fists as he desperately tried to push back the frustration he could feel rising. He couldn't get emotional now. He couldn't let it happen again. "This has to stop, sir. I can't continue to think of you as a grandfather with all the answers. I deny whenever anyone claims I am given special treatment but I know that's not true. Professor McGonagall, Hagrid, Professor Sprout, Professor Flitwick and you treat me differently. It isn't fair to everyone else."

"Is anything about your life fair, Harry?" Professor Dumbledore asked patiently.

"No!" Lily cried, "And I think that after all you went through you deserve a little special treatment," she huffed.

"What is this really about?"

Harry looked over his shoulder at the Headmaster. What was this really about? "I need things to go back to the way they were," he admitted. "You saw what I did in the hospital wing. I can't afford to get angry any more. I can't...I can't allow myself to feel..."

"HARRY JAMES POTTER! DON'T THINK SOMETHING AS STUPID AS THAT!" James cried angry.

Dumbledore was instantly on his feet and within two strides was at Harry's side, pulling the teen into an embrace. "Don't you even think that for a moment," he said firmly. "I know you're frightened, Harry, but you can't allow your fear to push you away from those who care. We *will* help you through this. I give you my word."

Harry didn't return the embrace. He knew he needed to pull away and keep his distance but his body seemed to refuse to move. He needed Dumbledore to only be his Headmaster again.

It had been so much easier when he only had himself to blame for everything. He needed to go back to that for everyone else's safety. Why couldn't Professor Dumbledore see that?

"Because, unlike you Dumbledore knows this is not your fault," Remus growled and took a piece of parchment from his pocket and a self inking quill. "Must have talk with Harry about his overwhelming guilt," he wrote and put the paper back in his pocket. James just shook his head at his friend's note taking habit.

The next day was a Hogsmeade visit but Harry elected to stay back. He hadn't even gotten out of bed before Ron and Hermione reluctantly left without him since Harry convinced him he would probably be in bed for most of the day anyways. Dobby popped in a few times with cold compresses for his ankles while Harry worked on schoolwork since Harry needed to have gaps between the times he iced his ankles. It was painfully boring but he figured the sooner his ankles healed completely the better.

Dobby had also brought Harry enough food to feed a small army or maybe just Ron.

"Or Padfoot," James told Lily knowingly. Sirius ignored this and kept reading.

Harry ate what he could, knowing he would be having his first checkup in a few days. By mid-afternoon Harry had completed the majority of his work and crawled back under the covers. His feet were propped up with the cold compresses wrapped around them making it difficult for Harry to lie down any other way than on his back. He had nearly fallen back asleep when he heard a *pop* then felt someone checking the cold compresses before tucking him in. He knew it was Dobby.

The sound of the door opening followed by two people entering made Harry want to groan in frustration. Just when he was about to fall asleep Ron and Hermione had to return. "Who are you?" Ron asked curiously.

"Dobby, sir," Dobby said quietly. "Dobby is making sure Mr. Harry Potter's feet are healing. Dobby has been helping Mr. Harry Potter all day. Mr. Harry Potter is very kind wizard, much better than old family. Many elves want to help Mr. Harry Potter but Mr. Harry Potter calls for Dobby so Dobby is here."

"You seem to care a lot about Harry," Hermione said gently. "How well do you know him?"

"Mr. Harry Potter free Dobby from old family," Dobby said happily. "Mr. Harry Potter visit Dobby and other elves many times when Mr. Harry Potter's wolf and dog were here. Mr. Harry Potter happy with Mr. Harry Potter's wolf and dog. Mr. Harry Potter not happy any more."

"Then his wolf and dog should get their butts back there," Lily scolded.

"I resent being called wolf," Remus said and looked at Sirius.

"What? I *am* a dog!"

"Why would you think that?" Ron asked in confusion.

"Dobby can not say," Dobby said nervously. "Headmaster Dumbledore tells Dobby to help Mr. Harry Potter when Mr. Harry Potter needs help. Dobby is Mr. Harry Potter's elf. Dobby can not speak ill of Mr. Harry Potter. Dobby would punish himself for hours of Dobby spoke ill of Mr. Harry Potter."

"Harry wouldn't want you to do that, Dobby," Hermione said uncomfortably.

"No he wouldn't," Lily nodded.

"Dobby knows this," Dobby said uneasily. "Mr. Harry Potter is kind and forgiving to all house elves. It is an honor for Dobby to help Mr. Harry Potter so Dobby must punish himself when Dobby is bad. Mr. Harry Potter doesn't like it when Dobby punishes himself. Mr. Harry Potter has even ordered Dobby to not punish himself." Dobby moved over to the head of the bed and smoothed out the covers. "Mr. Harry Potter needs his rest. Mr. Harry Potter work hard all day after Mr. Harry Potter's friends leave him."

"You know," James said fondly, "I like Dobby and how he cares for Harry, but that Mr. Harry Potter thing does get annoying," he finished rolling his eyes.

It almost sounded like Dobby was accusing Ron and Hermione of abandoning Harry but he vanished with a *pop* before Ron or Hermione could say anything. "Come on Ron," Hermione said softly. "Dobby's right. Harry needs to rest. He's deserved some peace and quiet."

They left the room allowing Harry to finally open his eyes. He knew he would have to talk to Dobby about his protective nature. He had tried to convince Dobby that they were friends but Dobby wouldn't listen. Dobby had been horrified by the suggestion making it the last time

Harry had brought the idea up. Harry still thought of Dobby as a friend and that was what mattered.

Harry did manage to fall asleep only to be woken by Dobby, Ron and Hermione for dinner. They ate in the dorm room much to their enjoyment. Dobby provided whatever they wanted which was more to Ron's benefit than anything. Ron could out-eat most of the Gryffindors any day of the week. As Harry and Hermione finished, they simply sat on the bed and tried to focus on anything than watching Ron eat. It could be quite repulsing after a while.

The main discussion that night had been the article the Slytherins had been reading before Potions. Apparently Rita Skeeter was continuing on her mission to discredit Professor Dumbledore. She blamed everything that had gone wrong in the Tournament (especially the involvement of a fourteen-year-old and the injuries he sustained during the second task) on Dumbledore's 'incompetence'. Harry had to wince in regret after hearing this since he had basically done the exact same thing only a week ago. He made a mental note to have another talk with Professor Dumbledore. He could only imagine what the Headmaster was going through.

For the rest of the weekend Harry stayed in the dorm, only leaving when he absolutely had to. Dean, Seamus and Neville had quite a shock the first time they saw Dobby appear but quickly grew accustomed to seeing the house elf pop in every few hours to check on Harry. Once Harry had finished his school work he had started reading ahead in his books since there was nothing else really to do other than have Ron beat him at chess. By the time Monday arrived walking was much easier for Harry. He only felt a dull ache if he was on his feet for a long period of time.

Madam Pomfrey had been startled to find Harry in better condition during his checkup but didn't hesitate in reminding Harry that he still needed to gain more weight. Harry simply rolled his eyes in annoyance. Madam Pomfrey had been telling him that for years. The weekly checkups continued until Easter when Madam Pomfrey relented on the checkups to be once every other week. It wasn't exactly what Harry wanted but it was a start.

"You just do what Madam Pomfrey says Harry James Potter," Lily said sternly.

Since Harry had no knowledge of what the third task may be he was left only with his schoolwork. The fourth year students were still receiving quite a bit but it was nothing compared to over Christmas holidays when Harry had schoolwork and the clue for the second task to worry about. The lack of worry was a welcomed feeling for Harry unfortunately it

wasn't meant to last. In the last week of May, Harry was cornered by Professor McGonagall who informed him to be at the Quidditch pitch and nine o'clock that night to be told about the third task.

That night Harry met up with Cedric and walked towards the pitch. They talked about nothing in particular until they reached the Quidditch stadium and stopped in their tracks, staring at the pitch in shock. Their once smooth and clean cut pitch was now full of long, waist-high walls of green that went in various directions. It almost looked like a maze.

"*What?*" James cried, "NOOOOOOOO! My pitch! My beautiful, beautiful pitch!"

"Calm down James. It's just a Quidditch Pitch," Lily said softly in what she thought was a soothing tone. James stared at her for an instance then started shaking his head, rocking back and forward and moaning, "No, my pitch!"

"Wrong thing to say Lily," Remus said rubbing James's back.

Harry and Cedric met up with Fleur and Viktor who were already in the middle of the 'maze' with Ludo Bagman. "Good evening," Bagman said cheerfully. "Right to business, the third task is quite simple to explain. In the center of this maze once it is fully grown will be the Triwizard Cup. The first champion to touch it will receive full marks. There will be obstacles provided by Hagrid

"Provided by whom?" Lily asked shocked.

"Hagrid," Sirius said faintly.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!" the four cried.

and some of the other teachers that you will have to pass but nothing too dangerous.

"Have you *met* Hagrid?" Remus cried angry.

"I think Bagman received too many bludgers to the head," James growled.

The champion who is leading in points—" Bagman turned to Harry, "—will enter first followed by Mr. Diggory, then Mr. Krum and finally Miss Delacour. All of you will enter from different spots in the maze to ensure you all have a fighting chance. It should be fun, don't you think?"

"No," Sirius said annoyed.

The three male champions shared a look before returning their attention back to Ludo Bagman. Harry and Cedric personally know of Hagrid's love for dangerous creatures and Viktor had heard plenty from Harry. *Well, at least I won't have to face a Basilisk.* The third task also wasn't until June which gave Harry time to learn as much as he could to defend himself.

"If there are no questions I suggest we head back to the castle," Bagman said happily.

Harry moved to follow Bagman but felt a hand on his arm. Looking up, Harry saw Viktor Krum with a nervous look on his face. Obviously the Bulgarian had something on his mind. "Something wrong, Viktor?" Harry asked curiously.

"I need to speak with you," Viktor said softly.

"Harry?" Cedric called, noticing Harry wasn't following. "Are you coming?"

"I'll just be a minute," Harry said then turned to Viktor. "What's on your mind?"

"Shall we talk?" Viktor asked then smiled when Harry nodded. They left the stadium and walked towards the Forest in silence. It was clear that Viktor didn't want to risk anyone overhearing them. This made Harry a little uneasy. What in the world could Viktor possibly want to talk to him about? "I am curious," Viktor said at last. "Is there anything between you and Her'mion'e?"

The four burst out laughing.

Sirius wiped tears, "Oh, that was a good joke."

That had been the last thing Harry had expecting to hear. "Excuse me?" he asked in confusion. Apparently Viktor was more interested in Hermione than he originally thought. *I guess I'm not the only one keeping secrets this year.*

"Her'mion'e talks about you a lot so I was wondering if you two were serious," Viktor clarified.

"Nope, they're Harry and Hermione," Sirius said.

"That got old even before you were born Padfoot," Remus groaned.

Harry held back a grin. If Sirius could see him now.

"Oh, Harry. I so can! Well not exactly see, but read."

"Viktor, I love Hermione," he said and noticed how Viktor's face fell. "She's my best friend—" Viktor's face changed to a look of confusion. "—she was one of my first friends and is like a member of my family. I would do anything for her." Harry enfolded his arms across his chest as his eyes narrowed at Viktor. "I would also do everything in my power to defend her, especially against anyone who would hurt her." They stared at each other for a moment before Harry grinned at the Bulgarian. "Viktor, I just want Hermione to be happy," Harry said sincerely. "If she's happy with you then I'm happy for the two of you."

Viktor smiled, appearing to be relieved. "I am glad," he said. "I would hate—"

Harry noticed something moving behind Krum in the Forest and quickly pulled Viktor around with his left hand while flicking his right wrist and grabbing his wand. "Slowly back away," he said quietly to Viktor as he took a step back. Fighting one of the many creatures in the Forest wasn't something Harry really wanted to do tonight.

"Excuse me? Harry, Krum is older than you," Remus said, "It's supposed to be the other way around. *He* protecting *you*. GET BEHIND HIM!"

Everything Sirius and Remus had taught him flashed through his mind at an amazing speed. He knew he needed to get away from the threat but he needed to do it gradually. Many creatures would attack him if he ran. Harry also knew he couldn't take his eyes off of the danger in case it waned to strike. *Never turn your back on an opponent. Never give them the chance to attack.*

The only problem was the being making the noise wasn't some vicious animal but a man who appeared to be drunk. Harry glanced over at Viktor in confusion before looking back at the man and realized it was Mr. Crouch. He looked horrible. He looked like he had been in the forest for days. His robes were ripped and stained with blood, there were scratches on his face and his usual neat hair definitely needed a washing. Cautiously Harry took a step forward and could hear Mr. Crouch muttering about Weatherby, Dumbledore and Durmstrang. He sounded like he was out of his mind.

"Crouch? Drunk? I don't think so?" Lily said skeptically.

"Harry, what are you doing?" Viktor whispered.

"Yes, what?" James shrieked.

"Mr. Crouch?" Harry asked hesitantly as he took another step towards the babbling man. "Mr. Crouch, are you all right?"

"...send owls to Karkaroff and Madame Maxime, Weatherby," Mr. Crouch continued saying, ignoring Harry's questions. "We need to have the same number of students from each school...will you do that Weatherby?" Crouch suddenly fell to his knees.

Harry hurried to his side. "Mr. Crouch!" he shouted. "What's wrong? What happened to you?" There was no answer. Harry noticed Mr. Crouch's eyes were acting funny. It was almost like the man was on the verge of passing out but couldn't for some reason. Knowing that the man needed help, Harry turned to the Bulgarian champion. "Viktor, run to the castle as fast as you can. Find a teacher, any teacher. Mr. Crouch needs a healer. Tell them I'm out here. That should be enough for them."

"And leave you alone?" Lily cried.

Viktor looked skeptical. "Harry, are you sure?" he asked.

"Dumbledore!" Mr. Crouch cried as he grabbed Harry's arm. "I...need to...see...Dumbledore..."

"GO!" Harry shouted to Viktor and watched the eighteen-year-old run towards the castle

"No Victor! Come back!" Sirius yelled.

for a moment before returning his attention back to Mr. Crouch. "Help is on the way, Mr. Crouch. Dumbledore's coming."

"...stupid...I've been...so stupid," Mr. Crouch said weakly. "I...did it for...her...but...I couldn't...control him."

"Couldn't control who? What did you do?" James asked.

Harry honestly didn't know what to do. He knew he couldn't allow Mr. Crouch to become upset no matter what. He needed to keep the man calm. Hopefully Viktor wouldn't be long. Being stuck out by the Forest with a man who lost his mind was a little on the creepy side. Mr.

Crouch was now a liability. He would have to protect the man as well as himself if any creature were to see them.

"...my fault," Crouch continued muttering helplessly. "It's all...my fault...I must...warn Dumbledore...Bertha dead...my son...my fault...Harry Potter...the Dark Lord...must tell...Dumbledore..."

Harry's eyes widened in alarm. Voldemort? *Hurry up Viktor!* He reached out to touch Crouch's shoulder when his head screamed in warning. Without a second thought, Harry tackled Mr. Crouch as a flash of light flew just above him. They were being attacked. Pointing his wand at Crouch, Harry muttered a "*Stupefy*" before hurrying to his knees. He kept one hand on Mr. Crouch's chest to serve as reassurance that the man was still there.

"Harry, protect yourself! Stupefy whoever is attacking not Crouch!" Sirius yelled.

A flash of red light shot out of the forest flying directly at Harry. Reflexes taking over, Harry cast a strong defensive shield that absorbed the spell. Knowing he was at a disadvantage, Harry looked around and Hagrid's hut. He quickly fired off red sparks toward it as a call for help. *Please be there Hagrid*, Harry silently pleaded. *I need help.*

"Hagrid RUN!" Lily begged.

Luckily Hagrid was in his hut and came running out just as another spell came out of the forest towards Harry and Mr. Crouch. Harry fell to the ground as the spell once again flew above them. "Harry!" Hagrid shouted as ran towards the two.

Harry looked up as Hagrid reached him, pulling the teen to his feet with one movement. Hagrid gave Harry a quick look over before pushing him behind his large body, shielding the boy from any danger. "Mr. Crouch needs help," Harry said quickly. "I don't know who's out there—"

"Oh, thank you Hagrid," Lily sighed relieved.

Hagrid instantly looked over at the forest as he grabbed Mr. Crouch by the robes. "Back up Harry," he said firmly as he stood up and started backing away, dragging Mr. Crouch with him. "Stay b'hind me no matter what. Understan'?"

"Yeah," Harry said nervously as he started to walk backwards. Looking around Hagrid's large body, Harry noticed another flash of red light and ran around Hagrid before casting another defensive shield with as much power as he could. "Hagrid move!" He heard Hagrid moving faster as he again started walking backwards while trying to keep the shield up. His breathing quickened while he started to sweat. He could feel his strength leaving as he staggered, nearly tripping over his own feet.

"The shield is draining. He shouldn't have cast it. It would take more than a stunner to knock out Hagrid," Remus said knowingly.

A flash of red light flew past his head towards the forest. Harry looked over his shoulder to see Professor Dumbledore running towards him with Professor Snape and Viktor. He couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief. Returning his attention to the forest, Harry waited until he felt a hand on his shoulder before lowering his wand and nearly collapsing back against the body behind him.

"Hagrid, take Barty to the hospital wing," Professor Dumbledore ordered as he sank to his knees and wrapped an arm around Harry. Hagrid left, carrying the unconscious Mr. Crouch without another word. "Viktor, please go back to the castle for your own safety," Dumbledore continued as he stood up with Harry in his arms. "Severus, I need you to round up the teachers. We must search the forest as quickly as possible."

Harry let out an exhausted groan. He still had his wand clutched firmly in his hand as his head rested against something firm. It felt like someone was carrying him and moving very quickly. His head felt so cloudy. Sounds seemed to muddle together. Someone was speaking but he couldn't make out what they were saying. Harry tried to pull himself out of the sea of confusion he was currently in but wasn't having much success.

He was vaguely aware of something being poured down his throat before complete alertness returned. His eyes opened completely as he looked around only to see that he was in the hospital wing and being lowered onto a bed by Professor Dumbledore. Harry shook the remaining murkiness out of his head before looking around and seeing Mr. Crouch lying on a nearby bed appearing to be in a deep sleep.

"Is he all right?" Harry asked nervously as he sat up on the bed. "I had to stun him so he didn't run away or anything."

"Madam Pomfrey is doing everything she can, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said evenly. "May I ask what were you thinking when you sent Viktor to the castle instead of coming yourself?"

"Yes! What?" James said angry, "You are so grounded young man!"

You know Hogwarts better than he does. You could have found someone a lot sooner."

Harry's gaze fell as he shrugged. Dumbledore's tone was enough for Harry to know he was in trouble. "I didn't think it was fair to leave him with someone who wasn't entirely there," Harry said softly. "Viktor doesn't know Mr. Crouch at all. Sirius and Remus have told me enough about him that I figured I could maybe try to help him."

Dumbledore rested a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You took a large risk tonight, Harry," he said, "and I am proud of you. When you realized you were in danger you let Hagrid know you needed him. That quick thinking saved you and Mr. Crouch from whoever wanted to cause you harm. However, until the grounds and the castle are searched completely I must insist you spend the night in my guest quarters for your own safety."

"But what about Mr. Crouch?" asked Harry as he looked up at the Headmaster. "What if they weren't after me this time? Mr. Crouch was talking about how it was his fault, Voldemort and me. He may know something someone didn't want him to repeat."

"Let Dumbledore deal with Crouch," Remus cried exasperated.

Professor Dumbledore looked at Harry in the eyes for a long moment before glancing over at Mr. Crouch. "That may be true," he admitted then returned his gaze to Harry. "I will secure the hospital wing for the night to protect Mr. Crouch but I still want you in my guest quarters. It's certainly the last place anyone would look for you."

Harry had to admit Dumbledore did have a point. No one would look for him there because no one other than the teachers knew where it was. Looking around again, Harry noticed that no one else was in the hospital wing. "Is Viktor okay?" he asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "Viktor is fine," he said pleasantly. "Professor Karkaroff retrieved him not too long ago. Now if you're feeling up to it, I'll take you to your quarters for the night before joining the rest of the staff in their search."

Harry followed Professor Dumbledore out of the hospital wing and waited while Dumbledore cast a few protection charms on the hospital wing. Once that was complete, Harry walked with the Headmaster to the entrance to his office, through his office and to the sleeping chambers. Harry wasn't surprised to see a pair of pajamas waiting for him on the bed. He bid Dumbledore goodnight then changed and crawled into bed. Staring at the ceiling, Harry mentally went over everything that happened. What had happened to Mr. Crouch, someone who was supposedly ill? This entire school year was just one mystery after another. *At least one thing never changes.*

"Well, it should," Sirius huffed and crossed his arms.

Chapter 17

Secrets

The room was barely lit at all but there wasn't much to see anyways. The room was dirty and rundown. There was something familiar about this room, almost like a forgotten dream or memory. He had been here before, Harry was certain of it.

Suddenly Sirius flipped back through the pages and read the previous chapter.

"Hum, Sirius, the story..." Remus said pleasantly.

"Harry was sleeping in Dumbledore's Quarters. What's he doing in a barely lit, dirty and rundown room?" Sirius asked pointing at the last paragraph of the last chapter. The other three shrugged.

"Keep reading so we find out," Lily said.

A man wearing a black cloak that hid his features entered the room. He was fidgeting nervously as he paced back and forth, muttering to himself. Looking at his hands, Harry noticed there were only nine fingers in total. It was Peter Pettigrew!

"What's he doing there?" James yelled.

"I think I know," Remus said biting his lips, "At least I hope I do and Harry isn't actually with Wormtail."

"You think he's having another dream?" Lily said worried. Remus nodded.

There was an armchair facing the fireplace. A large snake was curled up by it, hissing softly. Harry didn't know why but he needed to stay far away from that chair and the snake. Something about it just sent chills down his spine. Returning his attention to Pettigrew, Harry couldn't help but notice that the man was doing his best to keep his distance from the chair and snake.

"Afraid of your master Peter?" James sneered.

"How do you know that's Voldemort?" Sirius asked.

"Gut feeling," was the answer.

"Stop that infernal pacing, Wormtail," a cold, high-pitched voice hissed. "I have told you I won't kill you...yet."

"That must be so comforting," Remus said dryly.

Pettigrew whimpered in fear. That clearly wasn't what he had been hoping to hear but he stopped pacing and stood by the door still fidgeting nervously. The plump man was always high-strung but this was different. Something bad for Pettigrew had happened to make him this nervous and his companion short-tempered. The question was what could it possibly be?

The answer came as the front door opened quickly followed by the most unlikely of people entering. *Professor Moody! What's he doing here?!?* Moody glared at Pettigrew before he walked to the chair and knelt, bowing his head in the process. "My Lord, I tried to fix Pettigrew's mistake," Moody growled. "I tried to recapture my father but Potter prevented it."

"What?" Sirius cried.

"Moody a Death Eater?" Lily said disbelievingly.

James grimaced, "That's not Moody. Told you he was acting strange. He's a Death Eater on Polyjuice and I have a feeling I know which. Just don't know how."

Father? My Lord? Harry's eyes widened in alarm. Moody was talking to Voldemort!

"And how could a mere child prevent you from carrying out your orders?" Voldemort hissed. "Harry Potter should have been no match for you, Barty Crouch, Jr., especially with that eye you have."

"Barty Crouch Jr.?" Sirius asked shocked ogling the book, "Wasn't he dead?"

"I guess you're not the only one that escaped Azkaban Paddy," Remus said grimly.

"But how? He's dead," Lily asked.

"Didn't he get a visit from his parents? Maybe one of them switched with them. Maybe the mother. Didn't they say she died not long after? That would be the perfect cover. All they had to do is take Polyjuice and he is obviously fond of it," James muttered at the end.

"His mother must have loved him an awful lot," Lily said.

"You gave your life for Harry Lily," James said sadly, "She must have done the same for her son. Even if he is a filthy Death Eater."

Moody glanced over at Pettigrew hatefully before returning his gaze to the floor. "Potter found my father and sent one of the other champions for help," he growled. "I tried to stun him but he cast a powerful shield to absorb the spell. I've never seen anything like it before. Potter then alerted Hagrid. The oaf used his body to protect the boy until the muggle-loving fool Dumbledore arrived. There was nothing I could do. I had to leave."

"You have failed me Crouch," Voldemort spat. "You have been out of practice for too long to be defeated by a fourteen-year-old boy. *Crucio!*"

They all cringed.

"I really can't understand why people follow Voldemort with the way he treats them," Lily said disgusted.

Moody screamed in pain as he withered on the ground. Harry wanted to cover his ears but the searing pain that erupted from his scar stopped him from making any movement. Pain filled his body as he screamed along with Moody. Harry knew Voldemort would hear him and know he was there but he couldn't help it. There was so much pain.

"No! He's feeling it! STOP THAT!" James cried desperately.

As quickly as the pain came it vanished. Harry fell to his knees as he slowly looked up to a wand moving from pointing at Moody to Pettigrew. *Oh no! Not again!* Voldemort shouted *Crucio* again and this time Pettigrew fell to the floor in pain as pain once again flared from the scar on Harry's forehead. Both Harry and Pettigrew screamed in pain for what felt like forever.

Lily was sobbing openly. James kept tugging his hair almost ripping it off. Remus was biting his nails and Sirius hands were shaking as he kept reading in a wavering voice.

When it finally ended neither Harry nor Pettigrew could move. "Your incompetence has risked that muggle-loving fool discovering my plans, Wormtail," Voldemort hissed. "If your blunder has cost me Harry Potter one Cruciatus curse will be the least of your worries. It seems that we will need to contact someone else. This is your last chance, Wormtail. You better not mess this up."

"Harry! Harry, wake up! Please wake up!"

"Yes, please," Lily sobbed.

Opening his eyes, Harry found himself lying in a bed with numerous blurry faces looking down at him. His scar was still burning in pain and his body was shaking uncontrollably. Someone lifted his upper body off the bed as they sat down beside him. His head rested against their chest as a hand started to rub his back in a soothing manner. Harry could only let out a moan as his eyes closed. He didn't think he would be able to move on his own for quite some time.

"What was that?" a voice that sounded a lot like Professor McGonagall asked.

"It must have been another vision," answered a voice that sounded like Remus. "He had one this summer but it wasn't nearly this bad."

Harry groaned as he tried to turn his head. A vision? It had only been a dream? Harry didn't know whether to be relieved or more panicked. It felt so real. Also, Remus was here? What was he doing at Hogwarts? Was Sirius here too? "Moony?" Harry asked in a raspy voice.

"Of course I am! I always come when you need," Remus said.

"We know that," James said, "But how *did* you know to come?"

Remus sat down on the edge of the bed and gently squeezed Harry's arm. "Right here, cub," he said gently. "Padfoot's here too. Madam Pomfrey should be here soon. Are you still in a lot of pain?"

Harry partially opened his eyes and looked at Remus' blurry face. "Just my scar," he said tiredly. He suddenly remembered his dream and tried to move only to have the arms wrapped around him hold him in place. After a minute he gave up resisting and just remained where he was. "Moody," he said as he fought to stay awake. "The spy is Professor Moody."

Professor McGonagall gasped as the arms around Harry tightened. "Harry, that's not possible," Remus said carefully. "Alastor Moody would never join Voldemort. Are you sure that's who you saw?"

"Yes! What do you think? Harry wouldn't lie!" Remus said angry. The other three stared at him and Sirius said patting his arm in a calming gesture:

"Moony, that's you you're yelling at."

Remus glared at him.

Although his body had finally stopped shaking Harry was still having difficulty moving which was really starting to get annoying. "I saw him but...Voldemort called him Barty Crouch, Jr.," Harry said unable to hide his confusion from his voice. "I thought he died."

"Unless someone took his place in Azkaban he did die," Sirius said bluntly. Silence filled the room causing Sirius to let out a scoff. "I was kidding! Who in their right mind would do something like that?"

Harry didn't have to think long on that question. "I would," he admitted sleepily. "If someone sent you or Moony there, I'd take your place, Midnight."

"Oh Harry, that's so sweet. But don't you dare!" Sirius said sternly.

"I'd hate to admit it but Harry does have a point," Remus said softly as he brushed Harry's hair out of the teen's eyes. "Any parent would take the place of their child. Wouldn't you take Harry's place, Padfoot?"

Sirius let out a sigh. "In a heartbeat," he agreed.

Lily hugged Sirius, "Thank you Padfoot."

Sirius patted her and said, "Knew I'd eventually grow on you."

Madam Pomfrey came running in a moment later and forced everyone but Harry to leave. Harry groaned in protest as his godfather lowered him back on the bed and left with everyone else. He was barely aware of the tests Madam Pomfrey ran before she helped him swallow several potions. His headache had lessened considerably and he was able to move his limbs but he was also extremely tired. Satisfied that she had done all she can, Madam Pomfrey let the adults re-enter the room.

Sirius and Remus hurried back to Harry's side while Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall remained in the doorway simply taking in the scene before them. Each Marauder sat down on opposite sides of the bed. Sirius was running one hand through Harry's hair, an action that seemed to comfort the teen, while Remus was making sure Harry was comfortable. It seemed criminal to interrupt a family moment such as this but it had to be done.

"No it hasn't," James crossed his arms, "Let them be!"

"Do you feel up to a few questions, Harry?" Professor Dumbledore asked.

Sirius looked over his shoulder at the Headmaster appearing to be ready to object but only let out a sigh and looked back at Harry. "Just say the word, Pronglet, and we'll kick them out of here," he said softly. "We can do this in the morning."

James laughed.

"Prongs, this isn't a laughing matter."

"I just got a mental picture of you kicking Dumbledore."

Harry shook his head slowly. He knew he needed to get this over with so there was no point in delaying it. "I'm okay," he said but could see that neither man believed him. "I'm just tired and sore. I think two Cruciatus curses is my limit." It was a bad joke and the judging from the sharp intakes of breath he heard Harry knew it was probably the last thing he should have said.

"Not a very bright moment, no," Remus said shaking his head.

"Why don't you start from the beginning, Harry," Professor Dumbledore proposed as he entered the room. "Whatever you can tell us will help."

Harry closed his eyes and relayed his dream. He managed to make it until Voldemort had cast the first Cruciatus curse before he faltered. He could still remember the pain he felt. With a shaky voice he continued speaking, ignoring the tightening grips his guardians were giving his hands. By the time he had finished Sirius pulled Harry into a fierce embrace. Harry was caught by surprise at first but relaxed in his godfather's arms. He was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to sleep.

Sleep came.

"Then sleep," James said patting the book and humming a lullaby. The other three looked at him strangely.

Harry awoke the following morning to find his guardians asleep in chairs at his bedside. Sitting up, Harry found his glasses on the bedside table allowing him to see clearly. He crawled out of bed as quietly as possible, grabbed the set of clothes set out for him and

entered the adjoining bathroom. After cleaning up and changing, Harry walked back into the bedroom and saw that his guardians hadn't moved. He was uncertain of what to do. Should he wait for his guardians to wake or should he leave? He did have classes today and knew that Ron and Hermione were probably wondering where he was.

But I'll worry Sirius and Remus if I leave.

The decision was made for Harry when the door slowly opened and Professor Dumbledore poked his head in. Seeing Harry dressed, he motioned for the teen to follow him and led the way to his office. As he entered, Harry suddenly felt nervous when he saw Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape sitting in front of Dumbledore's desk. He remembered the 'scolding' he had received from Professor Dumbledore last night and couldn't help but fear that had only been the beginning.

Dumbledore conjured a chair between Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall as he walked over to his desk and sat down. "Please have a seat, Harry," he said pleasantly. "There are a few things we need to discuss." Harry silently obeyed and sat down, keeping his gaze on the floor. "You're not in trouble, Harry," Dumbledore said gently. "I would tell you that our search for your attacker last night was unsuccessful but you already knew it would be. We have searched Professor Moody's quarters and made a startling discovery. It seems that the impostor has kept the real Alastor Moody locked in his trunk so he could use his hair for the Polyjuice Potion. Alastor is recovering from the ordeal in the hospital wing but we don't know how long his recovery will be."

"Told you the real Moody wouldn't cast Unforgivables on the students," James huffed.

"Yes, James. You did. But there's no use huffing at us!" Sirius rolled his eyes.

Harry looked up at Professor Dumbledore surprised that the man was telling him so much. He doubted the rest of the school would ever hear any of this. It would be extremely difficult to explain the majority of the truth without revealing Harry's visions, something Harry didn't want anyone to know anytime soon. If the school's reaction to him speaking to snakes was any indication, Harry knew people would probably believe he was losing his mind.

"Until Alastor is able to teach we need a temporary replacement," Dumbledore continued. "I asked Remus if he would consider the position but he wasn't sure of how you take it since he's your guardian."

"Yes. The return of Professor Moony!" James cried delighted.

"Oh, Harry would love that!" Sirius beamed.

To say Harry was confused would be an understatement. "He was my guardian last year when he taught me," he pointed out.

"But the entire wizarding world wasn't aware of it then, Harry," Dumbledore clarified as he leaned forward. "Some students and parents may claim that we are favoring you by employing one of your guardians as a teacher. We know you are under a lot of stress and we don't want to add to it, your guardians don't want to add to it."

"I can handle whatever students try to throw at me, Professor," Harry said firmly. He couldn't believe Dumbledore was more concerned about his 'stress' rather than what Remus would go through. "I would be more worried for Remus since not everyone is going to approve of his condition. That was why he resigned last year. No matter what Remus may say I know it bothers him when people see the wolf and not the man."

Remus shrugged, "I can handle it. Don't worry."

"Moony, we always worry," James said seriously. Lily and Sirius nodded.

"You will not try to take advantage of your relationship with Mr. Lupin in class?" Professor McGonagall asked sternly.

"Hey! He's not Malfoy!" Lily cried outraged.

Harry looked at her with a raised eyebrow. How could McGonagall think he would ever do such a thing? "I didn't last year and I certainly won't this year," he said sounding slightly offended. "I respect both of my guardians too much to do something as childish as that."

"Professor McGonagall didn't mean anything by it, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said calmly.

"Wouldn't be so sure of that," James narrowed his eyes.

"Most teenagers would try to take advantage of a situation such as this. I am sorry for the misconception you would act the same. Sometimes it's hard to think you've only known Sirius and Remus for such a short time considering how close you three are."

Harry was still confused. Why would anyone try to take advantage of their guardians teaching them? "I still don't understand," he said. "Why would kids act that way to their parents or guardians? Acting like that is only asking for trouble from other students."

"Oh Harry. To think like that requires foresight and not many have it. They usually just think of what will happen next. So the only thought would be the advantage they'd get not the trouble that could come," Lily said sighing.

Professor Dumbledore glanced at Professor McGonagall then Professor Snape before returning his gaze to Harry. "That is true," he admitted. "I don't think I need to remind you of Draco Malfoy. He uses his father's position as school governor to get what he wants. It's not that uncommon." Harry looked horrified in being compared to Draco Malfoy, something Dumbledore noticed. "I am not saying you would do the same thing. We just wanted to be certain this arrangement wouldn't cause problems. If you feel you can handle it then I'll inform Remus he will start teaching this morning."

Closing his eyes, Harry fought to keep his emotions under control. He was prepared for Draco Malfoy to give him a hard time along with many of the other Slytherins. He just hoped he wouldn't receive much from the other three houses. Opening his eyes again, Harry looked at Professor Dumbledore with a passive look on his face. "Professor, my position on this matter hasn't changed," he said evenly. "Remus is more of a target for ridicule than I am. He takes all of the slander given to werewolves without visibly showing how much it's really hurting him. I know being called a half-breed hurts him. The fact that the wizarding world views him as less than human hurts him."

Remus was engulfed in a hug by the other three. He smiled. Yes it hurt. But knowing that there were people that didn't care and loved him helped.

Dumbledore enfolded his long fingers as a slow smile appeared on his face. "I will discuss this with Remus and see what can be done to make his stay here more pleasant," he said with his eyes twinkling. "Another matter we need to discuss is what happened last night. It wouldn't settle well if the student body found out they had been taught by a follower of Voldemort for nearly an entire school year especially with the Tournament still in full swing. To prevent a panic, I must insist you refrain from speaking of what happened last night to anyone other than those who already know."

Harry couldn't believe it. How could you keep something like what happened last night a secret from everyone? Secrets don't stay secrets for long at Hogwarts. Harry had learned that the hard way. "What about Viktor?" he asked. "He knows I was attacked—"

"—but that is all he knows," Dumbledore interrupted calmly. "I can't deny that you were attacked last night but no one besides the staff and your guardians know who it was. We will acknowledge your attack and admit that the attacker escaped but any information pertaining to Barty Crouch, Jr.'s presence here will simply be held back. This is for your safety as much as anything, Harry. If the wizarding world were to learn of your visions you could be put in serious danger. The Ministry could try to use you for information on Voldemort and his followers."

"As much as I think people should know that Crouch Jr. isn't dead and dangerous I care more about protecting Harry," Lily said grimly.

A chill went down Harry's spine causing him to shiver. More visions? The one last night was enough to last a lifetime. Professor McGonagall noticed Harry stopped paying attention and reached out and grasped his hand firmly. Harry didn't even notice it. He was too caught up in his fear. He didn't want to be seeing what Voldemort was up to. It hurt too much.

"Harry?" Dumbledore asked gently. "Harry, are you all right?"

Snapping out of his thoughts, Harry looked up at Professor Dumbledore and nodded although he really didn't feel fine at the moment. "I'm sorry sir," he said softly, hoping that Dumbledore would let the matter drop. "Er—what were you saying?"

Dumbledore held Harry's gaze for a moment before answering. "I was reminding you that we are doing everything in our power to ensure Hogwarts is safe, Harry," he said pleasantly. "Sirius has agreed to remain at Hogwarts for the time being to help out but we don't want the entire school knowing about his presence as of yet. If the students knew we needed someone like Sirius here for security they may overreact. Do you understand?"

Harry really didn't understand what the big deal was but wasn't about to say so, especially with Professor Snape sitting next to him. It struck Harry as odd at how quiet the Potions Master was being but once again he wasn't going to voice his thoughts. Snape was badmouthing him or his father so it was best to not stir the pot. "Yes sir," Harry said obediently.

"Well then, if you don't have any questions I believe breakfast is just starting," Professor Dumbledore pleasantly.

Taking that as his cue, Harry bid farewell and walked to the door. As he reached for the doorknob Harry felt a chill rush through him. Something didn't feel right about all this. "Sir, I know it's not my place but history has proven that secrets have a habit of coming out," Harry said as he looked over his shoulder at the Headmaster. "I just hope you are ready for the repercussions that come with it."

All three teachers stared at Harry in amazement as the teen left the office. No one said a word for quite a while. "That boy is too bright for his own good," Professor McGonagall said at last. "It was almost like he was channeling his mother for a moment."

Lily puffed proudly.

"Now we're never going to hear the end of it," Sirius groaned.

"What can I do if I am so bright," she said superiorly.

Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape had to agree.

By the end of the day Harry desperately needed sanctuary. Everywhere he turned there was someone asking about the attack last night, wanting to know every single detail. Cedric Diggory had cornered Viktor Krum before breakfast wanting to know what was so important last night and had received quite a shock when Viktor told Cedric everything about the attack he knew, including Harry's collapse. Panicked, Cedric hurried into the Great Hall with Viktor following him to see Harry mindlessly playing with his food. There were a few students from each house at their respective tables but their conversations had abruptly ended when Cedric marched up to Harry and demanded to know what happened.

"Cedric is quite fierce," Remus said, "I like him."

Harry had tried to push off the attack as nothing to worry about which left Cedric and Viktor in a shocked silence. The older champions grabbed Harry by the arms and pulled him out of the Great Hall to an empty classroom where they demanded an explanation. Harry told them what he could which wasn't more than what Viktor had told Cedric. Although Cedric was impressed that Harry managed to defend himself he wasted no time in ranting at both Harry and Viktor for doing something so stupid. This caught Harry by surprise and apparently Viktor

too. Cedric finished his rant by making Harry promise he would never do anything like that again. Harry quickly agreed and let out a sigh of relief when Cedric seemed to relax.

Of course Cedric hadn't kept his mouth shut about the whole thing so by the time the first class of the day was over the entire school Harry had been attacked last night trying to protect Mr. Crouch and the attacker got away. Hermione was another who scolded Harry for sending Viktor for help since the Bulgarian was older and had more knowledge of defensive spells forcing Harry to bite back the question of how she could know that.

"Yes, Hermione, how do you know that?" Sirius wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"She does have a point," James said nodding.

By the time lunch was over the gossip mill was in overdrive. Harry's attack was still on everyone's lips along with the return of Professor Lupin and absence of Professor Moody. As far as the student body was concerned Professor Moody had fallen ill so Professor Lupin was his temporary replacement. Looking up at his guardian who was sitting at the Head Table, Harry noticed Remus mouth 'Marauder's Quarters' and nodded in response. After everything that happened last night neither guardian had the chance to reprimand Harry yet, something he really wasn't looking forward to.

That night after dinner, Harry went to the Marauder's Quarters thankful that the password hadn't been changed. Entering the common room, Harry noticed that Sirius and Remus were sitting by the fire talking quietly. For a moment Harry considered leaving so he didn't disturb them but Sirius noticed Harry's presence and their conversation was quickly dropped.

Much to Harry's relief Sirius and Remus didn't scold him for what happened. Sirius was actually proud of how Harry handled everything but also made Harry promise to never do something like that again. Remus, on the other hand, expressed his concern that Harry used such a power draining shield which left him defenseless. Harry had to agree that Remus had a point. That shield had been one of the more powerful that he had learned but he didn't know how powerful the spells coming at him had been. If he had underestimated the spell would have gone through the shield and hit him.

As punishment, Harry had to spend two hours a day for the next week researching shields and other protection charms under the watchful eye of either Sirius or Remus. Harry knew it wasn't much of a punishment since he probably would be researching the topic anyways for

the third task. There was also the matter of Sirius making the two hours more fun by having practical lessons whenever it was his turn to 'monitor the punishment'.

"I am always fun Pronglet. Always."

Word had reached the Ministry within a few days of the attack about Mr. Crouch's presence at Hogwarts. Cornelius Fudge had arrived along with Percy Weasley and a medi-witch from St. Mungo's hospital to determine Mr. Crouch's 'state of mind'. The prognosis wasn't good. The medi-witch concluded the same as Madam Pomfrey: Mr. Crouch had suffered brain damage due to a severe memory charm. He was sedated and moved to St. Mungo's for an 'undetermined amount of time'. Fudge had turned completely white when Crouch started talking about the Dark Lord getting stronger and nearly ran out of the hospital wing (from what Sirius described since Harry and Remus had been in class when Fudge had arrived).

Since Fudge had been in the hospital wing he had seen Professor Moody who was still recovering and therefore learned that Remus was his substitute. He wasn't too happy about the temporary replacement and demanded to supervise a class which just happened to be the one Harry was in at the moment.

"Hey, it's not your decision, it's Dumbledore's!" Sirius cried outraged.

"Moony is a great teacher!" James yelled.

When they entered the classroom they saw the students in groups of three talking quietly as one from each group took notes on a piece of parchment while Professor Lupin strolled around, observing. After about five minutes of this Remus instructed everyone to put their quills down then called on one member from each group to write their findings on the blackboard.

Once everyone was finished, Professor Lupin took a look at the lists of spells, charms and hexes before addressing the class. "Only one group thought of the *Protego* charm," he said thoughtfully. "Most of you have written down offensive spells but what about defensive? If someone were to cast a leg-locker curse on you how will you free yourself?"

Sirius and James raised their hands and kept crying, "Professor Moony, Professor Moony. Pick me."

Remus and Lily smacked their heads and Remus said, "Just read Sirius."

Several hands raised in the air. "Dean?"

"Finite Incantatem?" Dean Thomas suggested.

"That is one way but not the only way," Professor Lupin said with a smile. "Your assignment: one roll of parchment on the defensive side of dueling. Select three spells, hexes or charms and find at least three ways to counter it. We will discuss your findings next time. You are dismissed."

"MOONY! You gave homework! How could you?" James cried horrified.

Sirius shook his head, "Straying so far from the good side. We may be too late to save him," he choked a fake sob. James patted him and he waved a hand dismissively, "I'll be fine. I'll get over it... eventually," he finished in a strained voice and hugged James fake sobbing deeply. Remus and Lily groaned.

The students instantly started talking about what their three choices would be as they packed up their things and left the classroom. Harry motioned for Ron and Hermione to go ahead without him and stayed behind and when everyone had left approached his guardian, unaware that Professor Dumbledore, Mr. Fudge and Percy Weasley were standing at the back of the classroom.

"So, have I lost my touch?" Remus asked Harry with a grin.

"Not at all, sir," Harry said returning the grin.

Remus smiled proudly and sat a little straighter.

Remus returning as a formal teacher felt a little odd for both of them. "You have a point. No one really thinks of the defensive side of dueling. In second year it was always attack first, attack hard."

Remus let out a sigh. "I know," he admitted as he packed up his things. "That's usually how everyone thinks." He looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow. "You do know that I am expecting your essay to be on material you haven't already learned. Let the other students handle the easy charms and jinxes. Think of this as practice for the third task. You need to defend yourself, Harry. I won't say any more on the topic."

"I thought the teachers weren't supposed to help?" James raised an eyebrow.

"Who's helping? I am assigning homework. If by a coincidence it happens to help Harry what can I do?" Remus said innocently.

Harry nodded. "Mr. Bagman already told us what we would be facing," he said firmly. "Trust me. I have no intention on taking the easy way out on this assignment. I planned on researching the topic anyways."

"That's good to hear," Remus said as he walked around his desk. "Although I wouldn't let your godfather know. He already thinks I've poisoned your mind against him—"

"Yes," Sirius eyed Remus evilly, "Encouraging research and trips to the library."

The sound of someone clearing their throat made Harry jump and turn to see their observers. Not liking that Cornelius Fudge (the same man who tried to sentence Sirius to the Dementor's Kiss without a trial) was there with Percy Weasley; Harry took a subconscious step back and felt a protective hand on his shoulder. From the firm grip Harry could tell that Remus had the same apprehensions he did.

"Who would like Fudge?" Lily asked scornfully.

"Is there something I can do for you Minister?" Remus asked politely.

"Not at all," Fudge said stiffly. "I had learned you had returned to teaching and wanted to see for myself—"

"—if I were a danger to my students?" Remus offered.

"Moony! Don't say that!" Lily cried.

Remus shrugged, "No use pretending that's not what he's thinking."

"I assure you, Minister, that this position is only temporary until Professor Moody recovers. I was the only one available on such short notice."

"And Mr. Potter receives no privileges from your new position?" Fudge asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Hey, Harry said he wasn't going to abuse that you, you, ... I give up there isn't a word bad enough for Fudge," James growled frustrated.

Harry's eyes narrowed at the accusation. Why did everyone believe he would take advantage of Remus being a teacher? "I am harder on Harry than any other student," Remus said calmly. "I do not let any student—no matter who they are—slack off in my classes."

"Ha! In your face!" Sirius cried satisfied.

"As you can see, Cornelius," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "Remus is more than capable of covering for Alastor...unless you would prefer Sirius Black to take the position instead."

"Dumbledore! Don't joke like that! I would never join the enemy like that!"

"Never say never Paddy," Remus said wisely.

Sirius looked at him in shock and said almost in a whisper, "Never!"

Fudge quickly looked at Professor Dumbledore in alarm. That seemed to put any objections Fudge may have had to an end. "N—no, that's fine," he said quickly. "I'm sure Professor Lupin will have no trouble since the position is only temporary. We should really be going...loads of paperwork and we need to find someone to take over for Barty."

Fudge and Percy left shortly after that much to everyone's relief. Harry had to wonder why Fudge was so against Sirius teaching. Sirius had taught him for the entire summer and was actually quite good at it. He had his beliefs and grudges, especially against one Potions Master but nothing deeming him unworthy to teach. Of course Fudge has been rather jumpy whenever the topic of Sirius Black is mentioned ever since the trial that proved his was innocent. Harry had to wonder if Fudge simply feared Sirius and what the Animagus may say to those who were willing to listen.

"A lot Harry. A lot," Sirius said.

"He says a lot even when there is nothing to say," James told Lily in a staged whisper. She giggled. Sirius glared.

Chapter 18

The Maze

Professor Moody had been declared healthy and able to teach after a week stay in the hospital wing. He needed a new magical eye and wooden stump for his missing foot since the imposter had taken the originals with him so Dumbledore had to pull a few strings. The problem was Moody's eight month stay in his own trunk had left him a little more jumpy than normal (according to Sirius).

"More jumpy," James said, "That must be a nightmare."

Remus did everything he could to help the real Professor Moody out with teaching and although it was difficult for someone to jump into a role someone else had been playing (even though the person had been portraying him). Dumbledore had insisted appearances be kept up to prevent a panic. Sometimes Harry had to wonder who Dumbledore was more worried about: the students or the Ministry.

"I think; the Ministry," Lily said scowling, "The students couldn't care less. All they'd care was that the impostor wasn't there anymore and go on with life as usual. The Ministry on the other hand could say Dumbledore wasn't up to the job and start meddling."

As June arrived, Professor Moody was 'back' to teaching and no one was the wiser. Remus remained at Hogwarts with Sirius for 'security reasons' but Harry knew it was because his guardians didn't believe the third task would go on without a hitch. Both men were taking Harry's dream of Voldemort seriously enough to oversee everything having to do with the task. To anyone else, it would seem that they were being obsessive but their actions only proved to Harry that the threat was real. Voldemort was really out there...somewhere...waiting.

The four shuddered and looked around as if Voldemort would materialize there and then.

It had been hard for Harry to keep everything from Ron and Hermione. His one secret of his outbursts had quickly escalated to the truth about the attack, Sirius' presence, his dream about Voldemort, and specially his reaction to the dream. He didn't think Ron and Hermione would like hearing that he had actually felt pain of the Cruciatus curse through a dream.

Since Harry was excused from his final exams he was able to research and practice for the third task while everyone else studied. The third task was scheduled for a week before the

term ended and was approaching fast. His list of hexes, charms and spells was growing by the day. Now the only problem was keeping it all straight. He even had to ask his guardians help him run through everything a few times since Ron and Hermione were so overwhelmed with their class load.

Regardless of the sums of people wishing him good luck, Harry couldn't help but once again feel the pressure of everyone's expectations. Several people had even asked Harry what he was going to pull off during this task reminding the fourteen-year-old that for some reason people were expecting him to do something miraculous. This only frustrated and infuriated Harry. As if he didn't have enough pressure already!

"Yes people; LEAVE HIM ALONE!" James cried.

"At least he has help this time," Remus said.

By the time June twenty-fourth arrived Harry couldn't wait for the Tournament to be over.

"you and I both Harry," Sirius said, "It seems like an eternity since we read your name being spit out that goblet."

"Sure dose," Lily said, "And it was just this morning."

He didn't care what the outcome may be just as long as the attention and pressure ended. Truthfully Harry didn't want to win. He didn't need the money and certainly didn't want the recognition. He had considered not even showing up but knew Ron, Hermione and the majority of the Gryffindor house would never forgive him for it.

Harry was trapped in his own thoughts during breakfast. Everyone was talking around him, oblivious to the fact that he wasn't contributing to any of the conversations. Ron was talking with Dean and Seamus while Hermione had her face buried in a book. It was times like this when Harry wondered if he really belonged. He felt like no one understood him but knew it was mostly his own fault since he was keeping so many secrets from his friends. The problem was he was just too afraid of how they would react.

The feeling of a hand on his shoulder made Harry jump and quickly turn around to see Cedric smiling at him. "Come on Harry," Cedric said happily. "We get to spend the day with our families and I want to introduce Professor Lupin and Mr. Black to my parents."

"Oh, he's introducing the parents!" Sirius said in a mocking voice.

"Sirius! Stop that! Cedric is almost like an older brother to Harry!" Lily scolded.

Before Harry could say anything Cedric had pulled him to his feet and was ushering him towards the side chamber. For some reason his brain didn't seem to be working at a reliable rate. It wasn't until Harry was pushed into the chamber and saw his guardians waiting for him that he registered what Cedric had told him. The pair of Marauders pulled Harry into an embrace acting as if they hadn't seen Harry in ages. When Harry stepped away he was pulled into another embrace but this one was rather suffocating.

"Oh look at you!" exclaimed the voice of Mrs. Weasley. "You've grown so much but you are still on the thin side!"

"I think Mrs. Weasley would tell even Slughorn that he is on the thin side," Remus chuckled.

"Mrs. Weasley?" Harry asked in confusion as he pulled himself out of her embrace. He noticed another Weasley standing to her right with long red hair and a fang earring. It was the eldest of the Weasley siblings. "Bill?"

Mrs. Weasley tried to smooth out Harry's hair but it wouldn't seem to cooperate. She eventually gave up, realizing it was a lost cause. "Sirius and Remus invited us to come, dear," she said happily. "We haven't seen you for so long. Charlie told us all about the first task. I couldn't believe Dumbledore approved of the use of dragons."

"Me neither," James fumed.

"Charlie and Dad wanted to come," Bill said with a grin. "They couldn't get off work but they both wish you luck."

Harry felt someone tap his shoulder and turned to see Cedric with his parents standing behind him. Mr. Diggory had a scrubby brown beard and looked a lot like Cedric. Mrs. Diggory had a kind face and long brown hair. "Harry, these are my parents," Cedric said with a smile.

"Pleased to meet you, sir, ma'am," Harry said politely then gestured in reference to the Marauders. "My guardians, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin," he then gestured to the Weasleys. "Mrs. Weasley and her son, Bill,—friends of the family."

Mr. Diggory shook hands with Sirius, Remus and Bill before nodding politely to Mrs. Weasley. He then returned his attention to Harry. "I must say you have certainly made a name for

yourself, Mr. Potter," Mr. Diggory said. "You seem to have this competition wrapped around your finger."

"Oi! What do you mean by that?" James said glaring.

Harry's eyes widened as an arm reached around his shoulders and pulled him back in a protective manner. Was that really what people thought? *I never should have spent those hours in the library. I never should have tried. I should have just let myself fail. Everyone would be happy then and no one would be pressuring me to win now.*

"No you shouldn't," Lily scolded, "You have as much right as anyone to do well. Diggory is just jealous his son isn't in first place even though you're younger."

"Now, now Amos," Sirius said protectively. "You know that's not true. Harry is a hard worker just like your son."

"Yeah, you tell him Padfoot!" Remus said crossing his arms, "I don't like him."

"I'm sure he is," Mrs. Diggory said with a smile as she tried to resolve the tension. "Good luck this evening, Harry. Amos, I believe we were going to take a walk with our son. Sirius, Remus, Molly, William, it's been a pleasure."

Cedric gave Harry an apologetic look before leaving with his parents. Sirius glanced at the other three adults before pulling Harry closer. "Don't take what he said seriously, Harry," he said softly. "Come on. Let's give Molly and Bill a new outlook on Hogwarts."

"I don't think Molly appreciates your outlook on Hogwarts Sirius," Lily said raising her eyebrow. Sirius blew her a kiss.

Harry was silent for the majority of the morning, only talking when asked a question directly. It seemed like everything was once again coming to the surface. Not only were his classmates pressuring him to win, now he had to worry about making his guardians and the Weasley's proud without anyone believing he somehow was getting inside information.

"Hey! We are proud of you no matter what!" Remus cried.

"Yeah! Diggory is just a jealous git!" Sirius cried and looked at Remus that had been scribbling in his parchment again, "Must tell Harry we are proud anyway," he read over his friend's shoulder chuckling

and shaking his head. Lily giggled and James turned around so that he wasn't facing Remus but his shoulders were shaking.

The problem was it had been the truth for the first two tasks. Hagrid had helped him with the dragons and Cedric had helped him with the egg. *But everyone had help in the first task. Does that make it any less wrong?*

"You just said it Harry," Lily said patiently, "Everyone had help. So you were all leveled."

Deep in his own thoughts, Harry didn't notice the conversation around him ceasing. He didn't realize the worried glances he was receiving from the four adults around him. He knew he shouldn't let everything get to him; he shouldn't let what Mr. Diggory said bother him but it was so hard. He knew that people thought he was given special privileges because he was the-boy-who-lived. He just didn't think it was the entire wizarding world.

"Harry?" Remus asked as he rested a gentle hand on the teen's shoulder. "Harry, are you all right?"

"No," James answered, "Sirius, what are you doing?" he asked slowly.

Sirius had taken a very disgruntled Remus's hand on his own and was stroking it on his cheek.

"What? The book says Remus's hand is gentle. I am just testing!"

Snapping out of his thoughts, Harry looked up and realized that they had noticed his lack of attention. He mentally cursed himself for dwelling on his thoughts in the presence of Sirius and Remus. Ever since the second task both men had made it their mission to know when Harry had a lot on his mind and make him talk about it. He accepted that they wanted to help but Harry was never one for talking about feelings. No one had ever seemed to care before so like everything else Harry was use to handling it on his own.

"Harry, please don't worry about what Amos Diggory said," Remus said in the same gentle tone.

"See, again with the gentle. Moony is gentle all around," Sirius said happily.

"He's just jealous that you are ahead of his son in points. Diggory has always been competitive. He wants his son to win so he tried to shake you up a little bit."

"Yeah, that's basic tactics. Goad your opponent," James said annoyed.

Harry looked at the four adults uncomfortably. The thought of a parent's pressure only made him more uneasy. Was Cedric going through the same thing he was? Were Viktor and Fleur? "Would you be angry if I didn't win?" Harry asked quietly.

"NO!" the four cried at once.

"Of course not," Sirius said instantly. "We don't care if you win or lose, Harry. We're here to give our support, to let you know you're not alone. We are not here to put any more pressure than you have already put on yourself."

"Yes, you already do that to perfection without help!" Lily huffed.

Sirius reached out a ruffled Harry's hair making Harry scowl in annoyance. "Just do your best. That's all anyone can ask for."

Harry couldn't help but feel like a large weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Sirius and Remus were right. He suddenly remembered the calming techniques Sirius had taught him. He shouldn't focus on what he couldn't control. He had left everyone else's opinions cloud his mind. The only thing he could do was remember what he had learned over the past four years and hope for the best.

They ate in the Great Hall for lunch, surprising Ron, Ginny, Fred and George. None of them had known that their mother and older brother were coming today. Bill easily served as a distraction for all of the Weasley siblings while Sirius and Remus distracted Harry by explaining what they had in store for Harry once the school year was over. Mrs. Weasley simply observed the two men and their charge with a soft smile on her face. This was the first time she had witnessed Harry with his new family.

She wasn't the only one smiling.

For the afternoon, Sirius and Remus gave Mrs. Weasley and Bill the tour of the Marauder's Quarters which included going through the photo albums Sirius and Remus had made about

Harry's life before the murders of his parents along with life after the adoption. Reminiscing was more embarrassing for the teen than anything but Harry wasn't about to say anything. Sirius, Remus and Mrs. Weasley seemed to be enjoying themselves too much.

James shook his head at his friends and crossed his arms.

"What?" Remus asked.

"Tsk, ts, just yesterday Moony you were embarrassed at your mum's antics of reminding you to wear a warm jumper and there you two are doing the same to Harry. Oh, how the mighty have fallen?" he finished dramatically. He received twin glares.

On their way to dinner Harry had learned that Fudge would be serving as the fifth judge tonight because Crouch would be incapable and Percy was under investigation. Apparently the Ministry was questioning whether Percy was actually working under Mr. Crouch's orders or someone else posing as Crouch. From the worried tone in Mrs. Weasley's voice, Harry knew this investigation was serious.

You could hardly hear yourself think with all of the excited chatter throughout dinner. Harry was once again starting to feel nervous but it was nothing like it had been this morning. He knew he was as prepared as he could possibly be and if that wasn't good enough then he didn't deserve to win. It was as simple as that. Now if he could get rid of the butterflies in his stomach he would be feeling a lot better.

The chatter ceased as Professor Dumbledore rose from his seat. "Ladies and gentlemen, in just a few minutes it will be time for all of us to make our way to the Quidditch pitch for the eagerly awaited third task," he said pleasantly. "Champions, please follow Mr. Bagman to the stadium now."

Remus and Sirius wished Harry luck one last time as he stood up followed by Hermione and the Weasleys. The entire Gryffindor table applauded and cheered loudly as he walked out of the Great Hall. It seemed that the Gryffindors tried to show their support by making more noise than anyone else in the hall.

"We always do Harry," James said happily.

The moment the large doors closed silencing the noise, Harry couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief. Once this Tournament was over a vacation was certainly needed.

"Yes, we could go to some tropical island and bask in the sun all day with drinks with little umbrellas," Remus said dreamily.

As they stepped out onto the courtyard, Cedric was immediately at Harry's side. "Listen Harry, I'm really sorry about what my dad said," Cedric said quickly. "He's been in a mood lately. Everyone at work has been asking him about you and if he's met you—"

"—why?" Harry interrupted. "I'm just a kid—"

Cedric looked at Harry as if he had grown a second head. "You haven't heard?" he asked. "It's a running joke with all of the Aurors of how the Minister of Magic was outsmarted by a thirteen-year-old. Everyone at the Ministry knows what you did to give Sirius Black a trial. You've done the one thing they've wanted to do for years: put Fudge in his place."

"Anyone that has met Fudge must have that as their biggest dream," Lily huffed.

"But I didn't have a choice," Harry protested. "He wouldn't listen that Sirius was innocent!"

Cedric just smiled and ruffled Harry's hair. "I know that," he said. "My dad told me everything. I guess I'm just trying to explain why he is the way he is. You didn't deserve what he said to you. Trust me. My mum gave him quite an earful."

"That's nice of her," Lily beamed, "Cedric too. For apologizing."

They stepped onto the Quidditch pitch which was now filled with twenty-foot high hedges forming a vast maze.

A strangled sob escaped from James. Lily rubbed his back soothingly.

They reached the dark entrance and could only wait. Not wanting his nerves to get out of control again, Harry knelt down and once again ran through some of the calming techniques Sirius had taught him. He had a feeling he would be using a lot of what his guardians had taught him tonight.

It was difficult to concentrate with the noise made by students filling the stands. The stands seemed to thunder with each step, multiplying when another student stepped on. After a few minutes Harry was forced to give up and stand up again. He knew he was going to have a rather bad headache if he forced himself to focus much longer.

The sun had set completely, leaving only a deep blue night sky. Hearing people approach, Harry quickly turned around to see Professor McGonagall, Hagrid, Professor Flitwick and Professor Moody approach. They were wearing large glowing red stars on their hats except for Hagrid who had one on his waistcoat. Harry couldn't help but notice how all of the teachers seemed to look at him for a moment longer than the other champions.

"They all have a soft spot for Harry," Remus smiled.

"We will be patrolling along the borders of the maze," Professor McGonagall informed the champions. "If you get into trouble and need to be rescued, send red sparks into the air. One of us will come, understand?"

For some reason Harry felt that Professor McGonagall was issuing the warning more to him than the other champions but he let it slide. He knew McGonagall was extremely protective of him with everything that happened last year but wasn't about to broadcast it since none of the students were aware of it—with the exception of perhaps Hermione.

Bagman pulled out his wand and pointed it to his throat as the four teachers left. "*Sonorus*," he said, magically magnifying his voice. "Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament! The current standings: in first place with ninety points is Mr. Harry Potter of Hogwarts School!" Loud cheers and applause filled the stadium. When it finally died down, Bagman continued. "In second place with eighty-five points is Mr. Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts School!" Once again applause and cheers could be heard. "In third place with eighty points is Mr. Viktor Krum of Drumstrang Institute!" More applause. "And finally, in fourth place is Miss Fleur Delacour!" Bagman turned his attention to the champions. "On my whistle, Harry! Three...two...one..."

The whistle blasted loudly in his ears causing Harry to wince before he entered the maze. The tall hedges looked even taller the closer you came making Harry feel even shorter than he already was. With a flick of his wrist Harry had his wand in hand and muttered "*Lumos*" to help him see where he was going. His training was already taking over as he continued walking cautiously. After about fifty yards there was a fork. Harry glanced in both before taking the path on the left. He continued walking as a whistle blew signaling Cedric's turn to enter the maze. He wasn't going to worry about the other champions. His main concern was his safety. He wouldn't get far if he was injured by blindly running into danger.

The silence was thick. Only Sirius voice was heard and it was almost a whisper as if he thought that by reading louder he'd attract danger for Harry.

So far this path seemed to be deserted but Harry still kept his guard up. He turned right as another whistle blew signaling Viktor's turn to enter. He continued walking until he suddenly felt like he was being watched. Harry instantly tensed as he turned around but saw nothing. He slowly backed up as he used the Four-Point Spell to find north. Knowing that the center of the maze was north-west, Harry slowly turned around and continued walking. He reached another fork and took the left path.

Almost unconsciously Lily grabbed James hand and they stayed that way.

Just like the previous path this one was empty. Harry was really starting to get nervous. This wasn't right. He heard the fourth and final whistle and knew that all of the champions were now in the maze. He continued walking, turning right as soon as he could to continue traveling northwest as soon as he could. He was about turn back and start over when a sudden cold rushed over him. He knew this feeling. He knew it all too well.

Dementors.

"WHAT?" James cried, "Are they crazy?"

Turning the corner Harry saw the massive creature wearing the hooded black robes with its rotting hands reaching for him, wanting to suck out his soul just like it almost did to Sirius. He quickly remembered the Quidditch Cup and spending time with his guardians before pointing his wand and the creature, shouting, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Three silver animals jumped out of the end of Harry's wand. The first was a silver stag that charged the Dementor, the second was a silver wolf, Moony, that stayed by Harry's side along with a large silver dog, Midnight. Harry watched as the Dementor seemed to stumble and knew that this wasn't really a Dementor. It was a Boggart. "*Riddikulus!*"

Four relieved sighs were heard.

"Thank God! I was almost marching up to Dumbledore and asking what he was playing at."

A loud crack filled Harry's ears and the shape shifter exploded. Harry watched as the silver stag faded away then looked down to see Moony and Midnight had stayed. Both shimmering animals waited patiently for Harry to make the first move. Harry smiled at them then started off again. Moony stayed by Harry's side while Midnight ventured a few paces ahead almost like he was checking to make certain the path was safe.

Sirius smiled, "Even our Patronus forms stay with Harry. I like that."

The other three beamed.

They walked in silence, turning left then right, Harry using the Four-Point Spell every now and then to make sure they were going the right way. It felt like they were walking in circles, each hedge looking exactly like the next. Harry was really starting to feel like a laboratory rat that was running around in an endless maze for an experiment.

Turning right again, Harry nearly ran into Midnight who was standing in front of a golden mist that was floating in the air. He heard Cedric cry out in alarm from somewhere nearby followed by Fleur screaming. Harry had to bite back the urge to rush off and find out what was wrong. He remembered there were four highly qualified teachers patrolling that could step in if it was necessary. *'Sometimes the hardest thing is putting faith in others,'* Sirius had told him. *'You can't always do everything on your own, kiddo. You'll only drive yourself mad by trying.'*

"Wise on his own way," Remus said fondly patting Sirius' head.

Not trusting the golden mist ahead, Harry cast one of the numerous protection shields he had learned and cautiously stepped forward. The shield pushed the mist away with each step he took. Taking a chance, Harry crouched down and pointed his wand upwards, trying to push the mist out of his path. Slowly the mist moved above him allowing Harry to scurry underneath it with Midnight and Moony following him. He reached another intersection and let out a frustrated sigh. This was really getting ridiculous. He was beginning to think there was no end to this maze.

Looking down and his two remaining Patronuses, Harry figured it was worth a shot. "Which way?" he asked tiredly. He watched as Moony went to the right path while Midnight went to the left. Not exactly the answer he had been hoping for. "Let me guess, Moony's way is safer but longer while Midnight's is quicker but more dangerous." Midnight sat down stubbornly making Harry roll his eyes. "No, Midnight," he scolded the Patronus. "Moony's right. You can either stay here or come with us. It's your choice."

Remus looked triumphantly at Sirius who mumbled, "Oh, shut up.!"

Midnight reluctantly stood on all fours and followed. Harry just shook his head as he followed Moony. He would have to ask Remus about Patronuses later. This certainly wasn't normal behavior. Patronuses normally didn't stay around for this long...not that Harry was

complaining. He found the company a soothing reassurance. It was almost like a piece of Sirius and Remus was right there with him.

Moony was leading while Midnight stayed at Harry's side. The wolf Patronus was slowly picking up speed forcing Harry to pick up his pace. He followed Moony around the corner only to skid to a halt as he came face to face with a Blast-Ended Skrewts Hagrid had used in Care of Magical Creatures class.

"Moony! I thought that was supposed to be safer!" James cried shaking Remus. With a little help from the other two James was subdued.

The only thing was it was certainly a lot bigger now. It was at least ten feet long with thick armor and long stinger that was curled over its back giving off the appearance of a giant scorpion.

Remembering his lessons, Harry pointed his wand at the underside that wasn't covered by armor and shouted, "*IMPEDIMENTA!*" The jinx hit the Skrewt, causing it to freeze in mid attack. Not wanting to waste any time around anything like that since the jinx wasn't permanent; Harry hurried past it with Moony and Midnight following him. "You could have warned me, you know," Harry said bitterly to Moony, not expecting a response. He used another Four-Point Spell and after another left turn was back on course.

Harry continued on the path, Midnight once again taking the lead. For nearly ten minutes they walked quickly, Midnight taking up the pace Moony had before. It seemed that both Patronuses wanted to be out of this maze just as much as Harry did. He knew he should be nearing the center when a familiar voice saying one word made Harry's blood turn cold.

"*Crucio!*"

"What? Who?" Lily asked shocked.

Cedric's yells filled Harry's ears, reminding Harry of the nightmare he had of Voldemort. He didn't have time to think. Turning towards the screams, Harry set the hedge on fire, burning a large hole for Harry to climb through. Once he did, Midnight and Moony jumped through the hole and hurried towards the noise. Harry followed them, stopping abruptly when he saw Viktor standing over Cedric who was twitching on the ground. He pointed his wand at the Bulgarian and shouted, "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

"Viktor? Why?" James asked betrayed.

Viktor's arms snapped to his sides as he fell backwards to the ground, stiff as a board. Harry hurried over to Cedric and helped him sit up. Midnight and Moony both sat down and waited patiently a few feet away seeing that Harry had everything under control. Harry had to roll his eyes at the sight of his 'pets'. *Oh yeah, I am definitely having a talk with Remus.* He quickly checked Cedric over before moving on to Viktor. Looking down at eighteen-year-old, Harry noticed that something was wrong with his eyes. They weren't looking around like they should be. It was almost like he was in some sort of daze. *The Imperius Curse!*

"Oh, ok," James sighed then his eyes bugged, "Who *Imperiused* him?"

"Viktor!" Harry shouted at the dazed student. "Fight it Viktor! It's your mind! Push him out!"

For a few seconds nothing changed Viktor's eyes still looked dazed. Harry was about to send up red sparks for help when he saw Viktor's eyes move once...twice then continuously. Viktor was Viktor again. Harry pointed his wand to Viktor and muttered, "*Finite Incantatem.*" He watched as Viktor's body relaxed and he blinked a few times before making eye contact with Harry. There was obvious confusion in those eyes as Harry slowly helped Viktor sit up.

"Harry, what are you doing!" Cedric yelled. "You just saw—"

"—someone under the Imperius Curse," Harry interrupted calmly, not taking his eyes off of Viktor. He didn't want to risk turning his back on someone who had been under someone else's control. *But whose? Who would do such a thing, especially to Cedric? Who would take that risk with so many watching? "Are you there, Viktor, or should I stun you this time?"*

Viktor rubbed his head as he looked at Harry then at Cedric, clearly confused. "What happened?" he asked. "When did you come? I remember seeing the Skrewt then nothing. Did someone attack me?"

Cedric moved to Harry's side. "The Imperius Curse?" he asked hesitantly, clearly not ready to trust someone who had just used an Unforgivable on him.

"I wouldn't either," Sirius grumbled.

Not that Harry could blame him. "Are you sure Harry?"

Harry nodded. "You could see it in his eyes," he said as he stood up and looked around, his hand gripping his wand tightly. This was going too far. No student could cast an unforgivable successfully and none of the teachers patrolling would even consider on doing such a thing.

That meant there was an adult on Hogwarts grounds (or had been) that wanted to do Cedric harm. *And possibly the rest of us.* "We should leave this area as soon as possible. There's a chance whoever used it on you, Viktor, could try again if they're still here. Can you continue or do you want to send up sparks?"

"Continue," Viktor said as he slowly stood up with Harry and Cedric's help. He then looked at the two Hogwarts students worriedly. "What did I do?"

Harry and Cedric glanced at each other nervously. Viktor was their friend and probably wouldn't take the truth well. "Er—you sort of attacked me but Harry came before anything really happened," Cedric lied. "We should get moving. We're wasting time."

"That's nice of Cedric," Lily said, "Not wanting for Viktor to feel guilty. Very gentlemanly of him."

"I can be gentlemanly," James said annoyed.

"Relax Prongs. She's not going to jump Cedric," Remus said patting James who huffed.

Viktor nodded then looked past them, his eyes widening in alarm. "What are those?" he asked quickly.

Harry turned around and smiled at Midnight and Moony who were still sitting and waiting. "Midnight and Moony," he said as he approached them. He knelt down so that he was looking at them face to face. "Thanks for the help but I should really finish this on my own. If you two want you can patrol the boundaries with the teachers."

Midnight jumped to his feet happily before running off with Moony following him. Harry smiled at the sight before standing and turning to see Cedric and Viktor staring at him with wide eyes. "What?" he asked innocently. "Don't tell me you've never seen Patronuses before. Midnight and Moony are just a little overprotective." Receiving no answer whatsoever, Harry simply shrugged and bid farewell before taking off again.

It didn't take long for him to find the burned hedge and jump through the hole, tucking his head and rolling as he hit the ground to prevent injury. Standing back up, Harry used the Four-Point Spell again and started moving once he found North-west. He knew he would probably have to explain Midnight and Moony's presence to Cedric and Viktor along with everyone who was probably watching. The problem was he didn't have an explanation. He remembered Remus telling him having three forms was extremely rare (more like impossible

but Remus had tried to break it to Harry gently) so the probability of people having questions was extremely high.

Without the aid of Midnight and Moony, Harry encountered several dead ends but continued on. As the darkness increased, Harry cast a strong '*Lumos*' to see where he was going. He reached a long straight path and instantly became cautious. He had to be somewhere close to the center of the maze which meant the challenges should increase. Right?

"Right," Remus said frowning.

"I don't like this. Not that I want Harry to encounter danger but this has been very suspiciously easy," Sirius said looking at the others who had the same worried expressions.

A sudden movement caught his attention. His was at the ready but he didn't strike. He didn't want to take the chance of angering whatever it was. The moment the creature came into view Harry couldn't believe his eyes. It had the body of a large lion and the head of a woman. It was a sphinx. She didn't appear to be preparing for attack, just blocking his path. Harry kept his distance and his wand ready.

"What you seek is past me," the creature spoke in a deep and husky voice. "You must answer my riddle correctly on the first try to pass. Answer wrong and I will attack. Refrain from answering, you may leave unscathed."

"Well, he should at least listen. He won't lose anything if he listens and decides not to answer," Lily said knowingly.

Great. Just great. Harry really wished that Remus or Hermione were here. Riddles were more their forte than his. Thinking about it, Harry figured he could hear the riddle and if he couldn't figure it out all he had to do was walk away and find another path. "May I hear the riddle please?" he asked tentatively.

The sphinx nodded and sat down in the middle of the path before she started to recite the riddle.

"First think of the person who lives in disguise,

Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.

Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,

The middle of middle and end of the end?

And finally give me the sound often heard

During the search for a hard-to-find word.

Now string them together, and answer me this,

Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

Harry closed his eyes and processed what she said.

Lily and Remus were doing the same.

There seemed to be three parts in the riddle adding up to a creature he wouldn't want to kiss. *Well that narrows it down*, he thought sarcastically. The first part of the riddle was easy. Someone in disguise dealing in secrets and lies would be an impostor or a spy. The second part made no sense so Harry moved on to the third. A sound heard when one was trying to find a word? There were several: um, er, eh, aaa...

"I know!" Remus and Lily cried together.

"Good for you!" James said annoyed, "Now shush!"

Wait a minute! Realization hit Harry like the bludger that hit him last year...hard. The middle of middle and end of end was the letter 'D'. The answer had to be a spy-d-er making the creature he wouldn't want to kiss being a spider. "The answer is a spider," Harry said confidently.

The sphinx smiled as she stood up and moved out of the way for him to pass. Harry nodded to the creature then continued on his way. He continued North-west with all of his senses on alert now. He was getting closer meaning the obstacles should be getting harder. Reaching another fork, Harry used the Four-Point Spell again and took the path to the right. He could see a light in the distance but still continued to travel cautiously. *'Always be prepared,'* Sirius had taught him. *'Never run into anything without knowing what you're facing. Acting rashly could cost you your life. Trust me, Pronglet, I know.'*

Remus and James patted Sirius back. Sirius narrowed his eyes. Remus said through chuckles, "Better late than never Paddy. At least you learned."

"Good thing he doesn't deny his past either," James said smiling, "Oh the fond memories. Remember when he decided to jump in the lake our first year before we knew about the Giant Squid. I remember the shrieks till today when it was putting him back on the ground with one of its tentacles."

"Yes, he was afraid of taking a bath after that. Horrible smell," Remus told Lily.

"Enough! Back to the book!" Sirius growled.

The Triwizard Cup was up ahead on a platform about a hundred yards away. A quick movement caught his attention forcing Harry to move. He rolled to the side as a large dark figure jumped in his path and hurried towards the Cup. It was Cedric. Harry was about to move when a something massive, being seen over the large hedge caught his line of sight. It was moving parallel with Cedric. It was going to attack Cedric.

"WATCH OUT CEDRIC!" Lily cried.

Harry hurried to his feet. He had an idea what sort of creature it could be and really didn't want to face one of *those* again. Unfortunately Cedric hadn't faced one before and had no idea what he was running into. "Cedric, look out!" he shouted.

Cedric skidded to a halt before jumping out of the way as an Acromantula stepped into the path and started moving towards Cedric. Harry acted quickly, pointing his wand at the creature and shouting, "*Stupefy!*" The spell hit the gigantic spider's body but nothing happened other than the creature turning to face Harry, seeing the boy as a bigger threat. "*Impedimentia! Stupefy!*" Harry shouted but it was no use. The creature just kept coming. He was running out of chances. "*Arinea Rximae!*" he tried and was shocked to see the creature fly backwards, landing on its back. "*Immobulus!*"

The spell hit the creature's underbelly and all movement ceased. The silence was deafening. Harry hadn't realized the lack of noise until now. It seemed that the entire crowd was eagerly awaiting the next move Harry and Cedric would make since they were both so close to the end. Harry approached cautiously until he reached Cedric and pulled the Hufflepuff to his feet.

"Thanks for that," Cedric said, unable to take his eyes off of the creature. "How did you know?"

Remus and Sirius puffed their chests. Lily and James rolled their eyes.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. Glancing over at the Cup, Harry knew that he needed to do. He just hoped no one would hate him for it. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Look, I think you should take the Cup. You wanted to be in this Tournament. I didn't. Your dad wants you to win. My guardians said they don't care. I'm only five points ahead of you. With any luck the judges will have more than a five point difference. I don't need the money or the attention. Please take it. It's still a Hogwarts win which is what we both want."

"WHAT?" James cried. "You deserve to win! Cedric wouldn't have gotten there if you hadn't saved him!"

"Oh, Harry. That's so noble," Lily cooed, "Stupid, but very noble."

Cedric once again stared at Harry as if he had grown another head. "Harry, I can't do that," he said. "You saved me twice tonight. *You* deserve to win. Forget about my father and everything else. You proved to be the better champion."

"I don't care," Harry said quickly. "Look, just take it before Viktor comes. *Please.*"

Seeing Harry's pleading eyes, Cedric let out a reluctant sigh and walked towards the Cup. Harry watched as Cedric picked up the pace and re-holstered his wand. He slowly started to follow Cedric, ready to congratulate his schoolmate...his friend. He had to wonder where Viktor was. The problem with Viktor taking the cup would be that there was still a chance that Harry could be declared the overall winner since he was ten points ahead of the Bulgarian. The judges wouldn't separate by more than ten; they hadn't in the past.

Silence remained as Cedric reached for the Cup only to be broken as a powerful wave of white and gold shot out from the Cup, sending Cedric and Harry flying backwards. Harry landed flat on his back with the breath knocked out of him. His chest ached as he rolled over and pulled himself to his knees. Looking over at Cedric, Harry panicked when he noticed the Hufflepuff student wasn't moving. He slowly stood and hurried over to Cedric who seemed to be merely dazed. *At least he isn't hurt.*

"What happened?" Remus asked worried.

Helping Cedric sit up, Harry heard a low pitched humming sound and slowly looked over his shoulder to see the Cup shining with unnatural light. With a flick of the wrist Harry had his wand in hand again. The light around the Cup brightened alerting Harry that whatever had hit them was about to again. He quickly cast a protective shield as the humming increased. Another wave of white and gold shot out from the Cup, hitting the shield and wrapping

around it. Harry tried to keep the shield up but he could feel it breaking down. The moment the shield was weak enough the white and gold light rushed over Harry and Cedric like a cloak.

When the light finally faded pandemonium broke out. The two teenagers and the Cup were gone.

"WHAT? WHERE DID THEY GO? FIND THEM?" the four cried in unison.

Chapter 19

The Inevitable

As the light vanished, Harry looked around to see they were in the middle of a graveyard with a dark church not too far away. Taking another look, he found no trace of the castle or anything remotely similar to something on Hogwarts grounds. They had somehow traveled a long distance but how? Who would do such a thing? *Who would use the Imperius Curse on Viktor?* As much as Harry hated to admit the way things were turning he knew that Voldemort was somehow involved. This wasn't an accident. Someone had wanted to bring him here.

"Don't say that Harry!" Sirius cried distressed.

"Padfoot, I definitely wish he wasn't right but denying the obvious is not going to help. Now he has to find a way out!" James said in a wavering voice.

Harry stood up and helped Cedric do the same. Cedric seemed to be completely confused and more than a little nervous. This only made Harry feel guilty. Cedric had been pulled along for the ride. Wherever they were, Harry knew they just couldn't stand around out in the open like this. They needed to move and find some way to call for help.

"Er—what just happened?" Cedric asked nervously.

"Your guess is as good as mine but I have a feeling we're not at Hogwarts anymore," Harry said stating the obvious as he holstered his wand. "Come on, we need to get moving. We need to find cover. Standing in the open only makes us a target."

"Yes, please do. Hurry," Lily begged.

Cedric looked at Harry in alarm. "A target for what?" he asked quickly. "We're in the middle of nowhere!"

Harry glanced at Cedric with an annoyed look on his face, causing the older teenager to close his mouth. "Look, I can tell you right now this is *not* part of the task," he said. "Dumbledore would never have us leave Hogwarts grounds. After the attack last month I figure it's better to be safe than sorry." He turned to start walking and paused. "It would also be better if we

were as quiet as possible," he said over his shoulder to Cedric. "There's no telling who may be watching."

"I *really* don't want to think about *who* may be watching," Remus said hoarsely.

The moment the words let his lips Harry knew he shouldn't have said them. Rustling could be heard behind them forcing both boys to turn around. Harry pulled out his wand from his holster and pointed it at the darkness with Cedric following suit. The fourteen-year-old could feel his mind working in overdrive. He was trapped between whether to run or try to stun whatever was watching them. Running would mean turning your back on the threat while stunning would mean attacking, possibly making the threat all the worse.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Cedric muttered.

"You're not the only one," Sirius grunted.

Harry was saved from answering as a noise from behind diverted their attentions. He partially turned so he could keep an eye on both threats only to see a short figure wearing a hooded cloak which blocked his face approaching. He seemed to be carrying a small bundle that could only be a baby or just some robes but Harry doubted it was either. Harry really wanted to run for it but his feet wouldn't move. He watched as the figure stopped in front of a large marble headstone just six feet away from them.

Pain suddenly seared from his scar forcing Harry to stumble and be caught by Cedric. His scar had never hurt this badly before. Closing his eyes, Harry tried to focus on anything but the pain. It had worked in the past why couldn't it work now? It felt like someone was trying to split his head open along his scar. *There is no pain. There is no pain. There is no pain!*

"FOCUS HARRY!" James yelled.

A cold, high-pitched voice silenced Harry's agony. "Kill the spare," he hissed.

"No! Don't kill anyone," Lily begged.

Harry didn't have time to think as another voice shouted "*Avada Kedavra!*" Knowing who the spell was intended for, Harry used all of his weight to push Cedric to the ground, the blast of green light flying over them both. Adrenalin poured through his body, suddenly pushing away any pain. Not wanting to stay any longer, Harry quickly jumped to his feet and ran, pulling Cedric with him.

"Stop them! Stop them!" the high-pitched voice shouted.

"RUN!" they all yelled.

Harry felt a screaming in his head and fell to the ground, once again pulling Cedric with him as different colored curses flew over their heads. They quickly crawled to a large tombstone and hid behind it. Harry could feel his heart pounding and he tried to think of something, anything to help them escape. He could hear two people approaching. They needed to move but moving meant becoming a target. *What do you do when your lessons contradict themselves?*

"Follow your instinct!" Remus answered.

"Thanks Harry," Cedric said quietly.

Harry looked over at the seventeen-year-old with a raised eyebrow. That was certainly the last thing he had expected to hear in the middle of an attack, especially considering it wasn't Cedric they were after. "We're not out of this yet so don't thank me," he whispered.

"Don't make this harder on yourself, Potter," a third voice that sounded somewhat familiar said loudly. "No one knows where you are. No one can rescue you this time. You're only delaying the inevitable."

"Well sorry about that but Harry will delay whatever you want as long as he can!" James said angry.

Looking over at Cedric, Harry knew he needed to create a diversion. These men had to be Death Eaters and only wanted him. He couldn't put Cedric in danger. "Whatever you do don't move until it is safe then run as fast as you can to find help," Harry whispered. "They're not after you...only me." As quietly as possible, Harry turned his body and pointed his wand in the direction of the voice. "*Stupefy*," he said then jumped to his feet and ran.

"WHAT? NO!" Lily yelled.

"Harry! What the bloody hell are you playing at?" James yelled.

"He's right," Remus said as if this was something he didn't want to think, "If they chase Harry they may forget about Cedric and then he has a chance to flee and get help. They are after Harry, he is the main target."

He hurdled over headstones as he avoided being hit but whatever curses or spell that was fired at him. His plan had worked. Both of them were following him leaving Cedric time to run for it and find help. Their feet hit the ground loudly alerting Harry that the distance between him and them was decreasing. They would catch up to him unless he did something soon.

"I'll take the brat!" shouted the second Death Eater. "Find the other!"

"There goes your plan out the window Moony," Sirius grunted.

NO! He would need to attack. There was no choice now. Harry slowed down his pace and let his pursuer catch up. As soon as he reached a headstone of the right height, Harry jumped up on the headstone then jumped up again, turning around and kicking the Death Eater across his hooded face. The Death Eater stumbled as Harry landed on his feet and pointed his wand at the attacker. "*Stupefy!*" Harry shouted.

The Death Eater blocked the spell and silent shot one at Harry forcing the teenager to duck for cover behind a headstone. The spell hit the headstone, causing it to shatter. Harry hurried to his feet and ran, casting another stunning spell over his shoulder as he went. He knew he needed to think of something to get out of this. The Death Eater had a point. No one knew where he was so no one would be coming for him. He was trapped.

"That's not right! Moony and I are right now trying to find you! Right?"

Remus grimaced, "How?" Sirius looked lost.

Dodging another spell that narrowly missed his head, Harry flipped over a headstone and changed direction by turning to the right. He hurried behind a mausoleum and hid hoping against hope that the Death Eater would continue running past him. Breath was coming in short gasps. Sweat was rolling down his forehead as he slowly moved around the massive fixture. He reached the edge of the wall and peaked around the corner, his wand clutched so tightly his hand was shaking.

Seeing nothing, Harry slowly kept moving along the back of the mausoleum as he cautiously kept looking around in all directions so he wouldn't be taken by surprise. He was nearly at the corner when Harry felt something grab him around his midsection and pull him hard to the right. He flew through the air only to have his back slam hard into a tree a moment later. Falling to the ground, Harry tried to breathe but found it impossible. His lungs didn't want to work.

"BREATHE!" Lily cried.

Hands roughly grabbed him by the back of his jumper and dragged him for what felt like hours as Harry struggled to breathe. Air finally started to enter Harry's lungs in short bursts, sending sparks of pain throughout his chest each time. He was barely aware of being thrown against a headstone and held in place as tight cords wrapped around him, binding him to the headstone.

"Did you find the other one?" the Death Eater called out as he backed away.

"Please tell me you didn't," James begged.

Harry slowly looked up through his askew glasses to see the shorter Death Eater come into his line of sight pushing Cedric in front of him.

"NO!" the four cried desperately. This was getting worse and worse.

Cedric had his hands bound and looked exhausted as he was forced to kneel down. The older teenager caught sight of Harry and tried to move but the shorter Death Eater held him in place. Harry noticed the missing finger on the Death Eater's hand.

"I'll kill him next time I see him," James growled.

The shorter Death Eater was Pettigrew meaning the other was Barty Crouch, Jr.

Deep down Harry knew what was coming. He tried to break free but he was bound too tightly. The slightest movement caused the cords to cut into his body but that was the least of his worries. Harry watched as Crouch raised his wand, pointing it at Cedric. He tried to shout out but his voice was caught in his throat. This couldn't be happening. He had to do something.

"Avada Kedavra!" Crouch hissed.

"NO!" Harry shouted as a blast of green light shot out of Crouch's wand hitting Cedric. Everything seemed to slow down as Cedric fell to the ground and remained still. A part of Harry was waiting for Cedric to start moving to prove he hadn't seen the killing curse being used on his friend. A part of him didn't want to accept that someone he knew was dead.

Sirius dropped the book shaking. Lily clung to James both crying and rocking. Remus kept shaking his head and mumbling "No." It took them a long while to be able to get back to reading and it was in a shaking voice that Sirius continued.

Harry helplessly watched as Pettigrew grabbed Cedric by the back of his shirt, pulled him over to the Triwizard Cup and left him like he was nothing of importance. The dread that filled Harry was unimaginable. His eyes couldn't seem to look anywhere but at Cedric's body. He didn't even realize when something was shoved in his mouth to prevent him from speaking. He only closed his eyes when a wave of pain hit him hard from his scar.

Regardless of the pain, Harry forced his eyes open and saw Pettigrew with the bundle in his arms once again. It was moving. There was something in those robes. Crouch entered Harry's line of sight carefully levitating a large cauldron. Seeing Crouch with a wand made Harry realize he didn't have his own wand. He looked around but the lack of light made trying to find a small piece of wood impossible.

Apart from Sirius's shaking voice the only other sound was Lily's strangled sobs as James held on to her.

The sound of the cauldron hitting the ground pulled Harry back to what was happening. Looking to his right, Harry saw a fire ignite underneath the cauldron as a snake appeared out of the darkness and stopped in front of the cauldron. Steam started to rise from the cauldron, alerting Harry that there was liquid inside that had already heated up. A few seconds later Harry could see the liquid boiling, sending out strange sparks that no liquid should ever shoot out.

The entire surface was sparkling as Pettigrew looked down at the bundle. "Master, it is ready," he said then pulled back the robes to reveal what he had been holding. It was the shape of a human baby but it couldn't look farther from it. It was dark red—almost black and was covered with what looked like scales if that was possible. There was no hair whatsoever on the thing and its eyes were red, shaped like a snake's.

They all shuddered.

Harry felt like he was going to be sick as Pettigrew lowered the thing into the cauldron. Closing his eyes and turning his head away, Harry heard a thud and knew the creature had hit

the bottom of the cauldron. He once again resumed in his attempts to break free from his bindings as he silently prayed that the unnatural being would just drown.

"Yes, please," Lily begged.

Pettigrew's voice broke into Harry's thoughts. "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

The ground underneath Harry moved. He quickly opened his eyes to see a small amount of dust rise through a crack in the ground and move to the cauldron. Sparks flew in every direction as the dust entered the cauldron, the surface changing to a deep blue a moment later. Whimpers coming from Pettigrew caught Harry's attention. Looking at the man, Harry noticed Pettigrew pulling out a long shiny silver dagger.

"Flesh—of the servant—w-willingly given—you will—revive—your master," Pettigrew said between frightened sobs then held out his right hand that was missing one finger.

As Pettigrew raised the dagger in his left hand Harry closed his eyes and turned his head away. He knew what was going to happen and didn't want to see it. That didn't stop the scream of pain that rang through the night. There was a thud as something fell to the ground followed by a splash. Harry heard someone approaching and opened his eyes to see Crouch kneeling down with the dagger now in his hand.

"You, you, you give up your friends for that?" James spluttered. "How can you have gone so low Peter? For a Master that makes you cut your own hand off?"

"B—blood of the enemy...forcibly taken...you will...resurrect your foe," Pettigrew stuttered.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm. Did that mean what he thought it meant? He tried to wrestle free when a forceful hand grabbed his right arm and held it still. Harry held back a whimper of pain as the grip tightened. Nothing he could do prevented the blade from cutting into his arm. Harry cried out but the cloth in his mouth prevented any sound from being heard. Blood quickly soaked through his sleeve and jumper. A glass phial was pressed to the cut allowing blood to fill it.

"Your best friend's son Peter!" Remus cried indignantly, "How could you?"

As his head fell forward, Harry heard Crouch stand up and hurry over to the cauldron. The blood was poured into the mixture, turning it from red to a pure white. Harry forced his eyes

open to see Pettigrew lying on the ground, holding his bleeding arm as he sobbed. Crouch was on his knees in front of the cauldron, waiting for something to happen.

"At least it wasn't Peter," Sirius grumbled. Lily stared at him. He sighed, "We have to take at least the small blessings Lily and hope Harry gets out of there. At least Peter wasn't the one to cut Harry. It's not much but it's something."

For a few minutes nothing happened. Harry could only hope and pray something had gone wrong but the sparks vanishing from the cauldron extinguished that thought. A rush of steam swelled over the cauldron and grew to cover the area around the large cauldron. Through the mist, an outline of a tall and extremely thin man appeared, standing out of the cauldron. The fear and dread flowing through Harry multiplied as he stared at the events unfolding.

"Robe me," said the high-pitched voice coming from the...the thing behind the mist.

Crouch stood and grabbed a set of black robes and stepped into the mist. He dressed the man then stepped back, his head bowed. The thin...man stepped out of the cauldron and walked through the mist towards Harry. As he came into sight, Harry could only stare in fear at the sight in front of him. The man's skin was too white for it to be human. His wide red eyes certainly weren't human and his nose was flat with narrow slits for nostrils, almost like a snake. There was no doubt in Harry's mind who was standing in front of him.

It was Voldemort. He had returned.

"I hate to state the obvious," James said grimly, "But this is not good."

Chapter 20

Return of the Servants

"I very much hoped they wouldn't return," Sirius said grimly.

Voldemort turned away from Harry and approached Barty Crouch, Jr., not giving a second glance at Pettigrew who was still on the ground bleeding. Crouch had turned to face Voldemort, still on his knees and his head still bowed. A hissing was heard, alerting Harry that the large snake was moving. Harry watched as the snake moved towards him and stopped at his feet, watching him, daring him to move so it could strike at him. Cautiously, Harry glanced back at Voldemort and saw Crouch handing over a wand.

"Crouch, Voldemort is bad enough wandless! Don't help!" James cried.

For a moment Voldemort just held the wand in his hand, like he was remembering how it felt before returning his eyes to Crouch. "Hold out your arm," he ordered. There was no room for objection in his voice. Crouch obediently extended his left arm and pulled his sleeve up to his elbow, revealing something that looked like a dark red tattoo resembling the Dark Mark that Harry had read about in the 'Daily Prophet'. It was the same mark shown in the sky after the Quidditch World Cup" a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth. Voldemort took a close look at the mark and smiled. "It's back," he hissed. "Now we shall see how many have foolishly turned against me."

"I hope all of them did," Sirius grunted.

"I hope that too," Lily said grimacing, "But I highly doubt that."

Without warning Voldemort touched the mark on Crouch's arm. Harry felt another burst of pain from the scar on his forehead as Crouch let out a scream. As fast as the pain had come it was gone. Bowing his head and breathing heavily, Harry forced himself to look over at Voldemort and Crouch to see the Dark Lord pulling his hand away from a now dark black mark.

Voldemort stood up straight and looked around the graveyard with a cruel smile on his face. His stance was foreboding yet somewhat impatient. Harry didn't want to think about what Voldemort was waiting for but that didn't stop his mind from coming up with possibilities. Whoever 'they' were Harry knew that they were servants of Voldemort. The question was what type of servants were they?

After a few minutes, Voldemort turned back to face Harry, his evil smile widening. "Harry Potter," he hissed. "You are sitting on the grave of my late father. He was a Muggle and nothing more than a fool—similar to your mother.

"Hey! Don't talk about Lily that way!" James yelled angrily.

Both of them served a purpose and nothing more. Your mother died to save you and I killed my father, only providing his usefulness after death. My *father* turned away from my mother when he found out she was a witch...much like your relatives turned against you."

Harry's eyes widened at the statement. Voldemort knew about Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia? What else had Pettigrew and Crouch told him? How much did he know about Remus

and Sirius? Did he know about his outbursts? Did he know about the training Sirius and Remus had given him? The thought of Voldemort knowing so much about him made Harry feel sick to his stomach.

"He can't know about all that," Sirius said worried, "No one knows. Right? Right? Moony? Lily?"

Remus and Lily nodded but their unsure expression was not comforting.

"Oh yes, my spies have informed me all about you, Harry Potter," Voldemort continued with a cold laugh. "You were taken from your abusive uncle and given to a blood traitor and a werewolf. Don't worry. Both of them can be easily turned to follow me."

"NO WE CAN'T SNAKE FACE!" Sirius cried.

"YOU'RE MIXING US WITH PETER! I WILL DIE BEFORE I JOIN YOU!" Remus cried.

Harry paled at the comment. "Revenge was taken against your uncle. Granted you needed the Muggle-loving fool to do it for you instead of taking it into your own hands. I took the revenge against my father. My mother died giving birth to me. I had to be raised in a Muggle orphanage since my father had left my mother before I was born. We share the same name, you know. Tom Riddle, a name I couldn't wait to leave behind."

"Damn sight better than Voldemort," James grumbled.

The sound of the swishing of cloaks alerted both Harry and Voldemort that others had arrived. "My *true* family has finally returned," whispered Voldemort. Black cloaked figures appeared between the graves with a cracking noise, the sound of wizards Apparating. They all wore white masks and had their hoods up, blocking anything of their head that could identify them. Slowly, they started moving, one by one, towards Voldemort, falling to their knees as they reached him and kissed the hem of his robes while calling Voldemort 'Master'.

"That's not a family," Lily sneered, "You don't see Harry having to bow to Moony and Padfoot. They respect and love each other. Not fear!"

Once they had greeted the Dark Lord, they stood back up and backed away; forming a circle around the grave Harry was bound to. Nervously glancing around, Harry noticed gaps in the circle. These people were wearing the same robes as Crouch and Pettigrew pushing Harry to the conclusion that these...men were Death Eaters, Voldemort's loyal followers.

Voldemort glanced around at the figures, looking neither impressed nor disappointed by the turnout. "Welcome, my Death Eaters," he said softly. "It has been thirteen years since you were last called yet you come like no time has passed. United under the Dark Mark you all wear...or are we?" He slowly looked around at the cloaked figures, almost like he was examining his followers just by a simple look. "There is guilt in their air," he said at last. "Many of you reek of it."

His voice turned to an accusing one. "Every single one of you is healthy and powerful," he hissed. "I can see no reason why no one sought me out, the wizard you swore your loyalty to. I had to wait for someone like Wormtail to come across me because everyone else had reentered society, claiming to be innocent of the very actions they performed of their own free will. Perhaps they felt the need to join the Mudbloods, Muggles and Albus Dumbledore."

"Of course they did. They care only for their own skin just like you," Sirius sneered.

Several members of the circle shook their heads while others stirred uncomfortably but Voldemort ignored the movement. "Being deserted by those who declared their eternal loyalty to me was a disappointment," he said, "and I don't like to be disappointed." Several members tried to move but it seemed that something was preventing them from dropping to their knees and pleading for mercy. "Don't even bother trying to beg for forgiveness. None of you deserve to be forgiven. It will take thirteen years of repayment for the thirteen years of betrayal. Wormtail has already paid some of his debt and Barty was trapped by his own father until I rescued him."

Crouch bowed his head gratefully as a confirmation of Voldemort's statement. Pettigrew was still on the ground, clutching his stump of an arm, sobbing. "You helped me return, Wormtail," Voldemort said as he turned to Pettigrew. "As worthless and cowardice as you are, you helped me and Lord Voldemort always rewards those who helps him."

Voldemort raised his wand and twirled it through the air, a strip of silver being left behind as his wand continued to move. Slowly, the silver began to take shape, forming what looked to be a silver human hand. Once it finished forming, it slowly lowered and attacked itself to Pettigrew's bleeding arm. Silence filled the air as Pettigrew stopped sobbing. He looked down and stared at his new silver hand in amazement before hurrying on his knees to Voldemort and kissed the bottom of Voldemort's robes.

"Thank you, my Lord, thank you," Pettigrew whispered then stood up and took his place in the circle.

"You disappoint me more and more every second Peter," James said sadly.

"I never break my word, Wormtail," Voldemort said. "You better remember that." Voldemort then turned to a man to the right of Pettigrew. "Lucius, I am surprised you arrived so quickly. You carried out your task masterly. I had thought when Barty's presence at Hogwarts was discovered my plans had been ruined. You brought the one I needed to me. You will be rewarded."

"He's the one that Imperiused Krum! I didn't even know he was at Hogwarts!" Sirius cried, "Slimy git. When I get my hands on you..."

The Death Eater he had been talking to bowed his head respectfully. Harry's eyes widened in hearing this. Lucius Malfoy was responsible for him being here? Lucius Malfoy had been there? Had he also put Viktor under the Imperius Curse, forcing Viktor to torture Cedric? The thought of Cedric made it difficult for Harry to breathe as he felt his eyes sting with tears.

"I trust you didn't use something as simple as a portkey that could be traced," Voldemort added.

"No, my lord," Malfoy said firmly as he bowed his head. "A transportation spell with a sensor notification spell placed on the Cup. No one suspected the presence of a concerned school governor."

Voldemort nodded as if he had expected such an answer. "That would explain how *the spare* arrived without either of them touching the object," he said then turned the large space next to Malfoy. "The Lestranges—locked in Azkaban for their master rather than turning against him. They will be rewarded when Azkaban falls. The Dementors will join us of course along with the giants and dark creatures that are feared by many." Voldemort moved on until he noticed the largest of gaps. "Ah, here are five missing," he said thoughtfully. "Three are dead, one is too much of a coward to return to me and the final has left me. He shall pay for his treachery with his life."

"Who do you think that is?" Lily asked.

"I have a suspect," Remus said grimly.

The Dark Lord slowly turned to look at Harry, a cruel smile forming on his lipless mouth. "Now, I am sure many of you have noticed we have a guest," he said as he strolled towards the teenager. "Harry Potter is, of course, my guest of honor tonight. Many of you thought this

mere *child* had brought about my downfall. I lost my powers and body that night because of something I had overlooked. His mother had died trying to save him, providing a protection which made it impossible for me to harm the boy."

"And I would do it all over again," Lily said sobbing.

The pain from Harry's scar was increasing with each step Voldemort took. It was impossible to think. He had to remind himself to breathe. There was a part of Harry that wanted Voldemort to just get it over with while another part was screaming at him to think of a way to escape back to Hogwarts...to his guardians and friends.

"Yes, Harry. Please don't give up!" Sirius begged. Tears falling unchecked from his eyes.

Voldemort took another step and reached out to touch Harry's face. "His mother's sacrifice was left upon him," he said. "Old magic that I had foolishly overlooked but it doesn't matter anymore. The protection is gone." Without further ado, Voldemort touched Harry's cheek, increasing the pain that was already searing from Harry's scar. "My error...the woman's foolish sacrifice that deflected my curse, sending unimaginable pain and ripping me from my body has finally been corrected. I am no longer less than a spirit yet alive. I no longer have to possess animals or other humans like I did four years ago in an attempt to steal the Philosopher's Stone—an attempt that had also been thwarted by Harry Potter. I no longer have to rely on a servant who was on the run from his former friends to keep me alive."

Several Death Eaters shifted their weight back and forth uncomfortably but Voldemort took no notice of it.

"You see, Harry Potter, fate always favors Lord Voldemort," the Dark Lord said with a grin. "I learned about the Tournament from Bertha Jorkins, a witch from the Ministry who had the misfortune of running into Wormtail. She also revealed the location of a faithful Death Eater. Her mind and body just weren't the same afterwards. I had to dispose of her." The look of disgust on Harry's face only made Voldemort's evil smile widen. "You saw what I was before the rebirth. You noticed the change from a few years ago, didn't you...Harry? You see, with a spell I invented, a little help from Nagini, and a potion consisting of unicorn blood and snake venom, I was able to return to a form that was almost human. Since Dumbledore had destroyed the Philosopher's Stone, I had to use other means—an old piece of Dark Magic. Bone from my father, flesh from a servant and blood from my enemy...there was only one choice of which enemy should be used. Your mother's protection is now in my veins too."

"What? No!" Lily said shocked shaking her head.

Harry stared at Voldemort in disbelief. He had moved past the denial. There was too much pain for this not to be happening. His head felt like it was going to split open any moment, his right arm was throbbing in pain and his muscles were screaming in exhaustion. Truthfully, Harry didn't know how much more of this he could take. Right now passing out was looking like an extremely good idea.

"No, Harry! You can't! If you pass out you're lost! Don't give up!" James encouraged him, "You'll find a way out. A way back to Padfoot and Moony!"

"You put up quite a fight, Harry Potter," Voldemort said, sounding almost proud. "I underestimated what the blood traitor and the werewolf had taught you in such a short amount of time." He looked down at Harry's neck for a moment, his eyes narrowing in confusion. "And what is this?" asked Voldemort as he peeled open Harry's collar to reveal the necklace. "Well, well, you are full of surprises, aren't you, Harry?"

Voldemort wrapped his long fingers around the necklace and pulled, breaking the clasp and its hold around Harry's neck. He stood upright and looked at the necklace closely. "A suppression necklace," Voldemort said then looked over at Crouch. "It seems that Dumbledore is full of secrets these days." He returned his red eyes to Harry. "Suppressing the magic of a fourteen-year-old. I never thought I'd see the day when that Muggle-loving fool was afraid of a mere teenager. You must be very powerful for Dumbledore to resort to this."

Harry narrowed his eyes as he stared at Voldemort. He knew that wasn't true. He wasn't powerful. Dumbledore wasn't afraid of him. Remus, Sirius and Dumbledore had told him many times that his magic was simply maturing too fast. The outbursts were causing him pain so the necklace was put on to stop it. There was nothing special about it.

"That's true Harry! Don't let him goad you," Remus encouraged.

James bit his lip, "Without the necklace he can have an outburst," he said scared.

"He won't," Remus said firmly.

"Moony-" Sirius started.

"HE WON'T!" Remus said more firmly with a hard look towards his friends. They decided to let him believe whatever he needed to.

Of course he wasn't going to tell Voldemort any of this.

"Perhaps we shall see how powerful you are," Voldemort proposed as he raised his wand and pointed it at Harry. "*Crucio!*"

Pain worse than anything he had ever felt before filled his body. Every muscle, bone and organ felt like they were on fire, a second away from exploding. Harry instantly closed his eyes and tried to think...tried to ignore the pain but it was too hard. He wanted to pass out...he wanted to die...he wanted it all to end. Was that too much to ask?

"No, don't give up. Come on Harry. It's going to stop soon. Don't give up," Lily mumbled through her sobs.

As fast as it came it was gone. Harry's head fell forward as he sat there, his bindings being the only thing keeping him from falling over. Laughter could be heard but that was the last thing on Harry's mind. He felt ashamed. All it had taken was one Cruciatus Curse and he had given up. He had asked for death to come. He had failed Sirius and Remus. He had failed Professor Dumbledore.

"No you didn't. We understand how you felt. The important thing is you didn't give up," Remus said hoarsely as he wiped his eyes.

"What a pity," Voldemort said as he tossed the necklace off to the side. "It seems that Dumbledore has overestimated your worth, Harry Potter. You escaped me all those years ago by luck and nothing else. I *will* prove my power by killing you right here, right now but not like this. I shall give you a chance to defend yourself, now that I know what you are capable of. Wormtail, untie him. Barty, find his wand."

Pettigrew and Crouch obeyed. Pettigrew knelt down in front of Harry, pulling the gag out of his mouth before tearing the bindings free with his new silver hand. A cry from Crouch could be heard through the silence alerting Harry that Crouch had found his wand. Before Harry knew what was happening he was roughly pulled to his feet and a wand was shoved into his hand. Raising his head, Harry noticed that the circle of Death Eaters had closed in making any sort of escape impossible. Harry's grip tightened around his wand as he straightened his glasses on his face. If he was going to die then it would be on his feet. He had one last chance to make Sirius and Remus proud.

"You already make us proud," Sirius said in a cracked voice, "You are not going to die!"

"I have no doubt that blood traitor of a godfather has taught you how to duel," Voldemort said quietly. "It will be interesting to learn what else he may have taught you although pranks will be of very little use now." Several Death Eaters chuckled at the comment. "Bow Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes and bowed ever so slightly, never taking his eyes off of Voldemort who returned the bow. He knew defiance wasn't the path to take. Voldemort knew he could physically defend himself but had no idea that his training with Sirius and Remus never consisted of pranks. He needed to think of a plan and keeping Voldemort away seemed like a pretty good one at the moment.

"Yes, Harry. Think. Use everything to your advantage. Especially Voldemort's confidence," Remus said a little more encourage by Harry's change of attitude.

"Now, we duel," Voldemort said as he raised his wand.

Harry was expecting Voldemort to act fast and ducked as Voldemort sent a quick curse at him. After hearing the screams of the 'unfortunate' Death Eater who received the curse instead, Harry knew it was the Cruciatus Curse. Quickly, Harry stood back up and pointed his wand at Voldemort. "*Reducto!*" he shouted but Voldemort quickly created a shield to deflect the spell.

"Impressive Harry but it will take more than that," Voldemort said evenly.

Two beams of light shot out of Voldemort's wand. Harry managed to dodge the first but wasn't so lucky on the second. Instantly, Harry felt pain flood his body once again. As quickly as possible Harry closed his eyes and retreated inside his mind. The pain suddenly lessened as he fell to his knees. The searing pain throughout his body was now only similar to the pain a broken bone would cause. Harry bit his lower lip to prevent himself from crying out in pain. Eventually it all stopped and Harry finally realized he could taste blood in his mouth. He had bit his lip too hard.

Slowly, Harry looked up at Voldemort who was staring at Harry with narrow eyes. Someone clearly wasn't happy about the lack of reaction their curse had. "It seems the curse wasn't strong enough for you," Voldemort said finally. "No matter. I'm sure with time we can find

the correct dose. What do you say, Harry? How would you feel to being just as insane as the Longbottoms?"

"What do you mean by that?" Lily hissed.

Harry remained silent. Did he just say Longbottoms? *Focus on the task at hand!* Gripping his wand tightly, Harry slowly rose to his feet. He was determined to end this on his feet, just like his parents had all those years ago.

"Answer me!" Voldemort shouted. "*Imperio!*"

The spell hit Harry quickly. Similar to in defense class, Harry felt his freewill leaving him but fought to keep it. Suddenly, Harry felt a warmth fill his body followed by a rush of energy. He remembered this feeling and there was no necklace around his neck to control it. The first feeling of nothingness vanished as he broke the connection of the Imperius Curse abruptly, sending Voldemort backwards a few steps.

"Yeah! Take that Snake Face!" Sirius yelled.

Voldemort looked at Harry with wide eyes. All of the Death Eaters who could see Harry's eyes noticed what the Dark Lord was staring at. There was an unnatural glow to those intense green eyes. The power in those eyes was frightening. It was almost as if an extremely old and powerful wizard had placed their eyes and their power into a teenager's body.

"Perhaps I was too quick to judge you, Harry Potter," Voldemort said with a smile. "You clearly are powerful. You have thrown off two of the Unforgivables tonight. Join me, Harry. I can give you more than that fool Albus Dumbledore. I can help you train this power into a formidable weapon. Think of what we could do together. Do you honestly believe you are the only magical child that has been mistreated by Muggles? They are beneath us, Harry. They deserve to be destroyed."

"Ok, this guy is obviously delusional if he thinks there is a chance in Hell that Harry would join him," James said.

Harry didn't have to think about it. "I would never join you, Voldemort," he said, sounding more confident than he felt. "You killed my parents. You are the reason I was sent to live with them in the first place."

Voldemort let out a hiss in anger as he raised his wand again but Harry was already moving. Pointing his wand at a group of Death Eaters, Harry sent a Reductor Curse at them, creating a hole for him to run through. Curses were fired but somehow Harry knew where they were and was able to move just right so nothing hit him. It was almost like he could feel what was coming. Changing directions, Harry dove for cover then crawled to another headstone and hid behind it.

"You can not change the rules, Harry," Voldemort scolded loudly as he approached. "I will find you and when I do you will die just like your parents, just like your friend that Barty had to kill because of you."

"HEY! That was *your* fault not Harry's. Don't try to get him to make a mistake by playing on his guilt," Sirius said angry.

Harry felt his hands clenched into fists. Voldemort was not going to mess with his mind now. Repositioning his body, Harry inhaled and let out a calming breath as he waited. Voldemort was coming closer. He was ten feet away...five...three...two...one. In the blink of an eye Harry was on his feet, jumping in the air as he pulled his legs to his chest then shot his legs outwards with as much force as he could manage into Voldemort's chest. Voldemort staggered as Harry landed in a low crouching position.

"Serves you right. Knocked by Muggle methods," Lily cheered Harry.

The next movement seemed to happen in slow motion. As Harry stood, Voldemort regained his footing. At the same time, their wands raised and pointed at their opponent. Two voices could be heard throughout the graveyard. A teenager's voice screaming, "*Expelliarmus*" while the high-pitched voice of Voldemort shouted "*Avada Kedavra*". The green light of the killing curse hit the red light of the disarming spell.

Harry suddenly felt his wand vibrating in his hand and tightened his grip. He wouldn't let go...he couldn't let go. A beam of gold light suddenly connected the two wands in addition to the red coming from Harry's wand and green coming from Voldemort's. Looking up at the Dark Lord, Harry saw that Voldemort was just as shocked as he was.

"What's going on?" Sirius asked. The other shrugged helplessly.

Just when Harry thought things couldn't get any stranger, he felt himself being lifted off the ground along with Voldemort and were carried over to a patch of land that was free of

headstones. The voices of the Death Eaters could be heard as they asked Voldemort for instructions. They reformed the circle around and pulled out their wands, ready to fire at Harry.

If it were possible, the golden connection between the wands noticed this and immediately splintered into countless strands that arched over Harry and Voldemort, creating a lightened golden dome, separating the two from the Death Eaters. There was no way anyone could interfere with what was happening now. Harry *and* Voldemort were on their own now.

Voldemort yelled something at his servants but Harry couldn't make out what it was. He was too focused on keeping hold on his wand as he gripped it tightly with both hands. A sound filled his ears, a familiar sound he knew all too well...it was the sound of a phoenix. Harry closed his eyes and listened. The beautiful sound along with the uncontrollable energy building in him gave him hope. He suddenly remembered the second task, how he had used the second outburst to force a spell out of his wand. Could that work now?

"YES! DO THAT! DO WHATEVER YOU HAVE TO!" Remus yelled.

The vibrating of his wand increased drastically. Opening his eyes quickly, Harry saw the beam between the wands had changed shape. There were now large beads of light that was slowly moving its way to Harry's wand. He had to push it towards Voldemort. Closing his eyes again, Harry focused on his wand and pushing the golden beads. He could feel the beads slowly moving towards Voldemort. He poured more and more of his energy, his focus in completing the task. Slowly, the vibrations of his wand lessened slightly allowing Harry to open his eyes and look up at his opponent.

Voldemort's wand was now vibrating fiercely as one golden bead connected with the tip of Voldemort's wand. Faint echoing screams could be heard as what looked like a hand belonging to a dense, grayish ghost emerged from Voldemort's wand followed by a head, chest and arms. It was the upper body of Cedric Diggory. Harry nearly dropped his wand in shock as he watched the rest of Cedric come out of the wand. He looked too solid to be a ghost but what else could he be?

Cedric stood, glanced at the golden beam connecting the wands then turned to Harry. "Hold on, my friend," he said, his voice sounding almost like an echo, a reminder of something Harry had forgotten.

"What's going on?" Sirius asked.

"I have no idea but if it helps Harry I very much don't care what or why that is happening," Remus said.

There were more screams as another...being pulled itself out of Voldemort's wand similar to the way Cedric did. It was an old man that looked strangely familiar but Harry just couldn't put a name with the face. Why couldn't he remember? The man had a walking stick in his hand as he leaned on it and took in the sight before him. He moved to Cedric's side and looked at Voldemort.

"So he *is* a wizard," the man said in amazement then turned to Harry. "Keep fighting, boy. He's the one that killed me."

Harry was saved from responding by another figure—or whatever they were—coming out of Voldemort's wand but this one was a woman. This one Harry knew he had never seen before. She was a pump woman, only a little taller than him. She also took in the scene before turning to Harry. "Hang on, Harry," she said, her voice echoing like Cedric's and the old man's. "Don't you let go!"

"Do as they say Harry," James cried.

The three figures started to pace around the dome, offering words of encouragement to Harry and words Harry couldn't hear to Voldemort but from the looks on their faces Harry knew it wasn't pleasantries. Another head emerged out of Voldemort's wand and the moment Harry saw it his breath caught in his chest. Nothing could prepare him for this.

"What?" Lily asked.

The grey shadow of a woman with long hair fell to the ground, stood up and looked at him. Harry's bottom lip was shaking as his eyes filled with tears. It was his mother looking at him. "Hold on, my son," she said gently. "Your father's coming...just hold on, my darling boy."

"Oh, it's me," she whispered, "Hold on Harry."

As his mother finished her plea Harry saw the figure emerge out of Voldemort's wand. The presence of the untidy hair as the head came out left no doubt in Harry's mind. James Potter fell to the ground and stood up. He glanced at the beam connecting the wands before approaching Harry, who could feel the tears rolling down his face. It was too much. Harry could feel another burst of energy forming, needing to be released.

"You must stay strong, Harry," James said, his voice echoing like the others. "Control what you are feeling. Your magic is a part of you, don't fight it."

"Yes, Harry. Do as I say. I must become very wise with years 'cause I absolutely haven't got a clue of why I am saying that," James said in a choked voice.

Harry tried to nod but it was too much. Harry let out a cry as his head flew back and power beyond power shot through his wand, through the golden beam at Voldemort. Suddenly one beam became two...two became four. Voldemort let out a painful shriek but didn't let go of his wand. Pain filled Harry's body, especially in his chest. What was happening?

"Break the connection Harry!" James shouted. "You have to!"

"Come on Harry!" Remus cried.

"I can't!" Harry shouted as he looked at his *father*. "It won't let me!"

"Harry, don't challenge your father!" Sirius cried, "Do as he says!"

"Harry, this is your magic," said Lily as she approached. "You are the only one who can control it. Break the connection then use this powerful magic you're feeling to change the Cup into a portkey. Envision the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch clearly in your mind and say *Portus*. It is the only way for you to escape, my son."

"Come on Pronglet. If Lily said it it's true. She knows stuff," James begged.

Harry nodded but doing so seemed to be easier said than done.

"Harry, please take my body back to my parents," Cedric said softly. "They need closure, as do you."

Harry nodded again as another burst of power filled his body but instead of it going threw the wand it seemed to explode. With a loud *boom*, Harry felt a powerful force ram into his chest sending him flying backwards as the same thing happened to Voldemort. The golden dome vanished as Harry flew through the air at an incredible speed. Before Harry knew it, his back collided with the ground sending more pain throughout his body. His entire body was screaming in pain, his lungs wouldn't seem to work but Harry knew he had to move.

Slowly, Harry rolled over onto his stomach and looked around to see the Cup and Cedric's body not too far ahead. Ignoring the protests from his body, Harry pulled himself to his feet and staggered to his destination. His lungs were screaming for air. His head felt too heavy to keep upright. Harry knew he was on the verge of passing out but forced his body to keep moving. He had to do this. His parents and Cedric were counting on him.

When Harry reached his destination, he collapsed to his knees, grabbing Cedric by the sleeve with his left hand and pointing his wand at the cup with his right. Closing his eyes, Harry focused on the Quidditch pitch until he could see it clearly in his mind before muttering, "*Portus.*" He rested his hand on the Cup and instantly felt a jerk behind his navel. His eyes closed as the graveyard dissolved into a whirl of color. He had done it.

A moment later Harry felt himself slam into the ground, sending more pain throughout his body. He was lying face down on thick grass waiting for the darkness to consume him. Unable to control his limbs anymore, Harry released his hold on Cedric and his wand just as distant sounds filled his ears. Two sets of hands slowly turned him over. A hand touched his face but Harry didn't move. He had no energy to spare.

"HE DID IT! HE'S SAFE!" Sirius cried with sobs as Remus hugged him. Lily and James were hugging each other and sobbing too.

"Harry, Harry can you hear me?" a familiar voice asked frantically. "Harry, please look at me!"

Before Harry could do anything, arms lifted him up and pulled him to the chest of someone. He felt himself being rocked back and forth sending pain throughout his back that had been slammed into a tree and into the ground.

"Stop rocking him moron! He's hurt!" Sirius cried.

With every ounce of strength he could muster, Harry forced his eyes to open partially and saw that it was Sirius who was rocking him.

Remus raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I am a moron. What can I do? TAKE HIM TO THE INFIRMARY!"

He knew he didn't have a lot of time. It didn't take a genius to know if you couldn't breathe, you would die. Slowly, Harry reached up with his left hand and loosely grabbed Sirius' cloak, causing his godfather to jump in shock and look down at Harry in relief.

"Harry, you scared me," Sirius said quickly. "Just hang on. Poppy's coming."

"S—Sirius, I—I tried," Harry croaked out weakly. The already dim lighting seemed to be decreasing into darkness. "P—Petti—grew...Crouch...I tried...to save...Cedric...I'm...sorry...He's...back...They...brought...him...back..." The pain, exhaustion and lack of air became too much for Harry as his arm went limp, releasing Sirius' cloak and falling to the ground. Harry's eyes closed as his head lolled backwards. No breath escaped his lips.

"NO!" they four cried.

"DO SOMETHING!" James yelled.

No one would be able to forget the scene before their eyes for as long as they lived as they watched Sirius Black with tears rolling down his face begging his limp godson to come back. Remus Lupin was finally able to pry the-boy-who-lived out of Sirius' arms and rush him to the hospital wing in a desperate attempt to save his life. Cedric Diggory was pronounced dead and it looked like Harry Potter was only moments away from following him. No one at Hogwarts felt like celebrating.

They were all sobbing uncontrolled and without embarrassment. Sirius was afraid to turn the page and find out that Remus attempt had been in vain.

Chapter 21

Revelations

Three and a half days...eighty-four hours...five thousand forty minutes...three hundred thousand four hundred seconds...four hundred and one...four hundred and two...That was the current count from when Harry had passed out on the Quidditch pitch. He had been brought to the hospital wing and healed as much as possible which wasn't much. His lungs had apparently collapsed, preventing him from breathing. Madam Pomfrey had healed those to the best of her ability. There was a deep cut on his right arm which had been sealed along with the smaller cuts all over his arms and chest. He had a few broken ribs which were slowly healing but what couldn't be healed were his magical exhaustion, physical exhaustion and weak heart. There were also dark bruises covering his chest and back that looked like he had been slammed into things a couple of times.

"But he's alive right?" Lily said shakily. Sirius nodded.

For over three days Sirius and Remus had remained at Harry's bedside, leaving only when it was absolutely necessary and even then one of them stayed behind. A soft and slow beeping could be heard which was Harry's heartbeat, being monitored magically. A clear mask was placed over his nose and mouth, continuously providing additional oxygen for Harry's still sensitive lungs. Special potions had to be brought from St. Mungo's to be injected into Harry's blood stream since Professor Snape had been called away two days ago and had yet to return. But all of the injuries weren't what made Sirius nearly attack Headmaster Dumbledore.

"No. It was the fact that he didn't get my godson out of that bloody tournament!"

"Though attacking Dumbledore may not have been the brightest of ideas Paddy," Remus said hoarsely.

Receiving news that Unforgivables had been performed on his godson was. Harry was suffering from affects of the Cruciatus Curse and Cedric had died by means of this killing curse. Several people had jumped to the conclusion that Harry had killed Cedric

"What? How dumb can you people get?" James cried angry.

but after examining Harry's wand (very carefully since no one could actually touch it without burning their own hand) it was discovered that no Unforgivables had been used. There were still some skeptics but after being shouted at by an angry Sirius and Remus, people kept their comments to themselves.

"Thank you," Lily said. Her face still wet.

The flow of visitors had been constant. It seemed like every single student in the Gryffindor House had managed to visit at least once along with several Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Hermione and the Weasley siblings were the most frequent though, checking on Harry several times throughout the day. Viktor Krum had also visited a few times but no one was really surprised since the three male champions had made no point of keeping their friendship a secret.

There had also been plenty of visits from the teaching staff and other adults that Harry knew. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley stopped by at least once a day to check on the boy both of them considered a son only to leave in tears when they saw nothing had changed. Fudge was also visiting daily be he was just checking to see if Harry had finally woken up so he could

question him. Sirius and Remus had to use every ounce of self control to refrain from attacking the man.

"He would deserve it," Sirius grumbled.

"He would just get you arrested Padfoot," Lily said sadly, "It's better this way."

Fudge had been under pressure ever since Rita Skeeter's article had been published about the third task. Somehow someone had taken a picture of Sirius holding Harry on the Quidditch pitch and with Rita Skeeter announcing Cedric's death and Harry Potter's struggle to stay alive, the wizarding world wanted answers, answers that only Harry Potter had.

Sirius had relayed Harry's last words to Dumbledore before sending him out of the hospital wing and warning him to never come near Harry again. It was an empty threat but so far the Headmaster had listened to it, relying on the other teachers and Madam Pomfrey to inform him on Harry's progress, or lack thereof. Truthfully there were many that were worried about Harry's lack of response. There was even talk about possibly moving him to St. Mungo's Hospital for more advanced care.

The sound of the door to the hospital wing opening made both Sirius and Remus jump but relax when they saw it was Madam Pomfrey carrying a small jar in her hands. Sirius and Remus knew the routine by now and moved to help. Sirius gently pulled back the covers while Remus carefully raised Harry's arms to make it easier for Sirius. As Madam Pomfrey reached the bed, Remus was unbuttoning Harry's shirt, revealing Harry's still bruised chest.

"Has there been any change?" Madam Pomfrey asked Remus softly.

Everyone knew by now to turn to Remus if you wanted a non-sarcastic or angry answer.

"Well, yes. Padfoot doesn't exactly have the best of attitudes when he is stressed," Remus said wisely.

"Oh, because considering things are obviously peachy I should be dancing with joy and serving people tea and biscuits," Sirius said.

"Point taken Moony," James said.

Remus was affected by Harry's condition just as much as Sirius but he held his anger back out of fear more than anything. The wolf in him was extremely overprotective of his cub, wanting

revenge for the damage done and the pain Harry would be enduring. He needed a calming draught to remain calm from time to time but at least he was willing to take it.

"Remus is more reasonable than Sirius," Lily whispered in James' ears so Sirius wouldn't hear. James nodded.

"What? What are you two talking about?" Sirius asked. He wasn't answered.

"None," Remus said honestly. "How is Dumbledore doing in holding off the Ministry?"

"The Minister is becoming rather impatient," Madam Pomfrey admitted as she opened the jar and dipped her fingers inside. "If Harry doesn't wake before the end of the term, the Minister wants him moved to St. Mungo's, under Ministry supervision." She pulled out some of the cream and gently started to rub it over Harry's chest.

"He can't do that!" James yelled, "Right? He can't?"

"I think not," Lily said frowning, "Harry has guardians. Remus and Sirius are the ones that get to make the decisions."

"No one is taking my godson anywhere," Sirius said through his teeth. "I'll take him to another country if I have to. That idiot isn't getting anywhere near Harry."

"Yeah! You try to take him away and feel my wrath!"

Remus and Madam Pomfrey shared a glance before she returned to rubbing cream over Harry's chest. Sirius stared down at Harry as he took hold of the teen's small hand. In this condition Harry certainly looked younger, twelve at the oldest. Sirius gently touched Harry's face and nearly jumped back in shock when Harry tilted his head towards the touch. The sound of a small groan a moment later alerted Remus and Madam Pomfrey that Harry was starting to wake.

"Harry?" Sirius asked gently as he tightened his grip on Harry's hand. "Harry, can you hear me?"

Harry let out another soft groan as he slowly turned his head towards the voice. Sirius started running his fingers through Harry's hair and the reaction was instantaneous. Slowly, Harry's eyes opened partially but it was clear that he wasn't completely awake yet. Sirius didn't know if Harry understood anything that was happening but it didn't matter. Harry was awake.

"We should inform the Headmaster—"

"—don't even think about it," Sirius interrupted Madam Pomfrey, not bothering to even look at her. "Harry's in no condition to answer questions right now." The tone in his voice left no room for arguments. Sirius' face softened as he returned his attention to Harry. "Don't worry, Harry," he said gently. "You're safe now. If I have to stay by your side as Padfoot, I'll do it. I'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Pronglet. I promise."

And to prove his point Sirius dumped the book on Remus lap and transformed sitting next to James and putting his head on his friend's lap. Rolling his eyes Remus caught the book and started reading.

Harry let out a whimper as tears filled his eyes. Remus wasted no time hurrying to Harry's side, sitting down on the edge of the bed and carefully taking Harry in his arms. "It's all right, cub," he said softly. "Just let it out. We know it hurts."

Other than the occasional whimper, Harry made no sound as tears fell down his face. After a while, Remus enlarged Harry's bed and stretched out his legs. The moment his head hit the pillow, Remus realized how tired he was. Almost as a reflex, Remus wrapped an arm around Harry, allowing the teen's head rest on his chest. Sirius had transformed into Padfoot and jumped up on the bed, lying down beside Harry. With a lot of effort, Harry was able to move his hand so it was buried in the dog's fur before falling back asleep.

The next thing Harry knew he heard the sound of a dog growling. Fear suddenly ran through Harry as his body started to shake. He didn't know what to think. Midnight never growled unless there was something that was a danger. He could barely move and there was something covering his nose and mouth like some sort of mask. How was he supposed to put up any sort of fight when he couldn't do anything?

"Harry, calm down," said the soft voice belonging to Remus. "You're safe here. Padfoot's just being overprotective."

"Someone has too!" Sirius cried.

"Back with us?" Remus said dryly to his recently untransformed friend. Sirius grinned sheepishly.

Slowly, Harry opened his eyes and looked up at Remus, fear still present in his eyes. Remus gave Harry a reassuring smile as he tightened his arm around the teenager. "Padfoot, that's enough," Remus warned. "You're scaring Harry."

"Yeah Padfoot, stop that!" James smacked Sirius head.

The growling stopped and with a *pop*, Sirius was sitting where the dog had been. "I'm sorry Harry," Sirius said sincerely. "I didn't mean to scare you." His gaze slowly moved towards the foot of the bed. "There are just a few people that shouldn't be allowed near you right now."

Harry followed Sirius's gaze but was unable to see who was standing there. He could see four blurry figures and from the overabundance of white Harry knew the second one to the right was Professor Dumbledore. This made Harry confused. Why would Sirius have a problem with Professor Dumbledore? Sirius didn't blame Dumbledore for what happened, did he?

"Of course I do!"

"Sirius, you have every right to be angry with me," Professor Dumbledore said in a tired voice.

"Got that right!" Sirius said crossing his arms.

"I promised to protect Harry and I failed. I can only apologize so many times. Nothing I can do will change what happened. The only thing we can do now is move on."

"Actually, I can think of a lot things Sirius and Remus could do to you to make sure you never let anything like this happen again," James said narrowing his eyes.

Harry turned his head and tried to bury his face in Remus' chest but the mask over his nose and mouth made it difficult. He didn't want to think about what happened. He just wanted to forget. Closing his eyes, tried to think of anything but the graveyard but his mind wouldn't let him. The flash of green light, Voldemort's red eyes, Cedric, his parents...it all seemed to be trapped to play over and over again.

"I know you want to protect Harry, Sirius," Professor Dumbledore added, "but right now the only way to protect him is to find out what happened. Harry needs to deal with what happened."

"HE JUST WOKE UP!" Lily cried. "Give the poor kid a break! He'll deal will deal with it when he feels a little stronger."

"I don't doubt that Dumbledore thinks he is helping," Remus said cautiously, "But I think his insistence is fuelled more by *his* need to know what happened than Harry's need to deal with what happened."

"And now is the only time to do it?" Sirius shot back. "He just woke up! He isn't well enough to relive it all again! Look at him! He's been unconscious for nearly four days! You are his Headmaster, Dumbledore. Remus and I are his guardians. We will decide what is best for Harry."

"Yes, you tell him Sirius!" Lily said crossing her arms. James looked shocked. He was about to comment about Lily and Sirius agreeing on something but decided that it was better for his health not to.

Turning his head, Harry gathered enough strength to move his hand and brushed Sirius' arm, startling the man. Sirius looked at Harry and let out a sigh in defeat when he saw the pleading look in the teen's eyes. Harry really didn't feel like taking but he didn't want Sirius and Dumbledore fighting over it. He didn't want anyone angry because of him.

Remus slid off the bed and repositioned Harry so he was more comfortable before grabbing Harry's glasses off of the bedside table and sliding them on gently. Instantly everything came into focus. Harry saw Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey were standing at the foot of the bed with Professor Dumbledore. Closing his eyes for a moment, Harry felt something stir as his tiredness was pushed away. It almost felt like an outburst but it wasn't out of control. Suddenly Harry knew what he needed to do. He just hoped he could pull it off.

"You don't need to do anything if it tires you Harry," James said, "Just say the word and I'll have this two over here kick all of them out."

Sirius and Remus sat a little straighter as if poised to act.

Harry reached out with both hands and touched Sirius and Remus. He then looked directly at Professor Dumbledore, shifted his gaze to his left arm before returning it back to the Headmaster. Dumbledore's gaze turned curious but he nodded as he walked over beside Remus and rested his right hand on Harry's arm. Harry then looked at the remaining adults, waiting for them to follow suit. Professor McGonagall glanced at Dumbledore uncertainly before moving to Sirius' side and repeating Dumbledore's actions. Madam Pomfrey followed her and after a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Professor Snape moved over to Dumbledore's side.

"I guess the last thing Snivellus want is to touch Harry," Remus grunted.

"Harry should be the one not wanting to touch Snivellus," Sirius said appalled. "Oh, to think of how close he is to me," he finished shuddering.

Everyone's eyes were on him as Harry closed his eyes and focused on the graveyard and everything that happened. After a few seconds he felt something expanding inside him. His eyes opened quickly as he inhaled sharply. He heard a few startled gasps as the hospital wing around them dissolved into the dark graveyard in the middle of nowhere.

The six adults looked around before looking back at Harry only to realize he wasn't there. Sirius and Remus started to panic, especially when they tried to speak and realized that their voices weren't working. Everyone turned to Professor Dumbledore for an explanation but Dumbledore merely looked at them before pointing to something behind them. They turned around and gasped when they saw Harry helping Cedric stand.

"Er—what just happened?" asked Cedric.

"Your guess is as good as mine but I have a feeling we're not at Hogwarts anymore," Harry said as he holstered his wand. "Come on, we need to get moving. We need to find cover. Standing in the open only makes us a target."

"A target for what?" Cedric asked quickly. "We're in the middle of nowhere!"

"Look, I can tell you right now this is *not* part of the task," Harry said sounding a little annoyed. "Dumbledore would never have us leave Hogwarts grounds. After the attack last month I figure it's better to be safe than sorry." He turned away to start walking but looked back at the older student. "It would also be better if we were as quiet as possible. There's no telling who may be watching."

"It's like in a Pensieve," Lily said.

"Except in a Pensieve people can talk," James said back. "I don't want to read it all again." The looks on the others said they didn't want it either.

The six adults watched the events unfold unable to do anything else. They saw Harry save Cedric from the killing curse before running for cover, pulling Cedric along for the ride. The scenery changed as if they were watching a Muggle movie, following Harry and Cedric as they ran. Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey gasped in disbelief as Harry, the younger of the two, took charge and tried to send Cedric for safety by making himself a target.

They watched as Harry ran with two Death Eaters chasing him before they split up. Their eyes widened as Harry fought back and tried to outsmart the Death Eater before being slammed into a tree. Sirius fell to his knees in horror as they watched the Death Eater dragging Harry to a headstone and bound to it. All of the adults stared in disbelief as they watched Cedric being murdered right in front of Harry. Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey were trying to hold back tears with very little success.

Even though they knew Harry had managed to escape the four were reduced to tears again.

What came next was something none of them had been prepared for. They watched Voldemort's rebirth. They saw the thing he had turned into but it wasn't over. Voldemort called his servants to him and as he waited, talked to Harry about their pasts. Once the Death Eaters had arrived, the six adults watched as they were welcomed back into the circle. They saw Pettigrew being given a silver hand and didn't miss the thanks Voldemort gave Lucius Malfoy for bringing Harry to him.

Sirius and Remus found it hard to take their eyes off of Harry who was being forced to witness this all. They noticed the pain Harry was in when Voldemort came close and even touched him. Their eyes widened in alarm when Voldemort found the suppression necklace and removed it. When they saw the Cruciatus Curse being used on Harry, it was too much. They had to look away.

"Well, how do you think we feel having to read all this again?" Sirius said shakily, "Thank you Dumbledore!"

To their shock and disbelief, the six adults watched as Voldemort forced Harry to duel and were astounded to see Harry fight off two Unforgivable curses (also noticing the change in Harry's eyes) before being offered to join Voldemort's side. Harry didn't give any of the six adults the time to dread the possibility by declining the offer immediately. They then watched as the rest of the duel unfolded, including the peculiar occurrence as the killing curse met the disarming spell. As the dome formed, they found themselves trapped inside as the grayish ghost-like beings of Cedric Diggory, an old man, a plump woman, followed by the Potters coming out of Voldemort's wand.

Both Sirius and Remus were on their knees in their eyes full of unshed tears at the sight of Lily and James Potter.

James and Lily engulfed Remus and Sirius on a four way hug and Lily said softly, "Don't be sad."

They could hear what the ghost-like beings were saying to Harry, saw how bright Harry's eyes were and how much pain Harry was in by the look on his face. They heard Lily Potter's instructions on how to get home, Cedric's final words and were shocked to see how the connection ended with both Harry and Voldemort flying backwards in opposite directions. When Harry landed hard on the ground, they saw Harry try to breathe but fail before pulling himself to his feet, staggering to the Cup and followed Lily's instructions. As Harry, Cedric and the Cup vanished, the six adults found the scenery changing once again to the hospital wing at Harry's bedside, touching Harry's arm.

Looking down at the teenager, every single one of them noticed Harry's eyes were now closed and his breathing was labored. Professor McGonagall moved to question what had just happened but was silenced by a look from Dumbledore who motioned that they should leave so Harry could rest for now. They had learned what happened. Explanations could come later.

"So, lemme get this straight," Sirius said with narrowed eyes, "First you make my godson relieve the worst moment of his life as soon as he wakes up and then you still want to chat about it? No way I am letting you!" he finished crossing his arms stubbornly.

The next time Harry opened his eyes it was because of quiet voices at his bedside. There were also some differences. Although he was still exhausted and still had the mask over his nose and mouth, Harry could feel pain from his back and chest that he hadn't felt before. Someone had removed his glasses making everything blurry. The lighting in the room had also dimmed significantly alerting Harry that it was nighttime. He tried to move and immediately regretted it as the pain flared throughout his upper body. *Oh yeah, I'm not going anywhere anytime soon.*

"Someone give him a pain killing potion!" James yelled, "You are in the Hospital Wing for the love of God!"

The voices immediately stopped as Harry let out a quiet groan. Blurry faces came into his line of sight as hands took hold of his. Someone put a hand on his chest, sending pain throughout his upper body. Harry let out a whimper as his eyes closed tightly. The pressure vanished quickly but the pain lingered for a few moments before slowly decreasing. Why was there so much pain? Had something happened?

"The pain killer must have worn off," Madam Pomfrey announced.

"No sh-"

"JAMES!" Lily yelled. "Language!"

"Keep him still while I fetch another dose."

Harry felt an arm slide behind his shoulders before he was carefully lifted so he was sitting at a forty-five degree angle. The process seemed to be extremely slow as sparks of pain continuously shot through his body. Harry tried to hold back the whimpers of pain that were trying to come out. What was going on? He felt his body tensing nervously before someone's fingers started to run through his hair in a calming motion. Harry instantly relaxed and felt the mask being removed from his face. His head was tilted backwards slightly allowing a potion to be poured down his throat.

Being caught off guard, Harry started to gag on the unknown substance until a hand gently rubbed his neck forcing it to relax so the liquid went down. Harry's body went limp almost instantly as the pain vanished. It was almost like Harry was trapped between sleep and awake, unable to do anything but wait for it to pass. Carefully, Harry was lowered back down onto the bed and covered up. He moaned in protest as the mask was placed back on his face. Was it really necessary?

A hand touched Harry's face. Opening his eyes, Harry noticed Dumbledore's white beard instantly. "I know nothing I can ever say or do could make up for what you've had to endure, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said gravely.

"You are right," Remus grumbled.

"You trusted me to keep you safe and I failed. The only thing I can offer you now is an explanation to some of the odd occurrences that happened that night."

Harry slowly blinked his eyes, unable to do much else. Whatever he had been given certainly made it impossible to move anything else. Slowly, Harry remembered allowing the selected few to see his memory. He had no idea how he pulled it off along with some of the countless other things. *The fact that I'm still alive being one of them.*

Dumbledore took Harry's lack of protest as the sign to continue. "Your wand connected with Voldemort's because you share the same core, a phoenix feather from Fawkes," he said. "When a wand meets its brother it will not act properly such as the Priori Incantatem, the reversal spell effect, that happened with Voldemort's wand. Barty must have been using Voldemort's wand when he killed Cedric. That was why you saw an echo of Cedric, followed

be Frank Bryce, Bertha Jorkins and your parents. They had the appearance and character of their living forms, allowing them to talk to you like they would have if they had been alive."

James, Lily and Sirius were listening to Remus' voice intently.

Harry closed his eyes as he felt them stinging with tears. *"Hold on, my friend."* That was what Cedric had told him, had called him: his friend. His mother had seemed so loving and his father wasn't anything like the prankster he had been told about. Perhaps Sirius and Remus were right. Maybe James Potter did change after he left Hogwarts.

"Of course he did," Lily said wiping her eyes, "How else would I have married him?" she bent low and whispered to the book, "He's not all that bad though." James grinned slightly through his watered eyes but said nothing.

Harry felt tears escaping the corners of his eyes and fall down the sides of his face before hitting the pillow. His breathing became a little labored as a gently hand touched his shoulder.

"You don't have to be brave anymore, Harry," Dumbledore said softly. "You have faced something not many adult wizards could manage and survived. You stood up to Voldemort when most would cower in fear. You have seen death and experienced pain that no child should ever live through. No one here will think of you as weak for showing a little emotion." Receiving no answer, Dumbledore changed the topic. "As far as your outbursts, I must admit I never expected anything like that happening. Sirius and Remus have agreed that when you are strong enough, they will try to help you control it so something like this does not happen again."

"Finally!" Sirius cried.

Harry slowly opened his eyes and looked at Dumbledore, the worry clear in his eyes. He remembered past experiences with his outbursts and didn't want to put Sirius and Remus through that again. He didn't want to put anyone through that again.

"Only when you are strong enough to handle it, Harry," Professor Dumbledore repeated. "Your lungs and heart are still healing and probably will be for a few weeks. Your outbursts caused your lungs to collapse and overloaded your heart. That is the reason for the oxygen mask and the heart monitor. They are not permanent but until Madam Pomfrey decides, they are necessary."

Dumbledore gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I can not begin to tell you how proud I am of you, Harry," he said with what sounded like admiration in his voice. "We all are. You parents and Cedric would be too."

"Yes we are," James said firmly, "And Cedric too!"

Harry's bottom lip quivered as tears filled his eyes again. How could Professor Dumbledore say that Cedric would be proud of him? Cedric was dead because of him! His friend, someone he had started to look up to as an older brother was dead because Voldemort wanted him and only him.

"No, Cedric is dead because Voldemort is a lunatic followed by other lunatics!" Lily said sternly.

Was this what his life was going to be like now? Were Sirius, Remus, Ron and Hermione next to die? Harry closed his eyes as tears continued to fall. Why did this have to happen? Why did it always have to be him?

"I think that's enough for now," Sirius said protectively. "If Harry has any more questions we'll let you know."

"Well done Padfoot," Remus nodded approvingly.

"Very well," Dumbledore said as he backed away from Harry's bedside. "I suggest some dreamless sleeping potion is in order. The calmer Harry remains for now the quicker his recovery will be."

"Then you are not helping much, are you?" Sirius mumbled.

Sirius and Remus were already at Harry's side propping him up. Harry felt his breathing mask was being removed and his head being tilted back. Tears fell down the sides of his face as Harry stared up at the blurry ceiling. He felt completely numb. He didn't even realize a potion was being poured down his throat or his breathing mask was put back on as he slowly succumbed to darkness.

"I can't believe Sirius is threatening to pull Harry out of school and Mum is supporting his decision."

"WHAT? SIRIUS?" Remus cried in disbelief.

"That's a great idea," Sirius said firmly.

"James? Lily? Knock some sense into him please," Remus begged.

Lily bit her lips but then shook her head, "He's right. Hogwarts wasn't safe for Harry." James nodded.

Remus thrust his hands to the skies exasperated.

"Ron, think about everything Harry's been through this year. I don't blame Sirius for wanting to keep Harry safe with You-Know-Who coming back but keeping him at home seems to be a little extreme. Can you imagine never seeing Harry again?"

"Yes, thank you Hermione. Quite extreme," Remus said looking at his friends but they were not budging.

"Don't even say that! Sirius would never do that! Harry's gonna be fine and he will be coming back to Hogwarts next year...he has to!"

There was an uncomfortable silence before Hermione's soft voice entered the air. *"I would miss him too, Ron."*

"No, you don't understand...I've been such a horrible friend to him this year. I can't believe I wasted all that time because I...I...I should have been there for him. He almost died, Hermione. I overheard Mum telling Bill that Harry almost didn't make it."

"Yes, you should," James huffed crossing his arms.

Harry let out a groan as he tried to move. His limbs moved slightly but not enough to make a significant difference. Thankfully he didn't feel any pain but the lack of motor skills was really starting to become annoying. If he continued at this rate he would be in bed for the majority of his summer holiday. Slowly, Harry opened his eyes and saw the blurry figures of Ron and Hermione looking down at him.

Someone slid his glasses on his face allowing Harry to see the worried looks on their faces as they came into focus. Hermione's eyes were red and puffy, like she had been crying recently. Ron looked like he was going to start crying any minute. Both of them looked extremely tired, making Harry wonder what they had gone through in the past few days. Thinking about it Harry realized he had no idea what had been going on outside the hospital wing.

"How are you feeling Harry?" Hermione asked as she took hold of his hand and held it tightly. Harry could only let out of soft moan as an answer. "Sorry, I forgot you can't really talk with the breathing mask on. Sirius and Remus wanted us to tell you they'll be back soon. Fudge is in Dumbledore's office right now being his usual self. I think Sirius and Remus were going to try scaring him away."

"Dumbledore sort of put a restriction on the hospital wing," Ron added. "After you woke up the first time, no one was allowed other than those who knew you really well. Everyone's been asking us how you're doing. You really scared us, mate."

"Not just you Ron. Not just you," Lily said sadly.

Harry looked at his best friends nervously. From the looks they were giving him, Harry knew he would never be able to tell them what had happened. Turning his head and looking away, Harry finally realized that he was different than them. He had seen a friend murdered in front of his own eyes. He had been tortured by Voldemort himself. You don't recover from that overnight. The horrors of that night were still fresh in his mind and probably would remain there for quite some time.

The sound of the door slamming open quickly pulled Harry out of his thoughts. His body instantly tensed as Ron and Hermione quickly turned around, blocking his view of who had just entered. His breaths started to come in short gasps. His heart raced which resulted in a loud beeping noise that could be heard throughout the hospital wing. The sound of running footsteps filled Harry's ears.

"Out of the way!" Madam Pomfrey ordered and entered Harry's line of sight. As quickly as possible, she pulled off the breathing mask, snuck an arm underneath Harry and propped him up. "This is a calming draught, Mr. Potter," she said to Harry before bringing the vial of liquid to Harry's lips.

Harry took the potion and instantly felt his uneasiness vanish. He felt his body being lowered back on the bed and the breathing mask put back on his face. He was aware of what was happening around him but didn't have the effort to worry about it. Harry let out a tired moan as he slowly turned his head to see a panicked Hermione and a pale Ron standing in front of a skeptical Minister of Magic.

"What's that moron doing there?" James asked angrily.

Madam Pomfrey checked Harry's pulse for a moment before looking over her shoulder at the observers. "Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley, I'm afraid I must cut this visit short," she said. "You can visit with Mr. Potter when he has stabilized again. I must insist that you too leave, Minister."

Cornelius Fudge simply narrowed his eyes and glared at Madam Pomfrey. "Now see here woman, Mr. Potter has questions to answer that can not wait!" he declared. "If he can talk about what happened to Dumbledore then he can certainly talk to me!"

"Can't he take a hint?" Sirius cried.

Madam Pomfrey turned around and faced the Fudge, not appearing to be intimidated at all. "Mr. Fudge, Mr. Potter is my patient so it is up to me to decide what is best for him," she said forcefully. "In addition, Mr. Potter can not be questioned without the presence of one of his guardians. If you would like to wait I'm sure Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin would love to have a word with you concerning your dramatic entrance since that was what triggered Mr. Potter's panic attack."

"Indeed!" Remus grunted, "Leave my cub alone!"

Fudge let out an annoyed huff and dropped a bag of gold on the bedside table. "Your winnings, Mr. Potter," he said shortly. "The Diggorys have declined on any claim of the prize money. I *will* be in contact with your...guardians concerning what happened. Hopefully any—confusion will clear up by then. Good day."

Harry stared at Fudge with wide eyes as the man put on his bowler hat and walked out of the room. Fudge didn't believe that Voldemort was back. Dread pushed away all other emotions. If Fudge didn't believe Voldemort had returned then who did he believe murdered Cedric? Harry wasn't looking forward to the day when he was feeling well enough to have that conversation. Cornelius Fudge was as stubborn as they came.

Ron and Hermione were forced to leave the hospital wing which left Harry alone unable to do anything but think. The events of the third task and after replayed in his mind. He had been horrified to see the Cruciatus Curse used on Cedric but that had only been the beginning. At the graveyard Harry remembered the look on Cedric's face when he saw Harry tied to the headstone. There was helplessness and fear. Cedric knew he was going to die and was worried about someone else.

"He wasn't the only one Harry," Lily said sadly, "All the time you tried to give Cedric a chance to live, and now you are just forgetting that. He wouldn't want you to."

Closing his eyes seemed to only make it worse and falling back asleep was completely out of the question. Opening his eyes again, Harry just stared up at the ceiling trying not to think of anything but it was difficult. Voldemort's voice wasn't an easy thing to forget. Phrases such as *"kill the spare"*, *"I will find you and when I do you will die just like your parents"*, and *"Avada Kedavra"* would probably stay with him until the day he died.

Harry didn't know how long he stared at the ceiling trapped with echoes of 'kill the spare' and 'hang on, my friend' running through his head. Right now that seemed like he was simply hanging on to his sanity. When the sympathetic faces of his godfather and 'uncle' came into his line of sight, Harry didn't even look at them. How could he?

Before Harry knew it he was pulled into a tender embrace by Sirius. "Don't worry, Pronglet," Sirius said softly. "In a few days we'll be home where not even the Ministry will be able to find us. I know it hurts, losing a friend like that and I won't lie to you. It will probably hurt for a while but with time it won't hurt so much. Try and think of the good times, not the bad. That's what Cedric would want."

"For once, Sirius is right," Remus tried to chuckle but it didn't take.

That was all it took for the tears to fall again. It seemed that Harry simply needed someone to say the words for him to accept it emotionally. Sirius sat down on the bed and continued to hold his godson who didn't make a sound but increasing wetness of his shirt was all he needed to know Harry was still crying. Remus sat down on the opposite side of the bed and gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze, reminding the teenager that both of them were there for him...and they always would be.

The next few days passed slowly. Harry was eventually allowed to breathe without the aid of the breathing mask but his heart was still being monitored and he still needed a lot of rest. He was able to move his arms and legs without strenuous effort now but was far from completely healed. He needed help to walk more than a few feet and suffered from severe dizzying spells whenever he stood up. Harry was also restricted to a soft foods diet but at least he was eating on his own.

Hagrid had come by to visit, informing Harry that he was going to do a job for Dumbledore over the summer with Madame Maxime but would be in contact with Dumbledore in case *someone* needed him. Harry gave Hagrid a soft smile at the comment and mouthed a 'thank you'. Even without the breathing mask on anymore, Harry didn't talk much to anyone. Most of

his answers were a shake of the head, a nod or a shrug of the shoulders. This of course worried a lot of people but no one said anything since Harry was already dealing with more than anyone could imagine.

As the day of the Leaving Feast arrived, Harry was still restricted to the hospital wing. Remus had already packed Harry's trunk that had been in the Gryffindor Tower and taken it to the Black House. Only a few sets of clothes stayed behind since Harry had grown tired of the hospital wing attire. Tomorrow everyone would be taking the train back home for the summer holidays; Harry being one of them. For the sake of Harry's still recuperating body, Madam Pomfrey had banned any sort of magical travel for at least two weeks meaning the train was Harry's only way home. Harry had accepted the order until he realized riding on the train would mean facing everyone, something he hadn't done yet.

Instead of attending the Leaving Feast, Harry would be eating dinner in the hospital wing, something Ron and Hermione had been disappointed to hear but accepted the reasoning behind it. Harry still wasn't allowed to eat the majority of the food that would be served and the thought of everyone staring at him like they naturally would wasn't something he was ready for. Ever since it became known that Harry had awoken, Ron and Hermione had become the only sources of information on anything concerning Harry. Since there were several students whose parents had been at the graveyard that night, most of the details were held from the public, even Ron and Hermione didn't know the full extent of Harry's injuries. All they knew was Harry's lungs had collapsed but had been repaired and were slowly healing.

Sitting on his bed and staring out the window at the sunset Harry had to wonder if this was what his life was going to be like now. He had held so much from his friends that he felt like they didn't know him anymore. They still didn't know about his outbursts but Harry could tell they (more so Hermione than Ron) knew something wasn't right. They had overheard about Harry's magical exhaustion but other than a few comments made to each other when they thought Harry was sleeping, they said nothing about it.

The sound of the door opening pulled Harry out of his thoughts. He didn't have to look to know who it was. He knew everyone's entrance by sounds they made, the way they opened the door and the pace of their footsteps. Dumbledore had a slow and soft pace, Madam Pomfrey's was soft and urgent, Ron and Hermione usually ran in, while Sirius and Remus both had fairly quick pace...which was what he was hearing now.

"Well, then Sirius slowed down, because right now he bounces," James chuckled. Sirius glared.

"Hey Pronglet," Sirius said as he plopped on the bed. "How are you feeling?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders in response, not taking his eyes off of the disappearing sun. He hated that he didn't know how to act around his own godfather anymore. He had broken down too many times in front of his guardians to know what to say anymore. The problem was Sirius and Remus always seemed to know what Harry was thinking or feeling and brought it out in the open to discuss...well, they talked and Harry listened.

"Of course we do," Remus said fiercely and Sirius nodded.

"See how things change Lily," James said looking at Lily as if the other two weren't there, "Now you have to hex them to make them talk. It took ages to get Moony to talk about things. And Padfoot, I don't even want to go there."

"I find it quite ironic that they are the ones dealing with a closed mouth teenager now," Lily nodded, "What goes around comes around."

They thoroughly ignored the death glares and pretended not to notice how Remus was reading through greeted teeth.

Remus sat down in a chair at Harry's bedside, not taking his eyes off of the silent teenager. "I know you probably don't feel like talking, cub," he said patiently. "We won't force you but sooner or later you will have to talk to someone about what you're feeling. If you don't feel comfortable talking to us then we will find someone you are comfortable with."

Harry looked over at Remus then over his shoulder at Sirius. He couldn't bare the looks of sympathy they were giving him. The problem Harry didn't exactly know what to say. One moment he was angry, the next he was numb of all feeling and the moment after that he felt depressed. How can you talk about your feelings when they're all over the place?

They ate dinner in silence except when Sirius and Remus informed Harry what Professor Dumbledore would be saying at the leaving feast. The Headmaster would be confirming that Cedric had been murdered by followers of Voldemort who then aided in the Dark Lord's resurrection despite the Ministry's belief that nothing of the sort had actually happened. Tonight Cedric's memory would be honored in addition to the efforts Harry made to bring Cedric back. Dumbledore would reveal that Harry faced and escaped Voldemort, something Harry didn't really want to become public knowledge. Now everyone would want to know

everything about that night: how Cedric actually died, what Voldemort looked like...what Voldemort did to him...

Perhaps that was the real reason why he was so reluctant to start talking. If he remained silent, no one took it personal when he didn't answer their questions. No one asked anything that couldn't be answered by a 'yes', 'no', or 'I don't know'. They assumed he was too distraught to speak...or too stubborn. To Harry, his silence was the only way he could stay in control. He hadn't forgotten the last time he had been angry and lost control. His magic was still measured on the low side but that didn't mean the outbursts were gone. One had helped him 'show' his memory of the graveyard for the lack of a better term. He hadn't felt anything since then but without the necklace he had grown accustomed to wearing, Harry couldn't help but be apprehensive.

"Me too Harry," James said worried, "Especially if you have that heart problem. I don't want to think what could happen."

The following morning had been an early one. Both Viktor and Fleur had stopped by to bid farewell and pass on their sympathies. It seemed that Viktor and Fleur had been warned about Harry's lack of speaking because they really didn't expect him to say much in return. Fleur embraced Harry before she left while Viktor shook his hand before saying that he will keep in touch. Harry whispered a 'thank you' which made a smile appear on Viktor's face. Viktor may not have been close to Cedric but he had seen first hand how protective of Harry the Hufflepuff student had been so he had an idea of how close the two Hogwarts champions had become over the span of the Tournament.

"That's nice of them," Lily said, "It must be hard for them too. If you think about it either of them could have been in Cedric's place and they must feel the pressure. Especially Viktor since he was bewitched to hurt Cedric and all. He must feel a little guilty."

The others nodded.

With all of the commotion that was bound to happen, Harry had been taken to the train early to get situated. Sirius would be riding on the train with Harry while Remus and Madam Pomfrey were getting everything ready at the Noble House of Black.

"I feel for you Moony," Sirius said with a hand on Remus's shoulder.

"Padfoot, you are going there too," Remus said kindly. Sirius's eyes widened and he cried in shock:

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!"

Hedwig had been told to fly home since she hated traveling in her cage. They took residence in the car at the front of the train next to the prefect carriage. It would be the last place anyone would try to cause trouble since so many older students would be around according to Sirius.

By the time students started boarding the train, Harry was nearly asleep with his head resting on Sirius' leg. He was covered with a blanket that was charmed to stay warm and had his back facing the door so those who did notice him figured he was sleeping and didn't intrude. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George ended up joining Harry and Sirius but made an effort to be extremely quiet. Fred and George were seated across from Sirius and Harry talking softly to each other, Ron and Ginny were on the floor playing chess and Hermione sitting next to Harry, his legs on her lap while she read a book.

The train ride was certainly a quiet one. Other than the occasional visitor that came to ask how Harry was, they were left alone. Sirius had heard enough about Harry's friends and enemies to know who to glare at and who to ignore. Halfway through the journey Harry had woken up with a sore neck which forced him to alter sleeping positions a little bit. The bruising on his chest and back had significantly decreased, now only being a minor annoyance so he wasn't dependent on pain killing potions anymore. Professor Snape had created a stronger cream after his return that had significantly sped up the healing process. Rolling over to face his friends, Harry tried to stay awake and managed to for nearly an hour before dozing back off.

Harry awoke with a start as the train came to a halt at King's Cross Station. Sirius helped Harry sit up then instructed him to hold tight for a bit for the crowd to decrease. Since everyone else's parents were waiting they couldn't wait around. Ginny gave Harry a gentle hug and wished him a speedy recovery before she left. Hermione hugged Harry and gave him a kiss on the cheek before she ordered him to get well soon and write to her as often as he could. Ron gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze before saying, "like she said, mate."

"Hermione can't ever just tell you things," Sirius said, "She is quite bossy. Reminds me of another Muggle-Born," and he not very covertly made head motions towards Lily.

"Black, say it to my face if you have the guts!"

Sirius kept quiet.

The moment Ron and Hermione left the compartment, Harry looked up at Fred and George who looked like they were about to repeat what everyone else had said. He held up his hand for them to wait and motioned for Sirius to grab his bag that had his remaining affects that hadn't gone home in his trunk. Sirius complied and watched in confusion as Harry reached in and pulled out a bag of gold. Looking back up at the twins hoping they would accept, Harry handed it over.

"Harry, what is this?" Fred asked in confusion.

"It's his winnings from the Triwizard Tournament," Sirius answered for Harry. "It looks like he wants you to have it."

"Wow, that's, wow," James said shocked.

"Are you nutter?" George asked. "Do you know how much this is?"

Harry took in a deep breath. The Weasley pride wasn't something he wanted to deal with right now. "Please," he said softly. "I...don't want it, too many memories. I...heard about your joke-shop. We could use the laughs...Please?"

"Normally, I would be against giving Fred and George the means for even more mischief but I have to agree with Harry. They will need the laughs," Lily said and the boys beamed.

Seeing the pleading look Harry was giving them banished any sort of reluctance they may have had. "All right Harry, we'll take it," Fred said at last. "On one condition...start talking again. It doesn't have to be about what happened if you don't want to talk about that. We—well all of us Weasleys still at Hogwarts miss talking with you. Talking *at* you just isn't the same."

Harry gave them a soft smile and nodded. "I'll try," he said quietly. He had planned on doing so anyways so it wasn't a hard promise to make. They bid goodbye then left the compartment, hiding their newly acquired gold on their way out. At least something good could now come out of him winning the Tournament.

Sirius took that as his cue to take the blanket Harry had been using and stuff it in Harry's bag before helping his godson to his feet. Harry swayed a little before steadying himself then let Sirius usher him out of the compartment and off the train. There were still plenty of people on the platform but it certainly wasn't as packed as it usually was. Harry ignored the stares and

whispers that suddenly filled the air as much as he could. Being the center of attention again was something he really wasn't ready for.

Remus came out of the crowd and pulled Harry into an embrace. "Don't worry Harry, we'll be home soon," he said softly. "Everything's ready for you."

"Yes, Moony will give them the evil glare of doom if they don't stop staring," James said annoyed.

Harry looked up at Remus and gave him a grateful smile. He didn't know if he was ready to face his demons yet but he knew that Sirius and Remus would be there for him when he was, just like they always were. They knew him better than he knew himself and right now they were exactly what Harry needed to recover physically, magically and emotionally. He would recover from this. It's what Cedric and his parents would have wanted.

"Yes it is!" Lily said, "And Padfoot and Moony will help you all the way," Lily said eying said Marauders sternly. They were nodding fervently and Remus read the last Author's note.

A/N: Well, that's it for Trials of a Champion. I want to thank everyone for your support throughout this story. With the response from Midnight Guardian it was really hard to come up with another story that could compare to it. Just like Midnight Guardian this ending was really hard to write. I hope everyone is pleased with it.

"Well, enjoy, enjoy, we didn't," James said firmly, "I really could have done with a lot less tragedy for my son!"

It could be an interesting fifth year, don't you think? Burden of a Destiny has been posted.

"I do hope fifth year is calmer," Sirius said, "But why do I have the feeling it won't be?"

The others nodded grimly and they all got up to go inside. Later that night, after dinner, as they were preparing to go to sleep James had to ask:

"Sirius what are you doing?"

"Going to sleep," Sirius answered.

"Why the helmet?"

"Precaution."

The end

